



STATEMENT DB309

Back to the Future? Does “Bible Code” Offer New Clues to Coming Events?

In his new book *The Bible Code*, former *Washington Post* reporter Michael Drosnin has popularized a technology called “Equidistant Letter Sequencing” or ELS, that decodes” prophecies allegedly hidden in the Bible. It has been on *The New York Times* bestseller list for 13 weeks and currently is ranked eighth (as of September 14).

Supporters claim ELS is a breakthrough means of predicting the future. But is it real? And what does it mean for Christians and for our understanding of the Bible?

On May 30 a full page ad in *The New York Times* stated that Drosnin sent a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on September 1, 1995 warning him of assassination, based on his “decoding” of the message “assassin will assassinate” in Deuteronomy 4:12. On November 4, 1995, Rabin was killed by an Israeli student.

ELS advocates claim to be able to “break” the code allegedly existing in the original Hebrew of the Old Testament. Drosnin did not invent the technique, but relied upon the research of mathematician Eliyahu Rips of Hebrew University and physicist Doron Witztum of the Jerusalem College of Technology. Rips, Witztum, and Yoav Rosenberg published their research in *Statistical Science*, a prestigious and peer-reviewed academic journal in 1994 (with the editors making it clear they were *not* endorsing the authors’ work).

Michael Shermer, publisher of *The Skeptic* magazine, explains ELS in his review of *The Bible Code* in the *Los Angeles Times*. An ELS “technician” might program a computer to pick out every fifth or tenth letter in the book of Genesis (any number may be chosen for the “skip code,” and any book of the Bible selected). The computer then sifts through the chosen text to decipher hidden messages.

An English-language ELS example was given in *The Bible Code* press release: “**Rips explained that each code is a case of adding every fourth or twelfth letter to form a word.**” The message of the letters in bold is “READ THE CODE.”

Shermer and others note however that Hebrew contains no vowels, making the interpretive options much greater and therefore much more confusing. For example, Prime Minister Rabin’s name could have been translated “Robin,” or as many as six other ways.

Also, while Hebrew reads from right to left, Bible “decoders” have allowed themselves to move from left to right, top to bottom, and diagonally in any direction. Since diagonal lines depend on where the margin of the page ends, there is no consistent methodology for interpretation.

“Complete Nonsense” Or Proven By Events?

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Nonetheless, Rabin's assassination has led to vast speculation and excitement. As many as 30 Internet sites are devoted to ELS. Hollywood actors such as Kirk Douglas and Jason Alexander have hosted seminars. But despite one sensational prediction, not all critics are convinced. Harvard mathematics professor and Rabbi Shlomo Sternberg told *Time* that Drosnin's book is "complete nonsense." Computer Science professor Dr. Brendon McKay of Australian National University has pointed out that the Rabin prediction decoded in Deuteronomy 4:42 could read "assassin *who will be* assassinated."

Even Rips and Witztum, the original "discoverers" of ELS, are critical of Drosnin's methodology. Many evangelicals also are unconvinced. May Lou Nielsen, manager of For Heaven's Sake bookstore in Longmont, Colorado stated, "I had one customer who wanted to order 100 copies of *The Bible Code*. I told him there are serious flaws with ELS. I hate to sacrifice the sales but I also, want to have integrity in what I sell." Even Drosnin seems unclear on what the "Bible code" really means. Drosnin told TV host Oprah Winfrey in June, "I am entirely secular. I don't believe in God."

But when Oprah pressed him, he acknowledged there seems to be an intelligence that gave us the code. "There is a code, therefore there is an Encoder," he said.

In fact, ELS is simply a high-tech version of a Ouija board or tarot cards, and the biblical injunction against divination applies (Deut. 18:9-11, 2 Chron. 33:6, Isa. 2:6). Paul exhorted Timothy to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Paul intended Timothy to be an evangelist and disciple, not a Bible decoder!

Skeptic Michael Shermer concluded his review this way: "*The Bible Code* is not only an insult to science and to those who are deeply religious, it is also an insult to God."