

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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Volume 12 Number 3

www.ntskeptics.org

March 1998

In this month's issue:

- [A Skeptical Look at The Bible Code](#)
- [The third eye](#)

A Skeptical Look at The Bible Code

Greg Aicklen's Examination of a Popular Phenomenon
by Danny Barnett

The North Texas Skeptics were pleased to present Dr. Greg Aicklen, who presented the lecture "The Bible Code: Examination of a Popular Phenomenon" during our meeting on February 14, 1998. Many of you may be aware of a book called The Bible Code written by reporter Michael Drosnin that has created a bit of controversy in some religious circles recently. Drosnin's book, which is based on a five-year investigation, claims that there is a special coding sequence that hides many prophecies in the first five books of the Bible, collectively known as the Torah. Although there are other researchers such as Ed Vallowe and Noah Hutchings who claim to have found codes or numerical patterns in the King James Version of the Bible, the encrypted prophecies detailed in The Bible Code were apparently lifted straight out of the original Hebrew text of the Torah.

Among the hidden prophecies listed in The Bible Code are predictions of the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy of the United States and of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel, the collision between Jupiter and the Shoemaker-Levy comet, the Oklahoma City bombing, and World War II. Many Christians are stating that these hidden prophecies are proof that a divine hand guided the writing of the Bible, especially since Drosnin is apparently an atheist who claims he was trying to debunk the idea of Biblical encryption.

Why the search for hidden codes in the Bible? Aicklen, who has a Ph.D. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Texas at Dallas, states that there is a premise among searchers that the Torah "contains literally all truth"; it just needs to be discovered. In the occult Jewish tradition of Kabbalah, there are 84 coding schemes that supposedly exist in the Torah, one of which is covered by Drosnin in his book. Also, computer technology has advanced to a point where computers are extremely fast and relatively cheap, making number-crunching and sequencing less of a chore.

The Kabbalist code described by Drosnin in The Bible Code is called Equidistant Letter Sequencing, or ELS for short. This code was apparently discovered by Eliyahu Rips, who described the process in a paper co-written with fellow code researchers Doron Witzum and Yoav Rosenberg. The paper, "Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis," was published in the August 1994 issue of the journal Statistical Science.

So what is an ELS? Aicklen provided a quick example. Take an English-language sentence well known by many typing students:

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.

Next, strip out all word divisions and punctuation so that you have nothing but letters:

thequick**br**own**fo**xjumpedoverthelazydog

At this point you may notice that some of the letters are in bold type and some are in italics. This is to point out words that have been found in the string of letters through ELS. The bold-type letters (**b o n o**) spell the Latin word **bono**, which means "good." The italicized letters (*p o r e*) spell out the word *pore*. Examining both words will indicate that the letters in both words are separated from each other by a mathematical sequence; the letters in **bono** are separated by a distance, or "skip," of 2, which means that every second letter falls into the sequence. The letters in *pore* are separated by a skip of 3.

The code researchers, Rips, Witzum, and Rosenberg, performed this experiment with the original Hebrew text of the Torah, claiming that the hidden prophecies began to reveal themselves when the Torah text was arranged in two-dimensional matrices with the ELS words arranged in vertical order. According to Aicklen, they acknowledged that "enormous quantities" of words and expressions could be constructed from mathematical progressions, and they also conceded that many of the words and expressions that are found occur due to chance. At the same time, however, these researchers also claimed that natural language places related words close together, and by arranging Torah text in 2D matrices and defining "distance" between any two equidistant letter sequences, people could "test whether the ELSs in a given text may contain `hidden information.'"

Aicklen showed how to create the desired tableau. Refer back to the earlier example where *pore* was taken from the truncated text stream. The letters in the desired word are found at n , $n+d$, $n+2d$, and so on until $n+(k-1)d$, where n is that starting point of the word, d is the distance or skip present in the ELS, and k is the length of the word.

Thus, *pore* has the following values:

- $n = 20$ (The character *p* is the 20th character in the string)
- $d = 3$ (It is a distance of 3 characters from one ELS character to another)
- $k = 4$ (The word *pore* is 4 characters long)

Once an ELS is found, the text should be arranged in rows of equal length so that the characters in the ELS appear as adjacent letters in a vertical column. Once this is done, the search for other ELS's "near" the first ELS can begin. Let's try it with the word *pore* that we found in the earlier sample.

As you can see from the sample tableau, the word *era* has been found with these values:

$n = 18$ (The character *e* is the 18th character in the string)

$d = 5$ (It is a distance of 5 characters from one ELS character to another)

$k = 3$ (The word **era** is 3 characters long)

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f o x j u m p
j u m p e d o
p E d o v e r
o v e R t h e
r t h e l A z
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So how could this be used to find ancient prophecies in the Old Testament? Aicklen then covered the necessary steps developed by the researchers for such an experimental procedure:

- Define the "distance" between a pair of words.

- Define statistics expressing how close words are to each other as a whole.
- Choose a sample set of word pairs to search for in each text.
- Determine if the word pairs in the sample set are in some way "unusually close."
- Compare with a control.

Following these steps, Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg created a list of 32 famous personalities, all of whom appear in the Encyclopedia of Great Men in Israel. Each person had to have identifiable birth and death dates and between 1.5 and 3 columns of text in the Encyclopedia. The names were then checked in the Torah, using Leo Tolstoy's novel War and Peace as the control. According to the researchers, the death and birth rates were too close to the personalities' minimal skip ELS for coincidence, and the results for War and Peace were much poorer than the results in the Torah. Case closed.

Or was it? Aicklen pointed out that skeptics such as Brendan McKay, Barry Simon, and Dror Bar-Natan had found problems with the results and methods of Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg. These skeptics pointed out that Equidistant Letter Sequencing is a phenomenon that is common to many languages and hardly exclusive to Hebrew. They also stated that Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg had previous knowledge of the probable success of searches for the sample they used, and the skeptics also claimed that the researchers may have massaged their data to achieve the desired result.

McKay, Simon, and Bar-Natan conducted their own hunt for ELSs using the same samples, methodology, and control used by Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg. Their results seemed to indicate that the War and Peace results were similar to the Torah results, rather than being poorer than the Torah results. Note that the skeptics used the same methodology, the same list of personalities, and the same rules as the Bible Code researchers — and came up with dramatically different results. According to Aicklen, the skeptics then asked Witzum whether he and the other researchers were now willing to claim Tolstoy was a prophet.

Although Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg officially claimed that they had no prior knowledge that may have biased their selection of sample search pairs, an audio recording of a May 1985 speech by Rips has been uncovered. In the speech, Rips described an ELS/Bible Code experiment in which he used 20 rabbis. Of the 20, 15 of them were used by Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg in the experiment detailed in the August 1994 issue of Statistical Science. Aicklen stated that the researchers invalidated the experiment by "loading the dice"; their list of names was tainted from a statistical point of view.

The experiment by Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg figured prominently in Michael Drosnin's 1997 book, The Bible Code. However, Aicklen has noted that Drosnin's book completely disregards all attempts at scientific methodology, that it drops too many names, and that all of the other players — including Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg — agree that Drosnin's assertions in The Bible Code are groundless. This didn't stop Drosnin from making this statement in the June 9, 1997, issue of Newsweek: "When my critics find a message about the assassination of a prime minister encrypted in Moby Dick, I'll believe them."

Brendan McKay, one of the skeptics who critiqued the work of Witzum, Rips, and Rosenberg, rose to Drosnin's challenge. He found the sequences igandhi and thebloodydeed in the text of Moby Dick. The ELS igandhi is short for Indira Gandhi, a Prime Minister of India who was assassinated on October 31, 1984. That revelation was just for starters. McKay also constructed two other tableaux out of the novel. One contained the sequences moawad and burstopenthe door; the other contained rene, moawad, and anexplodingbomb. These two tableaux and the sequences pointed to Rene Moawad, President of Lebanon, who was killed on November 22, 1989, when a bomb exploded beside his car.

McKay, however, wasn't finished yet. Out of a single tableau from the text of Moby Dick, he pulled the sequences preparefordeath, mlking, tenn, killedbythem, gun, and usagentdeed. These sequences appeared to point to the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., who was fatally shot in Tennessee on April 4, 1968.

During the meeting, without warning, someone in the audience who was looking through a back issue of The Skeptic claimed to find the equidistant letter sequences clinton, sex, and mon in an article by Pat Reeder. Does this mean that Reeder predicted that President Bill Clinton would be embroiled in a sex scandal involving intern Monica Lewinsky?

Aicklen decided to work up a hypothetical experiment similar to The Bible Code experiment. Take a state that issues license plates with codes of the format "XYZ 123." This will produce 17,576,000 possible plates for that one particular state. Aicklen then picked one particular license plate, GHA 039, which represents his initials and age. If he woke up in the morning and said "I think I'll see plate GHA 039 today," then walked outside and actually saw the plate on someone's car, that would be an amazing coincidence. If Aicklen were to predict seeing a new plate of his choosing each day, and then get his predictions right every single day, then he'd be on to something big. On the other hand, if Aicklen were to walk outside, see the plate GHA 039, and then "predict" that he'd see it, that's no big deal.

Taking it a little further, Aicklen created a scenario where he would try to determine if there was a "pattern" to the assignment of license plates around the state. Making a "random" selection of cars around the state, he would notice that cars "near" him are much more likely to have plates that start with "G," and "distant" cars have no discernible pattern. Is Aicklen on to something?

Aicklen took a skeptical look at such an experiment, asking if the selection of license plates was truly random. The criteria for selecting license plates would need to be examined, and if another sample were to be run with different plates, he would want to see if the supposed pattern was still evident. Aicklen had a few other questions for his own experiment. What happens if the experiment is run around someone else's house? How would distance be defined for the purposes of this experiment? Finally, is there any reason for Aicklen to wish that his house is special with respect to license plates?

Summing everything up, Aicklen stated that any evidence for a true Torah code is dubious at best, and that genuine code researchers consider Drosnin's The Bible Code and similar works to be nonsense. He also stated that the existence of a Torah code would not prove the existence of God; at the same time, the lack of a Torah code is not significant to the question of whether or not God exists, let alone had a hand in writing the Bible.

Thanks, Greg, for a wonderful and thought-provoking presentation! We hope to hear from you again soon.

The third eye

By Pat Reeder

As I write this, news has just arrived that the Earth will not be destroyed by an asteroid in 2028, as was breathlessly reported two days ago (and it seemed plausible, since *Inside Edition's* Deborah Norville said the word had come from top "astrologers"). There was a full day's worth of scary pontificating, but the very next day, NASA announced that their more accurate calculations showed that the asteroid will miss us by 600,000 miles. See how math helps, kids? So the good news is that the world will not be destroyed, at least by this particular asteroid. The bad news is that means I have to write another column. Damned unreliable space rocks!

Oh, well, at least I have more good news to kick it off with: the skeptics got a little ink in the national press today. This being a Friday the 13th with a full moon and a lunar eclipse on the same weekend as the Ides of March, A.P. reported that the chronically superstitious were feeling mighty shaky (those who didn't kill themselves over that asteroid story, anyway). A.P. also mentioned that some people from the *Skeptical Inquirer* marked the day by throwing away chain letters, walking under a ladder and smashing a large mirror. *SI* spokesman Matt Nisbet explained that it was to call attention to their crusade to promote rational thought based on reason, evidence and logic, though they probably didn't look very rational while they were doing all that stuff. The article did not mention whether anyone bumped his head on the ladder or cut himself on the broken glass.



Scientology was much in the news this past month, thanks to a story that first appeared in *George* magazine, suggesting that President Clinton had intervened on behalf of Scientologists in Germany in order to win a more favorable portrayal

from Scientologist John Travolta in the movie *Primary Colors*. The White House denied it. They also denied that Clinton was planning to visit Berlin to proclaim, "Ich bin ein Scientologist!" Naturally, Republicans demanded an investigation. Personally, I'd just like to know how they got tax-exempt status.

Still, despite its political intrigue and Hollywood star power, that was not my favorite Scientology Moment of the Month. That came as I waited for a haircut and had no other choice than to leaf through *US* magazine. There, I read a forceful defense of Scientology by noted theologian Jenna Elfman of *Dharma & Greg*, who said that people who attack it don't know the facts and should "read a book." When asked about charges that people who try to leave the group are harassed, Elfman exasperatedly replied that she couldn't possibly know about that, she's never tried to leave! May I timidly suggest that she read a Prometheus book?

For some unfathomable reason, UPN reran that ludicrous *Alien Abduction* special. Despite the fact that everyone short of Tasmanian hermits now knows it's a hoax, UPN trumpeted that they had "new footage," digitally recovered from the blank tape static (run THAT one by your friendly neighborhood video engineer!). But here's the only new information you need: the video was originally shot for a made-for-TV movie to be called *The McPherson Tapes*. Ninety-two minutes worth of footage was shot (so no wonder there's "newly recovered footage"). The actors rehearsed for two weeks before filming and had no idea that their work would be passed off as a documentary. Of course, the most unbelievable part of this story is that those people actually rehearsed for two weeks before turning in those putrid performances. I would have sworn they were cold-reading off of cue cards that were at least 200 yards away. In a thick fog.

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Those who were depressed at the debunking of the Loch Ness Monster can once again perk up: Nessie has been photographed again and is back in the news! Scottish pet food salesman and amateur photographer Richard White said he "noticed an unusual disturbance halfway across the loch" and snapped some photos. I haven't seen them yet, but a group of British bookmakers awarded him an \$825 prize for the best "Nessie" images of the year, not that there's that much competition. It's not clear whether the bookies are Nessie fans or just like to encourage public gullibility.

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For those keeping track of the Taiwanese cult who moved to Garland to await God's arrival in a flying saucer on March 31, the latest scoop is that they have caused no trouble and seem to be quite law-abiding. One neighbor even gave them the ultimate Garland compliment: "They take real good care of their lawns." And despite the fact that they are a group of Oriental cultists dressed all in white and living in Hank Hill country, they are making a sincere effort to "fit in" ...by wearing cowboy hats. And yes, they are white hats. That way, when God lands, He'll know who the good guys are.

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Princess Diana groupies who want their idol declared a saint got a boost for their cause this month with the first claim of a Diana-induced miracle. *Harper's Bizarre* fashion editor Liz Tilberis recalls that when she was battling ovarian cancer, she once had a particularly strong dose of chemotherapy and her blood cell count had dropped. Then, her pal Diana called to chat. That afternoon, a test showed her blood cell count had risen dramatically. Conveniently forgetting all that chemotherapy, Tilberis said, "I believe the princess was single-handedly responsible for getting me home to family — no one will ever convince me otherwise." So just two more miracles, and Princess Diana can officially be declared St. Diana. But I can't imagine anyone putting a St. Diana figurine on his car dashboard.

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Finally, to no one's surprise, the world appears to be getting weirder. In fact, it was four percent weirder in 1997 than in 1996, according to the Weirdness Index compiled by the British paranormal magazine, the *Fortean Times*.

The *Fortean Times* compiles this index by doing what I do: monitoring the media for goofball paranormal stories, except they take them a lot more seriously (they argue that the world is getting weirder, I argue that standards for journalism are just getting lower). Anyway, among the tales that earned 1997 its ranking as the weirdest year since the magazine began keeping records were the Heaven's Gate suicides, Princess Diana car crash conspiracy theories, cloned sheep, a panic over penis-stealing magicians in South Africa, increased UFO and Virgin Mary sightings, and a rash of British Moslems claiming to have found verses from the Koran spelled out in seeds inside "holy vegetables."

Still, I'm willing to bet that 1998 can easily surpass 1997's record Weirdness Index. It's only March, and already we have everything listed above, from the asteroid to the Garland cult, plus I haven't even mentioned Madonna morphing into an expert on spirituality. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go call some British bookmakers and check out the point spread.
