Bible Code, Revisited

Jason Wilson

After the Bible Code and its technical term, Equidistant Letter Sequences, was defined, its intriguing story spread in peer-reviewed publications and rose among Jewish and Christian intellectuals. A review of the evidence for and against the Bible Code follows, including the Statistical Science journal debate, code in nonbiblical texts, code in randomly permuted texts, “mega-codes,” code-testing protocol, the multiple testing problem, ambiguities in the Hebrew language and text, and word frequencies. It is concluded that while the faith of Bible Code proponents is admirable, the concept does not hold up to scrutiny.

Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel … So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him.” ~Exodus 19:3, 7

All that was, is, and will be unto the end of time is included in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible … [A]nd not merely in a general sense, but including the details of every person individually, and the most minute details of everything that happened to him from the day of his birth until his death; likewise of every kind of animal and beast and living thing that exists, and of herbage, and of all that grows or is inert.¹

~Rabbi Vilna Gaon (1720–1797)

Introduction

There has been a flurry of activity over the so-called “new discovery” of hidden codes in texts of the ancient Hebrew scriptures. The Hebrew word פֶּרֶשׁ (Torah) refers to the first five books of the Bible and the word is said to be encoded at the beginning and end of each of its books. Start with the first ב (T) in Genesis, go 50 letters to find ג (silent letter whose added vowel point makes (o)), then go fifty more letters to find ג (r), and finally fifty more letters to the ב (h). Thus, we have the word Torah “encoded” at the beginning of the first book of the Bible. This is called an “equidistant letter sequence” (ELS). Even more striking is that the same word occurs at the end of Genesis and the beginning and end of Exodus. The same occurs at the beginning and end of Numbers and Deuteronomy, except backwards.² This is an example of a Bible code.

The intrigue goes far deeper than single “encoded” biblical words, however. In 1994, Eliyahu Rips discovered the ELS of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s name near the ELS “assassin will assassinate” (see fig. 2).³ That year, he and journalist Michael Drosnin attempted to warn Rabin, who was assassinated on November 4, 1995.⁴ Drosnin publicized the event in his book The Bible Code in 1997, which soared to number 3 on the New York Times bestseller list. The ensuing years saw the phenomenon uncritically picked up by the Christian community, with a number of pro-code Jewish and Christian publications, and few critics.

In this article I will answer the following questions in four sections: (1) What is the Bible code? How does it work? (2) Where did it come from? What is the story behind it? (3) What does the evidence
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