

The Genesis Death Sandwich story

By Gordon Rugg

Background: This is an edited update about the article by David Musgrave and myself on textual features in the Book of Genesis.

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There's a new article by David Musgrave and myself about textual analysis of ancient texts here: <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/2013/rug378029.shtml>

It's an expanded version of our previous articles on the topic, including our presentation at the ASOR2012 conference.

There's been a fair amount of media coverage of our work on textual structures in Genesis, with most of that coverage picking up on the informal name of "the Genesis death sandwich" and with a suggestion that it would make a great name for a punk band. (If that ever happens, we'd be grateful for tickets to the first gig...)

This article provides some background to that story, and some answers to questions that are likely to be frequently asked.

One obvious and good question is why we were looking for those words in the first place. The reason is that those themes were already long accepted in the community of biblical scholars as being important themes in Genesis. It was a fair bet that if there were any interesting textual structures within Genesis, that they might include the themes of life and death.

The visualisation that we used for our presentation at the 2012 ASOR conference and for our previous blog article was from the King James Bible, for the practical reason that it would be much more accessible to non-specialist readers than the Hebrew version. We also put the text of several books from the KJV onto the Search Visualiser website so that people could run their own searches (via the "sample texts" option on the search bar, under the option for searching the entire web).

We checked our results against the original Hebrew version, which showed the same pattern.

We're reasonably sure that the "sandwich" structure is an example of *inclusio*, also known as *bracketing*. This is a standard literary convention which is used in numerous other places in the Bible; Wikipedia has a good article on it. Some of the well-established examples of *inclusio* involve substantial amounts of text, so it's far from impossible that the entire book of Genesis could be displaying this structure.

Whether it was a deliberate use of *inclusio* or a subconscious use is an open question. We don't think that this structure is likely to be a coincidence, given the number of times the two words occur within Genesis, and given that these are themes that have long been recognised as significant within it.

We've run other searches on Genesis involving other terms not viewed as significant by scholars, and those didn't show any systematic distributions.

One search, though, did produce an interesting result: the word "woman" appears overwhelmingly in the first half of Genesis, and only rarely in the second half.

Another search that fits with traditional scholarship involves the word "begat". That occurs in a striking cluster early in Genesis, which is mirrored by another striking early cluster in Matthew. It's long been recognised that the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John contain numerous explicit references to the Old Testament, including mirroring of themes and structures within it; that pair of visualisations makes the point clearly.

So, in short, we're saying that the Search Visualiser does a good job of showing textual structures more clearly than if you just read the text; we're also saying that some of the structures we've visualised are structures that have long been known by traditional scholars. The structuring of life and death in Genesis appears to be something that hasn't been noticed before; we think it's a standard literary device being used on a larger scale than had been previously realised. No aliens, no secret codes, no conspiracies, but some striking images, and a great name for a band...

Notes

The Search Visualiser is available for online use, free, at:
www.searchvisualiser.com