

ANOTHER PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE WORK OF THE "GANS" COMMITTEE

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As the member of the Gans committee entrusted with implementing the experiments designed by the committee, I will record some comments on the procedures followed, in the hope that this may help evaluate the outcome of the experiments. It will be useful to begin with some general observations.

The "Codes hypothesis" which was being tested claims the existence of encoded references to historical "events" - or "facts" - in the text of the book of Genesis, including events taking place after the writing of the Bible was completed. One must bear in mind the fundamentally non-scientific character of this hypothesis. This is not on account of the outrageous nature of the claim, but rather because of its incompleteness which doesn't allow for falsification. No one is privy to the type of events that a divine Encoder would choose to include. This must be guessed at, and the non-appearance of a particular event or fact does not falsify the claim. Nor can one be certain that the data will be presented in precisely the form we expect. The hypothesis does prescribe the manner in which events are purportedly recorded; namely, by statistically testable proximity within the text of key words or phrases related to the event. In the case of the Gans experiment and its replication, the words in question are the names of leading Jewish personalities and the designations of localities of significance in their lives (usually birthplace or place of death). Guesswork enters however on account of ambiguities in the presentation of this data; the rules for presentation will tend to be ad hoc and are not part of the larger hypothesis. It must be conceded that the design of experiments by our committee did not succeed in eliminating this guesswork.

The original experiments by Rips, Rosenberg and Witztum and by Gans were flawed as a result of the looseness in the presentation of data which theoretically allowed for manipulation of the data that would lead to ostensible confirmation of the hypothesis. In attempting to replicate the Gans experiment, the committee sought to avoid the pitfalls of the earlier version, hopefully both with regard to the credibility of a confirmation and with regard to the decisiveness of non-confirmation. Here the first goal was relatively easy to achieve; the second much harder. The first goal was achieved to some extent in both versions of the experiment, by calling upon "independent" experts to make the decisions that determined the data to be checked by the computer search of the text. The security component was more decisive in the Replicative version in which, following a suggestion of I. Rips, a multi-stage process was invoked, involving independent experts between whom no collusion was possible, and by carrying out the various stages of the process under a high degree of confidentiality.

The significance of non-confirmation of the hypothesis by the experiment is predicated on the assumption that the data being fed the computer is "correct". Clearly there is no absolute way of ascertaining this, and the "human" component is unavoidable. The data regarding the names of the personalities was left unchallenged, and a battery of experts was called upon in determining the list of localities to be checked against the names. In the original conception of the replicative test the experts

were to be called upon to (i) identify the localities associated with each individual, (ii) determine the appellation of the locality at the time in question (e.g., Leningrad vs St. Petersburg), (iii) determine the correct spelling of the appellation in question. These represented the three stages of the compilation process.

In the course of implementing stage (ii) it was found that typically knowledge of the time span in question would enable the expert consulted to guess who the historical figure was, thus compromising the desired independence of the information provided by the various experts. To overcome this the second expert was asked to report on the appellation/s of the particular locality as they appeared in Jewish documents during the various periods of Jewish occupation.

In the original conception as discussed by our committee, the third stage was to deal with orthography from a purely grammatical standpoint, and there was some ambivalence as to the role of an expert in this regard. The committee accepted the algorithm proposed by I. Rips (appearing in Appendix 3B(iii) of the formal committee report, DP 364 of the Rationality Center), which provides the rules of spelling for words with known pronunciation. It developed, however, that the pronunciation of names in most cases - as attested to by the experts consulted - could only be known from the spellings. The procedure that appeared as a result most in line with the spirit of the deliberations by the committee on this matter was to consult a third set of experts on the spellings that appear in documents relating to the localities. Thus three further experts were called upon, each widely read on Jewish history in a particular geographical region, and they reported on the dominant spellings used for the cities in question. Finally, when applicable, the spellings were modified in accordance with the Rips algorithm.

Another deviation from the committee directive was instructing all but the first expert orally rather than in writing. This was found necessary as a result of the subtlety of the instructions and the need for clarity as well as the nature of our request which made an informal presentation preferable to a formal one in writing.

The challenge remains to the proponents of the Codes hypothesis to design an experiment that can be decisive in both directions. It is questionable whether the human element can be removed in a manner satisfactory to all sides. The present experiment is, in my opinion, close to optimal, and may represent the best that "scientific" analysis can achieve, but it cannot be said that the issue has been totally resolved.