



Skeptics on the Bible Code

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In the late 1990s, a book called "The Bible Code" was published. Its author, Michael Drosnin, claimed that a high-powered computer program had uncovered a large number of secret messages in the Jewish Bible (the Christian Old Testament). The most amazing claim was that a few years before the book's publication, this program had discovered that the then Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzakh Rabin, faced assassination. Several months after Drosnin and his partners warned him, Mr Rabin was assassinated.

What are we to make of the claims in "The Bible Code"?

First, let's examine the procedure Drosnin and his partners used, and what they found.

Drosnin (from now on we'll just refer to him) took the oldest extant version of the Bible and put its words into a spreadsheet. Spaces between words weren't inserted, so the spreadsheet was a solid mass of Hebrew letters. The computer then started with a letter in the grid (letter x), then selected subsequent letters at a regular interval (interval n), forwards or backwards (x , $x + n$, $x + 2n$, $x + 3n$, and so on), searching for a word. By changing the start letter, the interval, or both, a very large number of potential words can be made.

In the case of Mr Rabin, the letters of his name occurred every eighth letter in the grid, and crossing it were letters which spelt out the word "assassinate". Nearby, a number of other words were found which all seemed to relate either to Mr Rabin or the Middle East peace process. Subsequent searches revealed all sorts of messages, which only strengthened Drosnin's claim that the Bible contained all sorts of predictions, incorporated in the Bible in such a way that only a late 20th century computer would be able to find them.

But are Drosnin's claims all they appear to be?

There are in fact several problems with the Bible Code. They include the nature of the Hebrew language, the source material, the search method and the predictions.

Unlike English, and all major European alphabets, Hebrew contains no vowels. This means that it's possible for several Hebrew words to have the same spelling. Precisely which word is meant is worked out by context. This rarely occurs in English because vowels provide variety. For example, if you add

vowels to the letters ST in English, you can get sat, set, sit, sot, suit, seat, site and soot. In other words, the nature of Hebrew means that a sequence of letters can provide a much greater number of words than an equivalent number of English letters. Also, individual words have no context except for that provided by the reader. As few non-Jewish people read Hebrew, we have to rely on Drosnin both for the translation and the context.

Drosnin claims that all original versions of the Hebrew Bible are identical. However this isn't the case. Despite all the care taken by copiers over the years, no two versions are the same: letters are changed, added or left out. All of these alterations will affect the letters used in the process described above.

The search method itself is questionable. Firstly, as mentioned above, the search method throws up enormous numbers of potential words, given that there are hundreds of thousands of letters to choose from in almost any combination. Secondly, there's no indication of how close two words must be in order to be considered related. Thirdly, because of the large pool of available words, Drosnin could keep searching for words which suit his goal until he found enough. We don't know what words he rejected. For example, there may also be words directly contradictory to the message Drosnin seeks to uncover, but we won't find that out unless we check Drosnin's claims in Hebrew.

Now let's consider predictions in general. Suppose these predictions were placed in the Bible by God, and we find them. What then? Is it possible to prevent God's predictions from coming true? What if Mr Rabin had changed his plans on the basis of Drosnin's warning? Are these people more powerful than God? Or if the predictions are always going to come true, what's the point of warning people, as we won't be able to do anything about them.

Mathematicians pointed out the problems with his maths, explaining that it was perfectly normal to find lots of words in a large, random assortment of letters. Drosnin replied that he'd believe it when his death was predicted by the same method in the classic novel "Moby Dick". But the last laugh went to the mathematicians, even though performing the task was much harder in English than in Hebrew (as described above). They duly found the words "him to have been killed" in the same location as "mdrosnin" in the text, along with the time and location of his death.

The best site which explains the problems of Drosnin's theories, including the "Moby Dick" reference, is: <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/torah.html>