

Focus on the Kingdom

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Magazines like this aim to be provocative. Our experience has taught us to be less than happy with the theological status quo. Being provocative, however, does not mean that our purpose is not constructive. Our hope is to bring our readers' thoughts into conformity with the mind and spirit of the historical and risen Jesus, Israel's Messiah destined yet to appear on earth in fulfillment of the divine, Messianic program and to produce the long-awaited "restoration of all things" (Acts 3:21).

In order to trouble the comfortable (constructively), we must "rattle the theological cage" of any who accept uncritically what they hear in church. There is truth in the remark of the late Robert Shaw, distinguished choral conductor and son of a Baptist preacher, that "church often seemed to require checking one's brains at the door."

Many who enter the door of a "Lutheran" or "Calvinistic" gathering (both these names are massively influential in "Bible-believing" congregations of all sorts) seem unaware of important elements of the legacy bequeathed by these Reformation heroes. Luther, for example, had little regard for the letter written by Jesus' half-brother James. He called it "an epistle of straw," because it did not seem to contain Luther's favorite theological idea, "justification by faith alone." John Calvin wrote a commentary on the New Testament, but not on the Book of Revelation — those twenty-two chapters of prophecy which "God gave to Jesus" (1:1). Calvin was much less enthusiastic about Jesus as reported in Matthew, Mark and Luke, compared with John: "The doctrine which points out to us the power and the benefit of the coming Christ, is far more clearly exhibited by John than by the synoptists. The latter exhibit Christ's body but John his soul." Luther revealed his mind in regard to the Apocalypse (Book of Revelation) thus: "Everyone thinks of the Book of Revelation whatever his spirit imparts. My spirit cannot adapt itself to this book, and a sufficient reason why I do not esteem it highly is that *Christ is neither taught nor recognized in it*, which is what an Apostle ought before all things to do." In 1545 Luther printed the Book of Revelation with Hebrews, James and Jude as an appendix to the New Testament.

Zwingli, another leading reformer, regarded Revelation as "not a biblical book."

The Book of Revelation, as is well known, issues the direst warnings about any who would propose to add to or take away from its unique Christian message. Luther, we repeat, thought that Christ "was not taught in it" — this despite its formal opening statement that it is a divinely given communication, from God to Jesus, for the benefit and blessing of all those who read it and preserve its precious content (1:1-3). The Apocalypse provides in fact a brilliant culmination of the entire biblical story of God's intention to intervene by sending Jesus to establish the Kingdom of God on earth. And believing in that Kingdom is the first condition, according to Jesus, for entrance into it when it comes. Revelation therefore is very much germane to the Christian gospel. It is disconcerting to know, therefore, that Luther judged that Christ was not taught in its pages. We suspect a dangerous anti-Semitic tendency at work here. The Jewishness of Jesus and his Gospel can be more easily soft-pedaled if one avoids the Old Testament, Matthew, Mark and Luke and Revelation

John Calvin saw fit to authorize, in an act of barbarous cruelty, the judicial murder of a young biblical scholar and theologian, Michael Servetus, who challenged him on the issue of the Trinity. He used the strong arm of the Roman Catholic Church, known also for its inquisitorial fury, which sentenced multitudes of helpless non-Catholics to extermination. All this is history (from the lessons of which we are meant to learn), and a clear testimony, one would think, that these forms of institutionalized state religions — or at least their leaders — had lost touch with their non-violent Jewish founder, the Messiah.

Historians of recent years have come to realize that Hitlerite anti-Semitism has roots in the Protestant reformation. What evidence of the spirit of Jesus is there in the following outrageous condemnation of Jews?

In This Issue

Hidden "Codes" in the Biblical Text?	3
Comments	7

“What then shall we Christians do with this damned, rejected race of Jews? Since they live among us and we know about their lying and blasphemy and cursing, we cannot tolerate them if we do not wish to share in their lies, curses, and blasphemy...First their synagogues should be set on fire, and whatever does not burn up should be covered over with dirt so that no one may ever see a cinder or stone of it...Secondly, their homes should likewise be broken down and destroyed. For they perpetrate the same things that they do in their synagogues. For this reason they ought to be put under one roof or in a stable, like gypsies, in order that they may realize that they are not masters in our land, as they boast, but miserable captives. Thirdly, they should be deprived of their prayer books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught. Fourthly, their rabbis must be forbidden under threat of death to teach any more. Fifthly, passport and traveling privileges should be absolutely forbidden to the Jews. For they have no business in the rural districts since they are not nobles, nor officials, nor merchants, nor the like. Let them stay at home...To sum up, dear princes, and nobles who have Jews in your domains, if this advice of mine does not suit you, then find a better one so that you may all be free of this insufferable, devilish burden, the Jews” (Martin Luther, *Against the Jews and Their Lies*, 1542).

It is hard for us to believe that sound Christian theology can emerge from a mind as distorted as this. Indeed such antichristian ravings might be expected to produce a twisted gospel, and the evidence is plentiful that they did. Luther says:

“John’s Gospel, the epistles of Paul, especially Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and I Peter — these are the books which show you Christ and teach all that is needful and blessed for you to know, even if you never see or hear any other book, or any other doctrine. Therefore the epistle of James is a mere epistle of straw, since it has no character of the gospel in it” (*Preface to the New Testament*, 1522).

The point that Luther missed is that the Gospel foundation is most clearly laid in the three corroborating accounts of the ministry of Jesus. The books which Luther singles out contain the Gospel, of course, but when severed from their foundation in the synoptic accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke) of the Gospel preaching of Jesus himself they can be misunderstood. Would that Luther built his thesis on the important statement of Hebrews 2:3: “Salvation was first preached by Jesus,” and of I Timothy 6:3:

Any who deprecate the words of Jesus are “worse than ignorant.”

The unfortunate results of Luther’s arbitrary selection of Paul over Jesus are fully reflected in today’s cherished church tradition. The Christian Gospel, it is widely now held, is summed up in what *happened to Jesus, not what he preached and taught*. Thus Billy Graham announces: “Jesus came to do three days work: to die, be buried and to rise.” But would Jesus have agreed? “I came to preach the Gospel about the Kingdom of God: That is the reason why God commissioned me” (Luke 4:43). For the space of 25 chapters in Matthew, Mark and Luke Jesus is found *preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom as the saving message, without, at that stage, saying anything explicitly about his death and resurrection*. Moreover the Apostles, the seventy and other individuals are sent out to proclaim the very same saving Gospel about the Kingdom. Understanding of the Gospel of the Kingdom is indeed the “sacred secret” which distinguishes the followers of Jesus from the unbelieving masses. Listen to Jesus in Mark 4:11, 12: “You [disciples] can know the secret about the Kingdom of God, but to other people I tell everything by using parables, so that: ‘They will look and look, but they will not learn. They will listen and listen but they will not understand.’ *If they did learn and understand, they would repent and be forgiven.*” The same absolute insistence on an intelligent reception of the Gospel *of the Kingdom* as Jesus preached it — and as the indispensable prerequisite for a relationship with Jesus — is reported by Matthew (13:11-15): “*You* have been chosen to know the secrets about the Kingdom of Heaven...They see, but they don’t really see. They hear but they don’t really hear or understand...For the minds of this people have become stubborn. They do not hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes...Otherwise they might really understand in their minds and come back to me and be healed. *You* have been chosen to know the secrets about the Kingdom of God.” Luke 8:11-12: “The seed is God’s Message...but the Devil comes and snatches it away from their minds so they cannot *believe it and be saved.*” Remember again that Jesus is not here talking about his death and resurrection (incorporated, of course, later into the Gospel), but about the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, the one and only Gospel for all.

Paul can be badly misunderstood if read from Romans only, without his essential background in the Hebrew Bible and in the Gospel preaching of his master, Jesus. Paul can be twisted beyond recognition

when isolated texts in Romans are presented as the Christian Gospel, without reference to the plain account of Paul's preaching in Acts. "For three months he argued and debated the Kingdom of God" (19:8). He preached the Gospel of grace which Paul defined immediately as the preaching of the Gospel *about the Kingdom* (Acts 20:24, 25). Paul spent from dawn to dusk offering Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom to Jews, some of whom heard and believed and some responded with the same dullness of intelligence about which Jesus had spoken so eloquently. Finally Paul took *the very same Gospel about the Kingdom to Gentiles*, encouraged by the hope that they, despite their unfamiliarity with the concept of the Messianic Kingdom, would listen and be saved (Acts 28:23-31).

But Luther diverts us almost exclusively to Romans and Galatians, for our understanding of the Gospel. Something is amiss and in need of restoration. F.C. Grant, a brilliant commentator on the history of religious ideas, notes:

"The theological basis of the Reformation was Paulinism, chiefly as understood by Luther and Calvin, not the teachings of the Gospels, which were demonstrably Jewish in tone as well as in language and presuppositions...Theologians begin with Paul and the 'gospel' means for them the seventh chapter of Romans...[Thus the Gospel] is no longer the teaching of Jesus, but the interpretation of Jesus, chiefly his death and resurrection...The consequences of this misinterpretation are far-reaching, not only for Jews but also for Christians" (F.C. Grant, D.D., *The Earliest Gospel*, pp. 256, 258.). It is all part and parcel of a chronic Gentile failure to understand the Jew Jesus and his "Jewish" Gospel offered graciously to every human person.

We think that it is more than clear that fundamental elements of the Christian Gospel were ditched when the "founding fathers" of the Reformation, while giving up one dogma, the Roman Catholic, substituted another. This was based on an innate, Gentile anti-Jewish prejudice, which flared up at times into violent rhetoric, or, in the case of Calvin, into an act of murder when the doctrine of the Trinity, about which Jesus said nothing, was challenged. Had the Jewish Jesus and his Messianic Message of the Kingdom been the object of the reformers' efforts, things would have been very different, and the denominational chaos of our times might have been significantly reduced.

Happily there are some signs of recovery. A kind professor of New Testament in Canada wrote to encourage us, expressing his judgment that the

"theological enterprise as we know it today is rather smug about being convinced of its own maturity, when it is in need of much work in order that we may begin to think clearly. What you are doing strikes me as a very important contribution." A professor from the University of Saarland, a small section of whose book on the doctrine of God we translated in last month's *Focus*, is boldly telling us (not a moment too early) that it makes little sense to impose the dogma of the Trinity on churchgoers (much less to murder them if they don't believe it) when Jesus shows no sign of having believed this post-biblical view of God, which arose as a mixing of the original faith with paganism and polytheism. (For all our readers who can work with a German text we thoroughly recommend Karl-Heinz Ohlig's *Ein Gott in Drei Personen: Vom Vater Jesu zum Mysterium der Trinität*, Matthias-Grünewald Verlag, 2000.) ☐

Hidden "Codes" in the Biblical Text?

by David Maas

Introduction

During the last decade the notion that hidden codes are "embedded" in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament (OT) has become of great interest to evangelical and some Jewish circles. The idea has grown sufficiently in popularity to spawn over two dozen books (including at least one *New York Times* bestseller), several commercially available software packages (for "decoding" the codes), a number of television interviews and program episodes about the code, and at least one commercially viable Hollywood movie.

There are different nuances and complexities to this Code depending on which proponent one listens to, but the underlying methodology is quite simple. The Code is referred to as "Equidistant Letter Sequences," or ELS. The theory is that hidden words and sentences can be found "embedded" in the Hebrew text of the OT by counting Hebrew letters at equally spaced intervals. That is, a person can locate certain meaningful words or phrases, such as "hammer" and "anvil," if he examines the letters at sequences that were equally spaced in the Hebrew text. Thus, "if he found the first letter of a significant word such as *Torah*, and then, by skipping forward seven letters he found the second letter of the word *Torah*, he would continue to skip forward the same

number of letters to see whether or not the complete word *Torah* was spelled out in the text at equally spaced intervals.”¹

The classic example used to demonstrate ELS occurs in Gen. 1:1-5a. Starting with the last letter of the first word of the Bible, the *tau* roughly corresponding to our “t,” and counting forward in intervals of forty-nine characters, one discovers that the Hebrew word for “instruction” or “law” (*torah*) is spelled out every fiftieth letter.² We will return to this example in a moment.

The relatively recent awareness of the Code is due to technological advances. Prior to the advent of the modern computer it was extremely tedious to find such “codes” by counting Hebrew characters manually (the basic thought that “hidden codes” of various types exist in the Hebrew text goes back at least to the *Kabbalah* of medieval Jewish mysticism³). Yet today computers running appropriate software can quickly scan the Hebrew text and detect a variety of “embedded messages” (several such programs can be downloaded from the Internet). By using computers Code proponents claim to have discovered thousands of words and sentences “embedded” in most or all sections of the OT.

The import assigned to the ELS codes is that their existence “proves” that the Bible, at least the OT, is “divine rather than human in origin” (some Code proponents also claim to have discovered messages “embedded” in the Greek text of the NT⁴). Because numerous authors wrote the OT over a period of about one thousand years, it is for all practical purposes impossible for thousands of coded messages based on ELS to have been “encoded” in the OT text by human design. Therefore, the argument goes, the only reasonable conclusion is that the Code (and thus the OT) is divine or supra-human in origin.

Scholars of various disciplines have offered a variety of criticisms of the Code. Mathematicians argue that statistically such “codes” or patterns will occur by chance in any text of similar length to the OT, particularly one that includes no vowels as in the Hebrew text.⁵ Hebrew grammarians point out the liberties that Code proponents take with the consonantal Hebrew text. In biblical Hebrew vowels were not written, only consonants. Vowels were

supplied when someone read the text. In many cases *which* vowels are supplied affects not only pronunciation but also the meaning of a word. For example, the common Hebrew noun for “word” (*dabar*) is written with the consonants *d-b-r*, the two vowels (*-a-a-*) being supplied by the reader. Yet the same three consonants supplied instead with the vowels *-e-e-* (*deber*) form a word meaning “pestilence.” This and other characteristics of the Hebrew language make it fairly easy to find or force specific meanings into a given string of consonants.⁶ Others point to the failure of Code proponents to consider the thousands of textual variants that exist among the various manuscripts of the OT. Variant readings that add to or delete letters from the Hebrew text, whether or not they change the substantive meaning of a passage, will certainly affect any “Code” based on counting character intervals between letters.

But there is one problem with the Code that completely invalidates it. First we must ask the question: do we today have a version of the Hebrew text that is letter-for-letter the same as the text *as originally written*?

A Basic Premise

By its very nature the ELS Code demands the acceptance of an essential presupposition, namely that the Hebrew text we have today is *letter-for-letter precisely* the same as the text originally penned by the various authors of the OT. That is, in order for the Code to work, not only must our present Hebrew text preserve the same number of characters as contained in the original, but the letters also must be in the same *order* as first written. This necessity is easily demonstrated with a simple example. In the character string “sdwdClko wOqwo dDpo kjEmnx” the word “code” is found by using every fifth letter. However, by simply inserting the single character “e” after the “c” (“sdwdCelko W^oqwo D^dpo kJ^emnx”) my “code” now produces the nonsensical word “cwdj.” Hence my Code is invalidated by a change of one or more characters. The thesis that today we have a pristine copy of the original Hebrew text is the issue upon which the validity of the Code stands or falls.

Code proponents instinctively understand the necessity of accepting this premise in order for the Code to work. Thus they either state or infer that the Hebrew text we have today has been preserved without change or error since its inception. Note the following comments:

¹ Grant Jeffrey, *The Signature of God*, 255-256.

² Chuck Missler, *The Cosmic Codes*, 126-129.

³ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 337-343.

⁴ Grant Jeffrey, *The Mysterious Bible Codes*, 169-179.

⁵ John Weldon, *Decoding the Bible Code*, 94.

⁶ Phil Stanton, *The Bible Code: Fact or Fake?* 35-38.

“The three *Torahs* in use worldwide among the Jews — the Ashkenazi, the Sephardi, and the Yemenite — have only nine letter-level variations *total* in the entire 304,805 letters of the text!”⁷

“Details of today’s world are encoded in a text that has been set in stone for hundreds of years, and has existed for thousands of years. There is a complete version from 1008 AD that is nearly the same, and fragments of all but one book of the entire *Old Testament* have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are more than 2000 years old.”⁸

“Jesus Christ, Himself, affirmed that the actual letters composing the Scriptures were directly inspired by God and were preserved in their precise order throughout eternity.”⁹

“All Bibles in the original Hebrew language that now exist are the same letter for letter.”¹⁰

“When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, including the complete scroll of Isaiah, the most remarkable aspect was the *absence* of discrepancies when compared with our current copies of Isaiah. Only a handful of single-letter or punctuation differences were found! It was this rigor that has preserved the remarkable encodings that are still with us today.”¹¹

In several of the preceding quotations the key point is missed. The question is not whether all present versions of the Hebrew text are in agreement, but whether or not they preserve the character arrangement as originally written. Due to the work of a group of Jewish scribes known as *Masorettes* (from which the name of the present Hebrew text, the *Masoretic Text*, is derived) the Hebrew text we use today was indeed “set in stone” hundreds of years ago. The *Masorettes* established an elaborate system of regulations governing the copying of OT manuscripts. They also fixed the meaning of words by inserting vowels amongst the consonants. Their efforts were so successful that textual variants between medieval manuscripts and those printed today are rare. However, the work of the *Masorettes* occurred between approximately 600 AD and 950 AD.¹² What of the centuries prior to that period? A fundamental goal of the *Masorettes* was to establish a standard Hebrew text from among at least three competing older textual

traditions, each with its own set of variant readings numbering in the thousands if not tens of thousands. Few of these textual variants affected the substance of the OT. Most involved differences of spelling and the like that would, however, affect *the number and order of characters*.

As to the claim that the Isaiah scroll found at Qumran contained “only a handful of single-letter or punctuation differences,” the statement is simply false. Over forty-five hundred spelling variants exist between the Isaiah scroll and the *Masoretic Text*.¹³ And the claim that the oldest complete manuscript of the OT (1008 AD – *Codex Leningradensis*¹⁴) is “nearly the same” as the OT books found among the Dead Sea Scrolls is misleading. As priceless as the scrolls of Qumran are, a complete copy of the OT has never been found. Discovered at Qumran were one complete Isaiah scroll, one almost complete Isaiah scroll, and *fragments* from all the rest of the OT books except Esther. The majority of the manuscripts found at Qumran were from extra-biblical Jewish writings. There is simply insufficient data upon which to claim that the Dead Sea Scrolls demonstrate that we have in the *Masoretic Text* a pristine copy of the original text of the Hebrew Bible. *Codex Leningradensis* is still the oldest *complete* manuscript of the entire Hebrew OT in existence.

The Key Issue

It is to be remembered that the books of the OT were written over a one thousand year period from approximately 1400 BC to 400 BC. Prior to the advent of the printing press all copies of OT books were copied by hand.¹⁵ Regardless of how careful a scribe was errors occurred due to the nature of manual copying. Many (but not all) of the textual variants in both OT and NT manuscripts can be explained as scribal errors. However, a problem more fundamental to the Code than scribal errors exists.

During the period in which the OT was written Hebrew was a living language, an everyday language spoken, written and read by the Israelites. As with all living languages Hebrew underwent *orthographic* or spelling changes (as well as changes in syntax). The relevancy to the Code is that Hebrew scribes incorporated many such modifications to Hebrew spelling practices into the text of the OT. This was not due to carelessness or a lack of reverence for the

⁷ Chuck Missler, *The Cosmic Codes*, 123.

⁸ Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 38.

⁹ Grant Jeffrey, *The Signature of God*, 258.

¹⁰ Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code*, 194.

¹¹ Chuck Missler, *The Cosmic Codes*, 123.

¹² Kelley, Mynatt, and Crawford, *The Masorah of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 15-22.

¹³ Ernst Würthwen, *The Text of the Old Testament*, 32.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁵ Ellis Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism*, 37.

biblical books. Scribes were merely keeping the language of the Bible in harmony with current usage. This is no different than “modernizing” the spelling of Old English words from documents authored hundreds of years ago (e.g., changing the second person plural form of the pronoun “ye” to “you”).

Hebrew was originally written with a purely consonantal alphabet.¹⁶ No characters existed for representing vowels. All of the earliest books of the OT were written with this exclusively consonantal text. Beginning in the ninth century BC certain consonants began to be used as “helpers” to mark long vowels. That is, a consonant was inserted within a syllable to indicate that a specific long vowel was to be pronounced. This “helper” letter was not pronounced and did not affect the original pronunciation or meaning of a word. It served to communicate to the reader that a long vowel was present. A good example is the name *David*. In older or archaic Hebrew the name is spelled with the three consonants *d-w-d* while in later Hebrew the spelling is *d-w-y-d*. In both cases it is pronounced *dawīd* and both forms occur in the Hebrew Bible. However, in the latter case *y* (or *yod*) has been added to indicate a long vowel. Hebrew grammarians refer to the use of a consonant to mark a long vowel as *matres lectionis* (Latin for “mothers of reading”). Ancient Hebrew scribes incorporated *matres lectionis* into the biblical text to indicate long vowels. As one preeminent authority on the text of the OT wrote:

“Text transmission prior to 300 BC was also based on a predominantly consonantal spelling. As initially written, most early Old Testament books would have been written in an exclusively consonantal text. From about the ninth century on, certain consonants came to be used to indicate vowels. These ‘helping’ consonants are called *matres lectionis*, literally ‘mothers of reading.’ They were first used to indicate final long vowels (beginning in the ninth century BC) and later (beginning in the eighth century BC) they were also used to indicate medial long vowels. *Matres lectionis* were **subsequently added to the Old Testament text** [emphasis added], but not in a completely systematic way.”¹⁷

Complicating the matter is that the dates for the first usage of *matres lectionis* are approximations. Did the practice begin in the early or late ninth century? Was the practice implemented consistently

throughout Israel or did it grow gradually by region? Was there a long transition period to the new spelling method in such a non-technological society? Did a biblical author writing his original text during the ninth century initially use *matres lectionis* or not? We have no way of knowing the answers to such questions. We know the use of *matres lectionis* began around the ninth century from non-biblical inscriptions. But did biblical scribes adopt these improvements into the text of the OT as quickly as they came into use in popular literature or at a later date? Such unknowns make any effort to restore the original character sequence of the OT text by removing *matres lectionis* (and other orthographic changes) from the Hebrew text essentially impossible.

When the earliest books of the OT were originated *matres lectionis* were not used,¹⁸ yet they occur thousands of times just in the five books of the Pentateuch, the portion of the Bible in which most of the Bible codes occur. To return to our earlier example, in Gen. 1:1-5a at least twenty-one *matres lectionis* occur within this string of text. None of them were original. Remove them and the “hidden code” *torah* ceases to exist though the meaning and pronunciation of the passage remain unchanged. Ironically the spelling form used for *torah* in Gen. 1:1-5a by Code proponents is a later form of *tōrah* which uses the letter *vav* (corresponding to our “w”) as a *mater lectionis* (*mater* is singular, *matres* plural) to mark the long “ō.” Hence Code proponents are using a spelling form of *tōrah* (*t-w-r-h*) which postdates the Mosaic writings rather than the more archaic form (*t-r-h*) to find “codes” in the *very oldest section of the Bible*.

Three additional issues further complicate the matter. First, *matres lectionis* and other orthographic changes were incorporated into the OT text inconsistently. The *Masoretic Text* is “itself a mixture of orthographic forms from every stage in the history of Hebrew spelling.”¹⁹ Second, *which* Hebrew consonants were used to mark which vowels changed over time. For example, when *matres lectionis* first came into use the letter *hē* (*h*) marked the long “ō” but later the letter *vav* (*w*) was used as in the *Masoretic Text*.²⁰ In fact, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls even use *two* consonants in places to mark a *single* long vowel

¹⁸ Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, 66.

¹⁹ Frank Moore Cross, Jr. and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, 59.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶ Frank Moore Cross, Jr. and David Noel Freedman, *Early Hebrew Orthography*, 56.

¹⁷ Ellis Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism*, 40.

such as *alef* AND *vav* for a single long \bar{o} ,²¹ a practice not used in the *Masoretic Text*. Third, during the rabbinic and *Masoretic* periods as the Hebrew text was being “set in stone” there were some attempts by scribes out of due reverence to the original text to remove some of the later spelling forms in order to restore the older spelling patterns. However, such efforts were implemented inconsistently and only partially (which is another reason the *Masoretic Text* displays such a mixture of Hebrew spelling practices throughout).

In Summary

The adoption of *matres lectionis* into the Hebrew text of the OT by early Israelite scribes is only one of many problems with the popular ELS Code and represents only one of many such changes in Hebrew spelling habits incorporated by scribes into the OT text. My purpose has not been to study exhaustively all aspects of the Code or to present a complete description of the history of the biblical text’s transmission, but rather to show one of the key reasons why the ELS Code is invalid.

I believe that the Spirit of God inspired the books of the Old Testament *as originally written*. Nevertheless, orthographic changes to the text of the Hebrew Old Testament did occur and thousands of textual variants do exist. We ignore such facts at our own peril. The good news is that most of these anomalies affect only spelling (and other minor issues) and have little impact on the meaning of passages. Due to the efforts of textual critics we can be confident that we have a version of the Hebrew text that is generally faithful to the original. Yet the thousands of orthographic changes that affect the *number and order of characters* make any “Code” based on exact sequences of letters completely void. That Code proponents can find “hidden messages embedded” in the Hebrew text is not disputed. But the only possible conclusions are that they exist either due to pure chance or possibly the *Masorettes* deliberately rearranged the letter sequences of the Hebrew text to produce the Code. This latter possibility is extremely doubtful, as there is no evidence from any of the Jewish writings of the period to indicate such an effort was undertaken and it would go against everything for which the *Masorettes* stood.

The problem with Christian “fads” like the Code is that they only serve to further discredit the cause of

Christ and Scripture in the eyes of a lost world. Many believers hop on such bandwagons because they seem to offer spectacular evidence for the divine authorship of the Bible. The sensational always makes for an effective sales tool. Yet the Code should warn us of the danger of accepting every new fad and idea uncritically. Perhaps this Christian tendency stems from the subtle evangelical attitude that views Scripture, spiritual catchphrases, sacraments and church traditions almost as if they were magical talismans rather than tools to help lead us to truth. That the Code was not original to the OT text is clear to anyone familiar with the history of the transmission of the Hebrew text. And one does not need to dig too deeply to find the relevant information. Sadly, a number of non-believing critics of Christianity have taken the small amount of time necessary to research this very same data and have posted papers on the Internet ridiculing the Code, which are readily available and free. To these critics such “Christian” fads only substantiate their view that believers are gullible fools easily taken in by fantasies and myths.

Rather than pursuing serious study and unbiased inquiry of Scripture we have many Christians using their computers today to find the “deeper, hidden messages” buried behind the plain text of Scripture. As Allon Maxwell has so aptly put it, many believers are using their computers “for a form of divination.”²² The human desire to find easy answers and short cuts is as understandable as the appeal of the sensational, but when it comes to the study of Scripture there is no substitute for serious *individual* research. Unfortunately, the desire to “search Scriptures daily to see if these things be so” scarcely exists in the Body of Christ, at least in North America. ☩

“I was very pleased to discover your book about the Trinity. It is excellent and states what I have been privately preaching to my two minister brothers and others for some 12 years.” — *New Hampshire*

“I was raised a Catholic and your book helped me clarify many points, especially ‘Who is Jesus?’ Although yours concurs with my own heartfelt belief, it was electrifying to see scripturally.” — *Virginia*

Please mark in your calendars a unique happening at Atlanta Bible College, February 16th-18th, 2001. This will be our 10th annual Theological Conference, a forum at which our readers may make the acquaintance of others involved in the great issues of Christology and eschatology. Transportation from Atlanta Hartsfield Airport, as well as from a local hotel, will be provided. The conference will last from Friday afternoon to Sunday afternoon.

²¹ Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, 137.

²² Allon Maxwell, *Bible Digest*, 92, February 1999.