



STATEMENT DE-269

PRACTICAL APOLOGETICS

Magic Apologetics

by **Hank Hanegraaff**

On the June 20, 1996, "Praise the Lord" television broadcast host Paul Crouch came face to face with a brand new approach to apologetics. Before the program concluded that day, he had become one of its most ardent proponents. He was so convinced of its authenticity that he immediately began to ridicule skeptics: "I think it's safe to say that the eggheads are squirming like a worm on hot ashes right now."¹

The new apologetic Crouch discovered that day is popularly referred to as "Equidistant Letter Sequencing" (ELS). I, however, prefer to call it *magic apologetics*. At first blush it appears compelling. On closer examination, it is little more than "smoke and mirrors."

Its proponents would have us believe God has encoded secret messages in Scripture that are being discovered in these last days. Grant Jeffrey, one of its staunchest supporters, calls ELS a "thrilling revelation" and "possibly the most important evidence"² for the inspiration of Scripture.

In sharp contrast, the Christian Research Institute has denounced esoteric methods of biblical interpretation such as ELS for almost four decades. Even a cursory examination of ELS unmasks it for what it is — little more than a fringe variety of Jewish mysticism (i.e., the cabala) repackaged for Christian consumption. While in the past, cabalistic interpretations of the Torah have not been taken seriously by the Christian community, Crouch and other leaders' enthusiastic endorsements are today giving it widespread credence.

Hal Lindsey, for another example, describes ELS as "one of the most exciting scientific discoveries of this century."³ Lindsey concludes that what ELS represents is nothing less than "the signature of the Divine Author." He believes this discovery by the end-time generation is precisely what Daniel was speaking of when he prophesied (12:4), "Seal up the words until the time of the end, when many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased."⁴

Cultic Counterparts. Like its older manifestation, "Bible numerics" (reading mystical numerical symbolism into Scripture), ELS is best described as a pseudoscience. World religions, such as Islam and Judaism, and cultic movements, such as the Nation of Islam and the Baha'is, have long used these methods.

Muslims have used both numerics and ELS in a vain attempt to prove that Allah is the only true God and Muhammad is his prophet. In addition, they use these methods to "prove" that Christianity is false. Jewish cabalists embrace these methods as tools for winning lapsed Jews back to the faith through the Israeli-based "evangelism" movement Aish Ha Torah (Hebrew for "Man of the Law"), which promotes ELS "Discovery Seminars" worldwide.⁵ They also use ELS to "prove" that Jesus Christ was a false Messiah.

Nation of Islam leader Louis Farakkhan applies numerics to the Washington Monument and the street grid of Washington D.C. to "prove" that the city was designed as the nerve center for a white conspiracy against people of

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African descent. Baha'is design their buildings to repeatedly replicate significant number combinations, much like an infinite hall of numeric mirrors.

Putting ELS into Perspective. As previously noted, ELS proponents believe God has encoded cryptic messages into the linear text of Scripture. These secret prophecies are said to be a "checksum," virtually undetectable prior to the advent of supercomputer technology. ELS advocates believe God preserved the exact letter sequencing of the Torah (some say the entire Masoretic text⁶) in order to spell out end-time prophetic scenarios.

ELS practitioners use computers to search Hebrew texts for letter sequences that can be compiled into intelligible messages pertaining to past events. These practitioners claim to have discovered such encoded prophecies as Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the rise of AIDS, and detailed information regarding the Holocaust.

The core problem with ELS — as with all numerics — is that its "discoveries" are far too arbitrary to be considered scientific. The following sentence will provide a clear example of the application of ELS's flawed methodology:

"Paul Crouch was the cryptic treachery encoder." A computer, searching the above sentence,⁷ discovers that the *twelfth* letter from the right is "c." *Twelve*, of course, is four times *three*, and *three* is the number of the Trinity.

Further computer analysis discovers the incredible "coincidence" that, taking a "*trinitarian*" (3 letter) leap to the left, an "r" is discovered. An esoteric code begins to emerge as the letter "i" is discovered *three* letters to the left of r.

Suddenly it dawns on the ELS practitioner that God may have encoded a message concerning CRI (Christian Research Institute) in the sentence above. With great anticipation, the search continues. Incredibly, ELS methodology discovers that the next word in the code is "yes." Even more amazing, we discover a *quadruple trinity* sequence (4 X 3 or 12) conclusion to the prophecy (i.e., nothing intelligible for the following twelve letters, a clear signal that the message is ended).

What does "CRI yes" signify? The practitioner's subjective analysis inexorably leads him to the esoteric conclusion that CRI's analysis of ELS is correct. While this example might appear outrageous, it is perfectly consistent with the application of ELS in both cultic and Christian circles. In fact, the Christian application of ELS uses even more broad-ranging parameters.

One can search left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top, or, amazingly, even in diagonal directions. The spacing between words in the "prophecy" can vary from word to word, and the intelligibility of the message can be just as obscure. It is also significant to note that *none* of the prophecies can be known *beforehand*. Jeffrey himself acknowledges that "it is impossible to extract the encoded information unless you already know what the future facts are," and "the Bible prohibits us from engaging in foretelling the future."⁸ Like Monday-morning quarterbacking, hindsight is always perfect.

ELS Unmasked. ELS can be unmasked at various levels. The following factors should be sufficient, however, to demonstrate that what we are dealing with here is magic apologetics.

First, ELS practitioners play fast and loose with facts. Through either carelessness or deliberate "spin doctoring," they engage in what magicians refer to as "future magic." In other words, sensationalistic embellishments are continually added as ELS stories circulate.

As a case in point, the original article that stimulated interest in this arcane diversion was published without claims for any religious consequences in the journal *Statistical Science* (9:3 [1994]:429-36). Subsequently a review was published in the magazine *Bible Review* (October 1995, 28-45). While virtually all of the statistical claims made for ELS are based on this article and review, Grant Jeffrey deceptively asserts⁹ that support for ELS is published "in some of the most prestigious magazines in the world,"¹⁰ including "*The British Royal Statistical Science Journal*."¹¹

Jeffrey does some further spin doctoring by telling devotees why secret messages regarding Hitler were not discovered until after he had decimated Europe and destroyed 13 million people, including six million Jews: "Could you have found out about Adolph Hitler back in 1920 if you had possessed the knowledge that these codes existed and had a computer? The answer is NO! Back in 1920, you could not have found the name 'Hitler' because Adolph's name was not 'Hitler.' He had not yet changed his name to 'Hitler.'"¹²

Jeffrey is clearly revising history. Adolph was born on April 20, 1889, with the name Hitler. In truth, it was Adolph's father (the illegitimate son of Maria Schicklgruber) who changed his name to Hitler in 1871, 18 years before Adolph's birth.

Furthermore, ELS is a rigged "game" complete with after-the-fact prophecies and self-validating "messages." Although, as in the esoteric message "CRI yes" used in my illustration above, it might be tempting to conclude that its self-validating message is "the signature of God," in reality this technique is virtually identical to those used by psychics.

Let the psychic exude an ambiguous statement such as "I see that health is a big issue in your life," and the gullible will enthusiastically "flesh-out" the details. "How in the world did you know that my father-in-law is facing cancer surgery?" they may ask, and the psychic becomes revered as someone who "knew" intimate details regarding a relative's life-threatening situation. Rarely does the unwitting subject recognize that "My dog recently died," "I'm a vegetarian," or "I'm ruining my health by smoking like a fiend" are equally valid extrapolations of the psychic's original statement.

Similarly, when ELS practitioners say that the assassination of Rabin is "embedded" in the Torah, the uninformed may well be duped into believing God has validated Scripture with such a secret message. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Using the "rigged game rules" of ELS proponents, wording extracted from the Torah, such as "Rabin, Bang, Bang," could just as easily refer to Christopher Robin's shooting his pop gun at the balloons Winnie the Pooh was holding when he floated away on the breeze in the Hundred Acre Wood! For that matter, the self-validating message could refer to the tire blow-out Batman's sidekick, Robin, experienced in the Batmobile. It could even refer to a Mafia hitman named Robino who had two successful "hits" — bang, bang. It all depends on how one validates the after-the-fact prophecies and self-validating "messages."¹³

Finally, ELS shifts the focus of biblical apologetics from the essential core of the gospel — the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4) — to esoteric speculations. The skeptical scribes and Pharisees demanded that Jesus give them a *sign* that He was the long-awaited, prophesied Messiah. Jesus didn't tell them to be patient for almost two thousand years until computers could reveal ELS. He rebuked them, saying, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matt. 12:39-40, NKJV). Jesus was speaking of His death, burial, and resurrection, and "when He had risen from the dead, His disciples remembered that He had said this to them; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had said" (John 2:22, NKJV).

Every form of apologetics must begin and eventually return to the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the most well-attested fact of ancient history. Despite the claims of men like Paul Crouch and Grant Jeffrey, those who deny the incontrovertible evidence for the Resurrection are not likely to embrace the magic and misleading apologetic of ELS.

NOTES

¹Paul Crouch, *Praise the Lord* (Santa Ana, CA: Trinity Broadcasting Network, 20 June, 1996), videotape.

²Grant Jeffrey, *The Signature of God* (Toronto: Frontier Research Publications, 1996), 202, 221.

³Hal Lindsey, *Praise the Lord* (Santa Ana, CA: Trinity Broadcasting Network, 20 June 1996), videotape.

⁴Ibid.

⁵The Movement has trained more than 40,000 people to use ELS in the Torah to "evangelize" nonreligious Jews. The Torah, also called the Pentateuch, consists of the first five books of the Old Testament.

⁶The Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible developed after the time of Christ. The rabbinical system in Judaism formally approved it, book by book, between the sixth and the eleventh centuries A.D. (See Samuel Macauley Jackson, ed., *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint], II:94-98.)

⁷The ELS methodology does not take into consideration standard Hebrew text format, including word separation, direction, or punctuation. Since there are no vowels in Old Testament Hebrew, there is even greater liberty.

⁸Jeffrey, 218.

⁹The *only* statistical journal in which the article has appeared or in which the authors discuss ELS is the *Statistical Science* article already cited.

¹⁰Grant Jeffrey, *Praise the Lord* (Santa Ana, CA: Trinity Broadcasting Network, 12 December 1996), videotape.

¹¹Ray Gano, "Interview with Grant Jeffrey," *PropheZine News*, n.d., 36.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³Rabin, Robin, and Robino would be spelled the same in a nonvoweled language such as Hebrew.