# The Bible Codes

*by Marvin V. Zelkowitz*

Michael Drosnin published *The Bible Codes* [Simon & Schuster] in 1997, in which he claimed messages were hidden in the ancient Hebrew text of the *Bible*. In his book he claimed he saw the message "assassin who will assassinate" cross the text "Yitzhak Rabin," Prime Minister of Israel at the time. Shortly thereafter, Rabin was indeed killed, showing the truth of his finding in the text. Once he had that knowledge, he looked for many other events, and found them:

*Oswald, Marksman*, and *assassin who will assassinate* are all together.
*1929, stocks, the depression*, and *economic collapse* are linked.
*President Kennedy, to die*, and *Dallas* are together.
*Japan, atomic holocaust,* and *1945* are linked.
*Great earthquake, LA, California,* and *1994* are related.
*His name is Timothy, McVeigh, day 19, 9th floor, in the morning, he ambushed, he pounced, terror* are all related.

The book goes on to give many other similar examples.
What is going on here? Does the *Bible* contain such hidden messages? Was the *Bible* really dictated by God to Moses some 3,200 years ago, or was it written by men in at least four separate pieces, as assumed by most biblical scholars, about 2,500 years ago? [See *Skeptical Eye*, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 21.] If written by man, how could such prophetic messages be encoded in the text?

## Equidistant Letter Sequences (ELS)

Drosnin's analysis is based upon earlier work by Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, and Yoav Rosenberg, who published "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis" in *Statistical Science,* vol. 9, no. 3 (1994). They constructed a copy of Genesis without punctuation and spaces, just as in the original Hebrew text. Starting with a given letter, and a skip count of N, reading every Nth letter forms a new sequence of letters. By varying the skip count N and the starting letter, almost any word can be found somewhere in the text, and with 80,000 characters in Genesis, that gave a lot of starting positions. So far, nothing unusual. What they did next has still not been satisfactorily explained.

Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg took 32 names from the *Encyclopedia of Great Men of Israel* and their corresponding birth dates and found those 64 items in Genesis using the ELS process. They then computed the minimum distance in number of characters, using a skip of no more than 50, from the name to the corresponding birth date, and computed the total distance by adding up all 32 individual distances. They then showed that this total distance was smaller than random chance predicted. But when they tried this on other Hebrew texts (e.g., the book of Isaiah, a Hebrew translation of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Genesis with the letters randomized) the results were consistent with random chance. Something different was happening with the original text of Genesis that still has not been satisfactorily explained.

To date there is no good explanation of the results in the 1994 paper. The three authors do not make any claims about authorship of the original Genesis text, only that their results show that the process is not random, and you would assume it should be if men wrote the original text.

One may ask why would anyone even think of performing an ELS on the *Bible*? The idea developed during the 12th century with the development of Gematria as part of the mystical Kabbalah in medieval Judaism. Rabbis believed that God wrote the *Bible*; therefore, the *Bible* contained all possible knowledge. However, the *Bible* was written using the very human Hebrew language, which they believed could not express all possible knowledge. So additional information had to be hidden that

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was not expressible by direct interpretation of the 27 letters of the Hebrew alphabet (22 distinct letters plus 5 letters only used to terminate words).

With Gematria, each letter in the Hebrew alphabet took on a numeric value. The first letter, aleph, was given the value 1, Bet was given 2, Gimmel 3, Dalet 4, and so on. After 10, the next 9 letters had values 20 to 100 with the last 8 having values of 200 through 900. With this encoding, every Hebrew word had a value, and the game was to try and find relationships using numeric values for different words. Two examples:

(1) Jews have counted 613 distinct commandments in the *Bible*. The Hebrew word for Bible is Torah and has a Gematric count of 611. If you add in the two commandments God spoke directly to the Israelites in the desert during the exodus, you get 613.

(2) The Hebrew name for God has a count of 26. But the first letter in Hebrew, aleph (A), can be viewed as being made up of 2 Yod (Y) having a count of 10 each and a slanted Vav (V) having a count of 6, with a sum of 26. Thus God is 1.

Besides this counting rule, sequences of initial letters of words were also studied. It only needed the invention of the computer some 800 years later to extend this concept to the ELS.

### Drosnin's Method

Michael Drosnin took the method, but not the analysis, used in the 1994 paper. For example, consider the sequence: D E F S A I L K R M R T U V A R E B A W A Z E I T O M P B A G C R Q E S D B I U W A S S A S S I N I Y O F M L E G W U P. If you consider a skip distance of 10, you can write the text into a block that is 10 wide:

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D E F S A I L K R M
R T U V A R E B A W
A Z E I T O M P B A
G C R Q E S D B I U
W A S S A S S I N I
Y O F M L E G W U P
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Note how RABIN and ASSASSIN now intersect? Using the Hebrew text of the entire *Bible*, this is the process that Drosnin used to find his prophetic messages. However, unlike the 1994 study, he didn't try to find minimal ELS distance, only the occurrence of the text somewhere in the *Bible*.

### ANALYSIS OF DROSNIN'S METHOD

Drosnin's method and conclusions can be criticized from at least six points of view:

■ **Bad formal logic**—Finding an interesting ELS does not mean it must occur. (That is, A implies B does not mean B implies A.) For example, "Churchill" is linked to "assassinated," but he wasn't. So just because events in the past were found in the text, it doesn't mean future events must occur as predicted.

■ **GIGO (Garbage In-Garbage Out)**—Both the 1994 paper and the Drosnin book assume they were using the original text of Genesis. But we don't know what the original text was! Hebrew spelling was not fixed until about 2,000 years ago. Hebrew has no vowels, so two silent vowel letters (A, J) and the Vav (V) were included in some words in nonstandard ways. *The Talmud*, written about 1,800 years ago, was a compilation of Jewish laws. It quotes from the *Bible* and then discusses what that passage means. But there are over 300 differences from the quoted text to what is currently in the modern Torah used as the source text for the recent studies. Because of such inconsistencies, the detailed analysis is suspect.

■ **Bad translation**—Much is made of the connection between "Rabin" and "assassinated." But this is simply a mistranslation. In Deuteronomy, Moses describes three sanctuary cities where murderers who accidentally kill someone can go for refuge, safe from harassment from the injured family. So the passage really means "murderers who accidentally kill someone," not "assassin who will assassinate," a very different meaning. Other mistranslations in the Drosnin book are:

"After the death of Prime Minister" for;
"after the death of Abraham"

"July to Amman" for
"You will be my people. I am your God."
"Code will save" for
"the men numbered by Moses"

■ **Poor Statistical Analysis**—What words should be related? For example, Eichmann was found near Auschwitz? Was that significant? What about Hitler? What about Holocaust or its Hebrew equivalent Hashoah? Almost any German name of World War II vintage would be credited with a success. In some cases Hebrew dates were used (e.g., 5705 was 1945, but 19 was used for Oklahoma City bombing on April 19.)

■ **Didn't Follow Protocol of 1994 Study**—The 1994 paper analyzed minimal skip distances in the ELS, but Drosnin used any skip that was convenient. No scientific basis was found for that assumption.

■ **Common coincidences**—Many of the occurrences found by Drosnin are just common coincidences. He challenged anyone to find assassinated premiers in Moby Dick. McKay found 13, including Samoza surrounded by gun (backwards), dies, and hewasshot; igandhi (Indira Gandhi) intersects thebloodydeed; among others.

## Conclusions

So far, the 1994 Statistical Science paper is an enigma. No one has yet come up with a satisfactorily good explanation of the results of that paper. However, as for the *Bible* and the hidden messages contained therein, the analysis to date has been too sloppy to carry any real conviction whether there is or is not such a correlation.

## Postscript

Each year the Annals of Improbable Research awards the Ig Nobel prizes to those researchers whose research "should not or could not be reproduced." The 1997 Ig Nobel prize for literature was awarded to Doron Witztum, Eliyahu Rips, Yoav Rosenberg, and Michael Drosnin for their work described in this paper.

## For Further Reading

*Bible Code: Cracked and Crumbling*, and *The Secret Code Hoax* by Ronald S. Hendel

*Snake Oil for Sale*, by Shlomo Sternberg, Bible Review vol. 13, No. 4 (August, 1997) 22-25.

"Hidden Messages and the Bible Code" by David E. Thomas, *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 21, no. 6, (November, 1997) 30-36.