Hebraicisms, Chiasmus, and Other Internal Evidence for Ancient Authorship in *Green Eggs and Ham*

Robert Patterson[1]

THEODOR GEISEL WAS BORN IN 1904 in Springfield, Massachusetts. After an unremarkable adolescence, he attended Dartmouth College and later Oxford University in England where he studied literature. He then embarked on a career in writing and published numerous articles and cartoons in various magazines. During World War II he worked for Frank Capra's Signal Corps Unit and earned the Legion of Merit. In 1954 Geisel's publisher was struck by an article entitled *Why Johnny Can't Read*, concerning childhood illiteracy. In order to promote academic interest in the very young, the publisher asked Geisel to write a children's book, limiting the vocabulary to the level of a first grade student. The result was *The Cat in the Hat*, a short story that used only 220 different words. Acclamation and preeminent professional success followed, and Geisel went on under the *nom de plume* Dr. Seuss (his mother's maiden name) to author many more books, richly illustrated with his distinctive and quirky drawings. He eventually published 44 books, earning three Academy Awards and a Pulitzer Prize in the process. Geisel passed away in 1991, but over a decade after his death, he remains a top-selling author.

According to popular legend, circa 1960 an editor bet Geisel $50 that he couldn't write an entire book with a lexicon of only 50 words. Dr.

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Seuss accepted the challenge, and the result was the now classic *Green Eggs and Ham*.[2]

Upon an initial and cursory reading, the book appears to be a simple morality play. A zealous purveyor of an unusual gustatory selection hawks his wares to an Everyman, whose initial biases preclude his acceptance of the unfamiliar. By the end of the story, the Everyman has overcome his baseless prejudices and rejoices in his newfound knowledge. The book made perfect bedtime reading for the generation of youth later known as the baby boomers.

Deeper analysis, however, reveals that the book has complex subtexts comprehensible only when the factual nature of its real authorship is known. Indeed, there is overwhelming evidence that the manuscript did not originate with Geisel, who likely fallaciously claimed credit for an archaic work that he or someone else surreptitiously translated from an ancient language into modern English. In the absence of uncontested external proof, the true origins of *Green Eggs and Ham* only become clear with an analysis of the text itself, i.e., through internal evidences present in the body of the work. When preconceptions are cast aside, a strong case can be made for the antiquity of this fascinating and complex work. In particular, the narrative is rich in Hebraicisms, chiasmus, biblical themes, and cultural references familiar to the pre-Common Era Israelites.

Hebraicisms may be defined as writings that reflect a Semitic influence in cognates, syntax, or grammatical accent. Chiasmus, also known as inverted parallelism, is an ancient poetic method that states a series of ideas (ABC. . .) and then repeats them in reverse order (. . .CBA). *Green Eggs and Ham* may read awkwardly in English, but its inelegant articulation is immediately pardonable when it is properly understood to be the translation of an ancient Asian text.

The first six words of the manuscript send a chill of recognition through the spine of any scholar familiar with Near Eastern religious documents:

I am Sam.
Sam I am.[3]

This opening couplet immediately demonstrates a simple chiasmus, a hallmark of biblical Hebrew stylistics. Of significance also is the meaning behind the words. "I am" is the classic Old Testament tetragrammaton. "Sam" is English for the Hebrew word "Shem," meaning name. The

2. Dr. Seuss, *Green Eggs and Ham* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1960).
3. Ibid., 5, 7.

word Shem itself is one of the Hebrew names for deity. Thus, the informed reader will immediately recognize that this is a work of divine importance, commencing with two names of deity, each presented twice in an inverted parallel fashion.

The next few verses demonstrate another literary device from antiquity. Echolalia is the instantaneous repetition of a phrase; examples are found in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament. Inclusion of echolalic phrasing early in the text again reflects its ancient roots.

That Sam-I-Am.
That Sam-I-Am.
I do not like
    That Sam-I-Am.[4]

Numerous other Hebracisms are found throughout the text. One striking example is the commencement of a sentence with a negative conjunction or negating adverb. In English, it is grammatically improper to start a phrase with "No" or "Not," such as "Not in my backyard." The omniscient word processor will immediately highlight such a phrase as a sentence fragment. However, in Hebrew it is common to start a sentence with the word "lo" (meaning "no" or "not"); seven of the Ten Commandments begin in this way. It is, therefore, of significance to note the multiple, sequential sentences initiated in the negative, as in this passage:

Not	in	a	box.
Not	with	a	fox.
Not	in	a	house.

Not with a mouse.[5]

Although this phrasing would be crossed out in red ink by any vigilant high school English teacher, the citation makes perfect grammatical sense in Hebrew.

An uninformed skeptic could argue that interpretation of segments of the text as Hebraicisms is a subjective and inexact science. However, the definitive presence of chiasmic phrasing is not so easily dismissed, and numerous examples are found scattered through the body of the manuscript. Some are straightforward and easy to recognize, as in this excerpt:

4. Ibid., 9.
5. Ibid., 24.

I	do	not	like	them,	S a m-I-a m.			
	I	do	not	like	green	eggs	and	ham.
		Would	you	like	them	here	or	there?
		I	would	not	like	them	here	or there.
	I	would	not	like	them	any	where.	
I	do	not	like	green	eggs	and	ham.	

I do not like them, Sam-I-am.[6]

Other chiasmi are more complex and woven cunningly into the narrative. For example, Sam-I-Am poses a number of non-rhetorical questions to the anonymous other character in the narration in a lengthy passage similar in construct to the interrogation of Job by his three friends. From the depths of despair, the unnamed protagonist summarizes his stance on the relevant culinary issues with a forceful, yet eloquent plea. A careful reading of his declaration reveals that his poetic soliloquy is a twelve part (twelve is a sacred number to the Hebrews) perfect inverse parallelism reflecting the preceding protracted dialogue from Sam-I-Am, in which he is queried concerning preferential selections of transportation, ungulates, meteorology, diurnal rhythms, habitat, and small furry rodents.

I	could	not,	would	not,	on	a	boat.
I	will	not,	will	not,	with	a	goat.
I	will	not	eat	them	in	the	rain.
I	will	not	eat	them	on	a	train.
Not	in	the	dark!	Not	in	a	tree!
Not	in	a	car!	You	let	me	be!
I	do	not	like	them	in	a	box.
I	do	not	like	them	with	a	fox.
I	will	not	eat	them	in	a	house.
I	do	not	like	them	with	a	mouse.
I	do	not	like	them	here	or	there.

I do not like them anywhere![7]

A plethora of Semitic cultural references is also found in the text. For example, the goat and the fox are both Old Testament animals. Also, the "green eggs" referred to repeatedly can be understood in the light of the times. Without modern-day refrigeration techniques, putrefaction would quickly have commenced in unconsumed food, resulting in moldy (green) eggs. In the worldview of the ancient Israelites, one can, therefore, certainly understand the reluctance of the unnamed central character to consume a meal that is potentially pathogenic and also non-kosher.

6. Ibid., 12-16.
7. Ibid., 46.

Finally, multiple traditional Old Testament themes flow through *Green Eggs and Ham,* including the chronicle of the flood. According to the book of Genesis, Noah had three sons—Shem, Ham, and Japheth. As already discussed above, Shem is the Hebrew equivalent of the English name Sam, which appears in the text a total of 19 times. The word "ham" appears 10 times. Japheth is never mentioned specifically but may be the enigmatic unnamed character in the story. Also of significance, the word "rain" appears four times while the word "boat" (a synonym for "ark") is mentioned three times. And although not part of the written text, an illustration near the end of the manuscript shows a bleak image of apparently endless water, on which there floats a solitary vessel filled with animals. Taken all together, this cumulative evidence must be accepted as being far more than merely coincidental.

To summarize to this point, the rich presence of complex chiasmi, multiple Hebraicisms, Israelite cultural references, and Old Testament themes supports the theory that *Green Eggs and Ham* is, in fact, an ancient text of Semitic origin. Theodor Geisel, though a clever and charismatic man, was not a student of Near Eastern history or languages and would not be familiar with these writing techniques. He simply did not have the knowledge or resources to produce such a work and clearly is not the author of the book.

Part of the solution to the mystery as to the true source of the manuscript may lie hidden within the text itself. In 1997, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter named Michael Drosnin published an astounding book entitled *The Bible Code,* in which he examined equidistance letter sequences in the Bible.[8] Using the original Hebrew characters, every fifth letter was placed into a matrix, which was then analyzed for meaning. The resulting revelations have shed new light on the scriptures. A similar study was carried out on the text from *Green Eggs and Ham,* employing standard Word Search Puzzle techniques. Up/down, backwards/forwards and diagonals were all permitted. The study is ongoing, but preliminary results have yielded tantalizing clue words and phrases such as STATS, NINNY, and the cryptic message IDONOTOUX (possibly "I do not owe you anything").

In conclusion, this paper is the first to reveal the true origins of an ancient complex manuscript that for too long has been cavalierly dismissed as a mere twentieth century work of fiction. Although we have arrived at a better understanding of the roots of this crucial work, many critical questions remain unanswered. If Geisel was not the author, as he claimed, then who was? Is the book entirely allegorical, or was the shadowy Sam-I-Am an actual historic personage? What geographic hints in

8. Michael Drosnin, *The Bible Code* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

the text allude to the location of the physical setting for the events described? What possible anomaly in the arcane process of translation would account for the apparent anachronistic mention of cars and trains? And what moral and spiritual lessons does *Green Eggs and Ham* hold for us today in our lives? No doubt, inspired scholars will soon research and discover the answers to these and many other questions as this complicated but vital narrative finally receives the serious academic scrutiny it so richly merits.