

Introduction

In the early 1990s, Israeli mathematician Eliyahu Rips and two colleagues, Doron Witzum and Yoav Rosenberg, announced that they had found a secret code in the Hebrew Bible. Using a computer, they selected Hebrew letters occurring at regular intervals in the text of Genesis, such as every fourth letter, then every fifth letter, and so on. Searching through the long character strings they had compiled, they found the names of nearly three dozen prominent rabbis from past centuries.¹

The findings of the three Israeli scientists touched off an avalanche of books and articles by others who likewise claimed that acrostic codes in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament either confirm the divine inspiration of the Bible or foretell the future or both. The public appetite for Bible code speculation has been dampened only slightly by the fact that generating myriads of random letters stands a good chance of producing words and phrases related to whatever subject the “code breakers” are interested in. While it would be unfair to dismiss the original work of Rips offhandedly, anyone who investigates the “skip sequence” method he uses will find reason to remain skeptical.

The attention lavished on “Bible codes” is disconcerting not just because the Bible’s actual language fails to hint at the existence of such codes or even because sensational theories tend to reinforce skepticism toward religion in general and the Bible in particular. It is frustrating as well because the Scriptures do contain a kind of code, explicit in some passages and latent in others, that is more profound in its implications

1 Eliyahu Rips *et al.*, “Equidistant Letter Sequences in the Book of Genesis,” *Statistical Science* 9, No. 3 (August, 1994).

than anything churned out by letter-counting computers. I am referring to typological prophecy, a method of foreshadowing in which characters and circumstances early in a narrative portray what will occur later.

Typology at first looks unpromising as an area of study because it can be—and too often has been—whimsically subjective. Representation of one thing by another can be read into almost any literary work or set of circumstances. Jacob shepherding his flock in the Old Testament might represent Jesus shepherding the church in the New, but equally St. George battling the dragon might represent Winston Churchill confronting the Nazi threat, or any number of other historical situations.

By treating the Bible's language as figurative, early church fathers were able to make it say nearly anything they wanted it to. Third-century bishop Origen of Alexandria was so imaginative in his symbolic reconstructions that, as one scholar put it, the Bible in Origen's hands became a "divine crossword puzzle" that no one but Origen could decipher.²

Typology need not be arbitrary, however. An example of controlled use of types is Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel. Jesus tells his audience about a farmer who planted and cultivated a field of wheat, explaining later that he has the church in mind. Between the tale of the farmer in verses 24–30 and the historical fulfillment in verses 40–43, he identifies his symbols: "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom" (vv. 37–39). Here we have the ingredients of an informal code, including a key that allows us to align the encrypted and decrypted forms of the message based on something other than vague resemblance.

Might coded and decoded messages occur more widely separated in biblical books as far apart in time of composition and content as Genesis is from Matthew? And might the "key," or list of symbol identifiers, consist not of a single passage but of verses scattered throughout the Bible text? In this book I argue that the Bible does indeed contain the three elements of a literary code: encrypted narratives from the Hebrew Scriptures, decrypted messages in the New Testament, and symbol identifiers that relate the first class of material to the second.

To distance the discussion from subjective interpretation, I will

2 R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959), 248.

identify features of biblical typology that can be sought in non-biblical literature and must be found there if type coding is to be explained other than by divine inspiration. Mathematical precision may not be possible and judgments are involved, but they are judgments that can be recommended on reasonable grounds to anyone who is willing to examine the evidence, regardless of whether they are otherwise inclined to believe the Bible or the claims of Christianity.

To say that coded alignment between sections of the Bible can be evaluated objectively is not to deny that it has spiritual implications. As a Christian I see prophetic foreshadowing as a confirmation of the New Testament gospel about Jesus. Faith may not be a cold decision comparable to solving an equation, but neither is it raw emotional heat detached from facts.

Each of us charts his or her spiritual course by consulting the constellation of our personal experience, taking into account our knowledge of the world, the testimony of our conscience, our appreciation of the beautiful, and our sense of wonder at the awe-inspiring. A single class of evidence, such as typological coding, is rarely decisive when it comes to religious belief. But we will make a wiser decision for having explored a part of the spiritual landscape neglected even by most scholars.

The question of the Bible's status is especially important given the challenge to belief posed by the social and intellectual climate of our time. Whatever magnetism the gospel may exert on our spiritual compasses is opposed by powerful forces. In addition to being politically incorrect, the Bible is likely to be seen by educated people as scientifically uninformed and historically questionable. If those liabilities were not enough to savage its credibility, the Bible comes across as overbearing, particularly on the subject of sexual morals, to a society in pursuit of guilt-free gratification.

“You say, ‘The way of the LORD is not right,’” God tells the people of Israel, acknowledging their distaste for his standard of virtue, and then counters, “Is My way not right? Is it not your ways that are not right?”³ If the message of the Scriptures about the relationship between God and man—about the toxic effects of sin and a divine rescue operation through Jesus—is true in spite of being wrapped in what strikes our modern sensibilities as unattractive packaging, we must come to terms

3 Ezek 18:25 NASB.

with it. The study of biblical type coding is worth the effort for that reason alone, but it pays dividends as well by enlivening passages of Scripture that seldom get a second look.

In the New Testament the apostle Paul says that he and other Christian ministers are stewards of God's mysteries, the Greek *mysterion* here referring neither to an incomprehensible paradox nor to a secret intended only for the few but to a divine truth so surprising that it requires specific disclosure.⁴ That kind of mystery might originally be hidden in what the Hebrew Bible calls a "riddle," *chiydab*, that is, a saying that alludes to something beyond the concrete sense of the words.⁵ In that case, the revelation of the mystery would also be the solution to the riddle. Though the riddle was too difficult for us to solve without the answer in hand, we could see afterward that the answer was present in the riddle just as meaning was present in Egyptian hieroglyphics before the discovery of the Rosetta Stone.

With these thoughts in mind concerning mysteries, riddles, and unexpected solutions, we are ready to begin an investigation of prophetic types.

4 1 Cor. 4:1.

5 Prov. 1:6.