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Is the Bible a True Narrative Representation?

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Abstract:

The application of TNR-theory reveals that the biblical narratives meet the demands of TNR-theory. However, theories generally denying the historical accuracy and authenticity of biblical narratives are shown to be untenable on account of inherent inconsistencies, failure to comprehend relevant data, and because they fail the test of simplicity at every turn. The only theory that is consistent with all of the facts presented, and the simpler theory by a far cry, is that the Bible should be regarded as a TNR.



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Is the Bible a True Narrative Representation?

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Moisés Silva urged evangelicals to “think through [the]...fundamental question of the hermeneutics of historical narrative.”¹ He urged further that this thinking should be coherent and fearlessly comprehensive: “No more atomistic solutions.”² What is required, according to Silva, is an “evangelical theology that is not motivated by fear and suspicion,” but by a “commitment to the integration of the whole theological agenda.”³ We agree, and propose the framework of a consistent, comprehensive, and elegant semiotic theory, more specifically, the theory of true narrative representations (TNR-theory), as one venue within which to pursue such an agenda.⁴

The Bible represents itself to be a true narrative representation from beginning to end. Its main protagonist from Genesis to Revelation is God. Because the events reported are supposed to unfold over time, from God’s creation of the universe to his redemption of mankind, the whole scriptural message, as a predication or statement from God to man, is a narrative. Because the story claims to be true, it claims to be a true narrative. Moreover, the narrative in question is peculiar in view of the fact that it purports to be comprehensive. It claims to cover *all* time from the creation to the end of time itself. Throughout, the story is about the seed of the woman through whom God reveals his mercy, grace, and glory. The culmination is the “Revelation” of the Lamb of God, the Alpha and the Omega who was and is and is to come.

In the entire narrative, relatively few attributes are given as definitive of the main character

¹ In his presidential address at the 49th annual meeting of the ETS on November 20, 1997. Published under the title ““Can Two Walk Together Except They Be Agreed?” Evangelical Theology and Biblical Scholarship,” *JETS* 41 (1998) 3-16. The quote remark appears on p. 13.

² *Ibid*, p. 14.

³ *Ibid*, p. 16.

⁴ For an exposition of the theory relied upon here, see J. W. Oller, Jr. and S. Collins, “The Logic of True Narrative Representations,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* I.2 (2001); also Oller’s “How Grammatical Relations Are Determined,” *The 22nd Annual LACUS Forum*, (ed. B. Hoffer) (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 37-88; “Word and Icon: The Indispensable Connection as Seen from a General Theory of Signs,” *Word and Icon: Saying and Seeing* (ed. Lewis Pyenson) (Lafayette, Louisiana: The Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana at Lafayette) 50-62. The theory was first developed with language acquisition in mind in Oller’s “Reasons Why Some Methods Work,” *Methods That Work: Ideas for Literacy and Language Teachers* (ed. J. W. Oller, Jr.) (Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1993) 374-385. For wider empirical applications of the theory in experimental contexts, see Oller’s “Adding Abstract to Content and Formal Schemata: Results of Recent Work in Peircean Semiotics,” *Applied Linguistics* 19/3 (1995) 273-306; and for applications extending to physics and metaphysics see, “Semiotic Theory Applied to Free Will, Relativity, and Determinacy: Or Why the Unified Field Theory Sought by Einstein Could Not Be Found,” *Semiotica* 108 3/4 (1996) 199-244; for theoretical and experimental work in mass media, see Oller and J. R. Giardetti, *Images That Work: Creating Successful Messages in Marketing and High Stakes Communications* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishers, 1999).

and the ultimate authority behind the story. The Bible reports that God is one Lord (Leviticus 6:4; Mark 12:29; Galatians 3:20; Ephesians 4:6), holy (Leviticus 19:2), true (John 3:33; 2 Corinthians 1:18), a Spirit (John 4:24), faithful (1 Corinthians 10:13), witness (1 Thessalonians 2:5); the Judge of all (Hebrews 12:23), a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29), light (1 John 1:5), love (1 John 4:8), and omnipotent (Revelation 19:6). None of these attributes of God is consistent with the view that the Bible is merely a fictional allegory. Rather, the Hebrew Scriptures are presented as history, as are the gospels and narratives of the New Testament. The entire document, from Genesis to Revelation, is presented as reliable truth, connected to specific authors, times, and places of history. Whenever the text looks forward to future events, they are foreseen and reported as if already past. The Bible presents itself as a story that is true—a true narrative representation (TNR).

I. GROUND WORK

The argument given here is a sequel to our earlier article and to various other publications that preceded that one.⁵ It begins with definitions of crucial terms, and builds on the foundation of previously published logico-mathematical proofs as well as empirical tests of hypotheses derived from those proofs.

The method of argumentation depends only on logical consistency (and nothing else). It applies the theory of true narrative representations (TNR-theory) to biblical history, and to theories and methods of research purporting to explain the Bible as an historical, literary, or propagandistic document. In particular it shows that hermeneutic theories grounded in studies of fiction are fatally flawed. More specifically, if the Bible is as true as it represents itself to be, historiographical approaches grounded in studies of fictional literature and propaganda must be hopelessly inadequate. TNR-theory shows why methods of exegesis and criticism that are grounded in theories of imaginations, fictions, propaganda, and deliberate deceptions must fail. These results are strictly deduced from widely published logico-mathematical proofs that have so far withstood the tests of all scrutiny applied to them. The crux of the matter is that only TNRs have certain logical perfections, and that these perfections absolutely cannot be discovered or inferred from fictions, errors, lies, or even true general representations.⁶

To discover the critical features of TNRs, it is necessary to examine their unique formal perfections. Since those perfections are not found in any other representations (Rs) whatsoever (not in fictions, errors, lies, or generals), it follows that to discover those logical perfections, it is necessary to examine the formal structure of one or more TNRs. While all of the perfections of TNRs flow from the fact that every TNR is determinately linked by one or more competent observers to bodily objects interacting in space and time, it is not necessary to identify any particular TNR in order to prove conclusively that no fiction, error, lie, or mere general has any of the logical perfections that accrue to all TNRs. However, TNR-theory also shows that TNRs are as common as raindrops. If we report that we had coffee with breakfast, supposing only that we did, our statement qualifies as a TNR.

The general proofs of TNR-theory depend exclusively on the mathematical requirement of consistency. The logical perfections of TNRs have been strictly proved in a series of perfectly

⁵ See the reference to Oller and Collins in footnote 4.

⁶ Oller and Collins, *op cit.* in footnote 4.

general logico-mathematical proofs following the method of “exact [i.e., mathematicized] logic” laid out by C. S. Peirce.⁷ The theory unfolds in such a way as to prove first that consistency is necessary; next that Rs exist; that material objects exist in space and time; that meaningful Rs are connected to material objects in space and time; and that TNRs exist. Next, the formal structure of TNRs is examined, and a limit is set to the entire universe of possible Rs. Then, the formal structure of TNRs is compared against all other possible representational structures within the universe of possible Rs.

Within such a rigorous framework, it is proved that only TNRs possess certain logical perfections. In particular, there are three pragmatic perfections (pertaining to the determinate material content found in objects, events, and relations situated in space and time), three syntactic perfections (pertaining to space-time relations obtaining between sign-forms, sign-users, and sign content), and three semantic perfections (pertaining to generalized content of signs, common uses of signs by communities of sign-users, and conventional uses of conventional signs with conventional meanings). TNR-theory shows conclusively that absolutely none of these perfections is shared by any other Rs whatsoever.

Not even a true general, such as the true and perfectly general proposition that “it is appointed unto men once to die” (Hebrews 9:27) has any one of the logical perfections of TNRs. Rather, all fictions, errors, lies, and all generals (including true ones!), without exception, must get every bit of any particular meaning they may have from one or more TNRs. Finally, the logical perfections of TNRs have been shown to form a genuine *trinity of trinities*. A genuine trinity is defined—after the Godhead (Father, Word/Son, and Holy Spirit)—as the sort of tri-unity where every part perfectly represents the remaining parts and the whole. Every single one of the logical perfections has been shown to possess this extraordinary mathematical relation to all the other parts, and to the whole trinity of trinities.⁸ Thus, each of the pragmatic perfections entails the other two, and all of the syntactic and semantic perfections. Similarly, every individual logical perfection of TNRs entails all of the others.

It is important to note that while TNR-theory is compatible with conservative biblical theology,⁹ its proofs do not depend in any way on the presumption of the truth of the biblical record. TNR-theory is as applicable to any representational system as it is to the Bible. In fact, the entire theory is developed without necessary reference to any particular TNRs whatsoever. If every example ever used to illustrate concepts of the theory should prove to be false, or merely imaginary, the theory would nonetheless stand. The only use of particular TNRs in the theory is to exemplify terms for the sake of comprehensibility. In no way does the theory depend on the particular examples chosen. A demonstrable infinitude of other examples could have served equally well. Nothing in any of the proofs depends on the presumption that any given R either is

⁷ See C. S. Peirce, “The Logic Notebook,” *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*, Volume 1 (eds. M. Fisch, C. J. W. Kloesel, E. C. Moore, D. Roberts, L. A. Ziegler, and N. P. Atkinson) (Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1982) 337-350. In fact, the whole series of volumes of the *Chronological Edition* is relevant as are the several volumes of the *Collected Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce* (eds. C. Hartshorne and P. Weiss) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935) but especially volumes II-IV which are respectively titled by the editors *Elements of Logic*, *Exact Logic*, and *The Simplest Mathematics*.

⁸ The relevant proofs concerning the trinitarian properties of TNRs have been published on the Peirce-List, and may be found in the archives at <http://www.door.net/arisbe/menu/peirce/archives.htm> in sections 9710 (1/1) [3/8] and [8/8], and in 9711 (1/1) [4/7] and [5/7]; especially see Installment 6 in the series on TNR-theory (in archive 9711 (1/1) [5/7]). To obtain these files address the message “get peirce-1 9710” and “get peirce-1 9711” on separate lines to listproc@ttacs6.ttu.edu.

⁹ As we showed in our earlier paper; see footnote 4 above.

or is not a TNR. Nor is it necessary to single out any particular fiction, error, lie, or general in order to develop any proof in TNR-theory. The development of TNR-theory is indifferent to whether or not any given R may turn out to be true, false, or indeterminate. With all of the foregoing in mind, key terms may be defined as follows.

A narrative is the sort of R that pertains to a *purported* series of particular events unfolding over time. The term “purported” is essential because the event sequence pointed to by a narrative may be real or merely imagined. In the case of an actual sequence of events, competently reported, the narrative ultimately involves one or more observers who have had access to the event sequence whether that access was direct (by perception) or indirect (through reliable reports of other witnesses). A narrative that happens to be true of its reported events, where it claims nothing false of those events, and where they deliver all that the narrative claims of them, is a TNR. In the case of a fiction, by contrast, some or all of the events in the sequence are merely imagined by its author(s) and/or its consumer(s). Ultimately, any narrative implies observation by someone competent to render a report. An error is merely a false fiction innocently mistaken to be a TNR. A lie is a fiction known to be false, and yet deliberately represented to be a TNR. A general is any R that purports to be about all (or no) objects, events, or relations of a given kind.

II. TNRs AS RELATIVELY PERFECT

It can be proved that if any TNR is at least as true as it purports to be (as all of them must be), it is as true as its purport can possibly enable it to be. That is, since a TNR cannot be about whatever it does not purport to be about, any TNR that there may happen to be, must be as true as it can possibly be. This follows from the fact that any purport of any TNR that is found in its particular material facts must be true of those facts. But suppose there were some additional purport in some TNR that was not itself contained in its material facts. Clearly that purport would be untrue of those facts; and the R would not be a TNR. Therefore, a higher standard of truth cannot reasonably be asked of any R than the standard logically met in any TNR. No R whatsoever can be any truer than it purports to be. Therefore, any TNR that there may be, must be as true as it can possibly be within the limits of its purport. Therefore, relative to the material facts they purport to be about, TNRs are perfectly well-formed—i.e., they must be as consistent with the particular facts they are about as they purport to be. To add more information would not make any TNR any truer, though up to a limit of complete informativeness, it could make it more informative.

Thus, to be true, it is essential that a TNR be determinately connected to particular facts by a competent observer (or more than one), and that it not say anything false of the actual events that it reports. A narrative need not, however, report every detail of the events that it is about in order to be a TNR, but since events cannot contradict themselves, TNRs must be consistent internally in all of their parts and cannot, in the final analysis, contradict each other. All of this is strictly demonstrable insofar as the space-time continuum is incapable of contradicting itself. That is, the matter/energy-space-time continuum cannot be other than it is. Nonetheless, there can be as many TNRs as there are competent and faithful observers located at different vantage points in space and time. Therefore, there is no end to the number of TNRs that can be constructed with respect to any continuous series of events arranged over time. Nevertheless, it is strictly demonstrable that all those TNRs that are possible must agree with the material events of space

and time, and to that extent cannot contradict each other.¹⁰

At the basis of the logical perfections of TNRs is the fact that only they are determinately connected to particular material objects dynamically situated relative to particular observers in space and time. The remaining logical perfections flow from this connectedness with a logico-mathematical certainty that (as has been strictly proved)¹¹ provides the only basis for the meaning of any Rs whatsoever. A few of the consequences of TNR-theory for biblical scholarship were explored in our previous paper. Here we continue by examining certain of those implications with respect to selected narratives and theories of interpretation. We compare certain parts of the biblical narrative with other narratives, archaeological evidences, and historiographical theories.

III. THE BIBLE AS A TNR

As a matter of interest to conservative theologians, the Bible represents itself to be a TNR from start to finish. Moreover, it represents the direction and leading of God to have the character of a TNR. For instance, the first use of the word “truth” (“emeth” אמת) in the Hebrew Scriptures appears in Genesis 24:27 where Abraham’s servant, in search of a bride for Isaac, is led directly to the household of Laban. He says, “Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth; I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master’s brethren.” Similarly, in its last use, the concept of “truth” again appears in such a way as to suggest a faithful reporting of events that have actually occurred; a TNR: “And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things, which must shortly be done” (Revelation 22:6).

Owing to the strictly formal peculiarities of TNRs, it follows that the Bible, if it is a TNR, must have all of the logical perfections that accrue to that kind of structure. In fact, the whole series of proofs showing the logical perfections of TNRs must hold for the Bible, or else, the Bible cannot be the sort of document that it purports to be. The Bible also has an additional peculiarity relative to all other TNRs. If it is actually true, it really must cover the full scope of time from creation until the end of time itself, because that is what it claims to do. If it failed in its scope, it would also fail to be true. Therefore, if the Bible is a TNR, it follows that all other TNRs must be consistent with it, and it with them.

If the Bible were not true, it would be a colossal lie of the sort, as C. S. Lewis once quipped, of a story invented either by “the devil of hell” or by a man who claims “he’s a poached egg.”¹² Lewis advised accordingly that we should not come up with any “patronizing nonsense” about Jesus being “a great moral teacher” because he has ruled out that alternative. Either he was the Messiah of Israel, God in the flesh, the person to whom believers can refer as “the Lord Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 33:16), or he was a lunatic or a liar. A man who falsely made the claims that Jesus made, or who merely imagined himself to be God, could not be a “great moral

¹⁰ Compare the conclusion of John’s gospel where he speaks of the books that would be written if everything Jesus said and did should be written down. He supposes that the whole world would not contain the books that would be written. Yet is it clear that, supposing John’s account to be a true report of a competent eye-witness that those other books would not contradict the one John wrote.

¹¹ See references to publications cited in footnote 4.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (revised and enlarged edition containing *The Case for Christianity*, *Christian Behavior*, and *Beyond Personality*) (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 56.

teacher”—he would be a fool or a demon. Similarly, if the God of the Hebrew Scriptures were a fictional creation of an overzealous priesthood, he could not have the attributes that he reportedly claims.

Never in the history of mankind has there been another document so widely circulated, frequently read, and thoroughly criticized as the Bible. Nor, as history attests, has there ever been a document with such a profound and lasting impact on the lives, behaviors, and beliefs of human beings. As argued by R. A. Torrey long ago, there are so many evidences of lasting positive effects of the Bible that to take it to be a deliberate deception is, on its face, a remarkable absurdity.¹³ John Dryden summed up the problem in a few lines of verse:

Whence but from Heaven could men unskilled in arts,
In several ages born, in several parts,
Weave such agreeing truths? Or how or why
Would all conspire to cheat us with a lie?
Unmasked their pains, ungrateful their advice,
Starving their gain and martyrdom their price.¹⁴

As for the question who wrote the Bible, evangelicals have but one answer: Regardless who held the pen at any given moment, God must have inspired and guided them in the original writing, or else the consistency of the whole defies explanation. Obviously, just any old god cannot inspire a comprehensive report of history from beginning to end, one that is accurate in its reported details and consistent throughout, and one that in its essence can be explained comprehensibly to a child of normal intelligence sometime between the ages of four and eight. In fact, it was because of his failure to find convincing empirical evidence against the trustworthiness of Scripture that the archaeologist and historian Sir William M. Ramsay was compelled to become a Christian.¹⁵ He set out to show the book of Acts to be full of inaccuracies and inconsistencies, but found it to be superior to all the other historical and scientific documents he had studied.

Evangelicals have traditionally accepted the historical authenticity of the Bible. Many hold this position dogmatically, on the basis of the doctrine of inspiration. For them, that may be enough. But suppose they are correct in their belief? What of all those other persons who are being duped into believing that the Bible is a fiction mingled with errors and deceptions? What of those persons who are being fooled into thinking the Bible is a book of propaganda? And what of those people who are recommending methods to improve upon the truth value of Scripture by separating out the “sayings of Jesus” as contrasted with the profane memories of not merely fallible authors, but deliberate propagandists?

IV. POSTMODERN APOLOGETICS

In present-day archaeological and historical scholarship, serious challenges to the historical

¹³ R. A. Torrey, *Late Nineteenth Century Revivalist Teachings on the Holy Spirit* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986); also *Ten Reasons Why I Believe the Bible is the Word of God* (Chicago: Moody Press, n. d.).

¹⁴ *Religio Laici or a Layman's Faith* (1682), in *The Poems of John Dryden* (ed. James Kinsley) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958) 311-322. Quoted lines are 140-145 on p. 315.

¹⁵ Cf. W. M. Ramsay, *A Manual of Roman Antiquities* (London: R. Griffin, 1855); *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, reissued in 1953); *St. Paul the Traveler and the Roman Citizen* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, reissued in 1962).

credibility of the Bible are increasingly advocated by scholars of all stripes. In fact, the assaults have grown so brazen that the long-standing “higher critical theories” and the much-embattled “documentary hypothesis” seem tame by comparison. At least the old school critics admitted the idea that historical memory must have played some role in the handing down of the oral traditions which were supposedly later written, codified, and redacted into the form that came to be canonized. Formerly, the same assumption of historical memory also prevailed in literary theories concerned with the writings of the New Testament. Today, however, meaning and truth are early casualties in the clamor against the veracity of biblical narratives. This position is also increasingly presented in the mass media.¹⁶

What should be the evangelical response to the new assaults on biblical authenticity? Can such arguments be ignored in the hope that they will go away? Is it adequate to say, as many do, that “we interpret the data differently”? Must we fall back on dogma and tradition? Is evangelical theology just old-time religion destined eventually to be entirely replaced by the plethora of new interpretations owed to the explosion of postmodern alternatives?

TNR-theory provides a logico-mathematical basis for reassessing the nature of meaning, truth, and historicity in all forms of literature including scientific reports. Not only does TNR-theory afford an independent way to examine biblical narratives, but it can also be used to test competing ideas, and especially theories that deny the historicity of the Bible. Thus, the applications of TNR-theory are three-fold: hermeneutic, apologetic, and polemic.

V. GENERAL THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TNR-THEORY APPLIED TO THE BIBLE

If the Bible is a TNR, God must be omnipotent in order to oversee its preparation, canonization, and its preservation throughout history. If the Bible is true, God must also be omniscient on account of the fact that the document purports to be about past and future events (ranging from creation to the end of time) to which no living human has ever had access. Finally, if the Bible is true, God must also be omnipresent, or else, how could he know the end from the beginning?

No biblical text can be found that is *inconsistent* with the view that God stands apart from the limits of time and space, and that limitations on human experience do not restrict God at all. As conclusive evidence of this fact, and one that has always been understood as such by competent readers of Scripture, is the fact that the declaration of the plan of redemption preceded the foundation of the cosmos. At least nine times in the New Testament reference is made to the idea that the determination of Christ’s death was an accomplished fact *before the foundation of the world* (cf. Matthew 13:35; Matthew 25:34; Luke 11:50; Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 4:3; Hebrews 9:26; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8; Revelation 17:8). In 1 Peter 1:19-20 reference is made to “the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.” In Revelation 13:8 there is reference to “the dragon” where it is written that “all those that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

¹⁶ The cavalier dismissal of any validity of Scripture is commonly seen in periodicals such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Popular authors commonly dismiss the historicity of the Bible and similarly deny its scientific value. To the contrary see R. Humphreys, *Starlight and Time* (San Diego, California: Master Books, 1994) for applications of biblical insights to Einstein’s general theory of relativity as it pertains to astronomical physics. Humphreys shows consistent solutions to the problems of distant starlight, red shift, and the micro-wave background noise that appears to be constant in all directions from the earth.

It follows, therefore, that either Carl Sagan and his ilk were wrong in supposing that the cosmos preceded the cross, or else the God of the Bible is a liar or seriously confused. Unless the Bible should turn out to be true, at best God has selected a poor metaphor. But, if the Bible is true, then surely it is correct in asserting that no critics will stand in God's presence, but rather that every one will bow the knee and proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord (Isaiah 45:23; Philippians 2:10-11).

If the Bible is true, only the Judeo-Christian God, the Creator of the entire cosmos, the God of gods, could have inspired so many contributors to write a TNR on the proportions of the biblical text. Otherwise, if the text is true by mere accident, the consistency of the whole is a vastly more remarkable miracle than that espoused by the evolutionists who claim that the cosmos plopped itself into existence by pure chance.¹⁷ The emergence of the Bible as an accidental TNR is immeasurably less likely than that life should have accidentally appeared on earth millions of years ago. It is less likely than the formation of distinct galaxies, the solar system, and the biosphere. It is less likely than the formation by accident of the entire genetic code, binocular vision, human intellect, and ultimately the language capacity which sets humans apart from all other creatures.¹⁸ In fact, if the Bible were an accidental TNR, its existence would easily dwarf all of those other miracles on account of the fact that the Bible, repeatedly and throughout, contradicts the view that any of the feats of creation were accidents in the first place. Such an accident as the Bible being a TNR is a logical impossibility. It must either be the word of God, or a colossal lie. That *is* the choice.

But suppose, just for the sake of argument, that the Bible were a TNR. Should it not be considered the primary source document of all the events that it reports? Should it not take precedence over all other documentary sources? Could it possibly be upstaged by a fictional narrative, or by one or a thousand theories grounded in fictional literature? Could the truth of the Bible, if it is true, be altered in the slightest degree by abstruse methods of hermeneutics or arcane examinations of archaeology and its artifacts? Should the Bible not take precedence, if it is indeed what it claims to be, over secular histories contrived not only by fallible human beings, but by persons deliberately exercising profane powers of imagination? Should the Bible not be regarded as more authoritative with reference to the historical periods and contexts of which it speaks than subjective interpretations of archaeological data and historiographical theories? In fact, if the Bible is a TNR, is it not a better source of inspiration for theoretical understanding of truth in all its manifestations, including those of mathematical and scientific reasoning, than any less comprehensive representation?

VI. CONSISTENCY AS THE ULTIMATE TEST OF ALL THEORIES

The logical results of TNR-theory¹⁹ for biblical studies are relevant to the growing quantity of speculations about the historical authenticity of Scripture, especially of certain testable narrative portions of the Bible. Although TNR-theory is relevant to the whole scope of biblical apologetics, the focus here is upon writings in both the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament

¹⁷ Against which view, see the book edited by J. P. Moreland, *The Creation Hypothesis: Evidence of Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1994).

¹⁸ See J. W. Oller, Jr., and J. L. Omdahl, "Origin of the Human Language Capacity" in J. P. Moreland, op cit. footnote 17, 235-269.

¹⁹ See references in footnote 4.

that are especially identified as narratives. There are many specific segments of text that might be singled out for attention, but we look at just two particular biblical narratives and two theories pertaining respectively to the Old and New Testaments. Relevant results flowing from TNR-theory as applied to biblical narratives and especially to biblical archaeology are these: (1) all TNRs must be consistent with all other TNRs relative to the matter/energy-space-time continuum; (2) all TNRs uniquely exhibit the logical perfections common to all TNRs; and (3) narratives that fail to exhibit the perfections of TNRs cannot be true.

Interestingly, although there are three distinct critical properties that must logically be found in an adequate R (or in any empirical theory) of any phenomenon or range of phenomena, only one of them yields the sort of critical evidence that human beings can make use of to differentiate better Rs (or theories) from worse ones. Above all, a theory must be consistent within itself—this is the strict logico-mathematical requirement. Also, a theory must be comprehensive—this is the empirical requirement that an adequate theory must not omit consideration of relevant data or facts. Finally, it ought to be as simple as possible—it ought not to include anything extraneous or unnecessary. This last criterion is the one commonly referred to as Ockham’s razor, owing to the fact that it was popularized in the dictum of the Earl of Ockham who wrote, *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* (entities not being multiplied except as necessary).²⁰

TNR-theory demonstrates conclusively that all three of these requirements boil down to the *consistency* requirement. Clearly, any theory that is not consistent with itself cannot be consistent with relevant phenomena or empirical data. Likewise, any theory that is not comprehensive is not consistent with all of the relevant data, and any theory that is inelegant in any respect (more complex than necessary) is one where some of the entities of the theory fail to have any corresponding entities in the relevant data, and thus the theory is not fully consistent with the relevant data (i.e., the unnecessary elements of the theory have no corresponding data to be consistent with). Thus, the three criteria (consistency, comprehensiveness, and simplicity), in the end, boil down to consistency alone.

Also, only consistency can enable decisive comparisons between competing theories, as can be demonstrated: From an empirical point of view, we cannot directly apply the comprehensiveness requirement because we cannot perceive or discriminate all possible bits of data at any given time or in any given period of time. Nor can we know for all possible applications of any entity in a theory whether or not it will eventually find some relevant datum to embrace. Therefore, the comprehensiveness requirement and the simplicity requirement can only be made use of in negative ways (as noted by scholars like Karl Popper).²¹ But inconsistencies, wherever they can be detected and demonstrated, are precisely the sort of data that can be used to advance theoretical and empirical work in the sciences and in mathematics.

Because—as TNR-theory demonstrates conclusively—it is impossible that TNRs should be inconsistent with each other, any irresolvable inconsistency between any pair of purported TNRs shows one of them to be false. The essential objective, then, is to derive contrasting empirical hypotheses from competing theories, and rule out as many as possible on the basis of crucial logical proofs and, where possible, experimental tests. Ultimately, however, the choice between

²⁰ As quoted by C. S. Peirce in Hartshorne and Weiss, volume IV, p. 4 (paragraph 1).

²¹ Cf. K. R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

competing alternatives is always governed by the demand for consistency because comprehensiveness and simplicity are, for reasons just given in the preceding paragraph, undiscoverable apart from the consistency requirement. Therefore, it is only through demonstrated inconsistencies that advances in the sciences and proofs in mathematics are possible. In mathematical reasoning it is the derivation of necessary inconsistencies that enable advances, while in the empirical sciences it is through contingent (empirical) inconsistencies that advances are made (per Popper's *Logic of Scientific Discovery*).

It is important to re-emphasize that the logico-mathematical proofs from which the foregoing results are deduced do not require the identification of a single particular TNR. This is crucial because the potential for error can never be entirely ruled out when making judgments about Rs that purport to be about particular facts. However, any such empirical error is virtually eliminated in an absolute way in the proofs of TNR-theory which are perfectly general and indifferent to whether any given exemplar of a purported TNR should turn out to be a true, false, or of indeterminate truth value. When it comes to particular texts that purport to be TNRs, the possibility of human errors of judgment can never be entirely ruled out. Indeed, this logical conclusion can be strictly proved (deductively derived) within the framework of TNR-theory. This result is also one of the critical tests showing that TNR-theory is consistent with conservative biblical theology and, in particular, with the biblical teaching that God has ordained "free will." It is, moreover, not only consistent with the biblical requirement of our power to choose, but also with the risk of choosing to our own harm. The latter possibility cannot arise if error is not possible, nor can error, not to mention deliberate sin, arise without free will.

If the risk of error could be entirely removed from human experience, it has been strictly proved within TNR-theory that not only would free will vanish from existence, but the requirement of faith would be unreasonable and nonsensical.²² Yet, free will is genuine, and the requirement of faith cannot be dispensed with. With free will comes the potential for error. We cannot believe in God, or reject belief in God, without taking the risk that is implicit in committing ourselves relative to certain particular Rs, i.e., believing them to be true or false. For instance, the gospel of Jesus Christ as presented in the Bible is such that it allows no neutrality in the final analysis. We must either believe that it is true or believe that it is false. A decision not to decide one way or the other, if prolonged, amounts to a negative decision.

With respect to any particular narrative, our interpretations are not only subject to the risk of error, but that risk on this side of eternity remains ineradicable. Noise contamination, bias, entropy, and ultimately death itself stands between us and the faith that we either choose or choose not to place in the God of the Bible. Interestingly, as Jesus made perfectly clear, if what he said is true, there can be no middle ground: Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30) and "He that is not against us is for us" (Luke 9:50). These two seemingly opposite statements completely remove any neutral ground. If the biblical accounts are true, the only safe ground is to accept Jesus as the Messiah. For the unbeliever, Truth is absolutely guaranteed to deal a crushing blow of utter destruction that grinds to powder (Matthew 21:44; Luke 20: 18). A failure to believe the gospel is not different in the end from a deliberate decision to reject it. Nonetheless, the element of risk and the requirement of faith remains, as Paul put it, until "this mortal shall have put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:54).

²² Oller and Collins, op cit., footnote 4.

VII. A SURPRISING TEST OF TNR-THEORY AGAINST BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

Oddly, from the vantage point of unbelievers, faith in the truth is the only alternative that involves absolute security, and that reduces the believer's risk, in the final analysis, to exactly zero. The contrast between the position of the unbeliever at risk and the believer who is secure, is the sort observed between the vicissitude of mere probability and well-determined absolute certainty. The contrast is reminiscent of the debate between Einstein, who held out hope until the end for the complete determinacy of physical law,²³ as contrasted with Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" and Planck's quantum mechanics, where absolute certainty is unattainable. Trying to predict how things will come out in a flawed and uncertain world encapsulates the faith problem presented to every unredeemed person. By contrast, the certainty of the believer, grounded in the certain foreknowledge of God—i.e., his knowing the end from the beginning (and every point along the way),²⁴ an aspect of God's knowledge that Einstein mistakenly attributed to physical law,²⁵—is analogous to the security guaranteed to believers who accept Jesus as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (John 14:6). The truth of the gospel, if it is really true, does not remove free will, but rather makes believers free indeed (John 8:32).

Einstein said that he could not believe that "God plays dice with the universe."²⁶ He supposed this, because it was obvious to him that God must know every detail of every event before it occurs. Therefore, Einstein supposed that physical law had to determine entirely, down to the tiniest detail, all the events of the matter/energy-space-time continuum. But God is no more dependent on physics, logically speaking, than he is on sociology, psychology, anthropology, archaeology, or any conceivable realm of human study and learning. Rather, all things, according to Scripture, including all human cognition and physics, depend on God's representation of things. According to the Bible, all events are present, open, and plainly visible from God's point of view. In fact, Scripture attributes all being, and the whole of that which is real, to the Word of God. God can know what will happen independently of physical laws and the vicissitudes of probability. God, Scripture reveals, is omniscient.

Besides, before Einstein stated his commitment to physical determinacy, Heisenberg, Planck, and Einstein himself, through his celebrated photoelectric effect,²⁷ had already found that subatomic events are not strictly determined by physical law. Therefore, Einstein's hope for physical determinacy ought to have been suspect. More recently, TNR-theory has shown conclusively that Einstein looked in the wrong direction when he supposed that physical law could provide absolute determinacy.²⁸ As Oller has shown, Einstein's expectation that all events can be predicted on the basis of absolute physical law would have precluded free will and the possibility of moral responsibility. For those reasons alone, Einstein's expectation ought to have been more closely examined, but evidently these consequences either did not occur to the great

²³ See R. W. Clark, *Einstein: The Life and Times* (New York: World Publishing Company, 1971), p. 742.

²⁴ As spelled out almost three centuries ago (circa 1701) by G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics, Correspondence with Arnauld, and Monadology* (ed. G. R. Montgomery) (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1953).

²⁵ See the paper on free will by Oller cited in footnote 4.

²⁶ Clark p. 265. Also mentioned in Lincoln Kinnear Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* (revised and illustrated) (New York: Bantam, 1950), p. 65.

²⁷ In Clark, op cit., p. 265.

²⁸ See "Semiotic Theory Applied to Free Will, Relativity, and Determinacy: Or Why the Unified Field Theory Sought by Einstein Could Not Be Found," as cited above in footnote 4.

physicist, or were disregarded.

More to the point, TNR-theory shows that the only source of determinacy is in TNRs. Unless material objects, events, and relations are represented in TNRs, in and of themselves matter and energy have no particular determinacy. Interestingly, the result of TNR-theory in this respect is consistent with the Bible. The determinacy of outcomes, according to Scripture, is something that belongs exclusively to God. He knows every word on our lips before it is spoken. He knows “the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12) before the person who has those thoughts ever comes into existence. In fact, the Bible asserts much more. Not only does God have foreknowledge of all events in the matter/energy-space-time continuum, but the Bible teaches that God *always and everywhere* shapes events in time and space so as to ensure *the best outcomes possible for all believers all the time* (per Romans 8:28).²⁹

From all the foregoing it follows that determinacy cannot belong to the thoughtless realm of matter (to whatever “laws of physics” there may be), but to the Spirit of God. He told Zerubbabel, that the outcomes of history with respect to his promises to Israel were “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6). Thus, neither the forces of nature, nor even the will of man ultimately determines the outcomes of physical events, but rather the Spirit of God. And, how we might ask, does that happen? The Bible teaches that determinacy in the material realm is dependent on unseen forces that are ultimately grounded in the word of God. Independently, TNR-theory demonstrates in a rigorous series of logico-mathematical proofs that the determinacy of any material events in space and time can only be known through TNRs formed by competent witnesses. Now, we may ask: Is God a competent witness (cf. 1 Thessalonians 2:5)? Being *the* “witness” is one of God’s defining traits. He must be witness to all the events of history, or the Bible must be false.

So, either Einstein must have been wrong in his expectation about the complete determinacy of physical law, or the Bible is wrong in its portrayal of free will. Yet, TNR-theory annihilates the supposed paradox of determinacy and free will. It comes out that free will is not in conflict with the foreknowledge of God nor with his guarantee that “all things work together for good to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). There is no more conflict between God’s foreknowledge (or even his benevolent interventions in the lives of believers) and the exercise of man’s free will than there is between a person’s knowledge of the outcome of a movie and the actions of the characters in the film. Moreover, if TNR-theory is correct, the physics of Heisenberg, Planck, and others will not be overturned, or at least not in the way that Einstein hoped in his attempt to build a “unified field theory.” Neither is God evil if he permits evil persons and demons to choose alternatives that lead eventually to “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

As a result, TNR-theory shows that Einstein’s hope of a “unified field theory”—that would predict all conceivable events in advance on the basis of purely physical forces requiring every particle of matter and every wave of impulse to behave in strictly lawful ways—was based on a mistaken premise from the start. Physical events are not, and cannot be, determined entirely by physical law. What is more, this fact is as easily demonstrated for stars and billiard balls as it is for electrons and quarks. The demonstration that determinacy resides exclusively in TNRs does not depend on the empirical demonstrations of Heisenberg, Planck, or Einstein, rather it predicts the results they found on an entirely independent and purely logico-mathematical basis.

²⁹ See the theology of “pre-destination” on pp. 3-63 in Leibniz, op cit. footnote 17.

More importantly, TNR-theory produces results consistent with the Bible that are unpredictable and surprising without reference to TNRs. Consider the astonishing biblical proclamation, commonly disputed by secularists ever since it was first pronounced, that “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky quoted Goethe’s character Faust³⁰ who disputed the Bible by asserting that “in the beginning was the deed.”³¹ Yet TNR-theory shows that all the secularists who have made such pronouncements are wrong, and the surprising claim of the Bible accords with necessary deductions by irrefutable exact logic proofs. Determinacy does not reside in physical matter but in TNRs. In fact, without a TNR nothing whatsoever can be determined. Not even the slightest shred of meaning can be found out, much less can any particular event or sequence of events be known or found out.

VIII. THE HUMAN PROBLEM: HOW TO DISCERN THE TRUTH

The fundamental predicament of all human beings, therefore, prior to faith in God, is as genuine as it can be. How are we to tell the difference between Rs that are true and trustworthy as contrasted with those that are either false or merely of indeterminate meaning? How can we tell the difference between good news from God as contrasted with fictions, errors, and lies from any other source? Evidently the problem is extreme, or the cross would not have been the necessary remedy for it. Why else would God himself have come down in human form to tread the winepress alone (Isaiah 63:3)? Why would he have declared that judgment and vengeance fall to him and him alone (Deuteronomy 32:35-36; Romans 12:19)? If the problem of discerning truth and falsehood were not a genuine matter of life and death, then why the death of the cross? Why was it necessary for God to take our punishment in his body on the cross?

When it comes to particular judgments about what to believe or not to believe by individuals at risk in space and time, the element of faith and the potential for error cannot be completely removed until time itself comes to an end. However, TNR-theory shows that the virtual certainty of the truth of any given TNR asymptotically approaches a theoretical limit of absolute (errorless) certainty as critical tests persist in yielding outcomes consistent with an ever more comprehensive interpretation. As the context of experience widens over time and space, any false R is more and more likely to turn out to be inconsistent with some part of the observed continuum. In fact, as any given R is found consistent with a limited context and is tested repeatedly in larger and larger contexts of experience, so long as it continues to yield results consistent with the widening context, the interpretation more and more rapidly approaches a limit of virtual certainty. Critical contextual tests may be applied in a great variety of ways, in almost any order, and because of the formal characteristics of TNRs relative to the material space-time continuum, interpretations that are consistent with an ever growing context of experience must tend without fail toward the correct discovery of whatever TNRs there may be. All that can mislead us in the determination of which Rs are TNRs and which ones are not, is a willingness to embrace inconsistencies. TNR-theory shows why this result is necessary. It shows that only to the extent that we are actually willing to regard fictions, errors, and lies as TNRs, can we be misled.

³⁰ J. W. Von Goethe, *Faust: A Tragedy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton, 1912).

³¹ Cf. L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language* (translated by Gertrude Vakar) (Cambridge, Massachusetts: M. I. T. Press, 1962), p. 153.

On the other hand, if we persist in the hopeful and faithful expectation that God is truth, love, and light, we cannot ultimately go wrong. If God is God, we cannot fail to find him when we seek him with our whole heart (Jeremiah 29:13). Or, working our way from the bottom up, so to speak, if there are any TNRs at all, the expectation of consistency, diligently applied by competent observers, is certain to turn them up. But consistency, if we really expect to be able to find it and whenever we do find it in TNRs, points us to the perfect God in whom there is not the slightest tendency toward inconsistency (Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18). Our ability to seek truth in TNRs, in fact, shows that we are created in the image of God. This result too is consistent with biblical teaching.

To see how the discovery of TNRs is assured in the long run, consider a simple example. Perhaps the simplest TNR conceivable is the sort seen in the correct application of a proper name to the individual whose name it is. For instance, if Plato should happen upon Socrates, how will he know that the person he encounters really is his friend Socrates? Perhaps it is merely someone who resembles Socrates, or perhaps the person he identifies as Socrates is a figment, i.e., an illusion, fantasy, or hallucination. Plato might be merely dreaming. TNR-theory shows that if any of these alternatives should be true, the predicate “Socrates” (as in “There is Socrates!”) cannot be applied to the case at hand with same consistency that will be found in the case where Plato actually meets up with Socrates in the flesh, i.e., where it would be fully appropriate for Plato to say, “Ah! Socrates! There you are!” But suppose Plato speaks to the man he thinks is Socrates and calls out to him, “Hey Socrates!” and the person spoken to responds in the expected way. Socrates responds with something like, “Whoah! Plato. What’s up?” In all such cases, so long as all reasonable expectations concerning a series of Rs are met—e.g., by Plato that “This person is Socrates and is married to Xanthippe, etc.”—Plato is apt to continue to suppose (correctly) that he is really speaking to his friend Socrates. If he were merely dreaming, Plato would, if he did not die first, wake up sooner or later and would probably find that Socrates was not there. Similarly, if he were hallucinating or experiencing a vivid illusion, some reality would eventually impinge upon Plato’s awareness that would be inconsistent with one or another aspect of the illusion, and he would thus be disabused of his error by seeing it in the larger context of a valid TNR, i.e., that he merely imagined seeing Socrates or mistook someone else for Socrates. But in the case of any TNR, inconsistencies cannot arise except some fiction, error, or lie, creeps into the picture and the R in question be degraded by it. TNRs cannot be inconsistent with each other or with material facts of the space-time continuum. Thus, from TNR-theory it comes out that merely consistent interpretations of Rs must tend toward the discovery of whatever TNRs there may be.

It also follows from TNR-theory, by strict formal logic, that fictions, errors and lies are singly, doubly, and trebly degenerate, respectively, and must ultimately be inconsistent with the larger context which itself can only be consistently represented in TNRs. It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that mathematical reasoning and science are possible. Also, it follows from TNR-theory that if there are any TNRs in the experience of any person, all of them ultimately point to God more certainly than that water seeks its own level.

IX. FICTIONS CONTRASTED WITH TNRs

And what of scholars who, by reason of their interpretations of archaeological data and/or applications of literary hypotheses to the Bible, deny the historiographical value of Old and New Testament narratives, and attempt to create their own special scenarios for the

historical/archaeological periods in question? For example, can the “emergence theory” of the origin of the Israelite nation, as advocated by Finkelstein and Na’aman, survive the requirements of TNRs?³² Or are the claims of the Jesus Seminar valid?³³ TNR-theory suggests many ways to analyze narratives in general, and to test the consistency of how they are variously interpreted. Narratives can be tested for internal consistency (within themselves) and for external consistency with other narratives, and with relevant empirical evidences. Proposed scenarios which relegate any given biblical narrative to the realm of fiction, can also be examined from the vantage point of TNR-theory. All tests of such theories, as demonstrated above, ultimately come down to the question of consistency.

To illustrate more concretely the applicability of TNR-theory to narratives in general and to biblical studies in particular, consider the following four cases: (1) the conquest of Ai narrative (Joshua 7:1-8:29); (2) the emergence of the Israelite nation scenario of Finkelstein and Na’aman; (3) Jesus’ healing of the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22-26); and (4) the Jesus Seminar’s portrait of Jesus as set against the claim of the gospels that Jesus represented himself to be the divinely-appointed Messiah of Israel.³⁴ The point is not to explain any narrative in detail, but merely to show how TNR-theory provides a basis for rendering a determinate judgment wherever a necessary inconsistency can be shown between competing alternatives. If one of the alternatives is consistent while the others are not, the consistent alternative is the only one that might possibly be a TNR. That is because TNRs must be consistent within themselves and with relevant empirical evidences. Therefore, the findings of TNR-theory will enable us to rule out false theories.

1. The Conquest of Ai Narrative of Joshua 7:1-8:29

No narrative passage from the Hebrew Scriptures has been more criticized than the story of Joshua’s conquest of Ai (Joshua 7:1- 8:29). For a great many writers (all of them relying on archaeology to assess the biblical account rather than the reverse), the conquest of Ai narrative is an etiological legend, a fiction, formulated by Iron Age Judahite writers to account for the massive Early Bronze Age ruins of Khirbet et-Tell near the modern village of Deir Dibwan, 20 km WNW of Jericho. In fact, those ruins were laid down nearly a thousand years before the time of Joshua.³⁵

Evangelical scholars, on the other hand, who suppose that Joshua fought the battle of Ai at the site now known as Khirbet et-Tell, have paradoxically held on to the view that the narrative is an accurate historical account of real events that took place during the time of Joshua, i.e., the account is regarded by conservative readers as a TNR. But conservative scholars cannot accept Khirbet et-Tell as the historical setting of the battle without running into serious inconsistencies. In fact, the archaeological evidence from Khirbet et-Tell does not meet the requirements of the

³² I. Finkelstein and N. Na’aman (eds.), *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994).

³³ R. W. Funk and R. Hoover (eds.), *The Five Gospels* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993).

³⁴ The two biblical passages involving Ai and Bethsaida have been chosen because of Collins’ familiarity with ongoing excavations at both sites. He has spent several seasons at Bethsaida, and is now serving as field supervisor at the Khirbet el-Maqtar (Late Bronze Age Ai) excavation. The other two cases are examined in order to show how TNR-theory differentiates consistent representations from inconsistent ones.

³⁵ See Finkelstein and Na’aman op cit. footnote 32; also W. J. Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

Joshua narrative at all.

TNR-theory demands, on the contrary, that the material facts must conform to the TNR in all of the respects that it delineates (or else the material facts must have been subsequently modified by geological upheavals or by massive human intervention or the like). Topography normally changes very little over millennia. A millennium, it is true, may be a long period of time from the vantage point of human beings, but is a relatively brief moment to rocks, mountains, and geological formations in a landscape. Therefore, topographical facts may sometimes be used to refute conclusively certain false interpretations of ancient TNRs.

And what do we find when the Joshua account of the battle at Ai is compared to the topography of Khirbet et-Tell? When the criterial geographical features required by Joshua's account of the battle at Ai are overlaid upon Khirbet et-Tell, the features of the landscape are notably inconsistent with the description given by Joshua.³⁶ For instance, there is no ravine or valley to the west of Khirbet et-Tell that is deep enough to hide a significant number of troops (per Joshua 8:3, 8:12). According to the Joshua narrative, a large number (by ancient standards) of Israelite soldiers were hidden to the west of Ai, between there and the town of Bethel (Joshua 8:9). To the north of the city there was a valley where Joshua, and the troops with him, were plainly visible from the city of Ai (Joshua 8:14). However, when the king of Ai went out of the city to fight with Joshua, he was unable to detect the troops lying in ambush to the west and behind the city (Joshua 8:14). But Khirbet et-Tell meets none of the topographical requirements. All that can be said in favor of Khirbet et-Tell as the traditional site for the battle of Ai is that it is within a day's march of Jericho. Beyond this the site fails to meet any of the requirements of the described topography. If the Joshua account is a TNR, Khirbet et-Tell cannot be the site of Ai.

If Khirbet et-Tell, is the site referred to by Joshua, then, the conquest of Ai must be a fiction, at best. If it was deliberately invented for the purposes advocated by those who support the "etiological legend" theory, the Joshua narrative of that battle is a deliberate deception, in short, a lie. These conclusions necessarily follow from TNR-theory by exact logic. The fit is not improved by supposing, as do Finkelstein and Na'aman, that the story was specially written to account for Israel's presence in the land of Canaan to subsequent generations. If the story were an etiological legend to explain the ruins at Khirbet et-Tell, then why did the creators of the legend (fiction) not incorporate the obvious topography of that site into their narrative? If the purpose of the story was to attribute the imposing ruins to a conquest by the armies of Joshua, as Finkelstein and Na'aman say the author(s) of the book intended to do,³⁷ why not see to it that the story at least conformed to the topography in its obvious details? Either the writers were stupid as well dishonest, or the proposed explanation of Finkelstein and Na'aman must be false. Interestingly, if Joshua's account is true, then the "etiological legend" theory must be false.

As if matters could be worse for would-be conservatives who have tried to reconcile the biblical narrative to the Kirbet et-Tell site, there is not a single synchronism that can be drawn as a result of a comparison between Joshua's narrative and the archaeological stratigraphy of Khirbet et-Tell. Although Khirbet et-Tell is one of the most thoroughly excavated sites in Israel,

³⁶ The result is a very poor fit. It shows multiple inconsistencies with details provided in Joshua's account. See P. Briggs's definition of the "criterial predicate screen" in "Testing the Factuality of the Conquest of Ai Narrative in the Book of Joshua," paper presented to the Near East Archaeological Society Meeting in Santa Clara, California, November 20, 1997.

³⁷ Finkelstein and Na'aman, *op cit.* footnote 23.

stratigraphic studies reveal that the city there was destroyed toward the end of Early Bronze Age III (about 2400 BC; a millennium prior to Joshua's time), and remained abandoned until a small unwalled settlement was built there during Iron Age I. Therefore, if the narrative of Joshua 7:1-8:29 is true, there must be another location fitting its topographical requirements.

TNR-theory, thus, provides a way of empirically showing the theory of Finkelstein and Na'aman to be false: what is required is to find a site that conforms in all its details to the narrative of Joshua 7:1-8:29. What is sought is a small fortified Canaanite city that came to an abrupt fiery demise at the end of Late Bronze Age I (1400 BC). Additionally, the archaeological record of that site must not contradict any detail of the conquest of Ai narrative in Joshua. In the light of TNR-theory, these facts would not prove the truth of Joshua 7:1-8:29, but would enable archaeologists to rule out all the competing alternatives that fail one or more consistency tests.

As J. Vernon McGee often stressed on the "Thru the Bible Radio" broadcast, if the Bible is true, it can no more be tested against our experience (or against archaeology) than we can test the dictum that "McGee was human and therefore destined to die" against McGee's death. Nor could anyone test the statement that he or she must die by up and dying. Rather, if the biblical narrative is true, archaeological claims must be tested against what it says. As McGee correctly noted on numerous occasions, the Bible is the basis against which our experience (archaeology included) must be tested. Only if the Bible is false can it reasonably be tested against experience.

Besides, a site for Joshua's Ai, other than Khirbet et-Tell, has been discovered.³⁸ The site, Khirbet el-Maqatir, located approximately one kilometer WSW of Khirbet et-Tell, meets every detail of the topographical requirements in Joshua 7:1-8:29. The archaeological record of Khirbet el-Maqatir has also revealed Early, Middle and Late Bronze occupations. The Late Bronze I occupation was fortified with a massive wall and rampart system, with secondary revetment support preserved in at least one location. Sling stones strewn throughout, and shown to be from Late Bronze loci, show a military engagement on the site at the time of Joshua's invasion. Furthermore, evidence points to the destruction of the fortified structure by fire toward the end of Late Bronze I (ca. 1400 BC). The six-year excavation project at Khirbet el-Maqatir, directed by B. Wood, has provided compelling evidence for the identification of Khirbet el-Maqatir as the Ai destroyed by Joshua.³⁹ On the one hand, if the story of Joshua's defeat of Ai is a TNR, this is precisely what is expected. On the other hand, if Joshua 7-8 is not a TNR, one would struggle to explain the fact that the geography, topography, and archaeology of the Khirbet el-Maqatir is commensurate with the passage in every detail.

2. The Finkelstein/Na'aman Emergence Scenario in Light of TNR-theory

The emergence theory of the rise of the Israelite nation not only denies that the Hexateuchal narrative is factual, but goes further than traditional higher criticism by denying that kernels of historical memory play any role in the Exodus and conquest narratives. While the higher critical theory of Graf and Wellhausen did not deny that a substantial layering of embellishment and

³⁸ Briggs, op cit. footnote 36; also B. Wood, "The Search for Joshua's Ai: The New Excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir." Paper presented to the Near East Archaeological Society, 1997.

³⁹ B. G. Wood, "Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1995-1998," *Israel Exploration Journal* 50.1-2 (2000) 123-130. See also B. G. Wood, "Khirbet el-Maqatir, 1999," *Israel Exploration Journal* 50.3-4 (2000) 249-254; B. G. Wood, "Khirbet el-Maqatir, 2000," *Israel Exploration Journal* 51.2 (2001) 246-252; and B. G. Wood, "Kh. el-Maqatir 2000 Dig Report," *Bible and Spade* 13.3 (2000) 67-72.

mythologizing could have occurred, it did not reach the extremes of emergence theory:

It is...evident that the emergence of Israel was not a unique, metahistorical episode in the history of a chosen people, but rather part of a much broader historical process that took place in the Ancient Near East, a process that brought about the destruction of the *ancien régime* and the rise of a new order, of national, territorial states...Combination of archaeological and historical research demonstrates that the biblical account of the conquest and occupation of Canaan is *entirely divorced from historical reality* [emphasis ours].⁴⁰

With such a statement, the entire book of Joshua (and much of the biblical history of Israel) is relegated to the realm of fictional propaganda. In general, emergence theory suggests that virtually all pre-monarchic narratives in the Old Testament are invented fictions. According to that scenario, there were no Genesis patriarchs. There was no Israelite sojourn in Egypt. There was no Moses. There was no exodus. The Israelites never wandered in the wilderness. There was no Joshua and no conquest of Canaan. Instead, emergence theory holds that national (or territorial) Israel coalesced from the autochthonous Canaanite population as various tribal groups banded together to wrest control of the central hill country of Palestine, a lengthy process that began sometime after the beginning of the Iron Age (ca. 1200 BC). Having carved out a niche for themselves in the highlands, the unified pre-Israelites tribes began to evolve into a nation-like entity during the 11th through the 9th centuries BC. To chronicle this “emergence” after the fact, the account of Joshua and other narratives were invented by an imaginative priesthood.

From Joshua forward, according to emergence theory, the Old Testament is on firmer historical ground; however, the historicity of the narratives about Saul, David, and Solomon is regarded as questionable. Sometime during what is traditionally known as the Divided Kingdom, primarily Judahite authors began to justify their presence in their acquired lands by manufacturing a “history” for themselves. Thus, they wrote contrived fictional narratives identifying themselves as YHWH’s chosen people, inhabiting the territories which he had delivered into their hands. In essence, the whole work was clever religio-socio-political propaganda. It was a work of fiction intended to mislead subsequent generations into accepting it as true. In the end, if Finkelstein and Na’aman are correct (judged in the light of TNR-theory), the whole narrative of the Hexateuch devolves into a deliberate deception—a lie.

What Finkelstein and Na’aman have done in denying the historical authenticity of huge sections of Old Testament narrative is to create an imaginary “history” themselves about the rise of the Israelite nation in antiquity, i.e., a story that includes and yet relegates Joshua’s account to the level of a fiction. And on the basis of what evidence do they create their alternative “history”? They say that they have arrived at their conclusions based on what “archaeological and historical research demonstrates.”⁴¹ Nonetheless, without any hope of consistency, grounding their views on the irrelevant remains of Khirbet et-Tell, they assert that their imagined “history” is both plausible and true. But could *their* story, conceivably be a TNR?

In order to be considered a TNR, the emergence theory must be consistent with all other TNRs. It immediately becomes obvious that if any narrative portion of the Old Testament, such as Joshua 7:1-8:29, can be reasonably demonstrated to be a TNR, then the emergence theory cannot be a TNR. But what other TNRs exist to confirm any single aspect of the emergence

⁴⁰ Finkelstein and Na’aman op cit., footnote 32, especially pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 13.

theory? What “historical research” are Finkelstein and Na’aman referring to? Historiographical inquiry, by its very nature, requires the existence of historical documents, preferably eyewitness accounts, or at least firsthand interview accounts, that can be analyzed by the application of internal and external texts for historical authenticity. It also requires that the writer(s) of a given narrative must intend to tell the truth rather than to create a persuasive fiction. Moreover, the Old Testament’s objective treatment of its characters, including the nation of Israel itself, is well documented and stands in stark contrast to the written materials from other peoples in the ancient Near East. But what historical documents, particularly the narrative kind, are consulted to support the emergence theory? In fact, none.

The emergence theory is not developed from the examination and assessment of ancient texts (Canaanite or otherwise) derived directly or indirectly from eyewitnesses of the events they describe. It is based solely upon the subjective interpretation of the archaeological record which, in the Levant as nearly everywhere else, is virtually mute. The only way that an archaeological record can “speak for itself” (as TNR-theory clearly shows) is if it happens to hold decipherable written records that meet at least some of the requirements of TNRs. The emergence theory assumes that, if there had been some kind of Israelite conquest of Canaan, it would have occurred at the beginning of the Iron Age (ca. 1200 BC). But most archaeologists realize that stratigraphic evidence for a late 13th/early 12th century conquest is mostly absent from the archaeological record of the Levant. However, a more literal biblical reckoning for the dating of the conquest is the end of Late Bronze Age I (ca. 1400 BC), a time frame that is archaeologically amenable to such a scenario. The archaeological claims of the emergence theory amount to something like saying, We have concluded from our examination of World War I strata, that the Revolutionary War did not occur as traditionally presented (!).

However, in the absence of ancient extra-biblical narrative texts which might qualify as TNRs, the emergence theory makes no real case against the biblical narrative. While it begins by denying the authenticity of the biblical narrative, only speculations and imagined sequences of possible events are offered to support this unfounded denial. TNR-theory demands that the emergence theory, if it is correct, must (a) show agreement with the relevant material facts; (b) be linked by actual observers to those facts; and (c) be consistent with both of the foregoing elements (i.e., the facts and the links provided by one or more observers of those facts). However, the emergence theory has no written R derived from the occurrence of the events it purports to describe. It is merely an imagined inference from mute archaeological data, which are demonstrably indeterminate. TNR-theory shows conclusively that to make such facts determinate, what would be required is precisely what Finkelstein, Na’aman, and company claim is missing—namely, one or more TNRs such as the biblical narrative purports to be.

With respect to the people, places and events of the emergence theory, the factual element is so degenerate as to enable authors of that story to invent whatever scenarios their imaginations can muster. And, as demonstrated by TNR logic, this kind of degeneracy is the necessary special imperfection of every fiction.⁴² When such fictions come into necessary conflict with relevant data, they devolve to errors. When known errors are represented to be true, the Rs devolve to the level of lies. According to TNR-theory, the emergence theory of Finkelstein and Na’aman cannot rise above the first-level degeneracy of a narrative fiction. Further, if they have misinterpreted the archaeological data so that their emergence theory in reality does not accord with the material

⁴² See Oller and Collins cited in footnote 4.

facts to which they have chosen to call attention, then their story is doubly degenerate, i.e., an error. To conclusively refute the theory advocated by Finkelstein and Na'aman, it is only necessary to show that it is inconsistent with material facts that are well-determined by, and entirely consistent with, the biblical narrative. Even if the Khirbet-el Maqatir site did not continue to bear critical scrutiny, the emergence theory is still doomed for want of any factual evidence in its favor. In the meantime, if Khirbet el-Maqatir is the site of Joshua's battle at Ai, the emergence theory is proved to be empirically false. Besides, the emergence theory does not accord with its own preferred site for Joshua's battle at Khirbet et-Tell (!); therefore, it is false (by its own inconsistency) independently of the discoveries at Khirbet el-Maqatir.

3. Mark 8:22-26 in Light of TNR-theory

That the Markan passage describing the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida is presented as a TNR cannot very well be questioned. Whether it is in fact a TNR or not is another matter. The story is short and simple. But is it a TNR?

To begin with, it is not in conflict with the historical facts reported by any other biblical claim given as a TNR from the same time frame. Furthermore, it satisfies the requirements of the necessary perfections relative to the material facts and the linking of the written R to those facts by a person who had every opportunity to witness the event or to interview those who experienced it firsthand.

One particular fact reported in Mark's account is the name of the village of Bethsaida. And it is precisely at this point that the narrative reveals its authenticity. If one understands the history of the site, then the importance of the name, Bethsaida, comes into focus.⁴³ The site had accommodated a series of fortified towns and unwalled villages since the Early Bronze Age. It was the seat of the Geshurite kingdom in the Iron Age. During the very early Roman Period it was a successful fishing village. Then shortly before AD 29, Herod Philip took an interest in Bethsaida. He had been a patron of the elevation of Livia, wife of Augustus, into the imperial cult along with her husband. As a result, she was given the title Augusta/Sebaste in addition to the name Julia, by adoption into the Julian clan. Philip was then instrumental in refurbishing Bethsaida and renaming the town Julias, or Bethsaida-Julia, in honor of Livia Julia, in September, AD 30. From that point forward it was known as Bethsaida/Julia or simply as Julias. But nowhere in the Gospels, and not in Mark 8, is the town ever referred to as Julias. In the first volume produced by the Bethsaida Excavation Project, Strickert seizes the point:

The Gospels record events ending with the crucifixion of Jesus on April 7, 30, CE. If the name Julia had appeared appended to the name Bethsaida in the Gospels, readers would have recognized it as anachronistic...and...Mark correctly refers to Bethsaida as a village.⁴⁴

Strickert's inference is that the author of the Gospel of Mark, presumably writing long after the events described, carefully avoids reference to the town as Bethsaida/Julia, or Julias, in order to avoid an anachronism. But, what if the text were a TNR? Reference to the place as "Bethsaida" would then be expected since that was the name known to the disciples who were born there, which included at least Peter, Andrew, and Philip. The people of the region in that

⁴³ See R. Arav, and R. Freund (eds.), *Bethsaida: A City by the North Shore of the Sea of Galilee, Volume One* (Kirksville, Missouri: Thomas Jefferson University Press, Bethsaida Excavations Project, 1995).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

day, before AD 30, had known the town only as Bethsaida all their lives. An eyewitness of the event in question (Mark 8:22-26) would not be susceptible to anachronistic error. Either way, the name Bethsaida is required if the account is a genuine TNR. And Bethsaida is the name found in the text. How could later writers have avoided the natural error of using the later name of the town?

Interestingly, the members of the Jesus Seminar, save one, unanimously declared the Mark 8:22-26 passage to be absolutely inauthentic (they gave it a “black rating”). Yet one member of the Jesus Seminar, J. Rousseau (an excavator of Bethsaida!), argues in favor of its authenticity. He concludes:

[The] story of the blind man cured at Bethsaida by Jesus meets all the criteria I have selected in order to detect its possible authenticity... Thus, we may reasonably conclude that Jesus most probably healed a blind man at Bethsaida by using saliva and imposing his hands.⁴⁵

At any rate, the archaeological evidence concerning the name change at a later time produces no inconsistency whatsoever, and cannot be construed as compelling evidence against the claim that the story is a TNR. By contrast, the alternative claim that the account is a fiction, created a generation or more after the fact, cannot account for the use of the name “Bethsaida.”

4. The Jesus Seminar’s Foggy Portrait of Jesus in Light of TNR-theory

For the members of the Jesus Seminar, the non-historical character of the New Testament Gospels is a foregone conclusion. If not, it should be, on account of the fact that the methods applied by that illustrious group are absolutely certain to produce corrupt and fictional interpretations of any TNR to which it may be applied. This is a lead-pipe cinch on account of nothing but the form of the Rs the Jesus Seminar comes to by its method of examining Scripture. A sampling of Seminar “axioms” reveals that corruptions of any TNRs to which they may be applied are absolutely guaranteed. They begin with a plain rejection of any admission of the historical authenticity of the Gospels. This immediately puts the Jesus Seminar scholars in the embarrassing position of being forced from the outset into disagreeing with any TNRs whatsoever that the gospels contain (if any). Moreover, if the gospels are TNRs in their totality, the Jesus Seminar sets itself at the start in opposition to the righteous Judge of all the world:

The evidence provided by the gospels is hearsay evidence... The evangelists are all reporting stories and sayings related to them by intermediate parties; none of them was an ear or eyewitness of the words and events he records.⁴⁶

Sayings and narratives that reflect knowledge of events that took place after Jesus’ death are the creation of the evangelists or the oral tradition before them.⁴⁷ Jesus makes no claim to be the Anointed, the Messiah.⁴⁸ Given such an approach, it is no wonder that only a handful of the sayings of Jesus, and practically none of the underlying gospel narrative framework, are considered to be authentic according to the Jesus Seminar criteria.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 265.

⁴⁶ Cf. Funk and Hoover, op cit. footnote 33, especially, p. 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 32.

One of the remarkable proposals of the Seminar is to separate the sayings of Jesus from their narrative contexts. According to the logical proofs of TNR-theory and the logical perfections that TNRs show in their structures, such a separation is as ridiculous as hoping to improve the faithfulness of a photograph to one of the elements it contains by cutting away all of the surrounding elements. As this process is repeated, eventually the photograph will be utterly destroyed and none of its elements will be recognizable. It is relatively easy to demonstrate in accord with the exact logic requirements of TNR-theory that it is impossible that a valid R might be improved by any method that systematically demolishes its context of appearance. Therefore, if any saying of Jesus were correctly recorded in a TNR context, all that the Jesus Seminar approach could accomplish is to sever it from that context and make it less comprehensible. Further, to list such sayings as general dicta independent of contexts would be to demote them to the level of true generals at best, and of indeterminate fictions at worst. In particular, what such a procedure guarantees is the reduction of coherent narratives to unintelligible lists of “possible” utterances that must eventually also become unintelligible as the process is carried toward its logical limits. The ultimate result is to destroy any intended sense or determinate meanings of any Rs to which such a procedure might be applied.

The underlying premise of the Jesus Seminar is that any authentic sayings of Jesus that there may be, and other sayings which were falsely attributed to him or which were intentionally fabricated, were written into fictional narrative contexts by later Christian writers who had no direct personal knowledge of Jesus or anything he might have said or done. Of course, scholarly challenges to such thinking already abound and, indeed, the weight of historical evidence for the consistency of the gospel accounts both with each other and with contemporary history is substantial.⁴⁹ However, TNR-theory shows why the recommended method of discriminating authentic from inauthentic sayings of Jesus is preposterous.

How could, for instance, any authentic sayings of Jesus survive apart from their narrative contexts? Memory simply does not work in that way, and the logic of TNRs shows why it cannot. All TNRs in discourse necessarily arise (originally) from eye-witness accounts of events in the matter/energy-space-time continuum. As such TNRs are dependent on the episodic structure of the event sequence underlying them. This has been shown to be the sole source for the material content of any R whatsoever.⁵⁰ Therefore, if any saying of Jesus is authentically attributed to him, this attribution must depend ultimately on a TNR, i.e., an act of Jesus correctly perceived and reported by one or more competent observers at a given place and time. Only if the saying is part of the original fabric of the historical continuum can it be determined to be such as it is, and can it be understood and recalled. Only to the extent that it is correctly linked by one or more competent observers to its material facts can it be truly represented in the first place. This much is proved in TNR-theory.

Of course, it is true that Rs can themselves be represented in Rs. If this were not so, no valid interpretations of any Rs could be produced. But, the approach of the Jesus Seminar to determining the “sayings of Jesus” apart from the narrative contexts in which those sayings were issued (perhaps repeatedly) is simply unworkable. If any given narrative of the New Testament

⁴⁹ See N. Geisler, *The Battle for the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1989); R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986); W. L. Craig, *The Historical Argument for the Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Mellen, 1985).

⁵⁰ Cf. references to TNR-theory cited in footnote 4.

gospels were true, the method of the Jesus Seminar is a sure-fire way of first confusing and then ultimately demolishing, on subsequent applications of the same procedure, all of the relevant data. This follows as a strict consequence of the assumption that a part of a context (e.g., a single sentence) can be more certain than the larger context in which it occurs. All experience and the strict logic of TNR-theory shows this assumption to be incorrect. On the contrary, we are ordinarily far more apt to forget the exact words spoken in a given context than the meaning of those words relative to the context itself.

In fact, the preservation of the surface-forms of oral discourse is vastly less common than the preservation of the larger structure of a narrative. This is true in general, without a single known exception, of all ancient written sources of historiographical value. From Herodotus to Josephus to Tacitus, the genre of ancient historical writing is dominated by descriptive and assertive narrative with very little direct quotation of exact surface-forms of spoken utterances. If anything, the tendency of most ancient narrative literature is to minimize oral discourse or to stylize it in the form of rhyme or other devices to make it recallable. Narrative structure, however, is more likely to be preserved, while sayings are routinely eliminated or forgotten. Thus, it ought to be expected that the narrative framework of the gospels would be preserved with relatively few direct quotations (“sayings”) intact. The fact that the gospels preserve so much of what Jesus said within the context of the events of his life is consistent with the claims of the gospel writers that they worked either as firsthand witnesses, or interviewers of those witnesses. The gospels present their purpose always to preserve the significant import of what Jesus *did* and *said*. And this is exactly what is required of a TNR. Oddly, the Jesus Seminar seeks to improve on firsthand accounts and reliable reports by a kind of second-guessing that would make liars out of the author/redactors of the entire record.

One might then ask this question: If, before the gospels were compiled, collections of the sayings of Jesus were circulating about, detached from any narrative framework, why is manuscript evidence for such collections entirely lacking? Amidst the wealth of extant manuscripts of the canonical gospels, why is there not even one shred of documentary evidence in support of one of the alleged “sayings collections”? The resultant conclusions of the Jesus Seminar would predict that such evidence would surely be forthcoming. TNR-theory would predict that the sayings of Jesus would not likely be preserved without their foundational narrative contexts. Which view does the manuscript evidence support? The number of ancient manuscripts attesting to the gospels in their full-blown narrative format is huge. The number of ancient manuscripts attesting to the existence of collections of narrative-less sayings is *zero*. The empirical evidence fits the prediction of TNR-theory, but is entirely inconsistent with that of the Jesus Seminar.

X. CONCLUSION

Given the rigorous logical proofs of TNR-theory in predicting and describing the structure of all TNRs, it must be applicable to all narrative Rs that claim to be true. With the historical authenticity of the Bible being rejected categorically by growing numbers of secular scholars, and being questioned increasingly even by conservatives who have tried to compromise with the attackers, TNR-theory holds out the possibility of testing the authenticity of all Rs that purport to be true. It is as applicable to extra-biblical writings as to the Bible, and to theories of interpretation. The application of TNR-theory shows that the biblical narratives examined fully meet the demands of TNR-theory. However, the emergence theory that generally denies the

historical accuracy and authenticity of biblical narratives, and the methods of the Jesus Seminar applied to determining the “sayings of Jesus” are both shown to be untenable on account of inherent inconsistencies, failure to comprehend relevant data, and because they fail the test of simplicity at every turn. The only theory that is consistent with all of the facts presented, and the simpler theory by a far cry, is to suppose that the Bible should be regarded as a TNR. Unsurprisingly, this alternative is the only one consistent with the Bible’s claims for its own authenticity.