BIBLE THE: AN EXERCISE IN MISSING THE POINT

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Category: Observations

Over the years, I've had cause to comment on a number of new editions of the Bible; some praiseworthy, others less so. Over the last few days, my attention has been drawn to Bible The, a project of the Sideline Collective.

> *Starting with the first book in the series â€“ â€œBible Theâ€ â€“ the entire King James Bible, reorganised and reprinted in alphabetical order. The result is a reductionist interpretation of the text that reveals some fascinating observations:Â Â Â*

Yes, Bible The takes all of the words of the King James Bible and lists them in alphabetical order. At first glance, this sounds absolutely bonkers and, let's be frank here, it doesn't get any better on further reflection. However, let's give the people who produced this book the opportunity to speak for themselves.

> *Each book completely reorganised from A-Z. This distils each text down to its lowest common denominator. It highlights the importance people tend to place on the order of said words â€“ and their meaning â€“ and allows for new and interesting interpretations of the written word, in much the same way as an abstract painting might.Â*

> *â€˜Rightâ€™ features 358 times, â€˜wrongâ€™ just 26. â€˜Lightâ€™ features 272 times, â€˜darkâ€™ only 43. â€˜Pleasureâ€™ 61 times, â€˜painâ€™ 25. And â€˜Lifeâ€™ 451 times, still more than the 371 instances of â€˜deathâ€™. This positive trait also translates into Biblical subject matter. For example, â€˜Heavenâ€™ features 582 times, whereas â€˜hellâ€™ only 54. There are 94 â€˜angelsâ€™ to 55 â€˜devilsâ€™, 96 â€˜saintsâ€™ to 48 â€˜sinnersâ€™, and 302 â€˜blessedâ€™ to a mere 3 â€˜damnedâ€™, and a total of 27 â€˜miraclesâ€™.Â*

So why do I think this is such a silly idea? Well, first off, it doesn't actually tell us much that is new. You've been able to get this sort of information from a good concordance, or Bible software for years. In fact, the older methods are more convenient as they will tell you how many times a word is used, rather than forcing you to run your finger down a column and count how many times "heaven" occurs in the text. Secondly, knowing how many times a word is used, tells you next to nothing

about the phenomenon that it is describing. The blurb says "a total of 27 miracles". However, John uses the word "sign" rather than miracle to describe the wonders that Jesus performs, so there are seven miracles which don't make it onto the list. Not only that, but many of the miracles in the Old Testament are just recounted without ever being described as miraculous. Frankly, I've no idea how many miracles the Bible records and the fact that the word "miracle" is used a total of 27 times tells us next to nothing. This problem is illustrated by another quote from the website:

> *Unsurprisingly, there is no â€˜sexâ€™ or â€˜intercourseâ€™ in The Bible*

The words "sex" and "intercourse" may not be used in the text of the King James Bible, but the euphemisms, "lie with" and "know" are not particularly uncommon. To actually find out how many times the sexual act was described, you would need to look at the occurrences of each of these words and determine in what sense the word was being used. However, this would be an exercise fraught with problems as the words "lie" and "with" occur in very different parts of the alphabet. This illustrates another problem; in English, many concepts are described using more than one word. Separating the words alphabetically destroys the sense and means that you can't even achieve the sideways look at the text that the authors are aiming for.

However, the biggest problem with this project does not involve the technicalities of language, it lies in the nature of the Bible itself. The Bible is a narrative. It tells one story from the beginning of Genesis to the end of Revelation. Yes, there is poetry, theology and other sorts of literature in there and there are complex linked and interweaving themes. However, the core of the Bible is a narrative of God's dealing with his creation which finds its climax in God himself taking on the stuff of creation to live, die and rise again.

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