

**THE DEPICTION OF JESUS CHRIST AS AN EPIC HERO IN THE GOSPEL  
ACCORDING TO MATTHEW**

**BY**

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**DEPARTMENT OF LITERARY STUDIES**

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## **DEDICATION**

To the Lord Jesus Christ for all I have learnt about Him in the course of the research.

## ABSTRACT

In the past the Bible was studied as a purely religious text but now there is a revolution in its study. At the centre of this revolution is a growing awareness that the Bible is literature, taken that literature refers to pieces of writing that are valued as works of art. Since literary studies are useful in the study, evaluation and interpretation of literature, methods of literary scholarship are therefore a necessary part of any complete study of the Bible. In addition, there is now an inclination to use literary instead of traditional theological terms to discuss the stories and poems in the Bible. The same applies to studies on Jesus. Not much has been done on Jesus Christ as an epic hero. He has mainly been studied as a religious personality and less from a literary perspective. Since the concept of the epic hero is universal and epic heroes share most characteristics, there is need for more people to know Jesus in a manner that resonates with them. This study therefore, using a literary approach, attempted to interrogate the depiction of Jesus Christ as an epic hero. The main objective of this study was to explain how Jesus is depicted as an epic hero in the *Gospel according to St Matthew*. This was done by first explaining how the *Gospel according to St Matthew* fits in the epic genre, then analysing how Jesus Christ is depicted as an epic hero in the Gospel and finally, looking at Jesus Christ beyond the epic hero. The study employed Deconstruction as propounded by Jacques Derrida as its theoretical framework. The Bible, specifically *The Gospel according to Matthew* and the literary epic was the area of research. This is because this gospel, compared to the others, most resembles an epic in terms of themes and style. The study utilised the analytical research design. Analytical research, a style of qualitative inquiry, is a non-interactive document research which describes and interprets the past from selected sources. These sources might be documents preserved in collections or participants oral testimonials or in the case of this research, a literary text by an author. The use of the analytical design was justified because it is ideal in a situation where a researcher attempts to analyse a situation or make an evaluation. The study population was *the Gospel according to St Matthew* in the New Testament of the NIV Bible. It made use of purposive sampling to select fourteen chapters, which best depict Jesus Christ as an epic hero, out of the twenty-eight chapters in the text for analysis. Textual analysis formed the basis of the qualitative data from the Bible and library sources respectively. The study was expected to contribute in the field of literature by showing how skills of literary appreciation can enhance our understanding of the Bible and Jesus Christ in particular.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background Information

In the past, the Bible was regarded as a purely religious text and scholars studied it as such. However, this has changed in recent years as more scholars are reading and studying the Bible as literature. This is because it contains types of writing that are often called ‘imaginative literature’ or ‘creative writing’. Some scholars have attempted to explain this change. Ryken (1984) says that there is quite a revolution going on in the study of the Bible. He argues that at its centre, is the growing awareness that the Bible is a work of literature and that methods of literary scholarship are a necessary part of any complete study of the book. He argues that there is now an inclination to use literary instead of traditional theological terms to discuss the stories and poems of the Bible.

Bevan (1993) is of a similar opinion as he believes that units on ‘The Bible as Literature’ have proliferated over the last thirty years. He says that there is little doubt that since the appearance of Northrop Frye’s *The Great Code*, the Bible has been definitively recuperated as the paradigmatic literary text and is now relentlessly subjected to the entire gamut of recent and emergent critical approaches. He further says that in addition to the literary richness of the Bible, it is also a central document of the western cultural heritage. He continues to argue that “beyond questions of source and inspiration, despite the quaintness of a language that is often deliciously antiquated, it remains a *sine qua non* for an informed understanding of an immense part of our contemporary literature, even in an age of dwindling faith.”

Others who support this view include Alter and Kermode (2005) who add that the Bible has become then, no longer a repository of truths, but a repository of points of reference, of images and allusions, a treasure-house of myths, characters, ideas, narrative modes and

patterns into which poets continually dip. They conclude that since most recently the post-modern has positively wallowed in the pleasure play and pastiche of intertextuality and collapsed meaning and therefore today the Bible remains, although now more interrogatively than affirmatively, the most persuasive source book for the twentieth century authors across many countries. There is need therefore to study the gospels from a literary perspective as well because as Ewing (1890) said, the composition of the four gospels in the first century was a literary miracle

It is not controversial that Jesus Christ is the central focus of not only the Bible but of history. Several scholars and renowned personalities describe him as great. No one man in history has inspired both love and hate in equal measure than Jesus. He is known by several names depending on his relationship with that individual. There are therefore very many perspectives to Jesus Christ depending on the lens one has on; historical, religious or even literary. For this reason, Jesus Christ, though regarded as essentially a religious and spiritual figure, is studied from a literary approach because of the literariness of the Bible.

However, this study, though about the greatest characters in the Bible, Jesus Christ, should not be misconstrued to mean it is a theological study. This is because it mainly used a literary approach to put into perspective the epic and the epic hero in relation to Jesus. It has interrogated how Jesus was depicted as an epic hero in *The Gospel according to Matthew*.

### **1.1.1 The Epic Genre**

The epic is recognized as a primary genre of world literature. Traditionally, it is a genre of poetry known as epic poetry (Merchant, 1971). However, because the epic genre has been undergoing a transformation, in modern terms an epic is often extended to other art form such as novels, plays, films, music, epic theatre, video games, and television shows where the

story is centred on heroic characters and the action takes place on a grand scale. The term epic has often been applied to any tradition that is “national” or “heroic” regardless of form or length. The earliest examples of the epic examples, such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, or the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, attest to its age; the Greek literary tradition makes this genre almost equivalent to the scripture. The influence of the classical literary tradition has associated the epic with written form and until recently obscured its occurrence in oral tradition (Johnson and Hale, 1997).

Epics can be known by their formal characteristics, but great epics participate in a tradition by which each new epic refers consciously to epics which came before it. To even have a chance to be recognized in this tradition, epics must meet the criteria for such great poems. Abram () sums up the total attributes of the epic as “a large work about heroes who are capable of larger deeds than ordinary mortal characters, whose actions are described beginning in the middle of the plot (*in medias res*. “in the middle of things”) so that the narrative appears to hurtle forward from great events (narrated in flashbacks) toward even greater events (often foretold in prophecies). The poet’s style is always elevated using extended similes. These are comparisons which incorporate long discussions of natural phenomena to explain the otherwise inexplicable aspects of the epic heroes’ character of the world.

Johns-Putra (2004) gives us the characteristics of the epic. He states that the epic is a narrative poem with the following characteristics: firstly, it is of a profound national or even universal relevance; secondly, it has a virtuous hero or heroes (*virtuous as defined by the culture of the epic*) who must go through many trials to achieve the good of an entire people. Thirdly, the epic is imbued with immensity and sheer enormity in the scope and breadth of the narrative; and finally, it is acknowledged by the vast majority of literary authorities over

many generations for excellence of its poetic and cultural merit. It should be noted that epics do not occur everywhere, but they are the products of a combination of social and historical circumstances and various verbal genres. A good example is the Bible is considered a great epic because it indeed is a very long story, strikingly written.

### **1.1.2 The Epic Hero**

In all epics, whether primary or secondary, there is an epic hero around whom the action centres. He is the main character or protagonist in the classic and since he is heroically larger than life, he often becomes the source and subject of legend and is mainly given the status of a national hero. This hero is usually a person of great strength, wit or skill whose adventure usually contributes to the development of a particular race or nation. In literature, the epic hero incorporates three characteristics, according to the Centre for Hellenic Studies at Harvard University. The epic hero is unseasonal, or transcends the time in which he existed. The epic hero is also extreme, in both the positive and negative aspects of his personality. He is also antagonistic toward another character, usually a god or god-like figure (Sosnowski, 2016).

Draper (1990) goes a step further in his description of the epic hero. He says that the epic hero is a larger than life figure who embodies the ideals of his people, besides often being a man of high status of great historical or legendary importance. He adds that the epic hero is usually favoured by or even partially descended from deities but aligned more closely with mortal figures in popular portrayals. The hero must undertake a long, perilous journey, often involving a descent into the Underworld (Greek, "*Neukeia*"), which tests his endurance, courage, and cunning. The journey the hero participates in is a cyclical journey or quest, where he faces adversaries that try to defeat him in his journey. He gathers allies along his journey, and returns home significantly transformed by his journey. In addition, the epic hero

illustrates traits, performs deeds and exemplifies certain morals that are valued by the society from which the epic originates. Most of the epic heroes are recurring characters in the legends of their native culture and they usually embody cultural and religious beliefs of their people. This is why they are venerated and emulated.

The epic heroes are supernatural in that they are smarter, stronger and braver than average human beings. As a result of this, the hero can be a warrior of some sort since he performs extraordinary tasks that most people find difficult because he is a hero that 'saves'. In the narratives, he is introduced in the midst of turmoil (*in medias res*), at a point well into the story; antecedent action is usually recounted in flashbacks. This hero is not only a warrior and a leader, but also a polished speaker who can address councils of chieftains or elders with eloquence and confidence. Apart from that, he is often a demi-god, possesses distinctive weapons of great size and power, often heirlooms or presents from the gods. Although his fellows may be great warriors, like Achilles and Beowulf, he may have a *comitatus*, or group of noble followers with whom he grew up. Often, he undertakes a task that no one else dares to attempt. Whatever virtues his race most prizes, these the epic hero as a cultural exemplar possesses in abundance. Stock epithets emphasize his key quality: "*Resourceful Odysseus*," "*swift-footed Achilles*," "*pious Aeneas*." The concept of *arête* (Greek for "bringing virtue to perfection") is crucial to understanding the epic protagonist. The heroes normally do everything for the glory it gives them (Toohey, 1993).

The hero establishes his *aristeia* (nobility) through single combat in *superari a superiore*, honour coming from being vanquished by a superior foe. That is, a hero gains little honour by slaying a lesser mortal, but only by challenging heroes like himself or adversaries of superhuman power. The two great epic adversaries, the hero and his antagonist, meet at the climax, which is delayed as long as possible to sustain maximum interest. One such device

for delaying this confrontation is the nephelistic rescue (utilized by Homer to rescue Paris from almost certain death and defeat at the hands of Menelaus in the *Iliad*).

The hero's epic adversary is often a "god-despiser," one who has more respect for his own mental and physical abilities than for the power of the gods. The adversary might also be a good man sponsored by lesser deities, or one whom the gods desert at a crucial moment. The hero may encounter a numinous phenomenon, a place or person having a divine or supernatural force, such as a haunted wood or enchanting sorcerer that he must use strength, cunning, and divine assistance to overcome (Miller, 2000).

### **1.1.3 Jesus Christ**

Jesus Christ, whose name means "God saves" in Hebrew and "the anointed one" in Greek, is a great historical figure and the foundation on which the Christian faith is built. He was probably born in the last years in the reign of Herod the Great and his birth, as is common with most epic heroes, was prophesied. He was a Galilean of the house of David and son of a woman called Mary who was married to Joseph, a carpenter. He grew up in Nazareth; a village on the hills of Galilee overlooking the plain of Jezreel. The story of his life is found in the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*. Connolly (1983) says that between 33AD and 26 AD, Jesus began his public life. He started his ministry when he was thirty years old and began preaching in Galilee, making his headquarters at Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was after being baptized by John when he proclaimed the kingdom of God. He called disciples to follow him and chose a group of twelve from among them. Biblical accounts indicate that he worked miracles and taught some memorable parables.

Jesus who, as Latourell (1990) and O'Collins (2009) assert, is the founder of the Christian religion, was a great teacher who drew great crowds and was considered a radical during his

time. He associated in a special way with public sinners and other social outcasts. His challenge to forms of piety, his desire to correct traditions, his violation of some Sabbath observances, his attitude to the temple in Jerusalem, his claim to divine authority in changing the law and forgiving sins, and his attitude of extraordinary familiarity with God, aroused antagonism of some Jewish leaders and teachers; the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who had him crucified by the Romans.

In Jerusalem, where he instituted a new covenant with God in the context of the Passover celebration, he was betrayed, arrested, interrogated by members of the Sanhedrin, condemned by Pontius Pilate and executed on the cross which bore an inscription of his crime as a messianic pretender. Crucifixion was described by the Roman orator Cicero as the cruellest and most frightful sentence. It was inflicted for murder, banditry and piracy but most commonly for rebellion. The Romans used it on a vast scale.

Connolly (1983) describes how Jesus Christ possibly died. He suggests that the victim was normally scourged and made to carry the cross-beam to the place of the execution. The upright post was left in position. Once the cross-beam was fixed, the victim was stripped and nailed in position. The cross, he adds, had a narrow strip of wood on which the victim could sit by pulling himself up. This prolonged the agony. As a special concession, the Jews were allowed to remove the bodies before dark and bury them. A placard was fixed on the cross listing the victim's crimes. Connolly's description is in line with what happened to Jesus as narrated in the gospels. Jesus was made to carry his cross-beam to Golgotha where the crucifixion was to take place. There he was stripped and nailed in position. He underwent agony on the cross as is indicated by his crying out to God. A placard stating that Jesus was the king of the Jews was fixed on the cross; this was his crime. After he died, his body was removed before dark and laid in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in line with Jewish



customs. Shortly thereafter he appeared gloriously alive to a number of individuals (e.g. Mary Magdalene, Peter and James) and groups (“the eleven”). Empowered by his spirit, a community of disciples gathered around Peter and the other disciples to acknowledge and proclaim the risen and exalted Jesus as the Christ (or Messiah) saviour, divine lord and son of God.

The death of Jesus is regarded as the ultimate sacrifice by Christians because, according to them, it brought man back into the right relationship with their creator. They believe that salvation of man was brought about through the death of Christ. His resurrection, too, is understood to mean that he has defeated death and it is as a result of this that Christianity is said to have continued to flourish over the ages because it gives the believers hope.

Great figures of history in the world have had stories crafted around their lives. In the African context these include leaders like Shaka the Zulu and Sundiata of Old Mali and Luanda Magere of the Luo. Jesus is a great historical figure who is a larger than life personality as his teachings, death, and resurrection have impacted on history and the lives of many the world over. He too can be studied in the context of the epic hero.

This study is based on the premise that, literature being a product of the society reflects the views and ways of life of that particular society, in the same way that the Bible reflects the views and way of life of both the Jew and the Christian. Indeed one scholar, Gassner (1942), described the Bible is an epic of great magnitude. There is therefore need to study this book especially focusing on one of its key characters, Jesus Christ, who can be traced from *Genesis* to *Revelation*.

The Bible, which is a bestseller, is largely regarded as a holy book by both Christians and Judaists who have for a long time treated it more as a spiritual guide than a literary text. Probably most scholars are reluctant to study it as a literary text since this may be viewed as a desecration of the Holy Scriptures. Moreover, they possibly fear repercussions from religious extremists similar to what Salman Rushdie faced when he wrote *Satanic Verses*. Attitudes to the study of the Bible have changed and continue to change, though. Literary scholars are showing interest in applying their methods to the Bible, and Bible scholars are calling for a literary approach, Ryken (2006). There is need for a harmonious existence between the Bible and Literature because the two actually complement each other. This study does not intend to reduce the deity of Jesus Christ but to possibly enhance it by giving it a new perspective from a literary lens.

#### **1.1.4 Jesus in the Gospel according to St. Matthew**

*The Gospel according to Matthew*, which falls in the Christian epic category, is the text of choice for this study. This is because compared to the other gospels; *Mark*, *John* and *Luke*; it qualifies most as an epic with Jesus Christ on whom this study is based, portrayed as the epic hero. This is why this study is entitled *the depiction of Jesus Christ as an Epic Hero in the Gospel according to St Matthew*. This gospel best shows how Jesus is an epic hero as the writer used the epic conventions in his portrayal of Jesus.

Mark depicts Jesus as an ordinary man- the Son of Man- who must suffer and die. As Guelich (1999) observes, the bulk of the Son of Man references appear majorly in Mark have to do specifically with Jesus' impending suffering and death. It is interesting to note that the term appears only twice and in close proximity in the first half of the Gospel (2:10, 28), the expression appears thirteen times from 8:31 through 11:42.

Luke portrays Jesus as a servant. Jesus is a messiah-Servant-Prophet. The image of the

servant comes early with Simeon in the temple. Jesus is meant to be a deliverer and he is sent by God to serve that purpose. Unfortunately, according to epic tradition, a servant can never be an epic hero. Luke therefore misses the mark.

John, Jesus is a mysterious being. The Jesus in John is too unworldly to be an epic hero. John calls him the Word/Logos, the Son of God, a Messiah and a prophet. John's portrait of Jesus is that he is uniquely commissioned agent of God who, in his task of bringing salvation of God to the world, exercises a unique, mediating function between God and human beings. Because Jesus is the designated agent of God, he also represents God to human beings in such a way that the Gospel can say that to encounter Jesus is to encounter God, to have seen him is to have seen the Father (12:45; 14:7-9).

*The Gospel according to Matthew* stands first among the gospels by reason of its length, the prominence of its use in liturgy and preaching of the church, and the attribution of its authorship to an apostle, Matthew. Certainly, its length makes it the most complete repository of the teaching of Jesus we have, (The African Bible, 2003). The text has a total of 28 chapters and is listed as the first book of the New Testament.

Matthew who was writing for a Jewish-Christian church, stresses Jesus as the fulfilment of all the prophecies and divine promises of the Old Testament, the new Lawgiver and Teacher of the New Covenant, the founder of a new and purified Israel. The main theme of Matthew centres on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as a king among the Jews because, according to Matthew, Jesus is the promised Messiah whose coming heralds the arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus, the long-awaited king, ended thousands of years of eager waiting. But he came to establish a new kind of kingdom- a kingdom different from what anyone expected (The Devotional Study Bible, 1997).

The aim of writing the gospel is further stated in *The Devotional Study Bible*. The kingdom of

heaven is the main subject covered by Matthew. It is suggested that *The Gospel according to Matthew* was not written to chronicle the events of Jesus' life but rather to present the undeniable evidence that Jesus Christ is promised messiah, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. His Messianic status is clearly established in the Infancy Narrative developed throughout the gospel. It is further stated that *The Gospel according to Matthew* was written to prove that Jesus was the expected messiah, the king of all earth, and to make plain the kingdom of God. It is the joining link between Old Testament and the New Testament, focusing on the fulfilment of the prophecy. Christians believe Jesus Christ was not only the son of God but also God. Matthew sees him as the fulfilment of the prophecy that had been made of a saviour and a king who was going to free the Israelites from the Roman Empire and establish a new nation. Christians believe that they are the new Israel that Jesus came to establish, and that membership of the new Israel is for all who believe in God.

In the first ten chapters of the gospel, the kingship of Jesus is revealed through the genealogy showing his pedigree which is acknowledged by the wise men who give him gifts befitting a king. His birth is shown as disturbing to King Herod who worries it is the fulfilment of an ancient prophecy that might mark the end of his reign as a king. Satan too tries to entice Jesus to prevent him from carrying out his mission. Chapters 5, 6 and 7 record the principles of the constitution of the kingdom that Jesus has come to establish. In chapters 8 and 9, power is released to Jesus and we see him as a miracle worker, and reality in a powerful monarch is seen in the multitudes that follow him.

Matthew's Gospel is written from a church perspective. Building on the sayings of Jesus, Matthew speaks of the ideals that Christians should strive for as followers of Christ the king. He stresses the universal missionary aspect of the church which is the new Israel, the true people of God, covenanted to him in person through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

In the recent past, there has been an upsurge on the study of Jesus and scholars have taken a lot of interest on him as a person especially with concerns to his identity. This may be as a result of the many faces he has. Over the years the name of Jesus Christ has conjured up more emotion in people than any other name. Some people use his name as a curse word, others in loving endearment, and others yet in a desperate lifeline. People have either hated him or loved him; many have given their very lives for him. Wars have been fought over him. Some people try to deny that he ever existed. Others say he was just a good teacher or a prophet. Others call him their Saviour - their all in all. It is against this background and wide interest in matters to do with Jesus Christ that this study has originated. The study sought to relate the literary world with that of the religious.

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

This study proposed to interrogate the depiction of Jesus Christ as an epic hero in *The Gospel according to Matthew* using a literary approach.

The literature reviewed showed that most studies carried out on Jesus Christ were mostly from theological perspective. This has led to a narrow and limited understanding of Jesus as a religious figure. There is need for this trend to change as skills of literary appreciation can enhance the way people, even the non-Christians, understand Jesus taken that he has an important place in world history place in world history. Most readers of the Bible overlook the fact that it is literature, and that the Gospels were written under the literary environment of the time and as such followed the epic conventions as a result of Hellenism. It is important to understand that methods of literary scholarship are a necessary part of any complete study of the Gospel according to Matthew, and the main character, Jesus Christ.

It is for this reason that Jesus Christ, though regarded as essentially a religious and spiritual figure, was studied then using a literary approach. Examining him as an epic figure should

extend the way people understand him because they can resonate with the idea of an epic hero. This is because the idea of the epic hero is universal. In every culture in the world, there is an epic hero that people celebrate. This study therefore intended to, using a literary approach, put into perspective the epic and the epic hero in relation to Jesus Christ. It attempted this by interrogating how Jesus is depicted as an epic hero in *The Gospel according to Matthew*.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

- i. Can *the Gospel according to Matthew* be considered an epic?
- ii. How is Jesus Christ depicted as an epic hero in the Gospel according to Matthew?
- iii. What are the unique qualities of Jesus Christ that transcend an epic hero?

### **1.4 Objectives of the study**

The main objective of the study was to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is an epic hero in the Gospel according to St Matthew.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- i. To explain what makes *The Gospel according to Matthew* an epic.
- ii. To analyse how Jesus Christ is depicted as an epic hero in the Gospel according to Matthew.
- iii. To identify the unique qualities of Jesus Christ that transcends an epic hero.

## 1.5 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The story of the life of Jesus Christ is found in the Bible especially in the New Testament in the synoptic gospels. This study focused on *The Gospel according to Matthew* because it stands out as the gospel that pulls things together, the link between the old and the new. The gospel starts with Jesus' roots but also contrasts Jesus with the traditional Jewish picture of the Messiah. Jesus is presented as a king who ended thousands of years of waiting and came to establish a wholly new kind of kingdom. The text has twenty-eight chapters but only fourteen of those that depict Jesus as an epic hero were used for the purpose of the study. Nevertheless, the study was limited to the literary epic category. The literary epic is the product of an author who writes it. *The Gospel according to Matthew* though a literary epic, can further be classified in the Christian epic category. The Christian epic developed as a result of the establishment of Christianity in the European context as the one true monotheistic religion. Other books from the Bible, especially the gospels (*Mark, Luke* and *John*), as well as others in the New Testament like the *Acts of the Apostles* and the Letters of Paul, the Old Testament prophecies in addition to the other types of the epic have been mentioned to create a link and further support the fact of the gospel as being in the epic genre. However, the study was restricted to *The Gospel according to Matthew* and the Christian epic.

Some of the factors that limited the study included the fact because Jesus is majorly a spiritual leader who is regarded by his followers as a deity. As a result, most of the literature about him portrays him as a religious or spiritual hero and not an epic hero. Studies on Jesus studies on a literary Jesus are so few that getting material on him as a literary figure was a challenge.

## **1.6 Justification and Significance of the Study**

The study was expected to make a contribution to the field of literature in particular by showing how skills of literary appreciation can enhance our understanding of the Bible and Jesus Christ in particular. It was hoped that the results of the study would fill the gap that other studies on Jesus as a literary figure and the impact he had on history.

In the past the Bible has been used solely for spiritual or religious purposes and rarely as a literary text for study. Coggins (2009) suggests that the study of the Bible has for the most part been undertaken by those who have had some link in the believing community; the Jewish and the Christian. However, he adds that there has been increased interest in the Bible as a literary phenomenon; this interest has by no means been confined to those who are themselves religious believers. He further adds that many books in the Bible have exercised great fascination for literary figures from the widest possible background like William Blake (1757-1827), Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), H.G. Wells (1886-1942), and Carl Jung (1875-1961) among others. He also states that one of the most striking features of the Bible, as a piece of literature, is its capacity for raising disturbing questions. This makes the Bible and its principle character, Jesus Christ, a relevant field for research.

Many scholarly studies have been undertaken on Jesus Christ in the domain of religion by theologians but having him as a subject of study in literature, more so as an epic hero, may prove very fruitful because more people, Christian and non-Christian, need to understand him better. In addition, this can also help evangelists in terms of delivering their sermons. Some of the most successful preachers of the Gospel are those who use literary stylistic devices to make their sermons memorable as well as pleasurable to listen to. The purpose of this study therefore, is to examine Jesus Christ through using a literary approach, in order to find out whether Jesus Christ is depicted as an epic hero in *The Gospel according to*



*Matthew.*

It is hoped that the findings of this study will enable other literary scholars and students to understand the person of Jesus Christ and use him more as a subject of study in literature. Optimistically, since literature has a didactic role in the society, the findings could offer solutions by shedding light on what is taking place currently in the church, in the political arena, in the society at large based on the life of Jesus Christ, his mission on earth and the times in which he lived.

### **1.7 Theoretical Framework**

The study applied Deconstruction as its theoretical framework. The choice of deconstruction was suitable to this study because it is Jacques Derrida's critique of the relationship between text and meaning. Derrida's approach consists in conducting readings of texts with an ear to what runs counter to the structural unity intended for a particular text. When one reads a literary text, it is possible to find that it consists of a multiplicity of overlying, inconsistent meaning in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to the reader. Deconstructive critics believe that meaning in literature is created during the act of reading a text (Tyson, 1950). For this reason, it is possible to find more than one meaning in the *Gospel according to Matthew* as one reads it. This may be different from what the author may have intended originally while writing this gospel.

Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) were the pioneers in deconstruction. They began to question the objective truth in language. However, Deconstruction is best known as a form of philosophical and literary analysis derived mainly from the work Jacques Derrida began in the 1960's. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, deconstruction in literature refers a detailed examination of a text in order to show there is no fixed meaning but that it can be understood in a different way by each

reader. Derrida French philosopher is the father of deconstruction. According to Derrida, who took the inspiration from Ferdinand de Saussure, language is not the reliable tool of communication. Deconstructionists look at the sentences ambiguities, even when the sentence seems, at first glance, as clear and specific.

Tyson (1950) makes a summary of the main beliefs of deconstruction theory. She says that for deconstructionists, language is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable, continually disseminating. For it, existence has no centre, no stable meaning, and no fixed ground. It further posits that human beings are fragmented battlefields for competing ideologies whose only “identities” are the ones we invent and choose to believe. Therefore, for deconstruction, literature is dynamic, ambiguous, and unstable as the language of which it is composed. Literary texts, like all texts, consist of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us. Deconstructive critics believe meaning in literature is created during the act of reading a text. It is precisely while the reader is reading that moments or readings are created, but inevitably give way to even more meanings, each new reading creating its own unique meaning ad infinitum

A text as linguistically and creatively rich as *the Gospel according to St Matthew* is ripe for a deconstructive reading. This is because a deconstructionist might focus on what seems to be a very slight or minor element of the text to demonstrate its innate contradictions and layers of meaning in order to offer further insight in the Gospel’s meanings, intentions and creative context. This may be done by pointing out to an apparent contradiction in the text. For example, may be the writer of the gospel wrote it to teach the Jewish Christians how to live the Christian life. However, a close look at the text shows that he used the elements of the epic to write his gospel. Some say the writer was Matthew, an apostle of Jesus and yet for some he never existed during Jesus’ lifetime. Christians may view the Bible as the word of

God. A theologian may use theology, for example the theology of Matthew, to study the story of the life of Jesus Christ, whereas a literary critic may use literary criticism and approaches to study its structure and style. Deconstruction theory was then relevant in the study since it is possible to study *The Gospel according to Matthew* as a literary text and not necessarily a religious one. This is because meaning is always uncertain, and it is not the task of a literary critic to determine meaning in a given text.

Deconstruction, being one of the methods of reading and interpreting literature, has some strengths and weaknesses. The strength is that the reader is encouraged to question traditional assumptions and prejudices. An example can be in declining to read the *gospel according to St. Matthew*, not as strictly a religious narrative as has been the traditional norm, but as a literary piece. This is because there are many assumptions regarding binary oppositions. Many of our thoughts and opinions are fixed in binary oppositions, such as man/woman, white/black, east/west, good/evil, etc. in these binary oppositions, the first pair is considered to be the norm and therefore superior, while the second is considered deviant and inferior. We tend to think that these oppositions are definite and fixed, whereas in reality, they are often blurred and in fact artificial. The power of ideology is that it puts forward ideas as natural and factual, but deconstruction helps us to see that they are not natural at all (Tyson, 1950).

Deconstruction, on the other hand, has some weaknesses. This might be the argument that that it makes truth or knowledge impossible because everything can be deconstructed. As a result, truth and knowledge are only relative and often subjective. For instance, a literary text will have a different meaning to each individual reader: it will have no absolute or fixed meaning. However, it did debatable whether this is a weakness or not.

## **1.8 Literature Review**

The Bible as literature has attracted immense scholarly attention in recent years with a number of scholars supporting the view of reading the Bible as literature. According to Gabel (2005), there are two sides to the movement: scholars are showing an increased interest in applying their methods to the Bible, and Bible scholars are calling for a literary approach. As Tyson (1950) says that Deconstruction treats works of art not as the harmonious fusion of literal and figurative meanings but as instances of intractable conflict between meanings of different languages thinking. Students of the Bible may apply literary genres, like the Epic genre, to the Bible and analyse biblical texts using a literary approach. This section reviewed literature that has been published by accredited scholars and researchers regarding the epic, the epic hero, the Bible as literature and Deconstruction theory.

### **1.8.1 The Epic**

Most writers are in agreement as to what an epic is, mainly that it is a long story, about heroic deeds of heroic characters, and that it is told using elevated language. Bowra (1945) says that an epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events, which have certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action such as war. Philip Sidney (1598) referred to the epic as the ‘best and most accomplished kind of poetry.’ Dryden (1667) defined it in the same way as a narrative of some length and deals with events, which have a certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action, especially of violent action such as war. He further says it is a long poem narrating the exploits of an individual central to the beliefs and culture of his society. He adds that the epic tells of fabulous adventure and superhuman deeds, by using majestic or elevated language with artistry that employs the full range of literary device- the lyrical and the dramatic. Epics were mainly performed in the pre-literate era; they were either sang or recited with an accompaniment of instruments though most used oral transmission. Epic poetry is very

demanding, and this makes it the pinnacle of man's creation. Sydney (1598) said it is the best and most accomplished kind of poetry.

An epic is used to refer to anything that is majestic, impressively great, or of unusually great size or extent. In literature, an epic is generally taken to mean a long narrative centred on a single hero presenting his or her adventures in a suitable heroic framework. Cuddon (1984) agrees with this as he defines an epic as a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes. He adds that it is a polygonal, 'heroic' story incorporating myth, legend, folk tale and history, and further adds that epics are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner. Epics are of different types depending on the audience and historical period; whether orate or literate. Draper (1990) suggests that there are two kinds of the epic; the first one is the primary epic also known as oral or primitive and the second one is the secondary or literary epic.

#### **1.8.1.1. The Primary Epic**

The primary epic was the first type of the epic that came into existence in the history of the epic. It was not meant to be read, as during this period people were mostly illiterate, but to be listened to as it was recited or sang by bards or griots. According to Cuddon (1984), the primary epic is the type of poetry that has no single author and is the product of oral tradition written down after centuries of oral tradition. He says that the authorship of the primary epic is not important but possible. The primary epic was originally intended to be sung by a muse. In this kind of epic, the deities and other supernatural agencies are involved in human affairs. The poems have a national interest and a bias.

*The Gospel according St. Matthew* fits in the primary epic category because its authorship is

not very clear. Luz, (1999) says that the literary character of the Gospels as we have them leave no doubt that the material was handed down for some years by word of mouth. Apart from that, there is no agreement as to who actually wrote the gospel even though it is attributed to Matthew the Tax Collector, a disciple of Jesus.

Dean (2000) says that primary epics seem to be generated by periods of upheaval and of struggle and adventure. More often than not, the protagonists are larger than life or demi-gods; are normally descendants of deities or great men or heroes. The characters represent cultural ideals like bravery, fairness and all-round virtue. The primary epics have certain features in common: a central figure of heroic, even superhuman calibre, perilous journeys, various misadventures, strong element of the supernatural, repetition of fairly long passages of narrative or dialogue, elaborate greetings, digressions, epic similes (particularly in the Homeric poems), long speeches, vivid direct descriptions of the kind favoured by the ballad maker, and, in general a lofty tone.

Matthew's Gospel was written at a time when the Jews were under the harsh Roman rule. The Jews were eagerly hoping for a military messiah to deliver them from the Romans. Matthew writes a narrative that has most of the elements of the primary epic as noted above. He constantly refers constantly to Old Testament prophecies to validate Jesus as the promised Messiah. Jesus is the central heroic figure. He is of superhuman calibre

Epics have existed for a very long time in most communities but, according to Draper (1990), It is Homer, who probably existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C., who is said to be the father of the epic. He is regarded with reverence and used, particularly as the author of the *Iliad*, as the model of all subsequent attempts. The oldest and in many ways the world's greatest epic poems and the best of Greek literature are the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer (c.1000 B.C.), whose heroes are Achilles and Odysseus respectively. The *Iliad* recounts the story of the wars

between the Trojans, and in particular the anger of Achilles caused by Agamemnon's slight, and how Achilles slew Hector and dragged his body round the walls of Troy. The *Odyssey* relates the adventures of Odysseus during his return from the Trojan wars to his island home in Ithaca. *Beowulf* is another epic of this period. It was probably written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The poem relates the exploits of a legendary Geatish hero who first rids the Danish of two demonic monsters: Grendel and Grendel's mother

### **1.8.1.2 The Secondary Epic**

According to Toohey (2017), another category of the epic is the secondary epic, also referred to as the literary epic, it came into existence with the emergence of literacy. This means, therefore, that the literary epic is the creation of a poet, a single gifted author or composer who works to create. The secondary epic is written by a poet whose authorship is beyond dispute, in an artificial age, and in an atmosphere of urban cultivation and refinements. Its polished and carefully ordered language is that of a literary set, and its epic devices are borrowed. The literary epic is basically meant to be read.

Publius Virgilio Maro, or simply put Virgil, a literary epic poet born in 70BC in Mantua, is regarded as the first national epic poet. He wrote *The Aeneid* which falls in the literary epic category. *The Aeneid* records and celebrates the foundation of Rome by Aeneas after many hazardous adventures following upon the Trojan wars and the fall of Troy. Kingsbury, (1988) describes the Gospel according to Matthew as a story. It was written by a gifted writer because compared to the other gospels, it is written by a literary artist, using beautiful language.

### 1.8.1.3 The Christian Epic

The establishment of Christianity in the European context as the one true monotheistic religion resulted in the rise of the Christian epic. The middle Ages commemorated in the Christian epic; august, severe, and mystical. This was the time when poets were at the height of their spiritual and creative possibilities. Epic poets, like Milton (1641), wanted to see Christian beliefs and theology reflected in their epics. The epic poetry of Homer and Virgil necessarily, as Draper (1990) says, have pagan themes and presuppose a polytheistic religion which is comparatively easily and naturally accommodated to the epic by the pantheon of gods and goddesses who, though immortal, are preternaturally powerful, are humanly divine and thus able to meet half-way the divinely human heroes of the poems in which they appear. The literary epic was compelled to look to theologically defensible topics such as the crusades.

In the Christian epic though, the distance between the man and the divine was both increased and contracted. This process was simultaneously aided in the Renaissance by a critical movement which sought to justify the classical epic by moralising it so that the exploits of heroes could be regarded as paradigms of virtue or figurative steps to salvation. Blackmore (1695) a critic stated his belief that ‘a *Christian poet* has as great advantages as the *Pagan* had, and that our *Theology* may enter into an Epick Poem, and *raise* the subject without it being self *debas’d*.’ Christian poets therefore need to include in their narratives noble characters who can be emulated as role models. Evil also gets to be punished in Christian epic.

The main proponents of the Christian epic included writers like Dante (1265-1321) and Milton (1608-1674). In Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (1320) he reluctantly relegates the classical poets and thinkers to his *Inferno* or Hell because they did not die in the true faith. Because



they were good men, Homer, Plato, Horace, Virgil, Aristotle, Cicero and the rest live on without torment in the nether regions, but because they lived before the coming of Christianity, they are all lost through eternity. The *Divine Comedy* has a mystic attribute and takes the breath away with its solemn and remote majesty.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* where theology enters with true elevation. In this epic he speaks of the opportunities afforded the creative imagination in the epic to celebrate the victorious agonies of Martyrs and Saints, the deeds and triumphs of just and pious Nations, fighting valiantly through faith against the enemies of Christ. Milton's theology emphasised the original sin and the epic underwent a profound inward revision. Not only the personal prowess of the hero, as in the transition from Virgil to Homer, but the very foundations of the heroic ideal on military glory was rejected as perverse. It is Satan who reflects this tainted ideal. The introduction of *Paradise Lost* offers an explicit re-evaluation of the epic and gives a divine pattern of meaning. For the purpose of this study, concentration will be on the Christian epic because the text of analysis is *The Gospel according to Matthew*, which is found in the Bible.

Another category of the literary epic is the 'comic epic' which Fielding (1742), refers to as the 'comic epic poem in prose', and which James Joyce carved out of Homer in his *Ulysses*. In the comic epic, the characters are ordinary or common men. Bloom is a common man moving in a Dublin world which has ingenuously contrived correspondence with that inhabited by Odysseus. The modern hero is belittled but his sympathetic identification serves to heighten his stature. It is the essential humanity of the modern hero that becomes his claim to heroic status. The comic epic foregrounds the humanity of the hero of the comic epic in prose.

The notion of heroism or the heroic is challenged by the constant revision of the epic and the concept of heroism. The first concept was that of Homer, of the hero after personal revenge like Achilles, then the hero with the virtue of military prowess and courage like Aeneas, to the 'better fortitude' of heroic patience celebrated by Milton, and Joyce proposed a pacifist hero who attains psychological victory of equanimity and abnegation. Apart from the change in the notion of the hero, the style too has changed in that the writers of the epic do not, as a necessity, employ majestic language and adhere to the classical form like before.

The didactic role of the epic has been reiterated by some scholars. Copeland (2006) says that the purpose of the epic poem is to entertain, teach, and inspire the listener or reader with examples of how people strive and succeed against odds. Most scholars concur that an epic must be a story, and the story must be told well and greatly and whether in the story itself or in the telling of it, the significance must be implied. The prime material of the epic must be real and not invented. However, when the story is safely concerned with some reality, the epic poet can graft on this as much invention as he pleases. In addition, the story must be founded deep in the experience of men. Apart from that, historical material can be used to create great epics (Hatto, 1980).

### **1.9 The Epic Hero**

The epic is a narrative poem that focuses on grand themes like fate, and it includes heroic characters and divine beings. At the heart of the epic is the epic hero, who is almost always a man. The epic hero has an elevated status like a king and is usually related to the divine, though is not a god himself. Despite the use of the word "hero," the epic hero does not have to be good -- he can be evil. Epic heroes mostly appear in epic poems, though they can also appear in literature.

An epic, as a necessity, has an epic hero around whom it centres. There can be no epic

without a hero. According to Glencoe and McGraw (2002), the hero must be named, and his deeds assigned to him because he lives in his reputation. The epic hero, who embodies the ideals of his people, is often a man of high status and great historical or legendary importance. The epic hero is typically involved with supernatural events, long periods, distant journeys, and life and death struggles between good and evil. Draper (1990) states that the subject matter of the epic is great and serious centred on the actions of a heroic figure, the epic hero. The epic hero has a goal and typically embarks on a long journey that involves struggling with natural and supernatural beings- gods, monsters, and other human beings-, which test his bravery, wits and other skills in battle.

### **1.10 The Bible and Literature**

Literature is the mirror in which man may see himself and his total environment. It is also the product of the society and reflects the happenings in that society. Ngugi (1981:5) says that “literature results from the conscious acts of man in the society.” He further states that “at the individual level of the artist, the very act of writing implies a relationship...at the collective level, literature acts as a product of man’s intellectual and imaginative activities embodied in minds and images, the tensions, the conflicts and contradictions at the heart of the communities being and process of becoming.”

It therefore stands to reason from Ngugi’s argument that since literature is a product of the society, it should reflect the struggles of that society as well as the norms and values it upholds. The teachings of Jesus Christ reflect the struggles of the Jewish society in which he lived. Indeed, his teachings contain the norms and values that are universal since his ministry was conditioned by the social and historical occurrences that determined the form it took. It dealt with emergent and emerging issues which Achebe (1970:8) calls “the burning issues of our time”.

Even though literature mainly refers to what is written, it is not restricted to the written text but may refer to what is spoken as well as there is evidence that what was eventually compiled as the canon of the Bible was a product of oral tradition. P'Bitek (1973) defines literature as the art of expression in song, dance and stories; that literature is man's creative work whether in written or spoken form. He further defines literature as an expressive activity for joys and sorrows of the human heart, which finds its way through literature while indicating that it is the communication and sharing of deeply felt emotions and the vehicle of communication is words. Literature is the mirror in which man may see himself and his total environment.

Literature is any or all of these definitions, but in the sense in which it will be studied here, it is that writing which, as Dressler (1977) says, is valued for its content (what it says), its aptness of expression (how it says it), and its form (how it is constructed). Literature should give satisfaction and pleasure by expressing live or noble or delightful thoughts in fitting language. All forms of Christianity accept the authority of the Bible though this may mean different things in different types of Christianity.

All forms of Christianity depend on the Bible as it is the manual that guides Christians on how to live the Christian life. Chapman (1988) states that the Bible is the source from which all Christian beliefs are derived and the final authority which determines what a Christian believes. But even though the importance of the Bible cannot be understated, its comparison to literature is possible. Woodhead (2009) says that like Christianity itself, the Bible is not simple or unitary. It does not have a single author, a single style or a single message. The link between the Bible and literature is evident in the fact that like literature; the Bible is a collection of books and genres, including historical chronicles, genealogies, stories, myths, prophecy, laws, poetry, proverbs, gospels, letters and apocalyptic literature.

Several scholars support the fact of the Bible as literature. Gassner (1942) has made an extensive argument as he, too, regards the Bible as a remarkable book which is not devoted to a single species of writing but is best described as an anthology comprising nearly every form of literature. He adds that reviewing it as a compilation of great histories, poems, stories, law books, rhapsodies, and visions fills one with wonder. He further adds that reality of the Bible as literature can be supported by the fact that large portions of the Bible comprise a fairly continuous national history, though it is also a kind of universal history, in the sense that its authors view events as the unfolding of a purpose in the whole world. The first eleven chapters of *Genesis*, (the stories of the Creation, the Garden of Eden, and the Tower of Babel) constitute a mythology whose spiritual meaning contains deeper truths than mere historical documentation. They exemplify the divine purpose, the appearance of human evil and travail, and the beginning of nations and their conflicts. The rest of *Genesis* includes three cycles of humanized legends, those revolving around Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph respectively. *Exodus* is closer to historical fact. It is a dramatic epic of national liberation, revolving around the personality of the spiritual hero Moses. *Deuteronomy* is the best example of a body of statutes that is also great literature. The thought is simple but passionately and majestically wrought, and despite its simplicity, the basic idea is stupendous revelation. Dinsmore (1834) states that a nation “is not a collection of independent individuals, but a moral person, having a conscience, a will, a unity of spirit which joins together with generations. A nation has a soul...”

The Bible has got its prominence among the great books of literature past and present. Green, (2006) says that perhaps the two most widely read books in the Roman Empire were Virgil’s *Aeneid* and the set of writings known as the Bible. Even today, the Bible still ranks as the most widely read book as it is currently a bestseller. According to Gideons International which is an association of Christian business; they have been able to distribute over 1.2

million Bibles and New Testaments to motels, hotels, hospitals, penal institutions, hospitals, schools, students, members of the armed forces and those in the nursing fields all over the world. Apart from that, the Bible stands out as the book that has been translated in many different languages of the world unlike any other book. In addition, it also has several versions, with over 100 versions and 50 languages online, which cater for different individual needs.

She suggests that throughout the long span of history, literature has pointed out social injustice and has demanded relief for the wronged. It has called attention to intolerable situations and has moulded public opinion. Literature has fanned the flames of war and kindled the torch of peace. The conditions which degrade man have been portrayed in the writings of every civilization. So have those accomplishments of man which truly make him seem more than mortal. Literature is the mirror in which man may see himself and his total environment. The Bible shares all these functions of literature with literature.

The idea of the Bible as literature is not something new but as old as the Bible itself. Ryken (2008) argues that the idea of the Bible as literature began with the Bible itself since the writers refer to a whole range of literary genre in which they write: proverb, song, epistle, and many others. He also adds that some of these forms correspond to the literary forms current in the author's surrounding cultures. Literature is an art form in which beauty of expression; craftsmanship and virtuosity are valued as self-rewarding and as an enhancement of effective communication. The standard elements of artistic form include unity, theme-and-variation, pattern, design, progression, contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence and symmetry. Authors cultivate artistry

Most literary scholars and writers have been influenced by the Bible and this shows how the two are related. According to Arnold (2009) the impact of the Bible on language has been

varied and he adds that in some cases the Bible has given people literary language. He says that the Bible is a library of mankind's literature and has called libraries of literature into being. He gives examples of writers whose works the Bible has influenced as follows; Dante (1265-1321) symbolizes Italian writers whose works show the influence of the Bible, Victor Hugo (1805-05) may well represent French writers whose works give overdue dependence on the Bible. The best representatives of Russian authors are Dostoevsky (1821-81) and Tolstoy (1828-1910). Others are Chaucer- *Canterbury tales* (ca 1340-1400) demonstrates a detailed knowledge of the Bible. Shakespeare (1564-1616) seems to have used the Geneva version of the Bible. Milton (1608-74) grew up with the Bible and his first literary attempt was the versification of the Bible. All the major works of Milton are based on the Bible. Others include Bunyan (1628-88) whose "library" was the Bible and a few other books, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Browning, (1812-89) whose work dealt with Biblical themes, Charles Dickens (1812-70) who has been likened to a prophet in the Old Testament as well as Tennyson (1809-92) whose style, expression and thought reflect the influence of the Bible.

However, though most scholars have supported that the Bible can be studied as literature and that it has and continues to influence many writers, there are a few conservatives who believe that the Bible is the word of God and studying it as literature would be simplistic. This is because of the deeply rooted belief that the Bible is the word of God and should be treated with the reverence it deserves. In the Gideons International's *New Testament* it is written that the Bible contains the mind of God and its doctrines are holy, its precepts binding, its histories are true, and its decisions are immutable. Mainly though, we need to look to the Bible to see the extent to which it is literary because literary scholars are showing an interest in applying their methods to the Bible, and Bible scholars are calling for a literary approach.

### 1.11 The Bible and the Epic Genre

Since the Bible is a book with religious authority, often referred to as the Word of God, there is a tendency to assume that it is purely a religious book. However, a close study of how the Bible presents its material shows that it resembles a literary work more than anything else because it is filled with stories, poems, visions and letters. Therefore to say the Bible is a very literary text should not be controversial (France, 1990).

It goes without saying that the Bible has several stories that fall under the epic category. Literary scholars have categorised such works as Biblical epics. Most of these Biblical epics are in the Old Testament and include heroic stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Samson as well as their female counterparts like Susannah, Ruth and Esther. Some epics, based on the New Testament, have been written. Examples include Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Dante's *Inferno* or La Ceppedes *Theoremnes*. Of great interest to this study is *Theoremnes*, where the author, La Ceppedes depicts Jesus as the hero in a cosmic drama where humanity's very existence is at stake. This depiction clearly lends the sense of urgency and grandeur indicative of an epic.

Other stories from the Bible more or less follow the same pattern of urgency and grandeur. In these stories the existence of the Israelites, God's chosen people, is always at stake. Historically, the Israelites, it would seem, have always been dogged by one crisis after the other especially in the form of captivity under cruel leaders. For example, Moses had to deliver the Israelites from their cruel slave drivers in Egypt (Exodus 3-15), then they were taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon. The Period of the exile in Babylon was in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. around 597-538 B.C. During the time of Jesus Christ, the Jews were under the rule of the Romans.

Such situations as those experienced by the Jews are the right literary condition for the



birthing of an epic story. Most epics are born out of a time of national crisis. The heroes in the biblical stories who took part at some stage or the other in the freedom of the Jews have been immortalised in print and film over the ages. These include Samson and David among many others. The stories are not only restricted to the Old Testament. The Gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* that have been said to be a reflection of the Pentateuch, first five books of the Bible namely *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy* have been regarded as epics and used as fodder to create epics by writers like Dante and Milton as has been stated.

### **1.12 Hellenistic influence on the Gospels**

Like most literary pieces, the *Gospel According to Matthew* is a product of the literary environment of the period in which it was written. During the time of Jesus Christ, the dominant power was Greece and the influence of Greece was more widespread and far longer lasting than any that had gone before. The ‘golden’ or classical age of Greece began about 480BC. The customs and ideas of the Greeks therefore formed an important part of the life and culture of Palestine in New Testament times (Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 1999). It is evident that because of the Greek influence at the time of writing of the Gospel, the writer adopted the classical Greek style, which was used by epic poets like Homer and Virgil.

Edwards (2009) suggests that the Gospel writers belonged to a society that constituted part of the ancient world and, in spite of the uniqueness of their message; they still had much in common with their contemporaries. They shared with the Greeks, Romans and other peoples of the Hellenistic world certain presuppositions, such as a stratified social structure with women insubordinate to men and an economy supported by slave labour. There are similarities between some of Jesus’ teaching and that of Greek philosophers.

Drane (1999) observes that in some instances, the Gospels share particular stylistic

characteristics of popular Greco-Roman biographies. Luke's preface, for example, follows a common literary practice of ancient writings; while both Matthew and Luke provide genealogies of their subject. Apart from that, the New Testament writers also shared with their contemporaries a basically pre-scientific approach to such subjects such as the physical universe, sickness and miracles. This means therefore, as Edwards (1992) suggests, that Hellenistic parallels can be found too in many features of the Gospels, like their understanding of demon possession (including the idea that demons can be transferred from one home to another) and natural phenomena (like earthquakes and eclipses). However, this can from time to time lead to confusion. As Edwards says, sometimes it is difficult to tell whether we are dealing with direct Hellenistic influence or a parallel development of ideas. Thus the motif of walking on the water (Mk 6: 47-51) is parallel to Argonautic saga but may in fact have closer links with Old Testament ideas of Yahweh's conquest of the unruly sea.

Some of the events associated with Jesus' birth and death appear to have parallels in the so-called prestige myths in Greco-Roman folklore, including tales of astronomical portents and dreams heralding the birth of famous people or marking their death (Gnuse, 1990). There are classical stories of heroes or famous men born of from a mortal woman and a divinity (e.g. Perseus, Plato, Alexander). There are tales of the return of the hero from the dead to life and of a hero's ascent to heaven (Dionysius and Heracles).

In order to read and appreciate Matthew's story of Jesus like an epic, one must be attentive to the codes and conventions that govern the literary and social context of the first century when classical epics prevailed. Knowing the general category of a literary genre of a text enables one to be informed of the features and intentions that characterize the writing, and not by our religious expectations and concerns we may impose on the text. While the *Gospel According to Matthew* is dominantly a religious text, classified under the Gospel genre, that has

affinities with the literary genres of biography and historiography, the Gospel is not strictly historical biography (NIV Commentary to the Bible, 2005). Because of its social and literary context, it may have affinities with the epic and if it follows the codes and conventions that govern the literary epic, that it can be categorized as one.

### **1.13 Deconstruction Theory**

Deconstruction is a school of literary criticism that suggests that language is not a stable entity, and that we can never exactly say what we mean. Therefore, literature cannot give a reader any one single meaning, because the language itself is simply too ambiguous. Deconstructionists value the idea that literature cannot provide any outside meaning; texts cannot represent reality. Thus, a deconstructionist critic will deliberately emphasize the ambiguities of the language that produce a variety of meanings and possible readings of a text.

Deconstruction was introduced by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida in his 1967 book *Of Grammatology*. Although he avoided defining the word directly, he sought to apply Martin Heidegger's concept of 'Destruktion' or 'Abbau' to textual reading. Heidegger's term referred to the process of exploring categories and concepts tradition has imposed on a word, and the history behind them. Derrida opted for deconstruction over the literal translation destruction to suggest precision rather than violence. In describing deconstruction, Derrida famously observed that "there is nothing outside the text." By this he meant that all references used to interpret a text are themselves texts, even the text of reality there is truly no objective, non-textual reference from which interpretation can begin.

Deconstruction then can be described as an effort to understand relationships to various contexts as a reader knows it. Derrida believed that culture and individuals are constructed through networks of affiliated language, symbol and discourse usages; all of life is textual, a tissue signifying relationships. According to him, no text can be isolated from the constant

circulation of meaning in the economy of the culture; every text connects to and is constituted through and of, other texts, Lye (2000).

Deconstruction as a school of philosophy originated in France in the 1960s and has had an enormous impact on Anglo-American criticism. According to Selden (1995), Deconstruction is a theory that derived from the 'deconstruction' movement in the 1970s but is often dated to Jacques Derrida in 1966 when he read a paper called '*structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences*' at a conference on structuralism at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore. He adds that the term 'the deconstructionist movement' has both a wide and a narrow sense. In the wide sense it names the movement which stretches beyond literary criticism. He further adds that deconstructionism is perhaps the most theory oriented, the most philosophical, and movement in the history of literary criticism.

Attempts have been made to define Deconstruction since it has resulted in a lot of misunderstanding. Paul Deman (1970), a deconstructionist literary critic and theorist who was a member of the Yale School in replying to a request for a definition of 'deconstruction' by Robert Moynihan, in the latter's *A Recent Imagining* said that 'It's possible, within a text, to frame a question or undo assertions made in the text, by means of the elements which are in the text, which frequently would be precisely structures that play off rhetorical against grammatical elements.' As used by the members of the school of deconstruction, the term 'deconstruction' refers, in the first instance, to the way in which the 'accidental' features of a text can be seen as betraying, subverting, and its purportedly 'essential' message.

Not all scholars were in favour of Deconstruction and its proponent. Richard Rorty (1931-2007) is an example of those who opposed Derrida's ideas who he claimed was most useful when viewed as a funny writer who attempted to circumvent the western philosophical tradition rather than the inventor of a philosophical or literary method. He criticizes Derrida's

followers as for taking deconstructive literary theory too seriously. He defined the term deconstruction as referring in the first instance to the way in which the accidental features of a text can be seen as betraying, subverting, its purportedly essential message.

Another person opposed to Deconstruction was John D. Caputo. He attempted to explain deconstruction by stating that “whenever deconstruction finds a nutshell secure axiom or a pithy maxim the very idea is to crack open and disturb this tranquillity. Indeed, that is a good rule of the thumb of destruction. That is what deconstruction is all about; its very meaning and mission, if it has any. One might even say that cracking nutshells is what deconstruction is. In a nutshell... have we not run up against a paradox an aporia (something contradictory) ...? The paralysis and impossibility of an aporia is just what impels deconstruction, what rouses it out of bed in the morning....” (Caputo 1997:32).

Deconstruction theory embraces the precept that meaning is always uncertain and that it is not the task of the literary critic to illuminate meaning in a given text. Derrida began with Saussure's ideas of the signified and the signifier: an idea (signified) is represented by a sign (signifier), but the sign can never be the same as the idea. The French term “différer” used in deconstruction discourse refers both to the difference between signified and signifier, and to the way the signified defers meaning to the signifier. The signified contains a trace of the signifier, but also of its opposite. According to practitioners of deconstruction, the job of the literary critic is to look for “slippage” in the text—to note duplicity, or to expose how a text has violated the very linguistic and thematic rules it has set up internally. Calling attention to breaks in the internal logic of a literary text achieves its deconstruction. Deconstruction itself can be deconstructed, however, and the process goes on indefinitely.

Because it challenges logocentrism—that is, it questions order and certainty in language—deconstruction has been viewed by its opponents as an intellectually obscure, negativistic

form of cultural critique. Abrams (1977), in *The Deconstructive Angel*, wrote a particularly devastating essay on deconstruction, and Steven E. Cole (1988) in *The Dead End of Deconstruction: Paul De Man and the Fate of Poetic Language* and Archibald A. Hill have criticized the methods of De Man and Geoffrey Hartman respectively.

Other scholars have found deconstruction a stimulating and innovative new approach to literary criticism. While such critics as Lance St. John Butler and Shawn St. Jean have written on major literary figures and works using deconstruction theory, other scholars, including Edward Said, David B. Allison, and Christina M. Howells have found an application for deconstruction in the fields of history and philosophy. However, there has been confusion that aims of deconstruction is destruction but Johnson, (1981) clarifies that the term deconstruction is not synonymous with destruction

## **1.14 Research Methodology**

### **1.14.1 Research Design**

Since this study was mainly qualitative, it was guided by the analytical research design. According to Macmillan and Schumacher (1997), analytical research, as a style of qualitative inquiry, is a non-interactive document research which describes and interprets the past or recent past from selected sources. These sources may be documents preserved in collections or participants' oral testimonies, or in the case of this research, a literary text of an author, the Gospel according to St Matthew. This design is perfect in a condition where a researcher attempts to analyse a situation and make evaluation. For the current study, it was helpful in explaining the extent to which *the Gospel according to Matthew* is an epic.

### **1.14.2 Study Population**

In this study the population was *the Gospel according to St Matthew* in the New Testament of from the New International Version Bible. The New International Version was used because this version is committed to accuracy. It pays careful attention to the words of the original language, Greek and Aramaic, before finding the best possible way to capture the meaning in natural contemporary English. It has created a number of elements throughout the years in order to stay relevant to potential readers of all ages (White, 2016). The gospel has a total of 28 chapters all of which formed the population of the study.

### **1.14.3 Sampling Strategy and Sample Size**

Purposive sampling (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) was used to select the individual chapters in the text which most portray Jesus as an epic hero in line with the objectives of the study. The sample for the study was from the Holy Bible- New International Version. sixteen chapters which have the characteristics of an epic and best depict Jesus Christ as an epic hero, and, were selected out of the twenty-eight chapters for analysis. These chapters were 1,2,4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,15,16, 26, 27 and 28. This is because the main theme of the text centres on the life and ministry of Jesus as the king of the Jews. an epic hero is always a king. As Fairchild (1998) states, *The Gospel of Matthew* was written to prove that Jesus Christ is the promised messiah, the king of all earth, and to make plain the kingdom of God. He further states that it was not written chronicle the events of Jesus' life but rather to present the undeniable evidence that Jesus Christ is the promised Messiah, of kings and the Lord of lords. This statement is in line with the definition of an epic hero who is described as, a larger than life figure from a history or legend, usually favoured by or even partially descended from deities, but aligned more closely with mortal figures in popular portrayals. An epic hero is essentially a great leader.

#### **1.14.4 Data collection Methods**

The research was qualitative in nature and used library based research. Primary data was collected by examining the selected chapters in the Bible. Documentary analysis of religious and literary texts which formed the secondary data, literary texts on the epic as well as Bible commentaries on Matthew's Gospel, was done in accordance with the research questions, both of which were useful in limiting the scope of the study. The study was limited to the Christian Epic and the *Gospel according to Matthew*.

#### **1.14.5 Data Analysis**

The study employed Textual analysis because it is the method used for analysing qualitative data. Ordinary prose was used to present the information gathered into a form which is concise and easy to understand (Korczyrisky, 2009). The data was in the form of written words which was analysed within the tenets of deconstruction theory, as deconstruction is a textual strategy. The data collected through content analysis of the selected texts was then coded according to thematic concerns, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. Deconstruction theory was applied in the textual analysis to create another meaning of the text of choice.

#### **1.15 Conclusion**

This chapter has given background for the study and defined those aspects as the research problem, the research questions, the research objectives, the scope and justification of the study and the theoretical framework engaged by the study. In addition, it has presented a review of relevant literature which provides the study with academic validity thereby exposing existing gaps which this study proposed to fill. Lastly, the chapter defined the methodical process followed by this study and justified why these were suitable for the success of the study.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW AS AN EPIC

### 2.1. Introduction

Religion aside, most literary critics and experts on the epic genre can affirm that, *the Gospel According to Matthew* is indeed an epic story because, according to Deconstructive critics, meaning in literature is created during the act of reading a text (Tyson 1950). Tyson suggests that art and literature is ‘a seething cauldron of meaning in flux’ because meaning changes dramatically. While reading the Matthew’s Gospel, one finds that it represents the convergence of various elements which have come to shape the epic over time, especially within the western tradition. Epics have seven main characteristics, and these are evident in the gospel: the hero is outstanding, the setting is large. The action in the text is made of deeds of great valour or requires superhuman courage. Supernatural forces-gods, angels, demons-insert themselves in the action. Finally, it is written in a very special style and the poet tries to remain objective (Dean, 2000).

Scholars concur that an epic is very demanding; this is what makes it the pinnacle of man’s creation. Both theological and literary critics agree that the writer of this Gospel was obviously an intentionally skilled writer. Among these is scholars is Drane (1999), who points out that the one thing that is obvious about *the Gospel According to Matthew* is the fact that that it is more carefully crafted as a piece of literature than the other synoptic. Another one is Gunim (2002) who says that the Gospel shows how Matthew adapts certain structural, stylistic and thematic elements of classical epics in order to present Jesus as a king.

The importance of the epic has been emphasised by scholars in the literary world. Gunim (2002) also notes that most literary critics of the Renaissance and Baroque periods considered the epic to be the highest ranking literary genre. He describes the epic as a supreme genre, only comparable with the supreme literary text; the Bible. Innes (2013) agrees with this view

as well. He says that the epic was once thought to be highest literary form; a poet's greatest achievement. He adds that its cultural importance was such that entire societies could be defined by and through it. He continues to state that ancient Greece produced Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Rome had Virgil's *Aeneid* and further suggests that in Judeo-Christian tradition, the first five books could be considered an epic. Abram and Hugh (2007) are of the same school of thought. According to them, the five books of Moses, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy* are epics of ancient Israel as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are epics of archaic Greece.

Drane (1999) points out that one particular way of understanding Matthew's structure was proposed in the early part of the twentieth century by B.W. Bacon. Bacon (1918) suggested that Matthew divided his book by analogy to the books of Moses, into five blocks, which are so independent of each other that they can be considered to be five books. He identified a series of five blocks or 'books' of material, arranged between the prologue of the birth stories and the epilogue of the passion narrative. Each of these sections of the Gospel concludes with the statement that 'when Jesus had finished saying these things...' and they were characterized by well-balanced combination of the narrative and the teaching material, which Bacon suggested was intended to present Jesus as the new Moses, with the five-central section's corresponding to the five books of the Law in the Old Testament. This view, though contentious, brings out the parallel of the *Gospel According to Matthew* to the first five books of Old Testament and how it can be depicted as an epic, taken that these books have been considered epics.

The aim of this chapter then, is to explain why the *Gospel According to Matthew* is an epic. This will be achieved by analysing the Gospel using the summary of attributes of the epic by Abram (1999) as well as the characteristics of the epic as listed by Harmon and Hugh (2003)

in addition to other elements found in classical epics especially by Homer in the *Iliad* and Virgil's *Odyssey*. This is because any study involving the epic as a necessity refers to Homer because as Hogan (1979) points out Aristotle frequently referred to Homer in his *Poetics* as Homer's methods are recognised as dramatic. He also argues that though epics can be identified by their formal features, great epics share in a tradition by which the new epic refers consciously to the epic which came before it. Therefore, to even have a chance to be recognised in this tradition, epics have to meet the criteria for such great poems. The chapter will also make reference to Northrop Frye's categorization of the epic in passing because as Howatson (1983) points out it is useful to define the epic by looking more precisely at historical models upon which the writer may have drawn while also examining the state of the epic at the time he possibly wrote. It is hoped therefore that the chapter answers the research question: Is the *Gospel According to Mathew* an epic?

## **2.2. The Gospel according to Matthew as and the Epic**

Tyson (1950) argues that for deconstruction, literature is dynamic, ambiguous and unstable as the language of which it is composed. Literary texts, like all texts, consists of a multiplicity of overlapping, conflicting meanings in a large range of meanings within a text therefore the dynamic, fluid relation to one another and to us. A person who is familiar with epic genre may identify certain structural, stylistic and thematic elements in Mathew's Gospel to be similar to those employed by the classical writers and therefore conclude it is an epic. as Tyson says, meaning in literature is created during the act of reading

*The Gospel According to St. Matthew* can therefore be examined as an epic. This is because, like most epics, it is a narrative on an impressive scale in the sense that it is well written in as far as the structure and style is concerned. For the first two centuries, and even to date, it has prevailed as the most popular Gospel compared to the Gospels of *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*. This popularity to some extent won by the writer's use of imagery and his teaching methods.

Recent years has witnessed a renaissance on the *Gospel According to St. Matthew* with many books and articles anxious to explicate the Gospel as a unified story or narrative told by a skilled storyteller who organises his work into a logical sequence of events. This is because the writer of the Gospel builds reflectively upon events to capture the significance of what happened in story form. An appreciation of the literary and communicative skills of the author enables one to recognize dramatic sequence of events a carefully scripted plot

Creating meaning while reading a text can be seen while reading the definition of an epic and subsequently relating it to *the Gospel according to Matthew*. A fleeting look at the definition of an epic reveals that there are certain similarities with reference to the Matthew's Gospel.

Howatson (2013-14) says that 'in literature an epic is a narrative poem on a grand scale and in majestic style concerning the exploits and adventures of a superhuman hero (or heroes) engaged in a quest or some serious endeavour. The hero is distinguished above all by his strength and courage, and is restrained only by a sense of honour. The subject matter of the epic includes myth, legends and folktale. It is usually set in a heroic past and embodies its country's early history and expresses its values.

For Greece and Rome, the simplest explanation of the epic is that it is a long narrative written in hexameters (or a comparable vernacular measure) which concentrates either in fortunes of a great hero or perhaps great civilization and the interactions of the hero and his civilization with the gods (Merchant, 1971). However, a little more thought suggests a contrast between the type of epic which was passed down from generation to generation ('oral' or 'primary epic e.g. Homer's *Odyssey*) and the epic which was composed with a pen referred to as 'secondary' or 'written or literate epic such as Virgil's *Aeneid*.

A critical study of most epics however, shows that not all epics follow those definitions. An examination of some epics reveals this. According to definitions, there is a hero and yet there

are epics that have no heroes for example *The Civil War* by Lucan (AD 39-63). Epics cannot be determined by their length alone as there are some epics that fail the length test. The epic poem that may have been written by Hesiod (c.700 BC) entitled *The Shield of Heracles*, though it has heroes, gods and a narrative is very short. Therefore, there are other factors apart from length and the epic hero that can determine what text is in epic genre.

That said, however, the definitions of the epic mentioned above can be applied to the *Gospel According to Matthew*. In his analysis of *Theoremes*, which is an epic based on the Gospels, Gunin (2002) says that the Gospel of Matthew evokes many of these characteristics *in extemis* in that the “grand scale” and “superhuman hero” and the “heroic past” ostensibly find their expression in Christ’s misery and rebirth. Added to the *klea andron* is the hero’s sense of valour and preeminence with respect to his peers. Christ’s superiority is that he emerges as the hems *hemicum*, at the very top, with his virtuous acts comprising *fabula fabulum*, wonderful or awesome deeds.

#### **2.4.1 The Gospel according to Matthew as a Secondary Epic**

We can still get a sub text in *the gospel according to Matthew* when we argue that there is always a subtext in the text. As Tyson says it is precisely while the reader is reading that moments of meaning are created. As we read the gospel, we unconsciously use our knowledge of the epic and find that it fits in the epic genre as a secondary epic.

Because deconstruction provides a way of playing with language and meaning that teases and delights, (Tyson, 1950) we find that in a text, meaning is like peeling an onion; when you think you have reached the end, another layer appears.

In addition, since it deals with a theologically defensible topic and morality, it falls in the Christian epic category as well but with an oral background just like the classical epics.

Because of Matthew's need to vouch for the truth in the story it would be difficult to assert that folktales and legends have a place in the text but some of the stories have been considered to be legends especially the miracles performed by Jesus.

The assumption that some of the stories are legends and folktales is because parallels to the miracles recorded in the Gospels are easily found in other ancient literature (Brown, 1984). Some of these miracles that are parallels include; multiplication of food to feed crowds (14:15-21), Walking on Water (14:22-33) stilling the Storm (8:23-27), discovery of temple tax in a fish's mouth (17:24-27).

Narrative criticism is useful in understanding Matthews's Gospel. Ducker (2006) says that it is Bauer (1989) who describes this as the literary critical approach that focuses on the final text and brings with it a special concern for the identification for the rhetorical features that point toward the structure of the text. This structure can be compared to the structure found in classical epics. Elsewhere and more specifically Margurat and Bourquin (198, 3) define narrative criticism as "a method for reading a text which explores and analyses how narrativity is made concrete in a particular text." This approach owes much to Robert Alter who regarded a text's meaning as lying autonomously rather than historically. When a story is looked at historically, the literariness is lost as it is primarily concerned with recording the bare factual events as they occurred with no embellishments.

*The Gospel According to Matthew* is a story about the exploits and adventures of Jesus Christ who is engaged in a serious endeavour of bringing salvation to the world. Jesus Christ is portrayed as the long-awaited Messiah that was prophesied centuries before. The genealogy of Jesus that aims to portray him as a king and his illustrious lineage supports this. The prestigious names he is given by Matthew, for example Son of David, Son of Abraham, Son of God, furthers Matthews aim in defining Jesus' role and portrayal as a messiah and king.

The miracles he performs, his teachings, his death and resurrection and overall the way he is depicted in the Gospel compared to the other Gospels of *Mark*, *Luke* and *John* demonstrate the significance of Jesus. Apart from that, every chapter in the Gospel gravitates around Jesus. For example, though John the Baptist is a great character, almost an epic hero because of the circumstances surrounding his birth but he is just a support character and when his job of ushering Jesus in is done, he makes his exit, albeit tragically in death. All this is in keeping with the Western Epic Model that requires the plot of an epic to centre on a hero of unbelievable stature, but he has someone who announces him.

## **2.5. Characteristic of the Epic in the Gospel According to St Matthew**

### **2.5.1. The Plot**

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle's famous study of Greek dramatic art, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) compares tragedy to such other metrical forms as comedy and epic. He determines that tragedy, like all poetry, is a kind of imitation (*mimesis*), but adds that it has a serious purpose and uses direct action rather than narrative to achieve its ends. He says that poetic *mimesis* is imitation of things as they could be, not as they are — for example, of universals and ideals — thus poetry is a more philosophical and exalted medium than history, which merely records what has actually happened.

The aim of tragedy, Aristotle writes, is to bring about a "catharsis" of the spectators — to arouse in them sensations of pity and fear, and to purge them of these emotions so that they leave the theatre feeling cleansed and uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of gods and men. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving change in the fortunes of the drama's protagonist (Aristotle recognized that the change might not be disastrous, but felt this was the kind shown in the best tragedies — Oedipus at

Colonus, for example, was considered a tragedy by the Greeks but does not have an unhappy ending).

According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and song (music), of which the first two are primary. Most of the *Poetics* is devoted to analysis of the scope and proper use of these elements, with illustrative examples selected from many tragic dramas, especially those of Sophocles, although Aeschylus, Euripides, and some playwrights whose works no longer survive are also cited.

Several of Aristotle's main points are of great value for an understanding of Greek tragic drama. Particularly significant is his statement that the plot is the most important element of tragedy:

Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and misery. And life consists of action, and its end is a mode of activity, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched. The purpose of action in the tragedy, therefore, is not the representation of character: character comes in as contributing to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of the tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be one without character. . . . The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place.

Aristotle goes on to discuss the structure of the ideal tragic plot and spends several chapters on its requirements. He says that the plot must be a complete whole — with a definite beginning, middle, and end — and its length should be such that the spectators can comprehend without difficulty both its separate parts and its overall unity. Moreover, the plot requires a single central theme in which all the elements are logically related to demonstrate the change in the protagonist's fortunes, with emphasis on the dramatic causation and probability of the events.



Aristotle has relatively less to say about the tragic hero because the incidents of tragedy are often beyond the hero's control or not closely related to his personality. The plot is intended to illustrate matters of cosmic rather than individual significance, and the protagonist is viewed primarily as the character who experiences the changes that take place. This stress placed by the Greek tragedians on the development of plot and action at the expense of character, and their general lack of interest in exploring psychological motivation, is one of the major differences between ancient and modern drama.

Since the aim of a tragedy is to arouse pity and fear through an alteration in the status of the central character, he must be a figure with whom the audience can identify and whose fate can trigger these emotions. Aristotle says that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves." He surveys various possible types of characters on the basis of these premises, then defines the ideal protagonist as

. . . a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty; a personage like Oedipus.

In addition, the hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the spectators, and as a character he must be true to type, true to life, and consistent.

The hero's error or frailty (*hamartia*) is often misleadingly explained as his "tragic flaw," in the sense of that personal quality which inevitably causes his downfall or subjects him to retribution. However, overemphasis on a search for the decisive flaw in the protagonist as the key factor for understanding the tragedy can lead to superficial or false interpretations. It gives more attention to personality than the dramatists intended and ignores the broader philosophical implications of the typical plot's denouement. It is true that the hero frequently takes a step that initiates the events of the tragedy and, owing to his own ignorance or poor judgment, acts in such a way as to bring about his own downfall. In a more sophisticated

philosophical sense though, the hero's fate, despite its immediate cause in his finite act, comes about because of the nature of the cosmic moral order and the role played by chance or destiny in human affairs. Unless the conclusions of most tragedies are interpreted on this level, the reader is forced to credit the Greeks with the most primitive of moral systems.

It is worth noting that some scholars believe the "flaw" was intended by Aristotle as a necessary corollary of his requirement that the hero should not be a completely admirable man. Hamartia would thus be the factor that delimits the protagonist's imperfection and keeps him on a human plane, making it possible for the audience to sympathize with him. This view tends to give the "flaw" an ethical definition but relates it only to the spectators' reactions to the hero and does not increase its importance for interpreting the tragedies.

The remainder of the *Poetics* is given over to examination of the other elements of tragedy and to discussion of various techniques, devices, and stylistic principles. Aristotle mentions two features of the plot, both of which are related to the concept of hamartia, as crucial components of any well-made tragedy. These are "reversal" (peripeteia), where the opposite of what was planned or hoped for by the protagonist takes place, as when Oedipus' investigation of the murder of Laius leads to a catastrophic and unexpected conclusion; and "recognition" (anagnorisis), the point when the protagonist recognizes the truth of a situation, discovers another character's identity, or comes to a realization about himself. This sudden acquisition of knowledge or insight by the hero arouses the desired intense emotional reaction in the spectators, as when Oedipus finds out his true parentage and realizes what crimes he has been responsible for.

Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* nearly a century after the greatest Greek tragedians had already died, in a period when there had been radical transformations in nearly all aspects of Athenian society and culture. The tragic drama of his day was not the same as that of the fifth

century, and to a certain extent his work must be construed as a historical study of a genre that no longer existed rather than as a description of a living art form.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle used the same analytical methods that he had successfully applied in studies of politics, ethics, and the natural sciences in order to determine tragedy's fundamental principles of composition and content. This approach is not completely suited to a literary study and is sometimes too artificial or formula-prone in its conclusions.

Nonetheless, the *Poetics* is the only critical study of Greek drama to have been made by a near-contemporary. It contains much valuable information about the origins, methods, and purposes of tragedy, and to a degree shows us how the Greeks themselves reacted to their theatre. In addition, Aristotle's work had an overwhelming influence on the development of drama long after it was compiled. The ideas and principles of the *Poetics* are reflected in the drama of the Roman Empire and dominated the composition of tragedy in Western Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.

According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements: plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and song (music), of which the first two are primary. Most of the *Poetics* is devoted to analysis of the scope and proper use of these elements, with illustrative examples selected from many tragic dramas, especially those of Sophocles, although Aeschylus, Euripides, and some playwrights whose works no longer survive are also cited.

Several of Aristotle's main points are of great value for an understanding of Greek tragic drama. Particularly significant is his statement that the plot is the most important element of tragedy. It is the occurrence of the characteristics of the epic that determines if a given text can be classified in the epic category. Aristotle's *Poetics*, chapters 23 and 24, specifies some of the characteristics which an epic ought to show. The first one is that it should have a plot structure which is dramatically put together and that the plot should present a single action

with beginning, middle and end.

More recent investigations have delineated *the Gospel According to Matthew* in terms of how individual events or episodes connect to the sequence to form a discerning plot. One of these scholars is Matera (1987) who talks at length about this in his work, *The Plot of Matthews Gospel*. He shows that the Gospel clearly progresses with a beginning, a middle and an end.

The fact that *the Gospel According to Matthew* is intentionally well written is an undeniable fact. The four canonical Gospels are complex literary works of a high order but Matthews Gospel more so. The Gospel writers wrote in a certain way depending on their target audience and intention. Each of the authors carefully selected and shaped his material toward both his understanding of Jesus Christ and the needs of the community to which he was writing (The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary, 1987). It has been suggested that Matthew must have been a teacher hence his well-written book. As a teacher, he sat down and carefully planned his work, a fact supported by Drane (1999) who suggests that the one thing obvious about Matthew's Gospel is that it is more carefully crafted as a piece of literature than the other synoptic. Among all the Gospels it is the one written with the most artistry. As for its being a well-structured story, Matera (1987) points out that a long and complex story such as Matthew's is more than the sum of individual incidents but that the individual elements are arranged in a certain way in their relation to one another.

More recent investigations have delineated the Gospels structure in terms of how the individual events or episodes connect sequentially to form a discerning plot. It is the organizing principle of the plot which determines the incidents selected, their arrangement, and how the sequences of events or episodes are to impact the reader. There is evidence that Matthew deliberately arranged events and sayings into groups (especially) of the odd numbers 3, 5, 7 or 9. Matthew does tell a story and thus the various episodes are carefully

interrelated by causal and thematic developments. In the story there are major and minor storylines and character development, with certain episodes marking key turning points in the unfolding drama. An analysis of the plot may help show the sequence of events and portray how the characters are developed meaningfully to tell a coherent story, Matera (1987).

There have been arguments concerning the structure of this Gospel. Bauer (1989) for example notes that there is still no consensus for the structure of Mathew's Gospel. The principle arguments are that the book of Mathew is arranged in 5 blocks of teaching (which may deliberately mirror the Pentateuch, as Bacon argued, with Jesus cast as the new Moses) that it is a chiasm pivoting at the end of chapter 13 (Billingham and Billingham. 1982), or that it consists of a threefold division (Kingsbury, 1986). Patte (1987,6) asserts that Matthew cannot take the risk of being misunderstood on such matters around which revolve meaning and purpose of existence...oppositions set in the text are the primary mode of such convictions."

What is evident is that Matthew's story is organised around several narrative blocks comprised of events that are interconnected to a particular emphasis or theme. The unifying factor giving coherence to the overall sequence of events is the explicit and implicit presence of the central character Jesus Christ in almost every episode. Within this story form events of similar nature are often clustered or repeated for their cumulative impact, as various themes are reinforced and developed.

This organisation of a text into blocks was a common structure in classical epics. Whether Matthews's gospel is organised in 3, 5, 7 or 9 blocks as has been argued by most scholars is immaterial. Of great relevance to this study is that it is written in blocks that can be excised to make books. Homer's *Iliad* has 11 books; Virgil's *Odyssey* has 24 books. *Aeneid* has 12. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 12 books and so on.

Aristotle also states that the plot of an epic should have a unity that is not only temporal but sequential, nor produced by concentrating on a single hero (Heath, 1989). The events described in the Gospel are sequential in the sense that events occur systematically from the beginning to the end. The birth, life and ministry as well as the death and resurrection of Jesus, then with regards to temporal unity the writer describes a particular community, in a specific geographical location, culture and time in history. Clearly this was the world of the Jews and their state under the harsh Roman rule. There are roman rulers with soldiers in the text. At the end it is to Pilate that Jesus is taken for final judgement. The culture as described is also period specific; this refers to the dress, food, means of transport, housing and so on. There is no electricity so there is talk of oil in lamps. Jesus rides on a colt and not a car and so on. However, even though the target audience for the Gospel were the Jewish Christians at that particular period in history, the events described and even the teachings are still relevant to today's Christian. This makes the Gospel timeless.

### **2.5.2 Literary Techniques**

Apart from the above the writer creates unity by employing certain literary devices. A study on Matthew's literary style puts emphasis on the literary devices he employs to guide the reader to experience the story in a given way. The literary features function on a broader structural level providing the text with a sense of progression and cohesion. This is achieved by the use of formulaic phrases, a device employed by the classical epic poets. Formulaic phrases can be found in Matthew 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1; and 4:17; 16:21, most of the features primarily contribute to a sense of cohesion within smaller textual links. These features may highlight or bracket unifying themes by opening and closing distinct units with similar words or phrases (4:23-24 and 9:35). The literary devices also build anticipation by foreshadowing subsequent events. For example, chapter 2 foreshadows the Passion narrative.

Apart from that they stimulate reflection and a sense of development in the story by verbal repetition and episodic similarities (8:23-27/14:22-23; 9:27-31/ 20: 29-34; 9:32-34;/ 12: 22-34; 14: 13-21/ 15:32-38). These elements along with Matthews's fondness for grouping materials according to thematic scheme are indicative of an environment largely educated through oral proclamation not the written form.

Because Aristotle said that the plot should not be produced concentrating on a single hero, Matthew has ensured that in as much as the Gospel According to Matthew is about Jesus Christ, there are several other heroes mentioned in the text right from the beginning in the genealogy in Matthew chapter one. These references to the Old Testament heroes like David and Abraham at the outset (1:1) as well as Isaac and Jacob who are very important in the history of the Jews. Depending on how one views it, Joseph the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus is a hero in his own right because he sacrificed self-interest for the sake of the baby Jesus. Angels commune with him. Other heroes in the Gospel include Mary the mother of Jesus is a hero because of her obedience. John the Baptist is another. France (1994) calls him a leader of a significant movement noting that Matthew is careful to show the continuity of John's ministry and that of Jesus. John was a fore runner of Jesus and died because of his preaching. The disciples are heroes by virtue of their association with Jesus among, others and so. Therefore, Matthew's Gospel is not just about the main hero, Jesus but about other heroes as well.

Aristotle further states that the plot of an epic ought to be compact enough to be grasped as a whole unit; an epic should contain reversal, recognition and calamity and that it should conform mostly to the criterion of what is probable. Recent years has witnessed a resurgence of studies of Matthew, with many books and articles concerned to elucidate Matthew's Gospel as a "unified narrative" or "story" told by a competent story-teller who organizes

thoughts into a coherent sequence of events. The new concern for the Gospels as literary masterpieces demands that the reader be attentive to how Matthew develops his themes and focuses his account on a retelling of the story of Jesus in a way that does not merely rehearse the past, but speaks meaningfully. This functions as a guide for Christian discipleship. Matthew's Gospel is therefore an epic in the sense that it is a story that is told well and greatly and in the story, itself and in the telling of it, the significance is implied (Matthew: An Introduction, 1998).

Mathew's literary skills are demonstrated by the fact that the book has a clear outline. Wansbrough (1998) says that Matthew does give a record of Jesus' teaching in blocks alternating with Jesus' actions all the way through his ministry, for another of the attractive and readable features of Matthew is the clear organisation of his Gospel. He goes on to say that each of the blocks treats in a coherent and organised way one particular aspect of the Gospel message. He suggests that the account in Matthew of the ministry of Jesus can be divided as follows; the first block is the initial preaching of the kingdom of Heaven (chapters 3 and 4), and the Sermon on the Mount, the basic conditions of following Jesus. The second block is Jesus' miracles, a chunk of nine (or ten) of them (chapters 8 and 9), missionary discourse, the task and trials of missionaries (chapter 10). The third block is on opposition of Jesus in Galilee (chapter 11 and 12) and the parable discourse (chapter 13). The fourth block comprises of the final ministry of Jesus in Galilee (chapter 14-23) and Discourse on the Community. The final block is the Ministry of Jesus in Jerusalem and Eschatological Discourse.

One of the most encouraging trends in recent study, according to Drane (1999) is the increased willingness to treat each section as a complete narrative, a story written to be read and enjoyed as a whole. The way Matthew arranges his work makes it very readable and



enjoyable because of the divisions into sections. Drane adds that among the Gospels, *the Gospel According to Matthew* is the one written with the most artistry because of its literary features that make it most comparable to the epic genre. Like the epic poets Matthew was skilful in what he wrote. France (1998) says that Matthew seems to have made five careful ‘anthologies’ of the teachings of Jesus on certain subjects. It is obvious that the book has the standard elements of artistic form which include unity which has been achieved by the structure as well as the use of formulas, theme-and-variation that is mainly seen in the poetic nature of the language that he uses to achieve musicality, a main example in the Sermon on the Mount, pattern in his preference for using certain numbers repeatedly, especially odd numbers like 3, 5, 7, 9 etc and sometimes even numbers like 2, 12 and 14 ; design by clear outline with a prologue. Five blocks on different topics and then an epilogue and progression in the sense that he starts most of his new themes or events with the ‘When.... or After.’ contrast, balance, recurrence, coherence and symmetry. The Gospel contains miracle stories, healing stories, nature miracles, historical stories and legends, baptism stories, the temptation and the transfiguration in which the author uses the narrative technique, infusing the literary devices mentioned here.

### **2.5.3. Paratactic Model**

An interesting fact about Matthew’s style of writing this Gospel is that he has used the paratactic model. Morris (1901) says that the term was introduced into linguistics by Friedrich Thiersch in his *Greek Grammar* (1831). The concept has since expanded, and a number of definitions emerge. Parataxis is a literary technique in writing or speaking, that favour short, simple sentences with the use of coordinating rather than subordinating conjunctions. In poetry it is a technique in which two images or fragments, usually starkly dissimilar images or fragments are juxtaposed with a clear connection, Cuddon (2012).

Parataxis was a technique used by ancient epic poets; Homer did this in the *Iliad*. Aristotle saw that the *Iliad* had an organic plot developed in few key episodes. Hogan (1979) posits that at its most elementary level, parataxis is simply a kind of opposition in which the poet modifies a word or phrase by adding a word, phrase, or clause without a connective. Often one oppositional element calls for yet another, as if the poet were tempted into an infinite regression from his narrative.

This technique is common in Jesus' teachings and speech. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7), each verse has no connection to the verse immediately after it. The same applies to the teachings after the Beatitudes that are on Salt and light (5:13-16), Fulfilment of The Law (5:17-19), Murder (5:21), Adultery (5:27-28), Divorce (5:31-32), Oaths (5:33-34), An Eye or an Eye (5:38), Love for Enemies (5:43-44), Giving to the Needy (6:2-4) and the famous Lord's Prayer (6:9-13) and so on up to chapter 7 of Matthew's Gospel.

Matthew also uses parataxis on a scenic level. On a scenic level parataxis implies the use of integral juxtaposed scenes with minimal connecting links. He introduces scenes without any specific recognition of their relationship which may give the impression of a disjointed or fragmentary structure. This is illustrated in chapter 8. Soon after delivering the Sermon on the Mount (5-7) he goes down from the mountainside (8:1) then assumedly into the plain, then to Capernaum (8:5), next to Peter's house (8:14), afterwards we see him outside in the evening (8:18), after that he is on the lake. It is interesting to note that true to the paratactic model, there are many gaps left here. It is not clear how Jesus reaches the places he does. What Matthew does is to begin each transition with "when or then..." (8:1, 5, 14, 16, 18, 23, 28, 34). Because Matthew's transitions are often abrupt and the episodes self-contained, it is an easy matter to excise the passages. Analytical criticism may not pass up this opportunity. But once we recognise what Perry (1937) calls "the early Greek capacity for seeing things

separately,” we shall realise that Homeric aesthetics did not demand the kind of organic unity western art has valued since Plato. It is the nature of paratactic composition to leave gaps where a more sophisticated closure would modulate the rhythm, whether through the speech of the characters, authorial intrusion, or scenic description.

In the healing stories of chapter 8 for instances, there is no indication of how Jesus reaches the places he goes to; all the writer does is to talk, in this case, of the miracles Jesus performed when he was in a given place. For example, as he comes down from the mountain, large crowds are following him, and he heals a man with leprosy (8:2-4). Unexpectedly, he is in Capernaum (8:5). The duration is not indicated or even how he reached the town. We are not even told much about the Centurion. After his encounter with the centurion, all of a sudden, he is in Peter’s house where he heals Peter’s mother-in-law (8:14-15). It is not indicated when he left Peter’s house as in the next scene it is evening and he is outside (8:15-16). How he reached the shore is not indicated but we are told “then he got into the boat (8:23). Matthew constantly uses authorial intrusion by his formulae ‘for this is what the prophet has written’ or ‘this was done to fulfil what was said by the prophet’ (1:22-23, 2b-6, 2:15b, 2:17-18, 2:23b, 3:3, 4:14-16, 8:7, 12:17-21, 13: 14-15, 13:35, 21:4-5, 26:56, 27:9-10) or after ‘Jesus had said these things...’ (7:28, 11:1, 13:35, 19:1, 26:1) and others like you have heard that it was said...but I tell you...’(5:20, 5:27, 5:31, 5:33, 5:38, 5:44).

The changes of scenes, as has been mentioned, are also abrupt and they are described; be it in the desert or on the mountain. This technique probably grew out of the conditions of oral recitation, in which the poet needed to keep his mind on the subject immediately before. In the hands of a skilled poet, however, paratactic composition achieves a different kind of composition, one predicated on the balancing of large elements and thematic integration into a monumental, coherent poem.

It has been argued by Hogan (1999) that there is in this paratactic technique an inherent danger of producing a fragmentary, incoherent whole. However, this is apparently not the case in Matthew's Gospel. The writer has attempted to control the larger elements of his story to secure a dramatic development by the recurrent use of themes or typical scenes. Some of these themes, like the promised Messiah, are so comprehensive as to include the entire book. The theme that the Old Testament points to Jesus, in whom God's purposes are fulfilled, the theme of Jesus as the Messiah, 'Son of God' and 'son of man', God's promised king, and in his recurring formula of 'This was done to fulfil what was said by the prophets' there is the theme that Jesus fulfils and transforms the law God gave to Israel through Moses. Finally, there is the theme that the people of God, now, are those who respond to the message of Jesus. A.B. Lord, for example, calls this "withdrawal and return", a theme common to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. More useful for understanding the poet's methods is the comparison of scenes which occur several times in the poem. Hogan adds that for any theme there is the usual, and apparently traditional order, a list of formulaic lines and phrases regularly present, and a scheme sufficiently elastic that he can add lines or motifs particularly suited to the context.

Scenes of arming, sacrificing, offering a banquet, entering and leaving battle are among numerous types of action for which the epic poet has habitual forms of procedure. In the Gospel, scenes of arming may include when Herod orders the killing of all boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity. This was after he was outwitted by the Magi (2:16). Matthew compared to the other Gospels, focuses more negatively on Scribes and Pharisees who are the main opponents of Jesus. Their enmity is shown by the use of 'their synagogues (4:23, 9:35) as well as their scribes (7:29). They are armed with verbal as well as physical weapons as there are temple guards mentioned (5:20, 9:11, 34, 12:2, 23:2-3, 27:62). The conspiracy between

Judas and especially Caiaphas and Pilate to kill Jesus is highlighted. The role of Judas is also more stressed in this Gospel (26:14-16, 47-56). Money is used as a weapon to entice Judas to betray Jesus. Another role that is stressed is that of Caiaphas the high priest who sent a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, directed by Judas Iscariot to arrest Jesus (26; 47). Jesus' companions were also armed with a sword and cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest (26:51). It is only John who names that the disciple as Simon Peter (John 18:10). A more comprehensive account of arming is when Jesus is taken before the Sanhedrin, to Pilate. When he is taken to Pilate there are many armed soldiers, and these are the ones who whip Jesus and eventually crucify him (27:1-2, 11-31, 65-66). There is an armed guard requested placed at the tomb after Jesus was buried (27:62-66, 28:4, 11, 15).

It is not only arming with physical weapons that are shown *in the Gospel According to Matthew*. The twelve disciples were also armed by Jesus for spiritual warfare when Jesus gave them authority to drive out evil spirits, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy and drive out demons. He also armed them for the mission by teaching them on what to do while he was still with them. Occasionally, he separated disciples and taught them alone. The disciples learnt by listening and observing. Finally, he makes them put their theory into practice when he sent out the twelve with instructions on what they were to do when they went (Matthew 10:1-42). Apart from the arming scenes, there are other scenes of offering a banquet in epics. The most prominent ones in Matthew included Jesus Feeding the Five Thousand (Matthew 14:13-21), the banquet where John the Baptist's head was delivered in a platter to Herodias (Matt.6:14-29), but the most important is the last supper (Matt 26:17-30-25)

#### **2.5.4 Setting**

Another important characteristic of the epic, as suggested by (Harmon & Hugh (2003), is that of a vast or lengthy setting, covering many nations, the world or the universe. The action spans not only geographical but also cosmological space across land, sea and into the underworld or through space or time (Idaho University). Most epics, whether classical or modern, demonstrate this characteristic of an immense setting that surpasses geographical setting. Traditional approaches to the Gospel usually treat the heading of “setting” as the date and place of the Gospel’s writing, alongside identity problems confronting the community addressed. Essentially there is need to search for possible clues that hint at the time and circumstances of the writing. This is because in literature, setting functions to create mood and atmosphere and to show the reader a different way of life. In addition, it makes action real as well as being the source of struggle for the conflict and to symbolise an idea. Therefore, other types of setting that enhance the understanding of the story must be taken into account.

The locations of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Egypt evoke feelings of continuity between Jesus’ history and that of Israel. Other locations such as the “desert” and “mountain” function to create a certain aura around events and characters in the story. Later in the story specific locations such as “synagogue” the “sea” and the “temple” all contribute to a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate the course of events. While the real-life settings of the author and his readers can be reproduced in terms of probability the temporal and spatial settings established in the story provide an integral context for interpreting Matthew’s story. The Matthean narrator is not bound by time or space in his coverage of the story. Matthew provides the reader with access to private conversations between Herod and the Magi (2:3-8), John the Baptist and Jesus (3:13-15), Jesus and Satan (4:1-11), the disciples (16:7), Peter and Jesus (16:23), Judas and the chief priest (26:14-16; 26:40) and Pilate and the chief priests

(27:62-64). He makes known to the reader the private discussions by the chief priest and the Sanhedrin (26:59-60), and the plan of the chief priest and the elders concerning the disappearance of the body (28:12-15). The narrator is present when Jesus is alone, while at the same time he knows the difficulties of the disciples on the sea (14:22-24). He easily takes the reader from the courtroom of Pilate to the courtyard of Peter's denial (26:70), and eventually to the scene of the cross (27:45). For the most part, the narrator in Matthew's story stays close to Jesus and views events and characters in terms of how they affect his main character.

### **2.5.5. Authorship**

Drane (1999) suggests that most scholars are of the opinion that *the Gospel According to Matthew* was written after AD 70 but just like the authorship, the date is also in doubt. It is probable that it was written after *Mark* and later than *Luke* which appears to contain direct references to the fall of Jerusalem in AD70. He further suggests that this presumption of course depends on the belief that there can never be such a thing as predictive prophecy, and therefore appears to have foretold an event in future. Even if the possibility of such foresight is allowed, Mathew was clearly an intentional literary stylist of some skill as he easily formulated the actual phraseology to reflect what happened when the temple was destroyed in fulfilment of an earlier prediction.

Similar to most traditional epics that never agree on actual physical location, there is no agreement as to the exact geographical location of Matthew's Gospel though there are maps indicating the world of the New Testament. Reid (1999) suggests that since it is not clear the precise locale of the Matthean community, a prosperous urban setting is most likely from the twenty-six times Matthew uses the word 'polis', city (cf. Mark four times, Luke sixteen times) and the twenty-eight times he mentions gold and silver. She also believes that Matthean Christians were men and women of diverse social and civic status, ethnic identities,

and levels of wealth. They comprised only a small percentage of the total population. She adds that it was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, trying to work out their identity in the new Israel. However, the oldest tradition, and still the most frequently suggested locale for the Matthean community is Antioch of Syria. It was an important centre for emerging Christianity (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3) where Christians and Jews struggled to work out their new relationship with Christ (Galatians 2:11-13). Other proposals include Jerusalem, Alexandria, Caesarea, Phoenicia and simply “east of Jordan.”

Nevertheless, as observed by France (2006) deciding on the geographical location in which the Gospel originated is of least significance for a sound understanding of the text. Much relevant to the interpretation of the Gospel is the dimension given to the discussion of “setting” by a literary reading of the first Gospel. This is a significant feature of the epic that depends on description because of the narrative technique employed by the writers of epic. In literary terms the discussion of setting involves the descriptive context or background in which the story transpires. Settings, as described by the narrator are like stage props in a theatrical production. Oftentimes, the narrator’s description of the place, time or social conditions in which the action takes place is charged with subtle nuances that may generate a certain atmosphere with a symbolic significance. For example, early in Matthew’s story, the narrator places events to create a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate his central character. The story opens with a series of events that are calculated to evoke memories of Israel’s past, and thereby to highlight the significance of the times inaugurated by Jesus.

## **2.6. Elements of the Epic**

### **2.6.1 The Dream Motif**

A literary stylistic device that characterises epics is the epic motifs. In Matthew’s Gospel one of the epic motifs evident is the Dream motif. In the ancient world dreams constituted one



form of divination. Dreams used as a literary convention corresponds to other Greco-Roman narratives. The form includes the form of the Matthean dreams as motif. The first one is the birth *topos* (1:8b-25) the second is association of dreams and prophecy (1:22-23; 2:15, 23), the third one is the double dream report (2:12 and 2:13-15). The next one is, dreams as an ominous sign in relation to the individual's death and finally transfiguration as a dream vision report. There are six occurrences of dreams in the text. Significantly, these concern the person of Jesus (Gnuse, 1990).

The first one is when an angel appears in a dream to prophesy the birth of Jesus. The angel discourages Joseph, who was engaged to Mary the mother of Jesus not break off the engagement because of her pregnancy. This is because Joseph had considered divorcing Mary in secret. (Matt.1:19). The second one concerned the Magi who were warned in a dream not to return to Herod or give him the information he wanted concerning the baby (Matt 2:12). In the third dream, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee with his family to Egypt as Herod wanted to kill the child Jesus (Matt 2:13) After the death of Herod, an angel appears to Joseph, telling him to take his family back to Egypt (Matt 2:20). Then there is the dream as an ominous sign during the trial of Jesus, when Pilate's wife warned him to have nothing to do with Jesus because she had had a bad dream about him (Matt 27:19). These dreams are an indication of struggle and battle. Apart from that the dreams indicate the involvement and appearance of supernatural beings and divine elements in the story. The dreams in Matthew's Gospel can possibly be a form of *Deus ex Machina* employed by Matthew in his narrative. He introduces the dreams suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution to an insoluble difficulty. In ancient Greek and Roman drama, a god was introduced into a play to resolve entanglements of the plot (Merriam-Webster, Dictionary).

### **2.6.2. The Supernatural**

One of the characteristics of the epic is the appearance of supernatural beings and divine elements in a story. Matthew uses these in his story. These comprise of God, angels, the Devil, Beelzebub, demons and divine occurrences in the story. Angels act as God's messengers to man, like when one appeared to Joseph and the Magi in a dream. Demon possession is common in the story as we are told of instances when Jesus exorcized the demon possessed. Other divine elements include the star of Bethlehem which 'stood over' Bethlehem to show the Magi the location of Jesus' birth. This star was followed by the Magi and Matthew 2:7 records that the star went ahead of them and stood over the place where the child was born. A dove that appears when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist to declare his semi divine status, the miracles and healing stories that illustrate an achievement of great deeds, the transfiguration in which and the other events that occur before, during and after the death of Jesus in Jerusalem. Epics narratives are concerned with the supernatural. Most of the Greek epics like the Iliad , Odysseys and Gilgamesh had gods supernatural beings mentioned. For example in H

### **2.6.3 Poetic License**

In epics the writer has the licence to craft on to the truth to suit their purpose. The prime material of the *Gospel according to Mathew* is real and not invented. This follows the prerequisite of the classical epic poetry that the story should be safely concerned with some reality, but the author may graft on this as much invention as he pleases. Matthew borrowed heavily from Mark just as Virgil borrowed greatly from Homer (Merchant, 1971), but some accounts in his story are possibly additions. He used the Markan outline but appended to it a genealogy, the birth narrative, the visit of the Magi, Jesus' flight to Egypt, the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem and Jesus' return from Egypt. He in addition refers to the Old Testament so as to validate and authenticate his story. Numerous quotations from the Old

Testament are included, some of which are given as testimonies that the coming of and the ministry of Jesus are the fulfilment of the hope of Israel. His purpose is to establish a base for what will follow; his great theme that in Jesus scripture is fulfilled (Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 1999). G. Cohen concurs that “the purpose of Matthew’s Gospel is to witness that Jesus was the Messiah of Old Testament promise and that his messianic mission was to bring the kingdom of God to men.

In keeping with one of the attributes of an epic as having an elevated style (Harmon and Holman, 1999), Matthew’s list is stylised and abbreviated to fit a pattern of his making: 14 names from Abraham to David; 14 names from David to Jechoniah; 14 from Jechoniah to Jesus. Fourteen is two times seven and the number seven signified perfection. ‘Six sevens are past (3 x14) and the ‘seventh seven’ is about to begin. Matthew’s list has two turning points: David is the start of the monarchy and the exile, its end. It is further suggested that it is possible that 14 is the numeral value of the name of David, since the letters/consonants of the Hebrew alphabet served also as numbers: d (4) +v (6) +d (4) =14. (Aune, 1987).

Homer does the same in the *Iliad*. Fitzgerald (1999) calls this “the Greekness of Homer and the formulaic character of his style.” Classical epic poets relied on the use of formulae in creating their stories. Fitzgerald points out that what distinguishes oral techniques is its adherence to regular patterns and peculiar reliance on formulaic phrases and lines. Formulae give the poet control and means of performing a long poem before an audience that is not used to waiting for the singer to ponder the next line. But the formulae may be used mechanically so that they appear to be clichés and filler.

Mathew writes as a Jew who has found in Jesus the fulfilment of all that is precious in his Jewish heritage. Fulfilment is the central theme of the Gospel. This theme comes to the surface in the repeated assertion that ‘All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said

through the prophet' (1:22; 2:15; 17,23; 4;14; 8;17;12:17; 13:35;21;14; 27:9); the wording varies slightly but in these 'formula-quotations', as they came to be called, are a distinctive feature of Matthew. The formulaic style is further evident in the five great discourses or collections of Jesus' teachings, which are all concluded with the formula 'When Jesus had completed these sayings', and or the like ( a formula which is much more striking in Hebrew than in English).

The writer of Matthew has incorporated other elements of epic style in his Gospel. One of these is the constant use of repetition. Matthew has repeated Jesus one hundred and fifty times, Christ seventeen times, 'the son of David' with reference to Jesus nine times. The teachings of Jesus are concluded with the repeated formula 'When Jesus had said these sayings', the clause 'Blessed are the...' in chapter five is repeated nine times in the Sermon on the mount. In the teachings of Jesus in the repetition of 'You have heard that it was said...But I tell you' and "the Seven woes"; starting with 'Woe to you...' in chapter 23. Certain directions and reports are repeated as later incidents seem to echo earlier incidents Matthew's constant reference to what had happened before in the Old Testament and comparing it to an event in his Gospel is indicative of this. When Herod slaughters the infants in 2:17 he relates the incident to an earlier prophecy. This is illustrated in the formula stock epithets are constantly applied to certain proper nouns such as "rosy-fingered Dawn" and "horse-taming Hector." Names are symbolic in epics are symbolic thus Jesus is called Immanuel meaning; "God with us" just as Odysseus is "Man of Woe," for he both gives and receives suffering.

#### **2.6.4. Homeric simile**

Mathew uses the Homeric simile (also known as Epic Simile) in the text. This is a protracted comparison beginning with "like" or "as"; the figure, loaded with description, often holds up

the action at the crucial point to produce suspense. This is used mainly in the parables by Jesus in the teaching discourse. Examples of epic similes include the Parables of the Vineyard, the weeds, the Wedding Banquet, and the Parable of the Ten Virgins to show what the kingdom of God is like. A much-extended comparison. In chapter twenty Jesus begins by saying “The kingdom of God is like... a mustard seed, hidden treasure, and net let down in the lake and so on.” Some sentences begin with “as.” Jesus says, “As it was in the days of Noah, so it shall be at the coming of the Son of Man (24:37) and during the Transfiguration the writer says, “his face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as the light’ These indeed are protracted similes as a whole story is narrated to bring out the comparison. There is a general absence of this device in *Beowulf*, but later English writers such as Milton and Arnold have deliberately incorporated such protracted comparisons into their works to give them weight and dignity.

### **2.6.5. Long Formal Speeches**

Epics are characterized by long, formal speeches such as challenges, inset narratives, flashbacks, and points of debate occur within the midst of the action; characters are commonly revealed in dialogue (Harmon & Holman, 1999). In the *gospel according to Matthew*, this particular characteristic is evident as well. There are five long speeches or discourses by Jesus. The five discourses are the *Sermon on the Mount*, the *Missionary Discourse*, the *Parabolic Discourse*, the *Discourse on the Church* and the *Discourse on End Times* (Kellum & Kostenberger, 2016).

These discourses are some of the most difficult to read in Matthew’s Gospel. This is because makes the Gospel to read like an epic in terms of pace. The pace of an epic, it should not be forgotten, is stately, and the rhythm ceremonious. (Harmon & Holman, 1999). This may not be exciting to the reader, though. A fact supported by France (1999) who says that ‘compared

with Mark's lively style, Matthew's method of telling stories can be quite monotonous.' While his Gospel contains much more material than Mark's where they tell the same story, Matthew is typically more concise. For example, the stories which make up chapter 5 of Mark (43 verses) take up only 16 verses in Matthew. He has omitted all the vivid narrative detail and cut out any 'redundancy' in the telling so as to focus on the main point. But where the point of a story lies in the Sayings of Jesus which it includes, he is likely, while reducing the narrative, to offer sayings in a fuller form. Speeches in epics are often followed by such phrases as "thus he spoke" to emphasize that the words are those of a character and not of the narrator.

#### **2.6.6. The Subject Matter of the Gospel according to Matthew**

The subject matter of Matthew's Gospel, like that of classical epics, contains myths, legends, history and folktales. Matthew has incorporated what has been termed by some as many mythical, historical and to a lesser extent, legendary motifs in his text. The writer of this gospel presents Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God; having filial relationship with God and as 'righteous. In the ancient epics, the hero is partially divine as he is usually favoured or even partially descended from deities but more closely aligned with mortal figures in popular portrayals. For example, Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*, was a demi-god; the son of a goddess and a mortal.

Jesus' conception and the prophecy of his birth by an angel indicate his semi-divine status. His royal status is implied by the birth narratives; the star showing his birth and the visit of the Magi and the symbolism behind the presents he receives. He is to be called Immanuel meaning "God with us" because of his mission. Matthew states that Jesus' mission is to save the world and therefore the fate of the world rests in the hand of Jesus. This is another characteristic of the epic in that the fate of a people or a nation rests on the hands of the epic

hero. He is a hero who, like the classical epic heroes, completes what everyone only attempts. His mission is to bring salvation to the world hence like the epic hero, he is a hero “who saves.”

According to Hainsworth (1991), the subject of an epic often originates from the Homeric ethos of the *klea andron*, or “the glorious deed of heroes”. Since Matthew’s intention is to portray the glorious deeds of Jesus as superhuman he carefully narrates instances where he performs miracles and carries out feats not possible to ordinary mortals though he is restrained only by a sense of honour. Unlike Achilles in the *Iliad* and Aeneas in the *Odyssey*, Jesus Christ’s strength is found in restraint and capitulation. He resists the devil’s temptations to glorify him during the Temptation (Matt 3) but instead fulfils his intended mission of saving mankind by dying on the cross as a sacrifice. During his life and ministry, he performs glorious deeds especially in acts of compassion of healing the sick, raising the dead, feeding the hungry, restoring the sight of the blind and deaf sight and hearing and even exorcise demons. Most importantly, he sought to draw people back to God by teaching them how to live godly lives.

### **2.6.7. The Epic Hero**

Dean, (2000) says that in an epic story, there is a heroic figure present that faces many challenges in the course of story. Draper (1990) describes the hero as a larger than life figure who embodies the ideals of his people, besides being of historical or legendary importance. In *the Gospel According to Matthew* the heroic figure is Jesus based on the writers concerted attempt to ensure he is the central figure in every chapter.

These characteristics of the epic hero are undoubtedly noticeable in Jesus as a hero who faces challenges. He encounters opposition from Satan and religious authorities who oppose his

establishment of the kingdom of God. The challenges are instantly recognizable right from the time the Jesus is born. His birth creates jitters and there are some like Herod who want to get rid of him, forcing his family to flee to Egypt. Matthew brings out the struggle and battle in the story by using the narrative technique. Jesus' conception is contentious as his mother is an unmarried teenager leading to her almost being jilted by Joseph and being stigmatised by the society (Matt 1: 18-21). After his birth Jesus has to go into exile as Herod wants him dead. He has his nemesis, the devil who wants to prevent him from carrying out his mission during the forty days he is tempted in the desert (Matt 4). Drane (1999) says that all the Gospels are unanimous in showing that, from the very start, Jesus' actions and words created divisions among those who met him. He adds that there are many stories about Jesus which show how he enjoyed great popularity as a teacher and a healer, but was also opposed by the religious and civil authorities of the day.

#### **2.6.8. Purpose**

According to Yoshida (2016), the main function of epics during the heroic age appears to be to stir the spirit of the warriors to heroic actions by praising their exploits and those of their illustrious ancestors, by assuring a long and glorious recollection of their fame, and by supplying them with models of ideal heroic behaviour. In the same way, Matthew's Gospel was written with the intention of not only celebrating Jesus Christ as a king but also teaching the Jewish Christians on how to live the Christian life and this is a serious subject. It is also designed primarily for instruction of person new to the Christian faith, of missionaries, and of the church in general. France (1998) suggests that Matthew has been called 'the 'Teacher's Gospel' because its material is so presented that it is suitable for teaching. The organisation of Jesus' teachings into five discourses with distinct concerns is evidence of this. Numerous quotations from the Old Testament are included, some of which are given as testimonies that the coming and ministry of Jesus are the fulfilment of hope in Israel.



Aristotle, when referring to the epic in his *Poetics* emphasised on the didactic role of literature. This is true as the writer of Matthew collected stories and sayings of Jesus which bear particularly on the regular concerns of the life of the church and put them together in such a way that the teacher of the church could draw from them. Most of the stories and the sayings have a teaching for the reader that leads to behaviour change. A notable characteristic of *the Gospel According to Matthew* is its interest in ecclesiastical affairs. As the only Gospel that makes a direct mention of the church, much of the instruction recorded in Matthew is especially appropriate for particular situations that arose in the Christian churches of the first century. The instructions are still relevant for Christians today. As postulated by Norhrberge, (1941) the epic tends to become a kind of scripture, summing up virtues and inherited gravity of a nation: “the privileged and summary testament of a people and their epoch.” Matthew’s Gospel summarises the virtues and inherited gravity of the Christian nation taken from the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Epics trace the history of a specific nation for a long period of time. Bearing in mind that the Bible traces the history of one nation, Israel, for a long period of time, it is accurate to say that indeed, the Bible, and by extension the *Gospel according to Mathew*, is an epic. The Bible traces the history of the nation of Israel which in turn metamorphoses into the new Israel in the gospels, as can be seen in the genealogy (Matt1). Matthew’s Gospel traces the history of Christianity, by following the life, death and resurrection of its founder, Jesus Christ from the context of the Old Testament. The story of an epic hero is normally recounted in flashbacks (Harmon & Holman, 1999). Mathew refers a lot to the Old Testament prophecies regarding the coming of Jesus Christ. The story is set in a heroic past and embodies Israel’s early history and expresses its values. The author’s constant reference to the Old Testament prophecies is evidence of this. It is a story a nation’s history, the history of the kingdom of God or the new Israel which is universal. The kingdom of God is no longer

the reserve of the Jews but belong to all who believe in Jesus Christ, the king.

Matthew uses the “Epic of the return” based on the heroes’ homecoming as given by Northrop Frye. This is seen in Homer’s *Odyssey* as well. Odysseus in his wanderings has a strong desire to get back home to his family. The story of Jesus’ public teaching and activity begins in Galilee and leads inexorably towards the final denouement in Jerusalem, before it reverts to Galilee for the concluding scene. Before the story can begin, however, Matthew introduces us to its chief character, and he achieves this in a series of scenes set largely in the southern part of Israel leading up to Jesus’ deliberate move to Galilee in 4:12. In this move, as in all that is recorded in the introductory chapters, Matthew traces the fulfilment of God’s plan revealed in Scripture. Here the ‘Epic of return’ is applicable to salvation history. After many years of man wandering away from God man is brought back to the Kingdom of God that Jesus has come to establish.

### **2.6.9 Invocation and Statement of theme**

One of the characteristics of the epic is that it starts with an invocation of the Muse. The story may also start with the statement of the theme (Harmon & Holman, 1999) ‘*The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David the son of Abraham*’ is the very first line in text (Matthew 1:1). These words are almost reminiscent of the invocation to the Muse in *Iliad* ‘Anger be now your song, immortal one’ but most significantly, they are an introduction to the theme. In epics the first line is always an introduction of the theme or an invocation to the muse. The writer seeks to introduce the theme before proceeding with his story. Stanfield (1999) suggests that from this first verse of his Gospel, Matthew begins his purpose. He has written to show Jesus to be the promised Messiah and begins by establishing his kingship by referring to him as the son of David, the son of Abraham. Apart from that, there is a possibility that it was an invocation to the spirits of David and Abraham but most probably to

the Holy Spirit for inspiration in order to write the story well. There was a strong belief that the scriptures were *Theopneustos*- God Breathed; they were written as a result of divine inspiration. (2 Timothy 3:16)

In the first line, another fact worth noting is that like the classical epic poets, Matthew assumes that all his readers know about Jesus, David and Abraham. As Hogan (1979) says, most epic poets had a tendency to begin their lines with the assumption that the readers knew of the characters being mentioned. For example in the *Iliad*, Homer began the first lines by assuming that his audience knew of Achilles, the son of Peleus, and how his quarrel with Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, brought destruction on the Achaeans before Troy. The Greek audience in the *Iliad* was not only familiar with what we call the myth of the Trojan saga, but were also accustomed to the poet's manner of telling the story. Matthew is writing the story to a Jewish-Christian audience who already have an idea of who David and Abraham are. Much of the material unique to *the Gospel According to Matthew* is only fully understandable and of interest to a Jewish readership. A number of Jewish terms and customs are mentioned without explanation for example in Matthew 5:12; 15:2; 12:1-20; 21:43. These includes laws, oaths, alms giving, fasting, Israel's status upon rejection of Jesus and evaluation of the Pharisees.

This first line is immediately followed by a list of the genealogy of Jesus Christ. Genealogies were important in the Greco-Roman world and more so in literature. France (1998) suggests that the modern reader finds this list a dull way to begin a book but for Matthew and his readers, however, it was far from dull: it was about the fulfilment of Israel's story in the coming of their true king. '*A record of the genealogy*' is, in Greek, the title of the 'Book of Genesis' so that the reader thinks of it as a new beginning. Cohen asserts that this list is a "genealogy," that is, a true and accurate record of descent; it is not, nor was it meant to be, a

complete “chronology” listing every name in the lineage. He suggests that probably for mnemonic reasons Matthew put it in a list of three fourteens, fourteen being chosen in just twice the total-cycle number. Israelites knew their kings and patriarchs. The omission of kings would have been noticed immediately. He further suggests that Matthew apparently wanted his list to be memorised in three lists of fourteen. Cohen observes that certainly our clue for verification is in Matthew 1:1 where the first verse, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David the son of Abraham.” Abraham lived across the 2000 BC line and David crossed the 1000 BC line. Jesus in turn crossed the 1 BC -1 AD line, having been born probably in 4BC, just before Herod died in that year. He concludes that Matthew 1: is a generational trace-symmetrical, accurate, and inspired.

Another perspective by France (2009) is that Matthew begins with a genealogy tracing the ancestry of Joseph, Jesus’ legal father through three groups of fourteen generations. Nineham (1976; 424) defines a genealogy as “the standard form of propaganda, a way of demonstrating the true status or character of some individual or a group of people. France says that the list begins with Abraham (the hero of the book of Genesis and patriarch from whom Israel traced its origin), leads to David (the first true king of Israel) and continues down to the royal line of Judah to the point where the monarchy was destroyed at the exile of Babylon. The division into three sets of fourteen generations emphasises these turning points and perhaps for the Jewish reader the point is reinforced by the fact that the three Hebrew letters of the name David, used as numerals, add up to fourteen. It is interesting to note that the list is also arranged to show Jesus coming at the beginning of the seventh group of seven generations since Abraham. The seventh was, for the Jews, a special time for celebration, so the implication is that Jesus came to bring a special blessing to the world.

Matthew's genealogy of Jesus also traces his ancestry as far back as Abraham. The ancestry is found on the side of Joseph, although the author later definitively states that Joseph was not Jesus' father. Subsequent to the genealogy is an account of the wise men's visit to Jesus' birth site, Herod's attempt to destroy the newborn child, and the flight into Egypt for the child's protection. After the death of Herod, the family returned and settled in the Galilee town of Nazareth, which, according to Matthew, fulfilled another Old Testament prophecy. Following these introductory stories, Matthew continues his Gospel by narrating the events in Jesus' public career in the same sequence as they are found in Mark. As mentioned before, this sequence is interrupted at appropriate intervals for the insertion of discourses that Jesus delivered on various occasions. This scheme enables Matthew to combine Jesus' teachings and events in one continuous narrative. While the author of the Gospel of Mark seems to have been impressed most of all with the wonderful deeds that Jesus *performed*, Matthew places the major emphasis on the marvellous things that Jesus *taught*. Some of the teachings were spoken directly to the inner group of disciples, but at different times and places Jesus addressed the multitudes, among who were many who gladly heard him. Often Jesus spoke in parables, for in this way he could communicate his ideas concerning the kingdom of heaven in language that the people could understand because the parables were drawn from people's own experiences.

#### **2.6.10. Epic Catalogues**

This list of the genealogy is similar to the epic catalogue list of warriors and armies found in classical epics. Keener (2007) states that lists were a common rhetorical form, including lists of names as found in Matthew 10:2. He further states that Homer's catalogue of ships as a model and catalogues of names, for example, deities and human genealogies flourished as a literary form. The Twelve is readily comprehensible Greek construction. The list serves the function of portraying Jesus as the culmination of the work God began through Israel by

beginning with a list of Jesus' ancestors. The list also highlights the fact that Jesus was the son of David, Israel's most famous king, and the son of Abraham, Israel's ancient ancestor. In other words, Matthew suggests that Jesus is a true Israelite and the long awaited Messiah. Matthew concentrates his skills on presenting Jesus as the long awaited, Messiah-the Christ predicted in the Old Testament by constantly referring to prophecies in the Old Testament. He carefully records what Jesus said about his kingdom, a radically different concept from the idea of the messiah in his day, when most Jews expected a political leader who would free them from Roman domination (Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 1999).

#### **2.6. 11. Beginning in *medias Res***

In an epic, the story begins in *medias res* (in the middle of things) (Harmon and Holman, 1999). According to the genealogy of Jesus, the list of Jesus' ancestors, Matthew wants to portray Jesus as the full culmination of the work God began with Israel. This is therefore a story that began in a distant glorious past when God and man fellowshiped together. After the fall of man, there is need to renew this fellowship. On the other hand, the Jews are waiting for a promised Messiah to deliver them from the harsh and oppressive Roman rule. They already have his specifications. He is an all-powerful military leader who like Moses, will be the instrument of their freedom. The story therefore starts in *medias res*, in the middle of things.

Matthew concentrates his skills on presenting Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah-the Christ predicted in the Old Testament. In addition, his frequent reference to the Old Testament in his text further portrays how this story is introduced in the middle of things. The story of Jesus had started with Old Testament prophecies concerning him and not just with his birth. Apart from that, the genealogy shows that Jesus came after others who were considered men of God, like ancient kings of Israel and the prophets who had existed before. He therefore comes to continue with the work others had started; to establish the kingdom of God. The locations

of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Egypt evoke feelings of continuity between Jesus' history and that of Israel and the Kingdom of God. Matthew's Gospel carefully records what Jesus said about his kingdom, a radically different concept from the idea of the messiah in his day, when most Jews expected a political leader who would free them from Roman domination (Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 1999).

#### **2.6.12. National and Legendary Characters**

The characters in epics are of national and legendary importance. The genealogy functioning as an epic catalogue list, serves to highlight this. Another important fact that this genealogy implies, is that Jesus was from an illustrious line. Since epics were composed to honour the deeds of heroic ancestors, such poems often have an aristocratic bias: peasants and servants (unless of aristocratic birth) are insignificant. In ancient epics, it was a prerequisite for heroes had to come from good lineage to be recognised and respected. Jesus, the main character and subsequently the epic hero is portrayed as a king and the illustrious genealogy is given as proof. The genealogy emphasises Jesus' pedigree. An epic is not made up of ordinary characters as the action and plot of an epic centres around a hero of a royal background (Dean, 2000).

The point for Matthew, therefore, is to show Jesus as the true king, descended from the royal line of David, as God had promised. Jesus Christ and his mission on earth, which is to establish the Kingdom of God, is the serious subject matter of the story in Matthew's Gospel. This is because an epic, as a requirement, is concerned with a serious subject. Epics present narratives of sustained obligation, handed down from heaven to earth; they require interaction of higher and lower beings, gods and mortals. Jesus' semi divine nature, demonstrated in the appearance of the angels during his conception, the star at his birth and the dove at his

baptism. Jesus' ability to heal and perform miracles, his death and the events that took place immediately thereafter and his resurrection, demonstrate his semi-divine nature.

An epic is a long story about great men and women. *The Gospel according to Mathew* has many characters that are renowned. This starts with the core character, Jesus Christ who is a great historical character. Leon (2000) says 'the book of Matthew is the story of Jesus Christ backing his assertion with the fact that Jesus is written one hundred and fifty times in the narrative. He adds that no one in the narrative addresses Jesus by his name and Matthew does not use the full name of Jesus Christ. Instead he uses Christ 17 times. However, as Aristotle states in *Poetics*, an epic story should not only be about the epic hero but other characters as well. The disciples of Jesus assume a legendary status as well because of their role as Early Church Fathers in starting the Christianity. Apart from the disciples, there are other key characters like Mary the mother of Jesus who has been elevated especially by the Catholic church as a mediator, his earthly father Joseph who has been accorded the status of a saint, the Magi who came to honour his birth, his disciples, King Herod and Pilate and rulers of the Roman Empire at the time, his eleven disciples who are remembered and revered as the church fathers.

### **2.6.13. Historical Verification**

Taking into consideration that the story of an epic is founded on the deep experience of men and therefore must have historical material, the story of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew should be historically verifiable. The Dead Sea Scrolls, the library of the Jewish sect living just before and during the time of Jesus discovered hidden in the caves in 1947 shed light on the thought-world of Palestine. Fitzgerald (1999) says that most ancient Greeks believed in the historical veracity of the Homeric poems; to some extent modern archaeology has corroborated this belief. Apparently, the writer of Matthew's Gospel was of the same mind-



set. This Gospel belongs in the period between 50AD and 100AD. Drane (1999) says that there have been debates in modern scholarship over the historical value of the Gospels. He cites a detailed account and readable assessment available in Bloomberg (1987). He says that through patient and well-informed discussion of various causes of scholarly scepticism, Blomberg shows how a respect for the Gospels as factual accounts of Jesus and his teaching may be justified by the normal canons of historical study, not merely asserted on the basis of unquestioning faith. Since the Gospels were written within one or two generations of Jesus' lifetime and they were based partly on written records and partly on traditions preserved in the teaching of the churches, together with reminiscences of their authors and their informants, and since the writing of the Gospels took place within the life of a Christian community committed to preserving the truth about Jesus, and within which there was still the continuity of the living memory of those who had been there at the time, there is no doubt that the Gospels have historical material.

#### **2.6.14. Geographical Location**

Even though similar to most epics, there is no agreement as to the exact geographical location of Matthew's Gospel though there are maps indicating the historical world of the New Testament. According to Gill (1999; 14), 'the world of the New Testament is the world of the Roman Empire'. Though we know very little about the author, the Gospel does not present a completely fictional world. The Gospel is realistic and claims to be historical. There are references to small towns and local cultural institutions that substantiate this historical realism. Reid (1999) suggests that since it is not clear the precise locale of the Matthean community, a prosperous urban setting is most likely from the twenty-six times Matthew uses the word 'polis', city (cf. Mark four times, Luke sixteen times) and the twenty-eight times he mentions gold and silver. She believes that Matthean Christians were men and women of diverse social and civic status, ethnic identities, and levels of wealth. They comprised only a

small percentage of the total population. She adds that it was a mixed community of Jews and Gentiles, trying to work out their identity in the new Israel. However, the oldest tradition, and still the most frequently suggested locale for the Matthean community is Antioch of Syria.

#### **2.6.15. Oral Tradition**

Apart from that it is also worth remembering too that oral tradition was generally regarded in the ancient world as a reliable method of preserving information and teaching and this can add to the historical value of *the Gospel According to Matthew*. Drane (1999) adds that this was particularly true in the Jewish world. Rabbinic scholars developed a sophisticated system of memorisation, which they valued more highly than written records, and which was capable of passing memorised vast bodies of material unchanged from one generation to another. He concludes that the Gospels, for all their literary and theological sensitivity, are historical documents. Similar to classical epics, *the Gospel According to Matthew* originated in an oral tradition and it is the style of the book that most clearly reveals its oral origins. Luz, (1999) supports this. He says that the literary character of the Gospels as we have them leave no doubt that the material was handed down for some years by word of mouth. He argues that education in the ancient world included a large measure of memorisation since books were scarce and expensive. In Jewish schools of the first century, pupils learnt the Bible by heart and then went on to learn the sayings of the rabbis.

Matthew is like the singer in the Homer's *Odyssey*, repeating what he has heard. There is no widespread agreement as to who wrote the Gospel, and when. According to Drane (1999) many scholars find no difficulty in accepting early Christian tradition that identifies Mark and Luke with the other synoptic, but with Matthew the position is rather different. It has been argued that Matthew himself did not write the book but depended on what he had heard from witnesses. In classical epics, the narrator of the story was not necessarily an eye witness. In

Homer's *Odyssey*, Demokodos, the court poet, sings of the great deeds of famous men. Demodocus, the singer, is blind; he has not witnessed the events he sings about, and he probably never travelled from the isolated home of the Phaiakians. Homer's Demodocus heard the songs of famous deeds and repeated them on festive occasions, sometimes selecting the song himself, and then accompanying his song with a harp and a lyre, which had the vividness of an eyewitness' report account and moved the audience to tears. The singer in the *Odyssey* is taught, or inspired, by the gods. From his story well told he may gain a reputation for divine inspiration. No doubt the vividness which causes Odysseus to weep from recollection came from a mere rehearsal of events. The bard dramatized his song and brought it to life, in so doing he created it anew.

Basing the argument on what transpired with Demodocus the blind singer in the *Odyssey* and by Homer who scripted the text, it is alright to conclude that the writer of Matthew heard the accounts of the stories of Jesus Christ from witnesses. If he had been an apostle of Jesus and an eye witness, he need not have borrowed so heavily from Mark and then modified the material to suit his purpose in writing. Like Demodocus, he was 'blind' to the actual events that took place and like Homer, he penned what he heard but never actually saw but created the work anew. It has been said that the writer of the Gospel was the most artistically gifted compared to the other Gospel writers. He used the material he received and made it a beautiful work of art that is truly inspired. Most memorable is his crafting of the Sermon on the Mount, the Parables as well as the Lord's Prayer in Matthew.

*The Gospel According to Matthew* therefore has the characteristics of ancient epics with regards to its authorship. This is because it falls in the primary or a folk epic category as it was written down after years of oral transmission. Epics without authorship are called folk epics. Like the folk epics that were a product of the community, there is no immediate

agreement among scholars as to who actually composed the Gospel though it has been attributed to Matthew. As Rowan (2006) interestingly points out it is ironic that the Hebrew Bible and the Homeric epics, which are the most prominent and influential works of literature in the western world have such obscure authorship. One cause for this is the source of these texts. According to one theory, the first epics took shape from the scattered work of various unknown poets. Through accretion these early episodes were gradually moulded into a unified whole in an ordered sequence.

It is apparent that the Gospel, like most epics, originated in an oral tradition. Burkett, (2002) suggests that the Gospels as we know them went through four stages during formation. The first stage is the oral tradition that comprised of stories about Jesus healing sick, debating with opponents as well as his parables and teaching passed down by word of mouth from one person to the other. In the second stage the oral tradition began to be written down in collections of stories by various people; collections about the miracles and collections of sayings of Jesus while the oral tradition continued to circulate. Burkett continues to suggest that the third stage Christians began combining the written collections and oral traditions in what came to be called 'proto-Gospels.' Finally the authors of the Gospels drew on the proto-Gospels, collections, and the still circulating oral traditions to produce the canonical Gospels *of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.*

The classical epic also underwent a transformation from oral tradition to the written form. As Innes (2013) says, it should not be forgotten that the epic developed out of a communal impetus to cultural memory before it became a written form. The folk epics, also known as the primary epics, were not meant to be read as during that period people were majorly illiterate. Instead an audience listened to a recitation or singing performed by bards or griots. They were either sang or recited with an accompaniment though most used oral transmission. Cuddon (1984) emphasises this as he asserts that the primary epic is the type of poetry that

has no single author and is the product of oral tradition written down after centuries of oral tradition. He says that the authorship of the primary epic is not important but possible. This is in tandem with Matthew's Gospel. Before it was written down, the stories about Jesus were passed down by word of mouth from eye witnesses and then through hearsay. Even though the stories eventually were written, the author is far from certain as like some classical epic poets, he nowhere puts his name on the book. The literary character of the Gospels as we have them leave no doubt that the material was handed down by word of mouth. As had been earlier stated, Mathew's fondness for grouping materials according to thematic scheme are indicative of an environment largely educated through oral proclamation, not the written word. Matthew's compositional scheme greatly facilitated learning by providing the listener with a coherent and orderly presentation that aided comprehension and memorization.

#### **2.6.16. Vast or Lengthy Setting**

There is widespread agreement that a feature of the epic, as listed by Harmon & Hugh (1999), is that of a vast or lengthy setting, covering many nations, the world or the universe. Another scholar adds that the action spans not only geographical but also cosmological space across land, sea and into the underworld or through space or time (Idaho University). Most epics, whether classical or modern, demonstrate this characteristic of an immense setting that surpasses geographical setting. Traditional approaches to the Gospel usually treat the heading of "setting" as the date and place of the Gospel's writing, alongside identity problems confronting the community addressed. Essentially there is need to search for possible clues that hint at the time and circumstances of the writing. This is because in literature, setting functions to create mood and atmosphere and to show the reader a different way of life. In addition it makes action real as well as being the source of struggle for the conflict and to symbolise an idea. Therefore, other types of setting that enhance the understanding of the story must be taken into account.

Nevertheless, as observed by France (2006) deciding on the geographical location in which the Gospel originated is of least significance for a sound understanding of the text. Much relevant to the interpretation of the Gospel is the dimension given to the discussion of “setting” by a literary reading of the first Gospel. This is a significant feature of the epic that depends on description because of the narrative technique employed by the writers of epic. In literary terms the discussion of setting involves the descriptive context or background in which the story transpires. Settings, as described by the narrator are like stage props in a theatrical production. Oftentimes, the narrator’s description of the place, time or social conditions in which the action takes place is charged with subtle nuances that may generate a certain atmosphere with a symbolic significance. For example early in Matthew’s story, the narrator places events to create a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate his central character. The story opens with a series of events that are calculated to evoke memories of Israel’s past, and thereby to highlight the significance of the times inaugurated by Jesus.

The setting of *the Gospel According to Matthew* is indeed a vast lengthy setting, covering many nations, the world or the universe since; as another scholar adds the action spans not only geographical but also cosmological space across land and covers many locations. The locations of Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Egypt evoke feelings of continuity between Jesus’ history and that of Israel. Other locations such as the “desert” and “mountain” function to create a certain aura around events and characters in the story. Later in the story specific locations such as “synagogue” the “sea” and the “temple” all contribute to a distinct atmosphere from which to evaluate the course of events while the real-life settings of the author and his readers can be reproduced in terms of probability the temporal and spatial settings established in the story provide an integral context for interpreting Matthew’s story.

The Matthean narrator is not bound by time or space in his coverage of the story. Matthew provides the reader with access to private conversations between Herod and the Magi (2:3-8),

John the Baptist and Jesus (3:13-15), Jesus and Satan (4:1-11), the disciples (16:7), Peter and Jesus (16:23), Judas and the chief priest (26:14-16; 26:40) and Pilate and the chief priests (27:62-64). He makes known to the reader the private discussions by the chief priest and the Sanhedrin (26:59-60), and the plan of the chief priest and the elders concerning the disappearance of the body (28:12-15). The narrator is present when Jesus is alone, while at the same time he knows the difficulties of the disciples on the sea (14:22-24). He easily takes the reader from the courtroom of Pilate to the courtyard of Peter's denial (26:70), and eventually to the scene of the cross when Jesus was crucified (27:45). For the most part, the narrator in Matthew's story stays close to Jesus and views events and characters in terms of how they affect his main character.

#### **2.6.17. Form of Address**

In Epics, the manner of address between characters is circumlocutous and courtly; characters often address one another in patronymics such as "Son of Peleus" referring to Achilles in the *Iliad*. (Harmon and Hugh, 2003). In *the Gospel According to Matthew*, there are several such forms of address. In chapter 8 when Jesus encounters some demon- possessed men coming out of the tombs they asked him, "What do you want with us, Son of God?" The two blind men in chapter 9:27 'followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!"' some of the disciples are addressed the same way as 'James son of Zebedee and his brother John, James son of Alpheus, Matthew the tax collector, Simon the Zealot, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him (10:1-4). Jesus refers to himself repeatedly as the Son of Man, Peter declares "Truly you are the Son of God" after Jesus walks on water, a Canaanite woman addresses him as 'Lord, Son of David and Jesus addresses Simon as 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah. Peter is also known as Peter the Rock and on the day Jesus is crucified, there is an inscription; JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS on his cross.

### **2.6.18. Epic Machinery (Deus Ex Machina)**

Epic machinery includes bardic recapitulations (e. g., the Phaeacian poet Demodocus in the *Odyssey* recounts the story of the Trojan Horse), a chief god's balancing the scales of fate, a long and arduous journey for the hero, weapons of supernatural origin (such as Achilles' shield, fashioned by Hephaestus, smith of the gods), a descent into the Underworld, and Nephelistic rescues (from "*nephele*" meaning "mist" in Greek). In the Gospel According to Matthew there are accounts of arduous journey's undertaken by Jesus include the flight to Egypt (2:13-15), the time he was led by the spirit to be tempted by the devil after fasting forty days and forty nights and later after his verbal duel with the devil in which Jesus emerged victor, Matthew concludes that 'then devil left him and angels came and ministered to him. Jesus also went up to a mountain with his disciples and preached to them the Sermon on the Mount which was very long, he walked on water (14:22-32), went up a high mountain with his disciples during the transfiguration (17:1-6). Another journey was to Jerusalem where he made the triumphal entry, went to the temple and drove out all who were buying and selling there. It must have been very difficult being mobbed by the crowds in Jerusalem with the blind and the lame needing to be healed. No wonder he went out of the city and spent the night in Bethany (21:1-17). The worst journey and most gruelling is what has been called in a renowned film "The Passion of the Christ", The Journey to the Cross that starts in the Garden of Gethsemane, his arrest, appearance before the Sanhedrin, before Pilate, then to the Praetorium and finally to Golgotha where he was crucified. According to the belief of that time, when a person died he descended to the world of the dead. Drane (1999) says that Matthew repeats Mark's account, though with some additional details, mostly directed towards heightening the supernatural trappings of the event. He speaks of earthquakes and also mentions the terror of the guards at the tomb (28:1-4). The weapons of supernatural origin could symbolic of the darkness that covered the land from the sixth hour to the ninth



hour and the fact that Jesus defeated death and resurrecting after three days hence the “nephelistic rescue”. Jesus was supernaturally rescued from death.

The story ends with a climactic combat that comprises battle between good and evil which leads to the death of the hero, Jesus Christ. In a reversal, in dying, the hero wins the battle because his death was actually the intended purpose; a sacrifice to save mankind. Hogan (1979) points out that ‘Fate’ and ‘Destiny’ are recurrent motifs in epics. Their essential reference is man’s lot. God may sympathise, but he cannot change his son’s destiny even though Jesus cries “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?”

Matthew’s subject is ostensibly the mission of Jesus to save his people from their sins and that is primarily the theme of the Gospel According to Matthew. In keeping with Aristotle’s requirements, the story has a happy ending with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Evil has not defeated Good.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

This chapter analysed the Gospel using the summary of attributes of the epic by Abram (1993) as well as the characteristics of the epic as listed by Harmon and Harpman (1996). It was found that the Gospel has the main characteristics of the epic that include; the plot that centres around a hero of unbelievable, it involves deeds of superhuman strength, includes supernatural and-or otherworldly forces, has sustained elevation of style with the author remaining objective and omniscient and starts by an invocation of the Muse or statement of the theme like most epic. From the foregoing, it is clear that *the Gospel According to Matthew* an epic. The superiority of the epic is affirmed by Hainsworth (1999), who asserts that the genre depicts a ‘continuous supernatural presence’, which in turn underscores the idea that most epics are characterised by a certain religiosity regardless of whether or not they correspond to the specialised genre of biblical epics.

## CHAPTER THREE: JESUS CHRIST AS AN EPIC HERO

### 3.1 Introduction

For many centuries now, the proponents of Christianity have succeeded in bringing large numbers of people from all races, religious and political divide as well as in literature to view Jesus Christ from a religious lens so as to gain a proper understanding of this great figure in history. There is no reason why the reverse should not be possible; that Christians become attuned to literature to further gain an understanding of Jesus from a literary lens, because when all is said and done, Jesus Christ is a hero; an epic hero.

Matthew deliberately depicts Jesus as the archetypal epic hero in his gospel. This argument is not groundless because the Gospel has a Hellenistic influence. Besides, there is argument by many scholars, and the argument is indisputably valid, that the Gospels were modelled after Homer and Virgil. According to the conventions of the time, the epic hero was a demi god, born of a virgin, his birth was prophesied, and he had an illustrious background among other things. Similarly, the *Gospel according to Matthew* portrays these elements of the epic story. Jesus portrays the attributes of the epic hero right from the infant narratives to his death and resurrection. Thus, it is Mathew's intention to depict Jesus Christ as an epic hero. Sandness (2011) takes an in depth look at a fourth and fifth century Christian practice that involved rewriting Gospel narratives in the tradition of the classical writers, Virgil and Homer. Since the Gospels mirror the style of these classical writers, we can deduce that Matthew's main character reflects an epic hero and therefore the need to study the depiction of Jesus as an epic hero in this gospel.

It is Liefed (1965), who says that students of religion have long been aware of the similarities between certain aspects of the figure of Christ in the Gospel narratives and Hellenistic portrayals of apotheosized figures. These include extraordinarily gifted men, perhaps miracle

workers, healers and wise men who are grouped together under the general designation of *theios aner* or “divine man”. Bieler (1967), suggests that some of the characteristics attributed to the divine man include; life and fate, striking appearance, wisdom, asceticism, power over nature and life and leadership of men. These characteristics of *theios aner* or divine man are in most cases similar to the characteristics of the epic hero.

The aim of this chapter therefore, is to analyse how Jesus is depicted as an epic hero. There are many types of heroes, but this paper will restrict itself to the archetypal epic hero. Those aspects of the personality of Jesus that are compatible to the concept of the epic hero as well as heroism will be employed in the analysis to find another meaning on his character, a literary one. The characteristics of the modern hero as portrayed by Virgil in the *Aeneid* and John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* will be mainly considered because the two proposed a hero who is not after glory for personal gain. This is the largely relevant in Jesus’ case.

Though Jesus Christ may not have all the characteristics of the archetypal epic hero in the Aristotelian sense, this should not pose a problem as it is nothing out of the ordinary. It is not unusual for epic heroes to lack certain criterion that define the epic hero. This is predominantly because the concept of heroes and heroism is constantly evolving and subsequently does not have a constant or fixed definition.

Given that the Hero’s Journey is an important motif in literature which to a great extent defines the hero as it describes the stages through which the hero must pass so as to be considered an epic hero, this chapter will, in addition to the characteristics of the epic hero as derived from classical epics especially by Homer and Virgil that are listed by Abram and Hugh (2003), use the *Hero’s Journey* as proposed by Campbell (1900) in his book and analysed by other scholars to determine if Jesus Christ, who is mainly spiritual icon, is

depicted as an epic hero as depicted in *the Gospel According to Matthew* because ideally the hero has to go on a journey that tests his calling.

Since the hero is more often than not defined by his character, an in-depth study of Jesus' character, as viewed by Matthew, in relation to the characteristics found in the classical epic heroes will be carried out. The epic hero has a quest that he cannot successfully complete if he is not physically and mentally competent to do so. Implicitly, the hero has to be often a noble, brave, wise, courageous, and strong leader. In addition, because an element of the supernatural is a necessary ingredient in his story he cannot succeed without supernatural aid for the reason that the war he fights is majorly spiritual warfare.

As had been noted in the previous chapter, epics are, as a necessity, imbued with religiosity. The supernatural character of the epic hero is very essential in view of the fact that most of the times he is involved in battle and has to save a nation or a people. Because of the mystical environment that permeates most of the epics, and the adversity that includes spiritual beings like demons, he must also be a half deity to be able to fight with them. Given that the epic story is ideally about battle, the concept of the hero and heroism will be first highlighted to clarify the character of the epic hero. This will be done as a backdrop to argue the assertion that Matthew depicts Jesus as an epic hero in his Gospel.

### **3.2 The Concept of the Hero and Heroism**

A very popular theme in literature, both past and present, is heroism. When starting a discussion on heroism, it is first necessary to define what a hero is. A hero is someone exemplary, who excels above the rest of his or her peers in courage, virtue, character, and honour (Ryan, 2012). We speak of any courageous person as a hero. Courage is essential to heroism, but it does not make the hero. A hero involves a story, *a mythos*, a plot, especially in literature.

In literature, an epic recounts the adventures of an epic hero. This epic hero is a larger than life figure who undertakes journeys and performs deeds requiring remarkable strength and cunning. Mythology and legend present him as a man, often semi-divine; he is born of one mortal and one divine parent. This man is endowed with great courage and strength and is celebrated for his bold exploits. He is usually favoured by the gods and noted for feats of courage. He has nobility of purpose and risks or sacrifices his life (American Heritage Dictionary).

Most epics are primarily memorable because of the presence of the epic hero. The epic hero is the main character of the epic. He is the one who adds flavour to the epic narrative and the greatness of the epic is directly proportional to the excellence of its epic hero. This is because basically the action of an epic is derived from the adventures and exploits of the hero. No epic is worth its salt without the epic hero as it is the epic hero who shapes it. It is no small wonder the first three classical epics and subsequent ones have their heroes; *Iliad* has Achilles, *Odyssey* has Odysseus/Ulysses, *Aeneid* has Aeneas, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero is Gilgamesh just as *Beowulf* has a hero; Beowulf. In the same way, Jesus Christ is the hero in the *Gospel according to Matthew*. Matthew emphasises this in the opening verse of the Gospel. (1:1). Epic stories are immortalised because of the epic heroes. *The Civil War* by Lucan (AD 39-63) is not as outstanding as the other epics because it has no hero. What makes the *Civil War* to stand out, however, is the glaring absence of an epic hero.

Homer's Odysseus (*Odyssey*) and Achilles (*Iliad*) epitomize the epic hero. These warriors, throughout their individual epic stories, undergo a journey in pursuit of *kleos*, (everlasting glory) transforming their lives into the foremost Greeks in battle and intelligence. However it is important to note that the "battlefield is inhabited solely by men" and, thereby, marks heroism as a "superbly masculine role" Redfield (1999). Jesus therefore fits in this role by

virtue of the fact that he is male. Thus an epic hero is the most heroic of his sex; he comes to embody masculinity through his performance in the masculine sphere of war and battle (Ryan, 2012).

Nagy (2007) however says that in ancient Greek myth, heroes were humans, male or female, of a remote past, endowed with superhuman abilities and descended from the immortal gods themselves. He gives the prime example as Akhilleus, more commonly known as Achilles in the English tradition. Since Achilles is a man, it still proves the presumption that epics are predominantly patriarchal.

It is because the epic hero is more aligned to human beings in popular portrayals that the setting of the epic narrative is on earth and not among the gods. The story of the life of the epic hero is told as he lives it among men. However, there is a mystical touch with regards to his adventures because he must undertake along, perilous journey, often involving descent into the underworld (Greek, "*Neukeia*"), which tests his endurance, courage and cunning. The journey the hero participates in is a cyclical journey or quest, where he faces adversaries that try to defeat him in his journey. He gathers allies along his journey, and returns home significantly transformed by his journey (Dean, 2000).

In order to understand what characterises the epic hero, it is important to examine the epic hero vis-à-vis heroism. It is the acts of heroism that make the hero. Heroism is defined as the quality or state of being a hero (Collins English Dictionary-English Definition, 2000) or very great courage (Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, 2007). These definitions are as adequate as far as definitions go but perhaps the meaning of heroism comes out best in the synonyms of the word.

Heroism is synonymous with boldness, bravery, courage, courageousness, fearlessness, gallantry, intrepidity, prowess, spirit, valour (Collins A-Z Thesaurus, 1995). These words aptly describe the character of a hero. A person who possess most of these qualities is the epic hero; a person to be admired, emulated and even worshipped. The hero is a victor that is talked about a great deal, with the stories that constantly get inflated with every narration. It is this embellishment of the hero's exploits that results into the epic with the central character, becoming a larger than life figure, hence the legendary epic hero.

Epics generally turn on the theme of heroism. They all have an implicit notion of heroes and heroism. An epic hero has to fight battles in his life. There is need to understand why it necessary for an epic hero to fight (Toohey, 2014). The answer obviously is, if there is no war to be fought then notion of the hero and heroism is null and void. A hero has to do something so good or brave and out of the ordinary in a battle that people will marvel at and retell for generations till the narration becomes legendary. It is these stories that make the epic hero a larger than life figure that though legendary, has historical importance.

It is, nonetheless, important to remember that war is not necessarily limited to physical combat alone. There are many types of warfare including holy or spiritual warfare that Jesus mainly engaged in as we shall see later. Other epic heroes are involved in warfare with the supernatural as well. For example, Hercules in his twelve labours battles with supernatural foes. The same applies to Odysseus in his journeys as a wanderer who fights monsters. This brings us back to the question as to why a hero has to fight.

It is Homer who gives us the answer as to why an epic hero has to fight. This is found in the *Iliad* 12:310-2 where Sarpedon explains his motives for fighting as, firstly a desire to validate the esteem in which he and Glaucus are held by their Lycian people (12:310-21) and, secondly, as a craving to gain for himself some form of glory which will outlive him

(12:3108). It is worthy to note that commonly in epic stories, anger, plus a desire for vengeance and a vaulting ambition for gain, drive heroes such as Achilles and Agamemnon to fight (Toohey, 2014).

Jesus Christ, on the other hand, fights for a different reason. He has neither a need for vengeance nor a vaulting desire for gain as his driving force. His aspiration is to do the will of God who sent him. He therefore has to fight those who would, knowingly, like derail him from his mission like Satan during the temptation (4:311) and the religious authorities. Others do this unknowingly, like Peter, one of his disciples who does not understand why Jesus should die and vows that it will not happen if he can help it. Jesus rebukes him saying “Get behind me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my path... (16:23). Most epic heroes know that they are destined to die.

Jesus has one key enemy, Satan with whom he battles. He fights sickness, demons and demon possession that are the works Satan. He also fights religious authorities like the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees with whom he had many verbal duels pertaining to religious beliefs and practices of the day that they believe Jesus is interfering with. Apart from that he fights death by raising the dead as well as rising from the dead himself after three days after being crucified.

The hero's life is based on the achievement of a goal- the culmination of all heroic efforts. This goal-oriented life is best evidenced in the epic heroes. In epics, the goal for which all heroes strive for is the achievement of *kleos*. The Greek term *kleos* is everlasting glory or fame beyond even death that accrues to a hero because of his heroic feats (Toohey 6). For the epic hero, the only way to gain *kleos* is by fighting- and most likely dying- in battle. The origins of the epic may be in doubt, but it is hardly contentious to state that heroism and the



hero are at the very heart of mythological and historical epic. Praise of the glory of heroes (*klea andron*) as has been mentioned, is perhaps the basis of the concept of heroism. In Homer we could cite such passages as *Iliad* 9.189 and 524, or *Odyssey* 8.73. Virgil's phrase, in *Aeneid*, *arma virum*, could be mistranslated as 'the warlike deeds of men.' Many epics take a firm stand on the worth of the civilizing process (Toohey, 2014).

The compulsion to fight has been termed 'heroic impulse' by Quinn (1968). It is what an epic does with the heroic impulse that makes it interesting. There is a pattern the writers use by which the theme of the heroic impulse is outlined. This pattern is part of the epic genre and it can be detected in most epics. It is especially important in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Milton's theology on the other hand, emphasised the original sin which made the epic undergo a profound inward revision. This revision affected not only the personal prowess of the hero, as in the transition from Virgil to Homer, but the very foundations of the heroic ideal on military glory which was rejected as perverse. A departure therefore came with the emergence of the Christian epic which sought to justify the classical epic by moralising it so that the exploits of the hero could be regarded as paradigms or figurative steps to salvation (Draper, 1990). This is what we see reflected in Jesus.

The concept of heroism or the heroic is challenged by the constant revision of the epic as well as the concept of heroism. The first concept was of Homer, of the hero after personal revenge like Achilles, then the hero with virtue of military prowess and courage like Aeneas, to the 'better fortitude' of heroic patience celebrated by Milton. Joyce introduced the pacifist hero who attains psychological victory of self-control and abnegation. Virgil's hero who is not after personal gain and Milton's pacifist hero are close in character to the Jesus Christ of Matthew's Gospel.

### **3.3. Jesus Christ as an Epic hero**

Deconstruction encourages scholars to consider not only what a text says but also the relationship and potential conflict between what the text says and what it does. As had already been mentioned earlier, meaning in literature is created during the act of reading a text. It is precisely while the reader is reading that moments of meaning are created but inevitably give way to even more meanings, each with reading creating its own meaning ad infinitum (Tyson, 1950). This is why Tyson says that art and literature is a “seething cauldron of meaning in flux because there can be a large range of meaning within a text. For this reason, while reading about Jesus Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew, it is possible to see him in different layers. He can be Jesus Christ, the messiah. He can also be Jesus Christ, the king; an epic hero.

The Gospel writers had the same situation in their depiction of Jesus Christ and each present him to us in his own unique way. To Matthew, Jesus is the long-awaited messiah; a king, while to Mark he is an ordinary man who must suffer and be rejected. Luke sees him as a servant but John’s portrayal is different from the synoptic; he portrays Jesus as a mysterious being; God himself. Matthew’s portrayal of Jesus as a king makes his Gospel the most relevant as an epic hero as he portrays Jesus mainly as legendary leader.

Just as the Gospel writers had different portraits of Jesus depending on their intention and purpose for their writing, we can present him in other ways as well, depending on our motivation. Jesus has been called a hero severally. In the world of literature, there are several perspectives of Jesus where he is regarded as an important figure, even by the proponents of the Christ-myth theory who purport to believe he never existed. It is however interesting to note that they further reiterate his significance by spending a lot of time and energy debating

and writing about him. His importance is manifested even by the fact that they believe he is mythical.

Most myths have some historical grain of truth and Jesus is no exception. Because of this, he can fill up one more lacuna in his study; that of the epic hero. The main reason for this is that the story of Jesus' life and personality has so impressed the literary world that there is archetype known as the Christ figure in literature. This Christ Figure, the main character in those works, has the characteristics of Jesus Christ and the writers even use the initials CJ for their main character. In view of the fact that Jesus has influenced and continues to influence literature, viewing him from a literary lens can shed further light on his character more so in the context of the world in which he lived as well as how the Gospel writers like Matthew saw him. Jesus, truth be told, is a man of high status in literary works.

Jesus Christ, as depicted in *the Gospel according to Matthew*, exemplifies the archetypal epic hero as well as the hero proposed by Milton and Dante in several ways. As has already been discussed, Jesus is an exemplar of the "*theios aner*" or "divine man" who is an extraordinarily gifted man, a miracle worker, healer and a wise man that has some characteristics similar to those of the epic hero (Liefied,1965) Jesus fits this bill of the Hellenistic Divine Man. This is because the characteristics of the "Divine Man" are readily recognisable in him as portrayed in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus is depicted as a leader of men. This is evident in the multitudes who followed him during his ministry. He is courageous, selfless, wise and compassionate. In addition, he is a miracle worker and a healer who has power over nature. He has come to save the people of Israel by establishing the kingdom of God. In that respect, the portrayal offers the view of a hero; a hero who saves.

Sandness (2011) uses Mimesis criticism, which is a new type of literary criticism to analyse the Gospels. He describes this methodology as an alternative to Form criticism and suggests

that certain stories and characters contained within the Gospels originated from the process of imitating the Homeric and Virgillian epic and not pre-Gospel tradition. There is an idea derived from mimesis criticism that epic poets were widely available in the first century for Christians through the written word, art and live performance. The pedagogical exercises in the classical world included *paraphrasis*, *emulation* and *synkresis* that are readily seen in the Gospels. These are also seen in the works of Homer and Virgil.

It is without question that Homer and Virgil were widely read and accepted at the time the New Testament literature was being developed yet it is debatable but possible that the Gospel writers imitated their style especially in their portrayal of Jesus Christ. This is because Jesus possesses the qualities of the epic hero with regards to the definition of the hero, as well as his similarity to the selfless hero in the Christian epic who is not after personal gain. He is shown a societal model of behaviour, and a man who is admired and emulated for good or brave deeds. Jesus' bravery and goodness are reflected in his ministry on earth but more so in his sacrificial death.

Matthew, who was writing for a Jewish-Christian church, sees Jesus as the fulfilment of all the prophecies and divine promises of the Old Testament. He views him as the new Moses and Teacher of the New Covenant and the founder of a new and purified Israel, the new Israel being the church. Jesus Christ is Matthew's epic hero. Without Jesus there would be no *Gospel according to Matthew*. He is the substance of which the Gospel is written; its main pillar. Jesus is the epic hero who adds flavour to this epic story and therefore, the magnitude of this Gospel is directly proportional to the distinction Jesus Christ.

Ideally, the action of an epic is derived from the adventures and exploits of the hero. In the *Gospel according to Matthew*, Jesus Christ is the central figure and therefore rightfully so, the hero as the action of the Gospel is derived from the story of his life. This is revealed in his

mission and role. He has come to save the people of Israel by establishing the kingdom of God and he is up to the task. In that respect, the portrayal offers the view of a hero.

### **3.3.1. Noble Birth**

According to tradition, epic heroes have a noble birth and an above average station in life. They are of imposing stature, broad importance and /or legendary status. In addition, they will be kings, princes or nobles of some sort, usually a male of noble birth/high position of historical or legendary importance (Dean, 2000). For example in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is an adult who was born with greatness, and is royalty, which means he is part of a social caste system and was meant to be king and famous among the people of Ithaca from the moment of his conception. The same is true of Jesus. From the infancy narratives, we see that Jesus was royalty because of the genealogy as well as from his given name and mission. He was meant to be king because of the prophecies of the Old Testament

It is the royalty status of the epic hero that validates him as a leader of men mainly because most individuals are born snobs; they find it easier to accept a person as a leader if he descends from a noble line. Commoners usually do not become epic heroes. This is why Jesus is shown as a branch of an illustrious family tree comprising historically important people to the Jews like Abraham and King David. Matthew intentionally drops in these legendary and historical names of Abraham and David to drive home his point. The two, Abraham and David, were held in very high esteem by the Jews. Abraham, as the Father of Faith and David as one of the greatest Kings

### **3.3.2. Jesus as a Historical Figure**

Matthew shows that Jesus is a historical figure by his many references to a distant past - of prophecies that were made concerning a great king who would come. He does this by constantly quoting from the Old Testament to prove the historical significance of Jesus. It is

evident therefore that Jesus passes this test of the epic hero being noble as well as of historical and legendary importance.

Any account of the life an important person is likely to start by a narration of the events surrounding his birth. Since an epic hero's birth is universal and unique it must be treated with the gravity it deserves. The epic hero's story begins with a listing of his genealogy and the main highlights of his infancy. That person's family background as prevailing either in the community or in the wider world, or indeed both of the factors, may well influence the course of that life in later years. This is what Matthew does. The events surrounding the birth and conception of Jesus are highlighted right at the beginning of the story in Matthew 1-3. The main highlights are his illustrious background (1:1-17), divine conception (1:18), birth (1:25), the star that appears at his birth and the visit by the Magi (2:1-2,9-11) as well as the threat to his life that results in the family fleeing to Egypt to protect the life of Baby Jesus. The lives of most epic heroes are often under threat as children. For example, because there was a prophecy that he would be killed. Achilles mother dipped him in the waters of the river Styx to prevent this. Close to home, Sundiata, the epic hero of ancient Mali was often in danger of being killed when he was a child. All these events surrounding Jesus' birth underline the fact that he is significant.

The main theme of *the Gospel According to Matthew* centres on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ as a king among the Jews because, according to Matthew, Jesus is the promised Messiah whose coming heralds the arrival of the kingdom of God. Jesus, the long-awaited king, ended thousands of years of eager waiting. But he came to establish a new kind of kingdom- a kingdom different from what anyone expected (The Devotional Study Bible, 1997). The new kind of kingdom that Jesus has come to establish is a twist in the redemption story because it is contrary to the then popular expectation. The popular expectation was of a

Messiah who was a military leader who would come with his army to free the Jews from the Romans.

### **3.3.3 Jesus as a Leader**

One of the qualities of an epic hero is that he is a natural leader of men. Epic heroes are leaders by default rather than by design. They are moreover leaders in the sense that people depend on and look up to them. These people follow him because he has some unique qualities. Jesus Christ has long been acknowledged as a great leader by followers. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus chooses the twelve disciples with the simple command "Follow me!" In most cases we see crowds are always following him to an extent that he is compelled to get away to get some breathing space either alone or with his disciples. For him to have this great following there must be something in his character demonstrated by his leadership traits.

Yuki (2001) says that an academic review on the topic of leadership leads to many observations, among them the concern for valid and reliable theory and practice. He posits that a number of major research approaches in the study of leadership including traits, behaviour, power-influence, situational and integrative approaches. Scholarly findings based on studies of the life of Jesus are scarce. A number of authors choose to describe Jesus obliquely through examples, teachings and models of his followers, notably Paul and Peter (Moesner,1986).

Taken that this study is concerned with certain aspects that pertain to the character of Jesus Christ, a trait based approach is the most relevant to be utilised in analysing Jesus' leadership. The trait approach to understanding leadership pays particular attention to the personal attributes of leaders such as personality, motivations, values and skills (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2004; Yuki, 2001). Yuki suggests that there is an underlying assumption to this

belief that some individuals are endowed with some traits not possessed by some people.

Jesus is positioned by several authors as unique (Scott, 1998; Smothers, 1985; Sparks, 1998). According to Sparks, Jesus was every Jewish hero rolled into one unique personhood. Koenig suggests that Jesus' uniqueness stems from his charisma which he defines as a special gift from God, bestowed from God for the purpose of leading and building up others for God's purposes. Smothers (1985) identifies Jesus' uniqueness as the "heir of all" and agent of creation. Unlike other epic heroes like Achilles who was angry, Jesus did not have a weakness of ego. As Koenig points out, weakness of ego was not a characteristic of Jesus; he displayed gifts of discernment and boldness.

Zablowski (2004) lists some five leadership characteristics of Jesus as a leader. He says that a leader should be an authoritative figure. One thing that stands out in Jesus' lectures is the frequent use of imperative. He argues that no matter what translation of the Bible you read you find Jesus speaking with authority. When he goes head to head with those in authority, he usurps them by answering their question with a question. He is not defensive in their presence. He has full authority and he uses it when it is necessary, be it with man or demon. Jesus speaks the truth without apology. *In the Gospel according to Matthew*, there are many examples of these. During his temptation he commanded Satan to leave him alone (Matt 4:10). When he called his disciples, he simply told them "Follow me!"

Secondly Zablowski says that a leader should be an example. Jesus has long been said to be a role model. Sim (2010) says that the concept of the *imitatio Christi* has had a widespread and lasting influence on the Christian Church over the centuries, and many saints and other holy figures, from ancient times to the modern day, have lived their lives guided by the example set by Jesus. These Christians have been inspired by the ethical teachings of Jesus in the



*Sermon on the Mount* in Matthew's Gospel and by the life of Jesus as presented in all four canonical Gospels.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus models the behaviour that he expects of his disciples. It can be said that he preaches water and drinks water. He is not a hypocrite. He hates evil in every form. An epic hero is always on the side of good. Aristotle would approve of Jesus because he is a character who is consistently consistent. From the beginning of his ministry to the end, he behaves in a consistent way. This is the stuff good leaders are made of; consistency in leaders develops and inspires confidence in their followers. When he condemns the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, he does this with a moral authority because his lifestyle shows he is not a hypocrite. For instance, he condemns those who pray loudly in public (6:6) and as an example he teaches them how to pray using The Lord's Prayer (6:7-15). He also gets up early to pray outdoors-in the hills. This reinforces what he taught against praying loudly in public. He lives and practices what he teaches and is therefore a model of best practices.

The third trait, according to Zablowski, is that a leader should be a friend. In his interactions with people, Jesus is not standoffish; he physically touches people (8:3, 15; 9:25, 29 etc). He touched eyes (when healing the blind for example in 9:29), hands (when he raised the ruler's maid back to life), feet and shoulders (after the transfiguration in 17:7). The fact that children were brought to him to be blessed shows that he was friendly; nobody takes children to unfriendly people. He is a friend of renegade tax collectors, sinners and other social outcasts in the society that no self-respecting Jew wanted to associate with (11:19). He is warm.

### **3.3.4. Jesus as Excellent**

Character is what captures the essence of the epic hero. This is because the epic hero illustrates traits, performs deeds and exemplifies certain morals that are valued by the society from which the epic originates, Draper (1990). For this reason, it is useful to look at Jesus

Christ's character as an epic hero is in terms of *arête*. *Arête*, in its basic sense, means "excellence of any kind". The term may also mean "moral virtue" (Liddell and Scott, 1893). In its earliest appearance in Greek, this notion of excellence was ultimately bound up with the notion of the fulfilment of purpose or function: the act of living up to one's full potential.

In Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, *arête* is used mainly to describe heroes and nobles and their mobile dexterity, with special reference to strength and courage, but it is not limited to this. Penelope's *arête*, for example, relates to co-operation, for which she is praised by Agamemnon. The term *arête* from Homeric times onwards is not gender specific. Homer applies the term of both the Greek and Trojan heroes as well as major female figures, such as Penelope, the wife of the Greek hero, Odysseus.

In the Homeric poems, *arête* is frequently not only associated with bravery, but more often, with effectiveness. An example of *arête* is Homer's description of Achilles' in the *Iliad*. *Arête* is associated with the goodness and prowess of a warrior. Hahwee (2014) says that norms and practices of Athenian virtuosity "operate within the politics of reputation, whose normative poles are honour and shame". This means *arête* functions as an external phenomenon depending on outside reception and acknowledgement for its instantiation. Dying in battle or securing a victory in the Olympic Games were considered *agathos* (good) and, hence, deserving of *timê* (honour). So, not only is Achilles a brave and brilliant warrior but also, from the outset, he is destined to die in battle at Troy with the utmost glory-a guarantor of *Arête* (Hahwee, 2014).

Jesus' death on the cross is a parallel exemplar. Jesus is destined for a death which he foretells. He lives for honour and does not bring shame to those who believe in him especially his father, God who sent him. Above all his impressive feats, he is not afraid to die. A true hero does not dread death but instead risks all he has for what he believes to be

right, moral and just. Jesus' death, like that of Achilles, guarantees his *arête*. He dies in glory as is evident from Matthew's narration of the dramatic events on the day of his death (27:1-54).

Jesus' bravery is seen in many ways in Matthew's Gospel. The first example is during the Temptation in the desert (4:1-11). During the conflicts with the religious authorities of the day who oppose his mission (9:3-6,11,12:2-15;15:2-9;16:1-4;19:3-9;21:15-16,23-46; 23:13-37) which culminates in their plotting to arrest and have him killed (26:3-5,15;27:1,48-68,27:1-2,11-39) Jesus always wins hands down in the debates.

Jesus' *arête* is further demonstrated by the fact the he has foreknowledge of his death and what it entails but he does not turn tail and run. Apart from that, he is effective in his ministry; be it in teaching, healing, preaching or praying. Jesus is a person of the highest effectiveness; he uses all his faculties: strength, bravery and wit, to achieve real results. In the Homeric world, *arête* involves all of the abilities and potentialities available to humans. The concept implies a human-centred universe in which human actions are of paramount importance; the world is a place of conflict and difficulty, and human value and meaning is measured against individual effectiveness in the world.

Matthew accordingly is at pains to prove that Jesus is exemplary of cultural values; *arête*. He showcases a Jesus who is significant and glorified not just in terms of values that do not really derive from his figure or rest on his authority but instead on him as a model that embodies the virtues (*arête*) already recognized by the writer and Jewish Christians for whom he was writing. This is because whatever virtues his race most prizes, these the epic hero as a cultural exemplar possesses in abundance Draper ( ). The Jews of the time in which Jesus lived valued the virtues of love, kindness, patience, truthfulness. These all are shown by Jesus in the stories.

One of the characteristics of the epic hero is that he fights for a noble cause. This consists of fighting for those who cannot defend themselves like the outcasts, women and children. Ultimately, all that Jesus believes in and is committed to comes down to selfless acts of loving and caring for others. Jesus is constantly helping others through teaching, good works, and fighting for the welfare of others. He has love for all, gives kindness to those forgotten, broken, or thrown aside, is patient when accused of misdeeds, and always tells the truth to everyone. His love for all can be seen in the fact that he speaks to women and gentiles. It is a known fact that Jews despised women. It is said that whenever Jewish men went to pray, they thanked God for the fact that they were not born as women. The gentiles were equally despised and yet he makes an exception of them as illustrated by the story of the Good Samaritan.

Jesus also glorifies children, and teaches men new ways of applying good values. His kindness is manifested when he heals healing of sick, lame, and blind, and lifts up the downtrodden through civil speech. He also eats with tax collectors, a breed hated by Jews. When goes to trial before the man who would soon condemn him, he listens to all that is said and gives no reply. When asked a question, he tells what is, not what he knows the askers want to hear.

Mathew seeks consequently to show the fundamental nature of Jesus by recounting incidents and sayings that display and prove his character because of his superior or supernatural strength. An epic hero has supernatural strength that enables him to do things ordinary people cannot do. It is Jesus' supernatural strength that enables him to risk death for the greater good of the society.

Matthew's Jesus also performs great deeds in the form of miracles. Because of his emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies, the writer of the Gospel exhibits

values in Jesus that are consistent with the classical epic hero. In addition he portrays Jesus as possessing characteristics that are consistent with heroism. These include bravery, courage, honesty, love, strength and compassion. The acts of healing the sick and raising the dead, as well as in his skirmishes with the religious authorities of the day, accepting to die as a sacrifice and rising from the dead, demonstrates that he is the embodiment of *arête*. This will be illustrated further by Jesus' character traits and the then social values to show that Jesus is the personification of *arête* which the classical epic hero must have in abundance.

Yet another additional trait or quality that can define the hero is that he pursues honour and distinction earnestly. This is accurate of Jesus as presented by Matthew; he is honourable in that he keeps his word to the one who sent him; God. He aims to establish the kingdom of God even if it means his life is on the line. A true hero is not weak. His actions are not self-centred but done for the good of the world especially those in need. He is compassionate and caring, and this is confirmed when he teaches, heals the sick and feeds the hungry.

Finally the most important good thing that he does is to give his life as a sacrifice on the cross. The passion narratives attest to this. The experience of the Passion as expressed in the Gospel narrative, specifically in Matthew 26-27, and portrayed in films like *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson is not something for the lily-livered; Jesus could have opted out of dying but did not. He therefore embodies courage, strength, and loyalty to his cause, which proved to be of great aid in his battles and quest. This extraordinary bravery and courage is the recipe from which an epic hero is made.

A word that runs through all the synonyms for Heroism is fearlessness. Jesus is bold right from the beginning when he is tempted in the desert. He faces his adversary and the elements in the desert courageously. Because of his bravery and confidence, he wins the battle in the desert by using wit and fortitude in his verbal spats with the devil. He is courageous in a way

that people admire. Another worth reflected in this episode is that he is intrepid; he is not afraid of dangers or difficulties as he is led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil (4:1). He has fortitude or endurance for the reason that he does not fear going without food and water for forty days and nights. Neither does he give in to the temptation to make bread from stones as suggested by the devil, yet he has the power to do so.

Human beings are social animals and therefore do all in their power to be around people they know but Jesus does not fear solitude, staying alone in the desert for that duration. Unlike most people he does not have a home or fear poverty. In addition, he is on record for not accumulating material wealth or possessions for himself. He summarises his circumstances by saying "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (8:20). He does not fear the danger of a storm but sleeps while it is raging. At the call of distress from his disciples he calms storms (8:24-26). Water does not prevent him from going where he is headed; he simply walks on it (14:25-29). He also has prowess; he is very skilled as a teacher and as an orator as seen in the Sermon on the Mount (5-7).

### **3.3.6. Jesus as a King**

From the beginning of his Gospel, Matthew leaves us in no doubt concerning the identity of Jesus. He is the Messiah, the Son of David, the son of Abraham. The latter two titles link Jesus to God's two great promises to Israel. "Son of David" recalls God's promise to raise David's seed and establish his kingdom forever (2 Sam. 7:12-16). "Son of Abraham" recalls God's promise that Abraham's seed would be a blessing to the nations (Gen. 22:18). Both of these things--Messianic kingship and Gentile blessing--climax in the final pronouncement in Matthew's Gospel: "All authority has been given to me in heaven and earth [kingship]. Go

therefore and make disciples of all the nations (Gentile blessing)" (Matt. 28:18-19). The titles also show that Jesus is a leader.

### **3.3.8. Jesus as semi-divine**

An important quality characteristic of Jesus, for Matthew's intention and for this paper, is that Jesus is part human and part God and therefore divine. Epics heroes are divine in the sense that they are born of one parent who is human and one who is a god. The birth of Jesus, like that of many epic heroes is prophesied long before his birth in the Old Testament by the prophets. In the same way, he is given a name that suits his mission. The angel tells Joseph that Mary would give birth to the saviour of the world and he, Joseph was to call his name Jesus. "She will give birth to a son and name him Jesus because he is the one who is to save people from their sins" (1:21). Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua which means 'The Lord saves' or Saviour (New Jerusalem Bible). The reason for the name is clear; Jesus is to save people from their sins. His main purpose on earth is to establish the kingdom of God.

Jesus is also called Emmanuel (1:12) to fulfil the prophecy of prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 7:14). By saying that Jesus is to be called Emmanuel; "God with us" Matthew alludes directly to the divinity of Jesus. An epic hero has to be semi divine and here Jesus qualifies to be an epic hero. One example in particular occurred in reference to John the Baptist who quotes Isaiah 40:3 saying; "This is he who was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: " A voice of one calling in the desert, 'prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him,'" (3:3). Jesus is called Lord. John confesses that "after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry" (3:11).

The question of Jesus being divine has been problematic because of the genealogy. His mother is human, but he is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit however his genealogy follows that of Joseph. According to Vincent (2001) Matthew's account of Jesus' birth (1:18-

25) answers an important question concerning this problem in the genealogy: How can Jesus legitimately be designated the Son of David when Joseph son of David is not his father and Mary, his mother, is not said to be from the line of David. The narrative details why Joseph completed the marriage and made Jesus his legal son, thus grafting Jesus into the Davidic line through Joseph's juridical recognition of him as his own son. "The object then is not to spotlight the virginal conception so much as to narrate how Jesus is the Son of David *in spite of* the virginal conception" (Garland (1993: 2)). The virgin birth is significant because it is a sign to the House of David that the anointed one has arrived (cf. Isa. 7:14). The messianic age has begun through the work of the Holy Spirit in Christ (cf. Isa. 61:1). Jesus' conception proves to be an eschatological event of a new creation, a new beginning. After long years of exile and oppression, God is once again at work, through Jesus, to save his people. He is therefore, as we shall see later, introduced *in medias res* -in the middle of things or turmoil.

Chapter 1 demonstrates how the virgin born Jesus can authentically be the Son of David. Chapter 2 demonstrates how Jesus can be the Messiah even though his ministry is associated almost entirely with Galilee. All four of the Old Testament references in Chapter 2 refer to locations (2:6, 15, 18, 23), proving the locations of Jesus travels were not haphazard but directed by God. The negative response of Herod and "all Jerusalem" to the news of the Messiah's birth (2:3) foreshadows the conflict and rejection to come. The positive response by Gentile Magi foreshadows the universal offer of salvation (28:18-20) and the positive response of the Gentiles to the Messiah (Vincent, 2001).

Practicing hospitality was another character trait that the Jews held highly, and Jesus demonstrates this quality. Stories abound in the Old Testament of instances when people fed strangers or visitors. Examples are Abraham when he welcomed strangers who turned out to be angels. The angels later prophesied about the birth of Isaac the son of Abraham born to Sarah in her old age (Genesis). The same is true of Lot who was willing to go to extremes in



showing hospitality to strangers on the night before Sodom and Gomorrah was destroyed (Genesis 19:2-9). In the New Testament as well cases of people giving food are also common. Zacchaeus, Mary and Martha all showed hospitality to Jesus and his disciples. Peter's mother in law, on getting healed, immediately "got up and began to wait on him" (8:15). When Jesus therefore shows consideration for the crowds that had been listening to him during the Sermon on the Mount and in the second incident showing he feeds the hungry people then he is practicing a value of the Jews; hospitality (14:17-21 ). From the examples above, it goes without saying that Jesus is the personification of *arête* and therefore commendable of being referred to as an epic hero

### **3.3.9. Jesus as a Recurring Character**

Epic heroes are recurring characters in the legends of their culture in the epic tradition. Some scholars have said that in Mathew's Gospel, Jesus is the new Adam and others suggest he is the new Moses. This is because of the parallels that Matthew draws between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus exemplifies as the New Adam during the temptation scene in Matthew 4:1-11. In Genesis Adam and Eve were in a lush garden with all the food that they could eat; in Matthew Jesus is in a wilderness where he has been fasting for forty days. In Genesis the temptation was to eat; and in the wilderness the temptations of Jesus began with eating. In Genesis the temptation was to be like God by disobeying God; in Matthew the appeal to Jesus was to be the king, but without obeying God. In Genesis Adam and Eve sinned because they did not know precisely what God had said, not as well as Satan did; in Matthew, Jesus was victorious because he knew Scripture better than Satan. In Genesis, after the pair sinned, angels barred them from the tree of life; in Matthew, after Jesus drove the devil away, angels came and ministered to Him. (Genesis 3:1-24 and Matthew 4:1-11).

An additional illustration of Jesus as a recurring character is his portrayal as the new Moses in the *gospel according to Matthew*. Matthew's five great discourses draw attention to another prominent theme of Matthew--that of Jesus as the new lawgiver after the pattern of Moses, the authoritative teacher of the New Covenant. Jesus' most prominent activity in Matthew's Gospel is teaching. Throughout the book great emphasis is placed on Jesus' authoritative words (7:24, 28-29). Jesus claims to know God's original intent in the giving of Torah and brings that intention to light in his teaching (5 - 7). Jesus uniquely and exclusively knows the Father's will (11:25-30). Jesus' life is the model of a life lived in submission to Torah and thus he reveals the will of God as the Torah does (11:28-30). Moreover, Jesus' words share the same eternality as the Torah; therefore, they will never pass away (5:18; 24:35). The book concludes by demonstrating that Jesus is the Lord with "all authority" (28:18) who teaches his commands to his church (28:19-20). Matthew portrays Jesus as the fulfilment and embodiment of Torah, the new lawgiver that Moses spoke of (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Therefore to reject Jesus is to reject Moses.

According to Wansbrough (1998), the promise of Moses in Deuteronomy 18.15 remained of crucial importance in Israel, 'Yahweh your God will raise up a prophet like me; you will listen to him'. Especially in the first century, when it was felt that there had long been no prophet in Israel (Lam 2.9; 1 Mc 4.46; 9.27), the yearning for a prophet like Moses was strong. A series of parallels with the story of Moses' infancy and early life shows that Matthew is deliberately telling the story of Jesus' infancy in such a way as to bring out the similarity between the two children: the events of Jesus' infancy show him to have been a second Moses. For this Matthew naturally uses not purely the biblical account but also the stories current at the time, amplifying the biblical account; one version of these can be conveniently found in the contemporary historian Josephus.

Whereas the oppressed Hebrews sought freedom the Egyptians, the Jews sought freedom from the Romans. With regards to the births, a seer foretold the birth of a rival leader and the Magi warned Herod of the birth of a child who would save his people. Just as Pharaoh and the Egyptians were alarmed, Herod and the whole city were alarmed because of the birth of Jesus. Pharaoh tried to kill all the male babies, but the quarry escaped, and the quarry escaped in the same way that Herod killed all the male babies in Bethlehem but again the quarry escaped. Other accounts have other details of similarity, for instance the star: At the birth of Moses a great light like that of a star filled the house. But the appearance of a star to mark the birth of a great man is a standard feature of legends in the ancient world, reported at the birth of Alexander the Great, Mithridates, the Emperor Augustus and others. The star could also symbolise the birth of another star; a celebrity, in this case Jesus Christ. Any epic hero is a star by default.

The narration of the events of Jesus' birth after the model of Moses implies almost nothing about the historicity of the details. On the one hand, a reading of Josephus' account is instructive in showing the latitude which a strict historian of the period felt himself to have in embroidering a story. On the other hand, Herod made no bones about executing several sons, wives and other members of his family on suspicion of attempts to supplant him. He was so notorious for this that his friend the Emperor Augustus punned in Greek that he would rather be Herod's *uj* than his *uioj* (his *hys* than his *hyios*, his pig than his son - Herod the Jew didn't eat pork - got it?). To kill the few male babies of the little hill-village of Bethlehem would make no problem for him. This could, however, imply either that the story is true or that it is well tailored to Herod's reputation.

The parallel between Jesus and Moses continues to be important throughout the Gospel. It surfaces continually. In the story of the Testing of Jesus in the desert, the final temptation

takes Jesus to a very high mountain from where he can see all the kingdoms of the world, which the tempter promises to give him (4.8). This is a satire, almost a parody, on Moses' final ascent to Mount Nebo opposite Jericho (so in the same area), from where he sees the whole of Palestine, which God himself promises to give to his descendants (Deuteronomy 34.1-4). A further little touch in the same account showing that Matthew is thinking of Jesus in terms of Moses is the note that he fasted 'for forty days (as in Mark's account) and forty nights' (as Moses' stay on the mountain in Ex 24.18). Again, in his account of the Transfiguration Matthew makes slight adjustments to Mark's account which show that he is representing Jesus as a second Moses: the radiance of Jesus' face, white like the light (Mt 17.2) mirrors that of Moses at his descent from the mountain (Ex 34.29-35). Thus, for Matthew, Moses and Elijah accompany Jesus at the Transfiguration because these two conversed with God on the holy mountain.

The principal importance of this imagery of Jesus as the second Moses comes, however, to be seen in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus goes up the mountain to give the second Law (Mt 5.1), just as Moses had done. This Law is the basis of the new people of God, just as the Mosaic Law was the foundation of Israel as God's people. By giving this Law on the mountain Jesus becomes the founder-figure of the Church just as Moses was the founder-figure of the people of Israel. It is as the second Moses that he has the right to correct and fulfil the Law in the six antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, and on the other occasions when he deals authoritatively with the Laws of Sabbath, purity of food, etc. This is part of the more general imagery of Jesus' own as a mirror and fulfilment of the people of Israel.

A further attribute of the epic hero is that they are supernatural in the sense that they are smarter, stronger and braver than the average human beings. The epic hero is also a miracle worker of some sort. Miracles were widely believed in around the time of Jesus. Gods and

demigods such as Heracles (better known by his Roman name, Hercules), Asclepius (a Greek physician who became a god) and Isis of Egypt all were thought to have healed the sick and overcome death (i.e. have raised people from the dead). Some thought that mortal men, if sufficiently famous and virtuous, could do likewise; there were myths about philosophers like Pythagoras and Empedocles calming storms at sea, chasing away pestilences, and being greeted as gods, and similarly some Jews believed that Elisha the Prophet had cured lepers and restored the dead. The achievements of the 1st century Apollonius of Tyana, though occurring after Jesus' life, were used by a 3rd-century opponent of the Christians to argue that Christ was neither original nor divine (Eusebius of Caesarea argued against the charge). The first Gospels were written against this background of Hellenistic and Jewish belief in miracles and other wondrous acts as signs - the term is explicitly used in the Gospel of John to describe Jesus' miracles - seen to be validating the credentials of divine wise men.

Howard (1999; 605) in his discussion of the New Testament miracles in the *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible* says that “the Gospels contain various happenings such as instantaneous healings of sick or disabled people or displays of control over natural phenomena which cannot be accounted for by normal explanation. On about 35 different occasions Jesus performed various kinds of deeds that seemed miraculous to those who saw them”. In addition there are several passages where we are told in general terms that Jesus performed miracles. In Matthew's Gospel there are stories that tell how Jesus healed the sick of various diseases. These miracles show that Jesus is compassionate and loving; he reaches out to those in need. For Jesus, teaching, preaching and healing go together; his authority is expressed in what he says and what he does. Jesus performed the healings by either touching or speaking.

An exceptional example of a miraculous healing that demonstrates Jesus' compassion and daring is narrated in the healing of the Leper (8:1-4). To the Jews the lepers were unclean, untouchable. Jesus could have healed the man with a look or a word-instead he reaches out and touches him. We are told that after the leper had pleaded to be healed, 'Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing, he said. Be clean!" Immediately he was cured of his leprosy. Jesus was not afraid of being infected, nor was he infected. Touching an otherwise untouchable leper added another dimension to the miracle. The touch showed love and acceptance and must have been very momentous to the leper who had been without the human touch for ages. This is because there were leprosy regulations for the Jews (Leviticus 13-14) and one of the regulations was for the victim to be kept in isolation after examination by a priest because such a person was unclean. The term leprosy in the Bible covers a number of skin diseases.

Matthew shows us another facet to Jesus' authority that could show his spiritual omnipresence. This is the miracle where Jesus heals the centurion's servant (8: 5-13). Jesus shows that he is not restrained by distance and uses word of mouth to heal someone he has not seen, who some distance away from him. He is not restricted by spatial or temporal dimensions. Moreover in this healing shows that Jesus has no discrimination when it comes healing. His mission is to Israel, but he does not confine his healing to them alone; he has no ethnic boundaries as long as someone has faith in him.

When Jesus goes to Capernaum, Matthew narrates another miracle where Jesus uses his healing power to cure sickness. This story is about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law who was lying in bed with a fever. We are told, "He touched her hand and she hot up and began to wait on him" (8:15-16) meaning that the healing was instantaneous and complete. Jesus also demonstrates his power over spiritual powers which were seen to be at the root of many

ills in Capernaum. Jesus is not limited to the physical world in his miraculous activities. In the evening many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed the sick. Matthew applies Isaiah's words quite literally to Jesus' healing ministry by saying "He took our infirmities and carried our diseases" (8:17).

Jesus' miraculous supernatural powers go into another elevation even for the disciples when Matthew shows that Jesus has control over nature. This is the miracle of Jesus controlling a wild and violent storm by rebuking the winds and the waves and the water became calm (8:23-27). The effect of this miracle is one of amazement as they ask, "What kind of a man is this? Even the winds and waves obey him!" They realise that Jesus' is the master of nature.

The story of Jesus calming the storm is immediately followed by Jesus calming another 'storm'; that of calming two wild and violent men at Gadarenes. This miracle could be deliberate on the part of Matthew. Two demon-possessed men are coming from the tombs and meet Jesus. According to the account they are so wild that none dare pass that way. In their accounts Mark and Luke focus on just one of the men, 'Legion' or 'Mob' (Mark 5:1-17; Luke 8:26-37). They may draw on a different tradition. Perhaps Matthew has in mind the two witnesses required for a valid testimony under Jewish law. Jesus restores both men to sanity by driving out the demons with the word "Go!" Once more Jesus demonstrates his authority over the supernatural; demons.

The account of the healing of the man with paralysis is done in his own home town. This man is brought to him lying on a mat. This man is healed because of the faith of the men who brought him. Jesus uses the physical healing as proof of the spiritual cure: the man's forgiveness (9:1-8). Jesus says that he did this "so that you may know the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." More healings are recorded in 9:18-34. These include the healing of the raising back to life of a ruler's daughter and the woman with a haemorrhage

as well as the two blind men (27-31). One interesting thought about the miracles that Jesus performed is that they demonstrate his compassionate side and love that responded to those in need; be it in healing the sick, feeding the hungry, exorcising demons or raising the dead. The miracles always resulted in wonder and thanksgiving by the recipients.

### **3.3.10. Jesus as a Warrior**

An epic hero is a warrior of some sort who performs extraordinary tasks that most find difficult as he is a hero who saves. Jesus has also been referred to as the divine warrior. According to Kantiya (2012) Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist confirms his position as the long awaited divine warrior/messiah. The prevalent expectation of the divine warrior is a violent overthrow of Rome's oppression, but Jesus is healing the sick, exorcising demons and preaching the good news. She suggests that what John and others do not understand is that the war has become more dangerous and so has the enemy. In a reversal, the enemy is not Rome, but Satan and Jesus' actions (exorcisms in particular) represent spiritual battle against principalities and powers. Because of this the weapons and the modes of fighting have to change. This change is seen when Jesus rebukes one of his disciples for drawing his sword and cutting off the ear of the servant of the high priest (26:52). He emphasises that violence is not the best way of winning his particular war. Thereafter he wins the battle by his violent death on the cross.

The epic hero is often a demi-god who possesses distinction weapons of great size and power, often heirlooms or presents from other gods. This is because he has to fight wars. Jesus possessed no physical weapon with which to defend him or destroy others. In the stories, however, he did possess divine powers, being the son of God. This can be seen when he walks on water, heals the blind and lame, and when he brings Lazarus back from the dead. He himself also rises from death's grip after being crucified. His divine power is his weapon.



The theme of war is what constitutes epics and therefore the theme of holy war is very strong in both the Old and New Testament. In the Old Testament narratives, God, Yahweh often fought for the children of Israel. In Holy war, the number of warriors and sophisticated weaponry was deemed unimportant. Jesus does not need physical weapons because he is a warrior fighting a unique battle against principalities and powers. His weapon is to death in obedience to God's will. Because of this he is given the spiritual weapons to wage war on the kingdom of the devil by God in order to establish his kingdom. The devil tries to derail him from his mission during the Temptation, but he does not succeed. His actions, like those of the epic hero, determine the fate of a nation of people. His actions, like those of the classical epic heroes, determine the fate of a nation or people. Jesus was meant to save people and bring them to a close relationship with God.

### **3.3.11. Jesus as an Orator**

The epic hero is not only a warrior and a leader but a polished speaker who can address councils of chieftains with eloquence and confidence. Jesus was never in physical battle, but he did speak well, and was a highly regarded leader. He influences thousands of the validity of what he was saying of the "kingdom of God" and its principles in his teaching especially in the Parabolic Discourse about what the teachings about what kingdom of God is like (Matt. 13). He even convinces some Pharisees, experts in the law, of his credibility and proved others wrong in their beliefs. The crowds were eager to hear what Jesus' teachings. They would follow him from town to town, often not even bringing food, such as in the stories in which Jesus was said to make a few pieces of food feed thousands. Throughout his three years of teaching, he led a group of twelve men, his inner circle, teaching to them

Christoff (2013) calls Jesus as the Divine Orator. He says that Aristotle articulated three basic 'levers' of persuasion in public oration: *Logos*, *Pathos* and *Ethos*. He defines

*Logos* ('reason or order') as the use of reason/logic and facts to advance an argument and *Pathos* ('emotion or feeling') as to arousing emotions to win arguments. *Ethos* ('character') he says is the use of personal character or group connections/solidarity to win arguments. He says Jesus used all the three levers in his oration. Since an epic story is basically the war between good and evil, the epic hero fights the evil with weapons and one of the weapons that Jesus uses to fight evil is by using his oratory skills. Christoff points out that Jesus the divine orator comes to argue his case in the eternal argument that contrasts the way of Satan and the way of God. He says that Jesus uses the three levers by Aristotle to win the argument. Jesus used all these levels in his arguments with Satan during the temptation scene (Matt 4), the Pharisees, Sadducees and the Scribes throughout his ministry in the Gospel according to Matthew. The religious leaders follow him around to find fault with him. When they accused him of using the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons to cast out demons, Jesus cryptically says 'a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand' (Matt 12: 24-29).

Jesus effectively demonstrates his divine *ethos* when he defeats the lies of Satan in the wilderness during the temptation (4:1-11) by answering Satan word for word when Satan quotes scripture to mislead Jesus in this case using personal character. He also repeatedly casts out demons using a word. Like when he healed the two demon-possessed men he simply told the demons "Go!" (8:28-32) and the demons came out and went into the pigs. For the man with leprosy he simply declared, "I am willing. Be clean!" Jesus shows solidarity with the leper in this instance. He shows omniscience in his ability to read minds and prophesise (12:25). Apart from these, Jesus performs miracles. He heals diseases and conditions like blindness and also has power of nature; he can walk on water, calm a storm and he raise the dead. Finally he himself dies but rises from the dead with a miraculous glorious body.

Among all the teachers who ever lived, it is a consensus that Jesus was the best teacher ever and from what we see in the gospels, 'no one taught like this man.' Interestingly, that phrase is actually the title of a major text book used for teaching Religious Education in Teachers Training Colleges in Kenya. Jesus demonstrates divine *ethos* when he offers divinely inspired teachings in the form of Parables, sermons and in the use of scripture. The first example was during the Sermon on the Mount; he gave teachings that demonstrated he was part of the community and knew about their way of life. He also used parables to further teach his audience using what they already know and what they could relate with. In the temptation and subsequent ones he severally quoted from the Old Testament scriptures.

The other lever that Jesus uses is *Pathos*. When speaking, he immediately knows and always seeks to arouse emotions in his audience. He has complete insight into the hearts and minds of his listeners. From growing up in rural Galilee, Jesus has an intimate knowledge of daily life including Jewish cultural values (for example, love, hope, faith, truth, righteousness, trust, forgiveness, friendliness, communality) and how people live (for example planting, shepherding, fishing, carpentry, landlords, kings, and so on.), giving him the insight into how to appeal to the emotional lives of people with integrity. He therefore also uses emotion but with integrity. He is often cryptic, leaving His audience yearning to understand. He uses zeal to signal the importance of clearing the temple He extensively uses healing to touch the hearts and minds of his followers (Christoff, 2013).

Apart from *ethos* and *pathos*, Jesus uses the third lever, *logos*. He employs powerful reasoning techniques to make his case by using deductive and inductive logic as well as fact-based argument. He also uses question and dialogue (Matt 16:13) and teachings which include practical application like teachings on anger, adultery and lust (Matt 15). Like the Rabbis and scribes of his time who were experts in the Jewish scriptures, Jesus has complete

knowledge of the scriptures and uses it in his oration. This is evident in his teachings and also whenever he has arguments with the religious leaders on his practices. For example, when Jesus and his disciples go through the grain fields on the Sabbath, his disciples are hungry and pluck the heads of grain of wheat to eat. When the Pharisees attack him about this he reminds them to what King David did in a similar situation (Matt 12:1-8). David and his men ate bread from the temple and this, like what the disciples. Jesus uses logic to win tis argument did, was against the law

An effective orator delivers world-changing oration. Jesus uses oration approaches that are vivid, memorable and repeatable. He offers “sound bites”/aphorisms. Chapter 8 is rich in these aphorisms/sound bites. For example he says ‘Do not throw your pearls to pigs’ (7:6), ‘seek and you will find (7:8), knock and the door will be opened to you 7:8 and so on. In his parables, Jesus uses commonplace imagery in provocative ways. Jesus uses epic similes to compare the kingdom of God to everyday objects. He does this in the parable of the Mustard seed and Yeast (13:31). He further uses the same device to compare the kingdom of God to Treasure hidden in a field and the Pearl (13:44) and also in the Parable of the Weeds. Jesus also incorporates parables in his teaching that offer various levels of spiritual richness that are enduring and endearing and have memorable characters: The Ten Virgins (25:1-12), The Parable of the Talents (25:-28). His teachings The Sermon on the Mount (5-7) has been called the most commented upon speech in human history. This is because not only is the language used beautifully, but it the sermon is memorable and universal, transcending time and space.

Like any formidable orator, Jesus exposes and demolishes false doctrines in public debate using scripture and logic. He carefully picks his battles with opponents and sometimes chooses not to engage (Matt12:15). Though only a carpenter’s son (Matt 13:53-56) with no

rabbinical pedigree, Jesus goes up against Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and priests when they attack him during his ministry many times in the Gospel decisively correcting them, and winning. Moreover, he combines symbolic acts with oration to persuade. For example, he breaks false cultural rules when he eats with sinners and tax collectors in Matthew's house (9:9-10), and touches the unclean (8:3, 9:20, 25). Jesus physically clears the Temple (21:12-13), provocatively enters Jerusalem as a king (21:1-11), and suffers the Passion to proclaim Truth (26-27).

Jesus oratory skills are further emphasized by Gary (2013). He summarises the qualities of Jesus that he believed made him the greatest speaker ever. He starts by saying that in September 1893, the Rev. Thomas Alexander Hyde of Boston published his book *Christ the Orator*. The subtitle of the Rev. Hyde's work is *Never Man Spake like This Man*. This is a direct quote from a gospel verse in the King James Version of the Bible. In this book, Rev. Hyde extols Jesus' ability as a great speaker. A more recent version translates the passage as "*No one ever spoke the way this man does.*" In either form, it's an accurate assessment of Jesus' talents as a speaker.

In his paper Gary attempts to argue why Jesus is a great speaker. One of the first reasons he cites is that Jesus has speaker credibility. He says that speaker credibility is a key factor in speaking persuasiveness and impact. This is because credibility is the foundation any speaker's influence must be built upon, adding that audiences need to know early that they can trust what you say and open themselves to your teaching. Nothing attains this gold standard like modelling the behaviour and truths you are talking about. He asserts that no one achieved that like Jesus. He also says that Jesus had originality of spoken expression. Great speakers surprise as much as they educate. Sometimes they startle listeners by what they say. Consider the very first line of the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (5:3)

How can the *poor in spirit* achieve heaven? We must ponder the meaning of this phrase- poor in spirit, to understand it, just as Jesus intended. A good speaker does not reveal all or spoon-feed his listeners because he knows the retention rate of what he says will be higher when the listeners are part of the thought process. No motivational speaker's bromides for this orator!

Bernard further cites eloquence of speaker's rhetoric as a quality that Jesus has. This, he says, is because time and again, the beauty of Jesus' teachings illuminates his otherwise serious statements. For example, when he says:

"And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Jesus is known for making Dramatic Statements. Making of dramatic statement adds spice to oration and is a quality of a good speaker. This is because speaking in public is performance, something Jesus well understood. Great pronouncements from speakers are often dramatic, as this passage where he predicts his death (Matt 20:17-19) , declares that one of the disciples is going to betray (Matt 26:21) him as well as when he prophesies about how his followers would be persecuted because of him (26). Perhaps the most memorable are the Seven Woes (Matt 23:1-23). In this particular incident Jesus was talking to the crowd and his disciples; one can actually visualise him performing on a stage as he makes the dramatic statements. These chapters are rich with dramatic imagery as well. He talks of Pharisees and the teachers of the law as shutting the kingdom of heaven in men's faces (23:13), calls them blind guides and blind fools (23:16) as well as snakes and vipers (25:33).

Apart from making dramatic statements, Jesus excelled in the use of metaphor when teachings. He spoke metaphorically; using similes, comparisons, and analogies. The greatest

orators use metaphors constantly to deepen meaning, mining the richness of spoken language. Jesus' genius in the use of metaphor was the *parable*, a Greek word meaning "comparison, illustration, or analogy". The Greek word for "parable" is "parabole" and closely resembles that in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word is "masal." The word "parable" literally means "to cast" (bole) something "alongside" (para) or to "throw to the side" so a parable is a comparison of two or more things that are cast aside something to make a teaching clearer or to reveal what has been hidden. The parable normally teaches one point and is used primarily for a comparison of something familiar with a concept, idea, or teaching of something that may not be otherwise understood. Jesus used parables as teaching aids that can be used as analogies or a comparison of something earthly with a heavenly meaning (Wellman, 2014).

Epic heroes are known for using the Homeric similes in their long speeches. These are the extended comparisons in the form of parables. The prominent ones are the kingdom parables where he compares the kingdom that he has come to establish with everyday things. This is especially so with in Matthew 13. They are the Parable of the Sower (13:3-9), the Parable of the Weeds (13:24-30), the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven (13:31-33), the Parable of the Hidden Treasure (13:44), the Parable of the Pearl and the Great Price (13:45-46) and the Parable of the Net (13:47-50). The last parables that Jesus give are in chapter 25. These include the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats. These last three parables in chapter 25 are the best exemplars of the Homeric simile in the sense that they are much extended and lengthy compared to the previous ones Jesus gave in chapter 13.

Jesus, like a good orator, has conciseness of delivery. Every audience values conciseness. Jesus' conciseness is evident in the case where he is still speaking to the crowds when he is told his brothers are standing outside and are anxious to have a word with him. But to the

man who tells him this Jesus replies, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” ...Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (12:46-50).

Jesus’ public utterances, again and again throughout the gospels, cut to the heart of the matter with penetrating psychology. In this he demonstrates public speaking incisiveness. When he was giving his sermon on the mount, after the beatitudes, Jesus told the crowds that “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? (Matt 5:13)” to encourage to be positive role models in their religious practice and “Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces” to warn against hypocrisy. He also declares “Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead” (Matt 8:22)

Keen audience analysis is compulsory for every speaker. Few things guarantee a poor speaking performance as much as delivering content without understanding your audience’s needs. Jesus knows the needs of his audience and so does not spend his time on content as many speakers do without determining what the listeners need to hear and why. As a result his speaker-audience interaction is rich. This is evident in his use of imagery and examples that resonate with his audience. Key examples are the parables he uses to teach. Jesus not only deeply understands his audiences; he knows things about them they themselves do not know.

Jesus often gives a compelling message. A compelling message may simply mean he has something to say. Having something to say or mastery of content, as mundane as that may sound, it is a quality of public speaking that all great speakers embody. Jesus’ speech was worldly and otherworldly, by turns, but it always demonstrated complete authority and



fearlessness of expression. When we speak with passion and total commitment, our message becomes compelling and difficult *not* to listen to. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount and use of parables and teachings, Jesus spoke with passion to express his compelling message.

In his Speeches, Jesus employed balance of speech construction that is a quality of a good speech. In his stories, aphorisms, parables, and searching questions, Jesus understood balance. Thesis-Antithesis was a favourite form. When the religious authorities ask Jesus if it is permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not, he simply replies “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar’s; and to God what belongs to God’s.” (22:21). The Beatitudes in Matthew is an example *par excellence* of “anaphora” or repeating words at the beginning of phrases—“Blessed are . . .” (Think of Churchill’s “We shall fight them . . .” or Martin Luther King Junior’s “I have a dream.”) Balance is another way we understand the beauty of our language, and Jesus uses it to add power and glory to what he says.

### **3.3.12 Jesus and his Quest**

An epic hero performs an extraordinary task that no one else would be willing to perform. This is because he has supernatural strength. There is a phrase known as ‘Herculean task’ that is often used to refer to a near impossible task. In Greek mythology, there is an epic hero known as Hercules who is given tasks to carry out that no one else can do. These are known as the Twelve Labours of Hercules. Hercules undertakes these tasks that no one else dares to attempt and yet he accomplishes them all.

In the same way, Jesus sought to save all of mankind from their sins against God by teaching the new covenant that God wished for there to be, and by giving himself as a perfect sacrifice to cover all sins ever made, being made at the time, and being made in the future. According

to a popular myth, it was only Jesus who was willing to leave heaven to come to earth. The extraordinary task that Jesus performs therefore is the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth that has to end with his horrific death on the cross.

### **3.3.13. Jesus and his Disciples**

Epic heroes were known not to operate alone but had comrades. Although his fellows may be great warriors, like Achilles and Beowulf, he may have a *comitatus*, or group of noble followers with whom he grew up. Jesus had several followers with whom he ‘grew up’ in the ministry; they shared his experience in the establishment of the kingdom of God, but out of all his followers he chose twelve men to be his disciples who are popularly known as The Twelve to be in the inner circle. We are given the names of the twelve disciples as “first, Simon who is known as Peter and his brother Andrew, James the son of Zebedee and his brother John; Phillip and Bartholomew; Thomas, Matthew the tax collector, James the son of Alphaeus, and Thaddeus; Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot who was also his betrayer (10:2-4).

At a crucial moment in their lives; the moment of death, the epic hero often stands alone. When Jesus is arrested, the disciples desert him (Matt 26:55) and even Peter, one of the disciples in the inner circle, who had sworn he would never do so (Matt 26:33-34), disowns him (26:69-75). Jesus had known what would happen and immediately after the Last Supper Jesus goes with his disciples to the Mount of Olives and tells them “this very night you will fall away on account of me (Matt.26:13). He quotes from Zechariah 13:7 saying;

“I will strike the shepherd and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.”

This quote from Zechariah that Jesus makes is a foreshadowing. When he is arrested at the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples all scatter. The disciples have no wish to be crucified

with him, but Jesus understands that this is an ordeal he must face alone. He even forgives them in advance when he promises to meet them after his resurrection (Matt 26:32). He is very courageous and daring in this endeavour and does not change his mind about the coming ordeal despite having foreknowledge about what awaits him. He could have long escaped when Judas left the room, but he says, “The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him” (26:24). In calling himself the Son of Man Jesus talks about his mortal self. As a mortal, he is destined to die but as a demigod, he will rise. He previously had an option of taking the devils offer of wealth and power during the temptation (4:1-11), but unlike most people, he forsakes this for doing the will of God in order to save the world.

### **3.3.14 Jesus as a Sacrifice**

The epic hero is destined to die, and the death is foretold. (Dean, 2000). For example in the *Iliad*, Patroclus foretells Hector’s own death just as the horse Xanthos foretells the death of Achilles. Jesus actually knows he is intended to die and similar to other classical epic heroes he foretells his death. Jesus alludes to his death when he says “For as Jonah was in the belly of a huge fish for three days and three nights so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (12:39-40). He actually predicts his death explicitly. It is written;

“ From that time Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things in the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life ” (Matt.16:21).

He predicts his death again when he is going to Jerusalem when he took the disciples a side and said to them,

“We are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will turn him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day he will be raised to life” (20:17-19).

Jesus knew that he would be killed as he had come to fulfil, and there was divine compulsion about what was written. Again and again he insisted that he must suffer and die, because this was what was written about him.

### **3.4. The Hero's Journey**

Since one among the many characteristics of the epic hero is that he has to undertake a long perilous journey that tests his endurance, an additional way of determining if Jesus is depicted as an epic hero in *the Gospel according to Matthew* is to analyse him using the motif of the Hero's Journey as propounded by Campbell (1968). This long journey that the epic hero undertakes is popularly known as the Hero's Journey. Draper (1990) points out that the epic hero has a goal and typically embarks on a long journey that involves struggling with natural and supernatural beings- gods, monsters, and other human beings- which test his bravery, wit and other skills in battle.

The monomyth, or the hero's journey, is a basic pattern that is arguably found in most hero narratives from around the world. Campbell (2008) describes seventeen (17) stages or steps along this journey. Very few myths contain all these stages—some epics contain many of the stages, while others contain only a few; some may focus on only one of the stages, while others may deal with the stages in a somewhat different order. These stages may be organized in a number of ways, including division into three sections: Departure (sometimes called Separation), Initiation, and Return. Departure deals with the hero's adventure prior to the quest; Initiation deals with the hero's many adventures along the way; and Return deals with the hero's return home with knowledge and powers acquired on the journey. In normal cases of departure, a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: Fabulous forces are encountered there and a decisive victory is won. The hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow gifts on his

fellow man. There are many different versions of the Hero's journey, but they retain the basic elements.

The concept of the journey is universal permeating generations, societies and cultures. According to folklorists and other narrative scholars, the Hero's journey forms the basic template for all great stories. The literary artists through their works have always taken us into new realms by means of the journey which need not be always physical. Almost all mythologies have some sort of hero and the hero generally takes a similar sort of journey, symbolising man's inner desire to overcome his darkest troubles and emerge victorious. The journey the hero takes is both physical and symbolic

### **3.4.1 The Separation**

The first part of the Hero's journey according to Campbell is the *Separation* which is also called the Departure phase. It deals with the hero's adventure prior to the quest. This commences with the birth of the hero. Campbell suggests that the fabulous circumstances surrounding conception, birth, and childhood establish the hero's pedigree, and often constitute their own mono-myth cycle. For this reason, most epics start with a genealogy; a genealogy has been described as 'the standard premium of propaganda, a way of demonstrating the true status or character of some individual or group. It is important that the status of Jesus is established from the beginning of the story to validate him as a hero.

In the *Gospel according to Matthew*, the story begins with the genealogy of Jesus. The opening words are; 'The genealogy Of Jesus the son of Abraham, the son of David' (1:1). It is this genealogy that establishes Jesus' pedigree. By means of this genealogy Matthew depicts Jesus as the true King descended from the royal line of David, as God had promised. It is the dynasty of a true king and not that of a commoner.

Matthew emphasises right from the beginning Jesus' title *Christ*, the Greek rendering of the title *Messiah* meaning anointed, in the sense of an anointed King. Jesus is presented first and foremost as the long-awaited Messiah, who was expected to be a descendant and heir to King David, so the genealogy serves the essential purpose of demonstrating this line of descent. For this reason Matthew begins by referring to Jesus by using stock epithets; use of stock epithets is common with reference to traditional epic heroes. Son of David and Son of Abraham indicate that Jesus was a Jew. In both stock epithets *son* means descendant calling to mind the promises God made to David and to Abraham. The title Son of David identifies Jesus as the healing and miracle working Messiah of Israel. Matthew uses this title exclusively in relation to miracles stories of Jesus. Another stock epithet or title used in relation to Jesus is, *Son of Man*. This is a title that looks at Jesus as an earthly ruler. It indicates that he will come to judge the world. The third title is *Son of God*. This is the title that implies Jesus' divinity. The angel says he is to be named Emmanuel implying that God is revealing himself through his son. Jesus proves his son ship through his obedience and example.

Jesus, like an epic hero has a noble birth and is therefore not ordinary but is significant and glorified in the infancy narratives and in subsequent accounts. In Matthew's gospel the fabulous circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus is illustrated by the infancy narratives. The birth of an epic hero is always prophesied and likewise the birth of Jesus is foretold by an angel and his name is given as "Jesus because he will save people from their sins' (Matt1:21). By his name, his destiny is revealed. Jesus was named prophetically. When Joseph discovers that Mary is pregnant, he is faced with a dilemma and considers leaving her. In Matthew 1:20-23 we read,

"But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because

what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.'

All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel' - which means, 'God with us.'

The angel also states Jesus' mission is to save people from their sins.

Toohey (2016) says that an epic hero's conception is out of the ordinary. His mother, like the mothers of the archetypal heroes, is a virgin. He is conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Since his mother is mortal and father supernatural he is therefore semi-divine. This is common with other heroes. Achilles was the son of the sea Nymph Thetis and Aeneas was the son of the goddess Aphrodite. Hercules on the other hand was the son of the god Zeus and a mortal mother. All these heroes were therefore half god, half man (Adeline, 2006).

He has a noble birth. When he is born, there are manifestations of the supernatural. Men from the East come to pay homage to the infant king. Different people refer to the men from the east as the Magi and even three kings but basically, they are astrologers. Studying the stars and their meanings is what makes them 'wise'. And they have no doubt the new star means the birth of the promised King of Judah. The presents they take to him are symbolic of his leadership and mission; gold is for a king, Frankincense for God and Myrrh for a mortal man.

Raglan (1936) in his work, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, says there is always an attempt to kill the hero as an infant who is reputed to be the son of god and because of this the child is spirited away as an infant and no details of the childhood are given This happens in the case of Jesus. The news of news is of a new king that has been born is not welcome at the palace. Herod the Great, king of the Jews from 37-4 BC was murderously

jealous of rivals. Angels warn both the Magi and Joseph of the threat to his life in a dream and the family escapes to Egypt. This threat to Jesus' life is not uncommon to archetypal epic heroes who go on exile or are hidden to prevent them from being killed by a person who feels threatened by their birth. Their escape to Egypt results in the slaughter of the infants by a desperate Herod.

#### **3.4.1.1. Ordinary World**

Another component in the Separation phase is the *Ordinary world*. The Ordinary World is where the hero exists before his present story begins, oblivious of the adventures to come. The protagonist has a "home"; a place that he thinks is normal, familiar and common to others in his culture. Campbell (2008) says that the hero exists in a world that is considered ordinary or uneventful by those who live there. Often the heroes are considered odd by those in the ordinary world and possess some characteristic or ability that makes them feel out of place. It is his safe place. This anchors the Hero as a human, just like you and me, and makes it easier for us to identify with him and hence later, empathise with his plight. The hero is enticed to leave the ordinary world.

Before Jesus begins his mission, he has a place he calls home, Nazareth. Jesus, the Messiah had to be born in Bethlehem according to the prophecy of prophet Micah ; "But you Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel whose origins are of old, from ancient times (Micah 5:2) in Matthew 2:6. Matthew goes further to explain why Jesus came to be known as 'Jesus of Nazareth 'after the return from exile in Egypt. Jesus may have seemed odd as a child because of the infancy stories surrounding his birth. It is possible stories about his unique birth could have spread. Apart from that, he was not born in Nazareth and their relocation there after the return from Egypt in all likelihood aroused curiosity and possibly conjectures. It is possible



he did not resemble Joseph, and this could have made him feel odd or out of place as well. Joseph, and his mother Mary may have treated him with deference since they knew who he was and what his mission was.

The ordinariness of the world in which Jesus lived is illustrated by the fact that Matthew talks very little about it. After Jesus and his parents return from Egypt and settle in Nazareth, apart from saying that he went to stay there as a fulfilment of the prophecy, that he would be known as a Nazarene, nothing else is said. There is a blackout about Jesus' youth until he is introduced *in medias res*, in the middle of John the Baptist's ministry. This is not an out of the ordinary occurrence. Little is normally known about the childhood of epic heroes. The fact that Matthew says 'nothing' about Jesus at this time shows something about his character; he was not a rebellious youth but an obedient child who caused no sorrow to his parents. What we know about Jesus' youth is recounted in a flashback when some people wonder about his miraculous deeds and yet according to them he was just an ordinary carpenter's son.

### **3.4.2 Call to Adventure**

The second stage of the hero's journey according to Campbell is the *Call to Adventure*: The hero is called to adventure by some external event or messenger. The Hero may accept or decline. For the hero to begin his journey, he must be called away from the ordinary world. A normal occurrence motivates the hero to acknowledge an unknown aspect of his world. Since fantastic quests do not happen in everyday life, heroes must be removed from their typical environment. Most heroes show a reluctance to leave their home, their friends and their life to journey on a quest, but in the end, they accept their destiny. Usually there is discovery of some event or some danger that start them on their journey.

Like any ordinary young man, it may not have been easy for Jesus to leave the life he was used to; the stability of home, family and friends to venture into the unknown. Indeed, most of the films based on the story of Jesus in the gospel of Matthew depict Jesus as being very close to his mother, Mary. According to Murdock (1974), separation from the feminine is one of the stages of the hero's journey. However, Matthew does not say if Jesus was reluctant in accepting the call and his failure to mention this is in keeping with the epic hero. It also shows that Jesus was dutiful. No epic hero refuses the call though he may be reluctant. Accepting the call is an indication that Jesus is brave and has nobility of purpose. He did not hesitate to accept the call to carry out his mission. When John the Baptist hesitated to Baptise Jesus, Jesus told him 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil righteousness.' (Matt 3:15). It is not clear how Jesus gets his call, but it may have been as a result of the preaching and activities of John the Baptist that starts him on the heroic path. John the Baptist is the forerunner, the one who announces Jesus. Most epic heroes have people who announce them. John the Baptist makes his mission as a forerunner clear when quotes prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
Make paths straight for him.” (Matt 3:3)

Though it is not explicitly indicated in the text, it is after the preaching of John the Baptist that Jesus' quest starts in earnest. Jesus goes to John to be baptised like all the rest, but John is reluctant to baptise him. In the call to adventure, sometimes it is a close ally of the epic hero who is reluctant to have him accept the call. According to Matthew, Jesus has no need to be baptised in order to be forgiven because he has no sin. Yet it is right for now because Jesus must do 'all that God requires of him' to save the world. So he steps into the River Jordan, accepting his destiny, to receive God's commission and blessing.

As Jesus gets out of the water after being baptised by John the Baptist in the River Jordan, the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove and lighting on him and a voice is heard saying, “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” (3:7) Matthew has already shown that Jesus is the Messiah, David’s son. In verse 7 Jesus is affirmed as God’s son. Now his feet are set on the path of ‘the Servant whose mission is to bear the sins of his people’ (France, 2007).

### **3.4.3 Supernatural Aid**

The hero is often accompanied on the journey by a helper who assists in the series of tests and generally serves as a loyal companion. Alternately, the hero may encounter a supernatural helper in the world of adventure who fulfils this function. The Spirit of God, and possibly as John the Baptist as well because he is Jesus’ forerunner, could be an example of the Helpers in the Epic Hero cycle. The *Helpers* or *Supernatural Aid* are the wise and often strange beings that help, teach or guide the hero (Campbell, 2008). John the Baptist is indeed strange if his attire, lifestyle and preaching is any indication. In addition, these Helpers are significant in that it is a manifestation of supernatural aid to the hero, in this case Jesus Christ. More significantly however it is the Spirit of God that guides Jesus in his journey. The spirit of God is a demonstration of the supernatural assistance. This seen after his baptism when the spirit of God descended like a dove (Matt 3: 16-17).

In the voice from heaven affirming Jesus as a beloved son, there is an underlying promise that Jesus will get supernatural aid to resolve conflicts he may meet in his journey in the form of special weapons, skills, magic and information. Indeed, later in the story, there are several instances where Jesus gets supernatural aid to resolve conflicts. The first instance is the time when he was tempted in the desert. After the temptation the writer says that ‘then the devil had left him, and angels came and ministered to him’ (4:11). When he and his disciples are in danger of drowning during a storm, ‘he rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was

completely calm'(Matt 8:26). When confronted with the issue of taxation, he directs Peter to catch a fish. Peter goes to the lake, catches a fish and gets a coin from the mouth of the fish which they use to pay tax with Jesus' cryptic comment "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar..." (22:21).

#### **3.4.4. Accepting the Call**

Jesus showed his courage and obedience by accepting the Call. This is referred to as the Departure. He insists that John has to baptise him because 'it is proper to do so to fulfil all righteousness' (3:15). The heaven opening when Jesus comes out of the water as soon as he is baptised (3:16) may be symbolic of a new beginning. He has to leave the life he is used to and instead start a new one.

#### **3.4.5. Crossing the Threshold**

After accepting the call, the hero goes to the next stage in his journey, *crossing of the Threshold*. The threshold is a gateway to a new world the hero must enter to change and grow. The new world the hero is forced into is much different from the old one. Campbell (2008) describes it as a fateful region of both treasure and danger...a distant land, a forest, a kingdom underground or above the sky, a secret island, lofty mountaintop or profound dream state... a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds and impossible delight'. As he embarks on his journey the hero enters a world he has never experienced before. Very often it is filled with supernatural beings, breath-taking sights and the constant threat of death. Since this world is so scary, it is up to the hero to refuse the quest or accept the call. Whatever he does leads to separation.

In *the Gospel according to St. Matthew*, Jesus is led into the desert to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1 This is where Jesus crosses the threshold. It leads to separation no matter what he

does. It is also interesting to note that he has no say in the matter as 'he is led by the Spirit. Campbell talks of the threshold as being a gateway to a new world the hero must enter to change and grow. The experiences necessary for Jesus to change and grow if he is to succeed in his mission of saving mankind.

With the crossing of the threshold, the hero enters the Initiation stage. Other scholars call this stage Descent and challenge. Descent represents the final separation from the hero's known world and self. It is also referred to as the 'Belly of the Whale". By entering this stage, the person shows willingness to undergo a metamorphosis. According to Campbell (2008), "The idea that the passage of the magical threshold is a transit into a sphere of rebirth is symbolized in the worldwide womb image of the belly of the whale. The hero, instead of conquering or conciliating the power of the threshold, is swallowed into the unknown and would appear to have died. When Jesus goes to the desert, he showed a willingness to undergo a metamorphosis. Most initiation stages the world over are difficult. This willingness is shown in his fasting for forty days and nights

In crossing the threshold, the hero commits to leaving the Ordinary World and entering a new region or condition with unfamiliar rules and values. The hero then travels through the Road of Trials. When he enters the wilderness after his baptism, Jesus is tempted by Satan. He goes through the Road of Trials. His experience as described by Matthew in the desert compares to the dream-like world of adventure where he must undergo a series of tests. Jesus is tempted three times by the devil as often these tests occur in threes in the hero's journey motif. These trials are often violent encounters with monsters, sorcerers, warriors, or forces of nature. For Jesus the encounter is with the devils. These tasks or challenges that Jesus must undergo are part of the hero's transformation. Each successful test further proves his ability and advances the journey toward its climax.

Here Satan guards the threshold to Jesus' full service to God. Will Jesus use God's power for his own ends? Will he give in to hunger and turn stones into loaves? Will he test God's powerful authority by throwing himself from a high place? Will he place his trust in Satan, worshiping the Devil to gain power God has already promised? Three times Jesus is tested, and three times Jesus offers faithful responses. Satan has been defeated. Jesus miraculously passed his tests and ordeals in the desert. He may also have realized that he had the power to use the word of the scriptures as a weapon to defeat the devil. The devil wanted to discourage or deviate Jesus from his journey.

### **3.4.7. The Descent**

The Descent for Jesus begins after his baptism when he is led by the spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil (4:1-11). This is a test to his calling. The place Jesus is led is different from the world he is used to. Jesus ventures forth from the world he knew in Nazareth into a region of supernatural wonder that is called the desert or the wilderness His temptation is in threes. He fasts for forty days and nights and this is in essence being the first test Jesus experiences. The hunger and thirst test his endurance. This makes him vulnerable. His ability to fast for that long is a supernatural feat. He therefore discovers a part of himself that he did not know existed. That he could take that long without food.

The next challenge Jesus faces is an encounter with the devil and forces of nature. He undergoes temptation. France (1999) states that 'Temptation' suggests a purely negative experience; but this was divinely intended preparation for Jesus' mission. He further says that the word more commonly means test. The focus of the temptation is on Jesus' recently declared status as Son of God (Matt 3:17; 4:3, 6).

The temptations of Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, come in a set of threes like that of the archetypal heroes. The three tests have implications for Jesus' relationship with his Father. They examine aspects of that relationship, and the ways in which a misuse of that status could ruin his ministry. He must be ready to accept privation in fulfilling his God-given task without 'pulling rank' (2-4); to trust his Father's care without the need to test it by forcing God's hand (5-7); and to reject the 'short cut' to the fulfilment of his mission which would be achieved at the cost of compromising his loyalty to his Father (8-10).

These trials are often violent encounters with monsters, sorcerers, warriors, or forces of nature. These tasks or challenges that the hero must undergo are part of the hero's transformation. Each successful test further proves the hero's ability and advances the journey toward its climax. The protagonist is tested and found vulnerable. Each successful test further proves the hero's ability and advances the journey toward its climax, but the outcome reveals a part of him that he did not know existed.

In the first test, Satan takes advantage of Jesus in his vulnerable state to fill his mind with doubt. Jesus is faced with the temptation to be relevant because Satan tells him "If you are the son of God, take these stones and turn into bread." Jesus wins the first round of the combat by refusing to do what the devil suggests. Since the devil quotes the scriptures, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy in his interaction with Satan. What the first test reveals is that Jesus is not self-centred. He does not make use of his gifts to satisfy himself; he has nobility of character.

The next temptation is the enticement to be spectacular. Satan takes him to the holy city and sets him on the parapet of the temple and says, "If you are the son of God, throw yourself down for the scripture says: He has given his angels orders about you, and they will carry you in their arms in case you trip over a stone.' Jesus again replies, "The scripture also says: Do not put the Lord your God to a test.' Jesus would have found it easier in his ministry by doing

something spectacular to impress people but again here his humble character is revealed. He does not want to gain any glory for himself.

The last test Jesus is given is the temptation to be powerful. The devil next took him to a very high mountain, showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour and promised to give all these to Jesus if he would bow down and pay the Satan homage. Jesus again rejected a chance to be powerful. The hero may encounter a numinous phenomenon (a place or person having a divine or supernatural force) such as a haunted wood or enchanting sorceress that he must use strength, cunning, and divine assistance to overcome. Jesus met Satan in the wilderness and he had to use his strength, cunning and divine assistance to overcome him in the desert.

All these tests are meant to test the worthiness of Jesus and his quest. In passing the tests, this further proves that he is a hero because he has defeated the enemy that would make him forget his quest.

One of our greatest tests on the journey is to differentiate real helpers from "tempters." Tempters try to pull the hero away from his path. They use fear, doubt or distraction. Jesus relies on his sense of purpose and judgment and the advice of his mentor, the spirit of God, to help him recognize true helpers. This is what Jesus does; he is able to differentiate true helpers from tempters.

The hero's epic adversary is often a "god-despiser," one who has more respect for his own mental and physical abilities than for the power of the gods. The adversary might also be a good man sponsored by lesser deities, or one whom the gods desert at a crucial moment. For Jesus it was Satan, the religious leaders as well as Judas Iscariot.



In the journey the hero walks in the road of tests and trials. This for Jesus was also in the form of opposition from the religious authorities of the day who see him as a threat to the religious establishment of the day. Jesus too feels they mislead people by their teachings about God. This can only lead to one thing, death for Jesus. In the epic hero cycle, the element of the underworld and the final battle is crucial. In medieval epics, a questing knight must overcome temptations that threaten to lead him astray. This is the climax of the journey where all will be lost or gained, and the hero will encounter fear or death. Jesus is encouraged in his quest during the transfiguration. Jesus took Peter, James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain by themselves. Matthew says that;

‘There in their presence he was transfigured: his face shone like the sun and his clothes became dazzling as light. And suddenly Moses and Elijah appeared; they were talking to him.’

This is almost akin to what happens to Achilles when the goddess Athena takes human form. Hogan calls this the impersonation of a mortal by divinity. There are divine beings that have impersonated human in the form of Moses and Elijah and just like in Book XIII Poseidon, a god takes the form of Kalkhas and encourages two warriors, Matthew does not say what Moses and Elijah were telling Jesus, but it could be safely assumed that they were encouraging him for the ordeal ahead. In Book 11 Odysseus has given Thersites a good blow and stands to address the assembly again and the goddess impersonating a crier orders everyone to be quiet when they are making too much noise and are not listening to Odysseus. Homer says that Athena was the herald.

The climax for Jesus is during his betrayal and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the final battle where he encounters fear and death by crucifixion. In the Garden of Gethsemane the fear of death is real. Being part human, he has emotions that other human

beings have. This is recounted in the Passion narratives. The hero must reach a low point when he nearly gives up his quest or appears defeated. This happens after Jesus has been suffered and is on the cross. When he is crucified, the worst pain Jesus suffers is not only the physical agony, nor the abuse and taunting by the chief priests, scribes and elders. His worst agony was in the fact that he feels God has abandoned him. The last words he speaks are “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?”

According to Hogan (1979), the concern for the Homeric warrior is honour and reputation but Jesus does not do any of the things he is being taunted to do; like rescuing himself. It does not occur to Jesus to give up. For any onlooker, including the disciples who deserted him, everything seems a lost cause. Another important stage in the journey of the Hero is the Climax/The Final Battle: This is the critical moment in the hero's journey in which there is often a final battle with a monster, wizard, or warrior which facilitates the particular resolution of the adventure.

The two great epic adversaries, the hero and his antagonist, meet at the climax, which must be delayed as long as possible to sustain maximum interest. One such device for delaying this confrontation is the nephelistic rescue (utilized by Homer to rescue Paris from almost certain death and defeat at the hands of Menelaus in the Iliad).

He has to fight his last battle; the battle with the monster of death. As he dies, he appears defeated. It almost seems that Jesus and his story is over, but this is not the case. According to tradition, the hero establishes his *aristeia* (nobility) through single combat in *superari a superiore*, honour coming from being vanquished by a superior foe. That is, a hero gains little honour by slaying a lesser mortal, but only by challenging heroes like himself or adversaries of superhuman power. Jesus has challenged a superior foe; death, and conquered it. He does this by resurrecting from the dead.

In the case of Jesus, his death, in a twist, was the ultimate victory. Matthew recounts the events following his death and here there is a manifestation of the supernatural in many forms. It is here where in the other gospels he descended to the world of the dead. In most cases descent into the world of the dead is symbolic of a burial after death. True to his word though, Jesus resurrects after three days. This is the *Return*: The hero again crosses the threshold of adventure and returns to the everyday world of daylight. The return usually takes the form of an awakening, rebirth, resurrection, or a simple emergence from a cave or forest. Sometimes the hero is pulled out of the adventure world by a force from the daylight world. Jesus resurrects from death.

### **3.4.8. Flight**

The final stage of the hero's journey is Flight: After accomplishing the mission, the hero must return to the threshold of adventure and prepare for a return to the everyday world. If the hero has angered the opposing forces by stealing the elixir or killing a powerful monster, the return may take the form of a hasty flight. If the hero has been given the elixir freely, the flight may be a benign stage of the journey. After his resurrection, Jesus prepares to return to his everyday life in heaven from where he came. It may be that he took the elixir, eternal life by killing the monster of death.

The hero will often meet a woman after the final battle, maybe a mother figure. In Matthew's gospel, it is interesting to note that the first people Jesus met after his resurrection were women; specifically, Mary Magdalene (28:8-11).

After his journey, the hero experiences atonement and recognition by the Father. The hero reconciles with the father figure, not always a literal father as he may be represented by a spiritual figure. There is also the aspect of the ultimate boon; the hero must bring back to the society to restore peace. Jesus, in his Great Commission (28:18-20) restores peace to his

troubled disciples. After the commission, he bids his disciples farewell and ostensibly returns to his father. In the epic hero cycle, the hero returns to the home turf where he is saved from further pursuit.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

From the abovementioned, it is clear that that Jesus Christ as depicted in *the Gospel according to St Matthew*, is an epic hero. Though Jesus does not have all the characteristics of the epic hero as suggested by Harmon and Hugh (2000) and though the story of his life does not fulfil all the stages of the hero's journey, nevertheless, it can be read as an epic (Campbell (2008)). This suggestion is no exception. Like all other epic heroes, Jesus fulfils some of the characteristic of an epic hero hence deserves academic appreciation. Such characteristic includes a noble birth (Miraculous Birth Motif) being capable of deeds of great strength and courage and a great Warrior (Cultural Hero Motif), travels over a vast Setting (Journey Motif,), national heroism (Sacrificial self-Motif), humility, faces supernatural foes and/or receives supernatural help ((Miraculous Deeds Motif.)

## CHAPTER FOUR: JESUS CHRIST BEYOND THE EPIC HERO

### 4.1. Introduction

Jesus Christ is one of the most significant figures in the history of the world. His life and ministry resulted in what Drane (1999) describes as one of the most remarkable religious and social movements the world has ever seen. It is no exaggeration to claim that no other epic hero from the ancient world has made such a lasting impact on world history than Jesus Christ. This is all the more surprising in light of the relative lack of mention of Jesus among the classical epic heroes. He is known more as a religious figure. The story of Jesus has the capacity to speak to people of different cultures, in all periods of history, in a way that is highly distinctive, maybe unique. Though written by in generally remote places of the ancient Roman Empire, the message Jesus has still speaks with great power to spiritual searchers in all times and places (Drane, 1999).

Tyson (1950) says that art and literature is a seething cauldron of meanings in flux because there can be a large range of meanings within a text. Because of this large range of meanings, even though Jesus Christ is mentioned more in theological circles than in literature, he can be examined from the perspective of the epic hero and how he transcends other epic heroes. The reason for this is because he had some unique qualities that have made him to be entrenched in world history. It almost seems presumptuous to attempt to compress what we know of the unique qualities of Jesus into a few pages. As the apostle John said, "Jesus did many things and if every one of them was written down, even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written (John 21:25).

This chapter therefore, will attempt to identify those unique qualities that Jesus had that make him to transcend the other epic heroes mentioned in literature. This will be done by first looking at Jesus and the kingdom of God, his effect on history, his quest, Christianity and its

universality, then finally, identifying the qualities that are exclusive to Jesus and not found in other epic heroes and how these have contributed to Jesus' prominence in history unlike the other epic heroes.

#### **4.2. Jesus and the Kingdom of God**

Carriere (1989), talking about great epics, points out that whether composed by unknown poets, transmitted orally and reshaped from century to century, or written by a single known author, epics relate to the birth of a culture, the early days of a nation or a kingdom, sometimes even to the creation of the universe. Their setting is often an age when human beings first began to exist outside the realm of the gods. Their heroes are denizens of a zone midway between the temporal and the eternal. The larger-than-life heroes around whom the epic centres should therefore be acclaimed for the birth of a culture, the early days of a nation or an empire and sometimes even for the creation of the universe.

Jesus Christ, being the figure around whom Christianity is centred, though of humble birth, was a visionary leader. At the very beginning of his public career, he spurns as an unworthy temptation, the offer of glory and territory, the suggestion that he seek to carry out his aims through political means (Matt 4:8-11). He consistently bucks the pressure of the crowd. Although Jesus was the most powerful leader ever, he spends his time telling stories, not raising an army. As a true Messiah, he seeks not to satisfy the people's false image of him but to please God. This is because there were people, called the Zealots, who became most involved in direct action against the Romans. Their overriding conviction was that they could have no master but God, and for them that implied driving out the Romans. At least one of Jesus' disciples, a man called Simon, was a Zealot, and it is often thought that Judas was one as well (Drane, 1999). These disciples are struggling with preconceived mind-sets; they expect Jesus to free them from the Roman rule. The disciples desired an earthly Kingdom. No doubt he knew that any attempt to carry out his aims politically was not the best means for

the sustainability of his ministry on earth because when all is said and done, politicians and their political establishments come and go.

From the very outset Jesus knows that he has not come to establish an earthly kingdom contrary to the then expectations of the Jews of the Messiah that had been prophesied who was to establish an earthly kingdom. He was aware that his mission was to restore the human race back to the right relationship with God. As narrated in Genesis, the relationship was broken after the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden because of disobedience (Gen 3). God had promised through Abraham and other Old Testament prophets that he would raise a leader who would bring his people back to fellowship with God. This promise had gotten distorted because of the urge to be free of the Romans over the years and no doubt Jesus wanted to put this back into the right perspective.

The teachings and activities of Jesus Christ relate to the birth of a culture, a new way of life. The Gospel writers each explain this in their own individual way, making their accounts of Jesus like one of the styles used by epic poets, parataxis. In the sense that like in epics, these different fragments in the gospels combine to make one whole. Most epic heroes have one version of their story written. Jesus rises above other epic heroes because he is accredited with the establishment of a unique universal kingdom; a spiritual kingdom. The Synoptics present Jesus from the start as charged with one message, compelling and irresistible, that the kingdom of God was at hand. The kingdom of God is therefore presented in three ways. Firstly, it forms the heart of Jesus' teaching and secondly, it is confirmed by his mighty works and thirdly, the kingdom of God is inextricably connected with Jesus' person as the Son of Man.

Jesus has a dynamic view of the kingdom of God. His conception of the Kingdom of God had continuity with Old Testament promises as well as shared certain features with apocalyptic

Judaism, particularly Daniel, but went beyond them in certain respects. The first respect was that the Kingdom of God was primarily a dynamic rather a geographical entity. Secondly it was connected with the destiny of the Son of Man and thirdly, entrance into it was not based on the covenant or confined to Jewish participation and lastly, whereas in apocalypticism it was a vague future hope, in Jesus it is definite and imminent; in fact, it demands immediate response (Caragounis, 1992).

With the apocalyptists Jesus held that the kingdom of God was no human achievement but an act of God. Jesus is acclaimed for the birth of a kingdom that is different from those created by other epic heroes. However, unlike them, he did not expect the kingdom of God to follow on upheaval and catastrophe, but to appear in an obtrusive manner. Nevertheless, the catastrophic element for Jesus lay in the upheaval his call caused to his followers' relations with their family and even their own self. This means that Jesus' disciples should be willing to hate their own life in order to be worthy of him, worthy of the kingdom of God.

The other kingdoms established the traditional epics required people to hate their enemies and their own lives; whether the enemies were real or perceived. Jesus reminds his listeners during the Sermon on the Mount that, 'You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" (Matt 5:38). Jesus is the personification of love and instead tells people to love their enemies and pray for those who hate them (Matt 5:44). This is not the case of the epic heroes whose activities are not based on love but on vengeance. There is a lot of killing and counter killing because of reprisal. For example, in the *Iliad* during the Trojan War, the Greeks do not love the Trojans; they are enemies of each other and therefore are at war. Achilles kills many Trojans in a bid to pay them back for killing Protoklus, his beloved companion. In *Beowulf*, the reader is first introduced to Beowulf as he disembarks from his ship; having just arrived in the land of the Danes (Scyldings) from his home in Geatland. He



has arrived to help the Scyldings; for 12 years, a mighty man-like ogre named Grendel has menaced King Hrothgar's great mead-hall, Heorot, terrorizing and devouring the Danes.

Beowulf kills Grendel in an impressive combat. Seeking to avenge the death of her son and recover his claw, the mother attacks Heorot the next night, surprising everyone. In the morning, Beowulf tracks her to a dark, swampy mere where she and her son live in a cave at the bottom of the lake and kills her as well. Jesus insists that people should forgive their enemies so as to live in harmony. Nowhere in the story of Jesus is it mentioned that he was vengeful or that he killed anyone. He insists that people should forgive their enemies (Matt 6:14)

#### **4.2.1. The Love of Jesus**

The life and teachings of Jesus are universal; relevant and applicable anywhere in the world. This is because the gospel that Jesus taught is based on love; perfect unconditional love. Epics have themes and the theme of the story of Jesus is love. This cannot be compared with the theme of the *Iliad* which is anger; the anger of Achilles. Anger cannot be the foundation of a religion because it is a negative emotion that creates fear and it is also self-centred. Jesus knew that everywhere in the world, people respond better to love than to hate. This is well brought out in the *Sermon on the Mount*.

It is Morris (1987) who says that Jesus brought into the world a new emphasis on love which he demonstrated in his own life and which he made clear he expected of his disciples to produce too. For him, love depends on the nature of the lover rather on the beloved. He adds that Jesus loved because he was a loving person not because he found attractive qualities in those he loved. He therefore expected his followers to be loving people, not simply to be drawn to attractive people.

In the Gospels 'to love is *agapao* which is used sixty-three times in the gospels while *Phileo* occurs twenty-one -times. The noun *agape* is found is found nine times; *philia* not at all. There is a clear reference to agape words in the Gospels, but the important thing is not so much the words chosen as the meanings and associations the evangelists put in them. Matthew has the love words a total of seventeen times, Mark nine, Luke eighteen and John fifty-seven. John has them more than all the others put together (Caragounis, 1992)

Love is a prerequisite for a religion to be meaningful and beneficial to man. Jesus understood this. His mission on earth therefore was because of love; sacrificial love, the type of love that gives. This love was universal and unconditional. He showed his selfless love by giving his time, listening, touching, teaching, and healing the sick; exorcizing the demon-possessed and setting the oppressed free. His ultimate act of sacrificial love is his death on the cross. As he says, "The son of man did not come to be served but to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28).

It is because of Jesus' love for humanity that he is unlike other epic heroes. Most epic heroes loved glory more. Jesus is described as always doing good deeds because of the love he had for people; showing compassion and healed the sick and fed the hungry (for example in Matt 14:14-21). In all the epics read, no hero ever performed an act if it was not to bring him some form of glory. For example, Odysseus has courage, nobility, a sharp intellect but with a thirst for glory. Sometimes his glory-seeking gets in the way of his home-seeking. He sacks the land of the Cyclopes but loses men in the process. He waits too long in the cave of Polyphemus, enjoying his free milk and the cheese he finds, and is trapped when the Cyclops return. Odysseus' love for glory prompts him to reveal his true identity to the Cyclops and this brings Poseidon's wrath on him. He is not willing to temper pride with patience until

much later in the story. Jesus, during the time he was alive, never revealed his identity even when it could have brought him glory

Jesus does not rely on his powers to intimidate or impress people in the *Gospel according to Matthew*. Throughout his ministry, Jesus shows annoyance with people who flock to see a popular leader do something supernatural. He wants from them not applause but commitment. Gradually he relies more on parables, which, in private, he would explain to his disciples. Drane (1999) says that Jesus believed he was but never claimed to be the Messiah. He also never boasted about his miracles but instead is humble and does not rely on his physical appearance or strength to accomplish his purpose. He is presented in the gospel as someone who is more interested in people than ideas. He continually ministers to them; teaching, preaching, healing feeding the hungry and even raising the dead. He does these so that people can be committed to God.

Jesus is better in terms of character than Beowulf who is described as an impressive-looking man. The Scylding coastal guard points out that he has never seen "a mightier noble, / a larger man" (247-48) even though he has held this office and served his king, Hrothgar, for many years, watching all kinds of warriors come and go. The crowds are impressed with Jesus' wisdom, but he does not require fame in order to do what he does. Beowulf is huge and strong. We are soon told that he has the strength of 30 men in his hand-grip. Just as important is the way that the young warrior (not much more than 20 years of age) carries himself; the Geat has the bearing of a noble leader, a champion, perhaps a prince. However, even though he has come to save the Scyldings, his actions are not motivated by love, but fame. Jesus came to save men but not because he wanted fame.

In a seminal lecture, often anthologized, English novelist and scholar Tolkien (1936) argues that the central structural motif of *Beowulf* is the balance between beginnings and endings, of youth and age. The most dominating example of this is the life of Beowulf himself. When he arrives in Hrothgar's kingdom, the hero of the epic is still a very young man. He is out to establish a name for himself. Reputation is a key theme of the poem and of central importance to Beowulf. As the coastal guard first approaches the Geats, he asks about Beowulf's lineage. Beowulf mentions his father's accomplishments and reputation as well as his king, Hygelac, and his people, the Geats. To King Hrothgar, he properly reveals more: Beowulf once killed a tribe of giants and has driven enemies from his homeland. He already has a favorable reputation, but he is eager for more achievements that will add to his good name. In the world of *Beowulf*, a man's good name is his key to immortality. It is all that remains after death. Part of the motivation for the Beowulf's coming to the land of the Danes is to gain more *fame*. This is different from Jesus who is not after fame. In *the Gospel according to Matthew*, the word fame is not used as unabashedly as it is used in *Beowulf*.

A more important reason for coming to Hrothgar's aid is directly related to a family debt. This is almost similar to Jesus' coming on earth; he came because of a promise to send a messiah to restore Man back into fellowship with god but there the similarity ends. In the *Beowulf*, years before, Hrothgar sheltered Beowulf's father, Ecgtheow, from a dangerous feud and purchased a settlement of the conflict with the Geat's enemies, a procedure incorporating *wergild* (man-payment or man-worth). Beowulf has come to repay Hrothgar's generosity.

The account of Beowulf is very different from that of Jesus. Beowulf may seem noble, but his actions are not motivated by love. He depends on his superior strength to gain a reputation for himself. Beowulf believes that reputation and a good name is the key to his immortality. In

Jesus' story, reputation is not the key theme. A good name is not the key to his immortality. He does not think or act or think like Beowulf. Whenever he does anything awe inspiring like a miracle, he does it out of compassion. For example, when he feeds the Four Thousand he tell his disciples, "I have compassion for these people. They have already been with me for three days. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way," (Matt 15:32). It is because he genuinely wants to help people out of love and concern. In addition, he is not out to make a name for himself.

For any religion to succeed, the Supreme Being must get all the glory. Whatever Jesus does, he diverts the glory from himself to God the Father. Whenever he performs major miracles, he talks to God. This is demonstrated in the when he raises Lazarus back to life. He prays to God first. In the Gospels, Jesus never comes out outright to admit that he is God. Even during the trial, asked if he is the son of God, he does not admit he is. He has the powers to perform miracles that would bring him glory, but he never does that; not even when it is necessary. For example, during his arrest, one of his disciples (in some accounts it is believed it was the apostle Peter) reached for his sword and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Jesus does something contrary to expectation. He says;

"Put your sword back in its place, for all who live by the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:52).

After his resurrection, he does not punish those who had killed him so as to prove he was mightier than his killers. He does not have a thirst for fame like Beowulf nor for glory like Odysseus. He instead heals the servant of the high priest; the last miracle he performs before his death. Jesus was not vengeful or murderous like the epic heroes whose actions resulted in a lot of hatred because of needless manslaughter; sometimes for no meaningful reasons save for a mundane one like fighting over a woman, the way Aeneas did in the Aeneid.

In Virgil's *Aeneid*, during the wanderings of Aeneas as every hero must in their journey, Aeneas next arrives at the mouth of the Tiber where the fulfilment of a prophecy confirms that his voyage is over. Recognizing in him the foreigner his diviners have predicted will marry his daughter Lavinia, Latinus, the King of the region, welcomes Aeneas with open arms. Juno, the goddess of however, returns to the charge. Arousing the jealousy of Turnus, a suitor of Lavinia who cannot bear to be set aside in favour of the newly arrived stranger, she sets the scene for a desperate struggle. A long series a combat ensues in which the warriors of both camps distinguish themselves by brilliant individual exploits. Finally, weary of the useless carnage, the two sides make a solemn pact to leave the resolution of their quarrel to the outcome of a single combat between Aeneas and Turnus. Aeneas, of course, emerges victorious and at this point the epic draws to a close.

These fights were done without any real love for the object. It was more like Bull fighting or Cock fighting for sport. It is Gilgamesh who says to Enkidu in the Cedar Forest when the secret desire to transcend death by achievement of fame and glory is taking shape: *"If I fall, I will establish a name for myself... An everlasting name I will establish for myself."* Jesus never fought any battle for battles sake. In the history of the world, he is one of the few great heroes who died without ever shedding any blood. Mahatma Gandhi respected Jesus greatly for his nonviolent approach especially about the aspect of turning the other cheek.

The kingdom that Jesus comes to establish, then, is not a kingdom of bloodshed but of love. It embraces people of all races, culture and spiritual divide. In his proclamation of the kingdom of God, Jesus was standing firmly on the Old Testament ground while at the same time proclaiming a subject that made every Jewish heart throb of God. Yet Jesus took this concept and transformed it from a narrow-minded nationalistic hope to a universal, spiritual order in which humankind could find fulfilment of its ultimate desires for righteousness, justice,

peace, happiness, freedom from sin and guilt, and a restored relationship to God-an order in which God was king (Canougis,1992).

Another unique feature that distinguishes Jesus Christ from the rest of the epic heroes is the founding of the doctrines that led to Christianity. The kingdom of God, as instituted by Jesus Christ, because of its meant for all mankind, was destined to be an everlasting kingdom. Compared the other earthly kingdoms sung about in the traditional epics like Rome that was established by Aeneas or the other kingdoms of the world or established by renowned leaders, it does not end (Drane, 1999). No less a personality than Napoleon Bonaparte, the French emperor observed this.

He points out:

"You speak of Caesar, of Alexander, of their conquests and of the enthusiasm which they enkindled in the hearts of their soldiers; but can you conceive of a dead man making conquests, with an army faithful and entirely devoted to his memory? My armies have forgotten me even while living, as the Carthaginian army forgot Hannibal. Such is our power."

"I know men and I tell you, Jesus Christ is no mere man. Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I have founded empires. But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force. Jesus Christ founded his empire upon love; and at this hour, millions would die for him."

"I search in vain history to find similar to Jesus Christ, or anything which can approach the gospel. Neither history nor humanity, nor ages, nor nature, offer me anything with which I am able to compare it or to explain it. Here everything is extraordinary" (Jesus Christ's Effect on History, 2000).

As can be deduced from what Bonaparte said, Jesus is more dominant than the most powerful world leaders and he has greater influence. This is because Bonaparte talks of Jesus 'making

conquests from the grave.” Though Jesus is not physically present in the world, his devotees are obedient and faithful to him. According to him, Jesus is incomparable. He does not use force but uses love which is more effective in the founding of his empire. People respond better to love than to hate.

Jesus has the wisdom and foresight to carefully lay the groundwork for Christianity, and he uses the universally invincible weapon of love. His character is based on the principle of sacrificial love. His quest to establish the kingdom of God is motivated by this; the love of God and the love of Jesus had that he accepted to die as a sacrifice to prevent all men who believe in him from perishing (John 3:16). The people he influences are devoted to him and his memory and therefore continue with what he started even without his physical presence. It must be noted that he has such great love and commitment for his disciples that during the Great Commission, he promises them “And surely I will be to be with you always, to the very end of age.” He later does this by sending them a helper, the Holy Spirit, to further teach them in spreading the gospel to help the whole world (Matt 28: 16).

#### **4.2.2. The Quest of Jesus Christ**

Jesus is an epic hero and every epic hero as a rule has a quest. It is the attainment of the quest that determines the hero status. One of the unique qualities that Jesus had is that he is focused. Before starting on his quest, he put into place a design or a master plan to ensure he succeeds in his mission. He knows what his quest was even if it means disillusionment from the masses; the Jews who expected him to free them from the Roman rule, and he is refuses to be side-tracked.

The quest of Jesus was totally distinct from that of the other epic heroes because of its very nature; it was a spiritual quest. He had a mission to establish the kingdom of Heaven. McKnight (1992) suggests that in general we can say the kingdom of Heaven is God’s reign



through Jesus Christ over all people and that those who repent and believe in Jesus enter God's reign in the present. He had not come to establish an earthly empire like other epic heroes even though the great expectation at that time was for Jesus to rescue the Jews from the harsh Roman rule. He makes it clear at the outset that he would not do that. During the Temptation Satan offers him an opportunity to rule the world (Matthew 4:8-9) but Jesus adamantly refuses. He is not out to do anything for personal glory but only wants to obey his father and he had his work laid out. He refuses to be diverted from his mission of bringing man back into fellowship with God.

According to Alexander & Alexander (1999), God made a covenant with the people of Israel. They were to be his special people through whom the whole world would be blessed. In response to God's love and care, and to fulfil his purpose, they were to keep God's laws and be faithful to him. But time and again they failed. And so their prophets began to speak of a new covenant, one that would keep because it would be 'written in their hearts': not something external but a new life within. This new covenant is what Christians believe, is what Jesus made possible through his life, death and resurrection.

Jesus is above giving in to the tempter or being lured by temptation and this makes him successful in his quest. He knows the dangers of temptation and so does not long for temptation's sweet lure.

According to the myth in *the Odyssey*, there were sirens on an island that lured sailors to their death with their sweet songs. With their ears plugged the crew member's sail safely by the Sirens' island, while Odysseus, longing to hear the Sirens' sweet song, is saved from folly only by his foresighted command to his crew to keep him bound to the ship's mast. Unlike Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Jesus does not tell his disciples to restrain him from falling into temptation at any given time He does is on his own. For example when he predicts his death

for the first time, Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him that it shall never happen. Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me Satan. You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men (Matt 16:22-23). Jesus never had to tell his disciples to remind him to keep sight of his goal. Odysseus does not lead by example. He is rightfully described as a man ‘of twists and turns.’ His inconsistency does not inspire confidence for a worldwide religion. The fact that Jesus was reliable made the disciples to have confidence in and believe his quest. Jesus, unlike Odysseus, was a leader who inspired confidence.

Another epic hero who had a quest but is surpassed by Jesus is *Gilgamesh*. According to Bottero (1987), the ancient Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, written over thirty-five years is the oldest extant epic in world history. He says that the author took as his hero Gilgamesh, the central figure of these tales, and a former monarch of the country, who must have reigned in the ancient city of Uruk in the middle of the third millennium BC. He further adds that the name of the name of Gilgamesh does not tell us about his title and we have no other information about him apart from what is recounted in the old legends. Bottero also says that yet despite his royal title, duly brought to the reader’s attention throughout the epic, Gilgamesh figures in the narrative neither in a political or military role for his battles and victories nor even as a national hero. He is portrayed simply as a man, as a preeminent model and a representative of each member of the human community. Throughout his work, his overriding concern is neither with conquest, the retention of power and glory, nor with prosperity of his country and the diffusion of its culture, but with the desperate search for a solution to the most terrible of all problems- how to face up to death. The Gilgamesh epic is first and foremost an account of drama of the human condition as personified by the ancient king of Uruk, with his adventures, dreams, hopes, sufferings and his final acceptance of failure.

Gilgamesh may compare with Jesus in the sense that Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospel narratives, he features neither in a political nor military role for his battles and victories nor even as a national hero. He does this contrary to popular expectations. Like Gilgamesh, Jesus' superseding concern is neither with conquest, the retention of power and glory nor with prosperity of his country. In both the Jesus and Gilgamesh narratives, the heroes do not commit any murders. The bloodletting is done by others. But here the comparison ends. Jesus is not portrayed simply as a man. Unlike Gilgamesh, Jesus is not out for desperate search for a solution to the most terrible of all problems- how to face up to death. Jesus already knows that there is life after death and because he relies on a higher power than himself, he is not in a desperate search but lays the ground to ensure that his quest is fruitful. Jesus does not accept failure the way Gilgamesh did. Gilgamesh accepts his failure in the quest for immortality.

A comparison between Jesus and Gilgamesh reveals that Jesus has certain unique qualities pertaining to his quest that Gilgamesh does not have. Gilgamesh's quest is personal and not universal like that of Jesus Christ, so Gilgamesh carries it out in a very selfish and strong-willed manner. His quest is motivated by the death of his friend Enkidu. Gilgamesh is a king who does not want to die. At the start of the seventh tablet, after a terrible nightmare in which he sees the gods in council condemn him to death, Enkidu suddenly falls ill, goes into gradual decline and expires into the arms of his despairing friend, Gilgamesh. At first Gilgamesh is unwilling to believe he is dead, refusing to even heed the hideous appearance gradually taken on by the dead man's corpse "until the worm fell upon his face". For the first time the hero is experiencing real death and seeing the unbearable image and presentiment of his own death conjured by the sudden death of his friend. He therefore says, "When I die, shall I not be like unto Enkidu? Sorrow has entered my heart."

To rid himself of the thought with which he is now obsessed and to find the remedy for death, whose true face has been so cruelly revealed to him, Gilgamesh sets off in quest of the secret of eternal life. This shows that he is a coward, afraid of death. His quest is motivated by fear. Jesus' quest, on the other hand, was motivated by love and obedience. Jesus says that whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it (Matt16:25). Jesus is not interested in his own eternal life but that of mankind because this is in line with his quest of the new covenant; the eternal life that man will share with God. Jesus is different from Gilgamesh in the sense that he predicts his death three times and is determined to go through the ordeal and not escape it like Gilgamesh wants to.

On his journey, Gilgamesh never takes time to listen to advice but demands his own way. For example, he encounters the mysterious nymph Siduri (the ale-wife) who advises him on the futility of attaining immortality and the alternative but lost in the dream of attaining eternal life, he does not heed her words but continues on his way. Later when he gets to Utnapishtim, he is given tests by the only man who was granted immortality by the gods for the sake of perpetuating the human race when the gods in their anger destroyed everyone, he miserably fails the tests and returns home depressed.

A defeated, dejected leader does not inspire confidence. Gilgamesh is a king who does not want to die but is faced with the sure knowledge that he is predestined, like everyone else, to die. Jesus knows that he is predestined to die but unlike Gilgamesh he recognises that he is able to defeat death. He therefore does not fear death. As he says in Matthew, he is willing to lay down his life and no one can take it away from him. Jesus proves this by resurrecting. Whereas Gilgamesh is scared of dying, Jesus knows he can only fulfil his quest by dying. This quality in Jesus supersedes Gilgamesh. Life after death is a strong basis for most religions in the world. These include Christianity and Islam. Jesus' resurrection is the basis

for Christianity. Christians believe that they will rise again like Jesus, so they are never afraid of death. This fact draws many people from all over the world to the Christian faith.

When the friend of Jesus known as Lazarus dies, Jesus does not despair but proves used his divine power to raise him from the dead and actually uses the situation to his advantage to reinforce the fact that he has power over death. It is possible that Lazarus, like Enkidu, had already started decomposing when Jesus raised him back from the dead after three days. As Martha points out to Jesus, Lazarus was already stinking. Jesus was unmoved by Martha's protests. He goes ahead and not only brings Lazarus back to life but restores his decomposed body as well.

Further, unlike Jesus, Gilgamesh could not have been responsible for activities that led to universal spiritualism because of his character. He is too despondent and disheartened for having failed in his quest. Distinct from Jesus who never admitted defeat, he just looked for a scribe to note everything down in tablets for future generations, for as Bottero (1987) suggests, the epic may have been set down in writing by order of Gilgamesh himself on his return from his lengthy travels, "weary and worn" after having "seen all and committed everything to memory". He wanted to pass on to posterity the essential lessons of a person's life. Jesus, confident in what he had taught his disciples, ordered them to spread his teachings to the world (Matt 28:16-20). From the gospel narratives, it is evident that his disciples obeyed this command by putting his teachings in writing so that the whole gets the teachings.

### **4.3 Jesus and his effect on History**

Jesus' only credentials were himself. He never wrote a book, commanded an army, held a political office, or owned property. He mostly traveled within a hundred miles of his village, attracting crowds who were amazed at his provocative words and stunning deeds.

Yet Jesus' greatness was obvious to all those who saw and heard him. And while most great people eventually fade into history books, Jesus is still the focus of thousands of books and unparalleled media controversy. And much of that controversy revolves around the radical claims Jesus made about himself—claims that astounded both his followers and his adversaries.

It was primarily Jesus' unique claims that caused him to be viewed as a threat by both the Roman authorities and the Jewish hierarchy. Although he was an outsider with no credentials or political powerbase, within three years, Jesus changed the world for the next twenty centuries. Other moral and religious leaders have left an impact—but nothing like that unknown carpenter's son from Nazareth.

What was it about Jesus Christ that made the difference? Was he merely a great man, or something more? Jesus is different from other epic heroes because of his effect and impact on history. It is true that one of the qualities of the epic hero is that he must be a historical figure. There are many heroes who are historical figures, but their stories are so shrouded in mythology such that sometimes it gets difficult to distinguish history from fantasy. Occasionally this is the case in Jesus, too, especially with regards to the miracle narratives like when he walked on water or turned water into wine. However, no hero has had the kind of impact on the world history like Jesus Christ. This has been noted by several scholars.

Historian Schaff (1858) describes the overwhelming influence which Jesus had on subsequent history and culture of the world. He says: "This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science...he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, he spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or

poet; without writing a single line, he set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times.”

Clearly from the studies carried out on epic heroes, none has been described the way Schaff (1598) describes Jesus. This further proves that Jesus transcends the epic heroes as they have been relegated to where they belong; in folk lore. Because of Jesus’ influence on history, more books have been written about him than about any other person in history. Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. Durant (1972) says that the triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy. This may be because Jesus is not a dictator but gives people free choice to follow him or not. His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals. Schools, hospitals, and humanitarian works have been founded in Jesus’ name. Over one hundred great universities—including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, Columbia, and Oxford – were begun by his followers (Bright, 1979).

The elevated role of women in Western culture traces its roots back to Jesus. As we shall see later, women in Jesus’ day were considered inferior and virtual nonpersons until his teaching was followed. Slavery was abolished in Britain and America due to Jesus’ teaching that each human life is valuable (Matt 6:25-34). Ramm (1957) points out that amazingly, Jesus made all of this impact as a result of just a three-year period of public ministry. When renowned author and world historian, Wells was asked who has left the greatest legacy on history, he replied, “By this test Jesus stands first.” These facts about Jesus have contributed to the spread of Christianity worldwide.

Yale historian Pelikan (1987) maintains that regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. It is from his birth that most of the human race

dates its calendars; it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray. There are other heroes who have been talked about a lot because they are power houses in their culture, just as Achilles was called the best of the Achaeans, but Achilles lacked the qualities that could result in a universal religion because of his anger and vengeful behaviour. Regarding the question as to whether Jesus is real, or he is a myth, Pelikan argues that if he did not exist, one must wonder how a myth could so alter history. There is an on-going debate on Jesus' reality perpetrated by the proponents of the Christ myth theory like Acharya & Murdock (2011).

#### **4.3.1. Christ Myth theory**

Chapman (2011) totally discredits the Christ Myth theory in a well-researched paper, *Was Jesus a Real Person?* In this article he explores the reasons for and against this theory. He wrote this article because of some people who have proposed that Jesus was not a real figure but a figment of mythology. This is because numerous people have wondered if Jesus really existed or if he is only just a fictitious character. For nearly two thousand years most of our world has considered Jesus a real man who had exceptional character, leadership and power over nature. But today some are saying he never existed. The argument against Jesus' existence, known as the *Christ-myth theory*, began seventeen centuries after Jesus is said to have walked the rocky hills of Judea.

Mythology refers to the field of knowledge dealing with the systematic collection, study, and interpretation of myths. The word *mythology* (from Greek, *muthologia*, storytelling: *muthos*, story + *logos*, speech) refers to a body of myths and legends that a particular culture believes to be true about itself and its ancestors, heroes, and deities. The term *myth* commonly refers to the mythology of ancient Greece and Rome. These myths were passed on via the oral tradition until they were later written down, and for many ancient peoples, these myths were



an irrefutable reality, generated by social needs and a product of cultural concerns. While legends are based largely on historical events and are focused on human heroes, myths are considered to be symbolic stories that explain natural phenomena, the creation of the world, and the establishment of civilization, the nature of humanity, and the organization of the universe (Chapman, 2011).

One of the advocates of the Christ myth theory is Walker (1983, 237). She believes that "Scholars' efforts to eliminate paganism from the Gospels in order to find a historical Jesus have proved as hopeless as searching for a core in an onion." She claims that the "gospel" story of Jesus is not a factual portrayal of a historical "master" who walked the earth 2,000 years ago. It is a myth built upon other myths and god men, who in turn were personifications of the ubiquitous sun god myths. Walker quotes what Massey says to support her argument;

The Christ of the gospels is in no sense an historical personage or a supreme model of humanity, a hero who strove, and suffered, and failed to save the world by his death. It is impossible to establish the existence of an historical character even as an impostor. For such a one the two witnesses, astronomical mythology and Gnosticism, completely prove an alibi. The Christ is a popular lay-figure that never lived, and a lay-figure of Pagan origin; a lay-figure that was once the Ram and afterwards the Fish; a lay-figure that in human form was the portrait and image of a dozen different gods. .

Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, summarizes the Christ-myth view on CNN TV *Larry King Live*:

There is not one shred of secular evidence there was ever a Jesus Christ... Jesus is a compilation from other gods...who had same origins, the same death as the mythological Jesus Christ.

When Larry King asked if she does not believe there was ever a Jesus Christ, Johnson fired back, "There was not...there is no secular evidence that Jesus Christ ever existed."

Another scholar who considered Jesus a myth was Lewis (1986). In his early years as an atheist Oxford literary scholar, he thought that all religions were simply inventions (Downing, 2002). Years later, a friend that Lewis called "the hardest boiled atheist of all the atheists I ever knew" told him that "the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good...It almost looks as if it had really happened once" (Lewis, 1986; 122-3). Lewis was stunned. His friend's remark that there was real evidence for Jesus prompted Lewis to investigate the truth for himself. He writes about his search for truth about Jesus in his classic book *Mere Christianity*.

It is significant to determine whether Jesus Christ was a mythical figure or not by distinguishing a mythical character from a real person. This should shed light on his uniqueness. A typical example could be by looking at the historical evidence that convinces historians that Alexander the Great was a real person and whether such evidence exists in Jesus' case. This is because both Alexander and Jesus are depicted as charismatic leaders. Both reportedly had brief careers, dying in their early thirties. Jesus is said to have been a man of peace who conquered by love; Alexander a man of war who ruled by the sword.

In 336 B.C. Alexander the Great became the king of Macedonia. A military genius, this arrogant leader, like the classical epic heroes looking for glory (*kleos*), swept through towns and kingdoms of Greco-Persia until he ruled it all. It is said he cried when there were no more worlds to conquer. The history of Alexander is drawn from five ancient sources written 300

or more years after he died (Alexander the Great: The Good Sources). Even though not one eye witness account of Alexander exists, historians believe he really existed, largely because the accounts of his life are confirmed by archaeology and his impact on history.

Likewise, to determine if Jesus was a real person, we need to seek evidence for his existence in the following areas: archaeology, early non-Christian accounts, early Christian accounts early New Testament manuscripts and his Historical impact. These areas can without doubt verify if he was a real person and this will contribute to our understanding as to how he is ascribed with universal spiritualism.

#### **4.3.1.1. Archaeology**

The sands of time have buried many mysteries about Jesus that only recently have been brought to light. Perhaps the most significant discoveries are several ancient manuscripts unearthed between the 18th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. We will look closer at these manuscripts in a later section.

Archaeologists have also discovered numerous places and relics that agree with the New Testament accounts of Jesus. Malcolm Muggeridge was a British journalist who considered Jesus a myth until he saw such evidence during a BBC television assignment to Israel. After reporting on the very places written about in the New Testament account of Jesus, Muggeridge wrote, “A certainty seized me about Jesus’ birth, ministry and Crucifixion...I became aware that there really had been a man, Jesus....”(Muggeridge,1969; 8).

Prior to the 20th century no tangible evidence existed for the Roman governor Pontius Pilate and the Jewish chief priest Joseph Caiaphas. Both men were central figures in the trial leading to the crucifixion of Christ. Sceptics cited this apparent lack of evidence as ammunition for their Christ-myth theory. However, in 1961 archaeologists discovered a

block of limestone inscribed with the name of “Pontius Pilate prefect of Judea.” And in 1990 archaeologists discovered an ossuary (bone box) with the inscription of Caiaphas. It has been verified as authentic “beyond a reasonable doubt” Walsh, (2009).

Also, until 2009, there was no tangible evidence that Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth existed during his lifetime. Cynics like Rene Salm regarded lack of evidence for first-century Nazareth as a deathblow to Christianity. In *The Myth of Nazareth* Salm wrote in 2006, “Celebrate, freethinkers.... Christianity as we know it may be finally coming to an end!” But, on December 21, 2009, archaeologists announced the discovery of first-century clay shards in Nazareth, confirming that this tiny hamlet existed during the time of Christ.

Although these archaeological finds do not prove that Jesus lived there, they do support the Gospel accounts of his life. Historians note that mounting evidence from archaeology confirms rather than contradicts the accounts of Jesus,” (McDowell & Wilson, 1993).

#### **4.3.1.2. Early Non-Christian Accounts**

Sceptics like Ellen Johnson cite the “lack of secular history” for Jesus as evidence that he did not exist. Yet there is very little documentation for *any* person from the time of Christ. Most ancient historical documents have been destroyed through the centuries, by wars, fires, and pillaging, or simply through weathering and deterioration. According to E. M. Blaiklock, who has catalogued most of the non-Christian writings of the Roman Empire, “practically nothing exists from the time of Christ”, even for great secular leaders such as Julius Caesar, (McDowell & Wilson, 1996). Yet no historian questions Caesar’s existence. And since he was not a great political or military leader, Darrell Bock notes, “It is amazing and significant that Jesus shows up at all in the sources we have” (Bock, 2002).

Bock mentions other sources. Some of these sources, the early historians who wrote about Jesus, did not have a Christian agenda. These also included Jesus' enemies like the Jewish historians.

#### **4.3.1.3. Jewish Historians**

The Jews had the most to gain by denying Jesus' existence. But they always regarded him as real. Kennedy (1997), notes that several Jewish writings refer to Jesus as a real person whom they opposed. For example, renowned Jewish historian Flavius Josephus wrote of James, "the brother of Jesus the so-called Christ" If Jesus was not a real person Josephus would not have made that comment.

In another somewhat controversial passage, Josephus speaks more extensively of Jesus,

At this time there was a man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good, and he was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and other nations became his disciples. Pilate condemned him to be crucified, and he died. And those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion and that he was alive. Accordingly, he was thought to be the Messiah" (Bock, 2002).

Although some of his words are in dispute, Josephus' confirmation here of Jesus' existence is widely accepted by scholars. As Israeli scholar Shlomo Pines writes, "Even the bitterest opponents of Christianity never expressed any doubt as to Jesus having really lived" (McDowell & Wilson, 1993). World historian Durant (1972) points out that no Jew or Gentile from the first-century ever denied the existence of Jesus.

#### **4.3.1.4. Roman Historians**

Early Roman historians wrote primarily of events and people important to their empire. Since Jesus was not of immediate importance to the political or military affairs of Rome, very

little Roman history referenced him. However, two important Roman historians, Tacitus and Suetonius, do acknowledge Jesus as a real person.

Tacitus ( 55-120), the greatest early Roman historian, wrote that Christus (Greek for Christ) had lived during the reign of Tiberius and suffered under Pontius Pilate, that Jesus' teachings had already spread to Rome; and that Christians were considered criminals and tortured in a variety of ways, including crucifixion" (Durant,1972). Suetonius (69-130 A.D.) wrote of "Chrestus" as an instigator. Most scholars believe this is a reference to Christ. Suetonius also wrote of Christians having been persecuted by Nero in 64 A.D. (McDowell and Wilson).

#### **4.3.1.5. Roman Officials**

Christians were considered enemies of Rome because of their worship of Jesus as Lord rather than Caesar. The following Roman government officials, including two Caesars, wrote letters from that perspective, mentioning Jesus and early Christian origins (Habemus, 2008). Pliny the Younger was an imperial magistrate under Emperor Trajan. In 112 A.D., Pliny wrote to Trajan of his attempts to force Christians to renounce Christ, whom they "worshipped as a god." Emperor Hadrian (76-136A.D.) wrote about Christians as followers of Jesus.

#### **4.3.1.6. Pagan Sources**

Several early pagan writers briefly mention Jesus or Christians prior to the end of the second century. These include Thallus, Phlegon, Mara Bar-Serapion and Lucian of Samosate.[21] Thallus' remarks about Jesus were written in 52 A.D., about twenty years after Christ. In total, nine early non-Christian secular writers mention Jesus as a real person within 150 years of his death. Interestingly that is the same number of secular writers who mention Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor during Jesus' time. If we were to consider Christian and non-Christian sources, there are forty-two who mention Jesus, compared to just ten for Tiberius, (Habemas and Licon, 2004).

In the quest to prove that Jesus is a myth, the disciples of Jesus have been mythologised as well. For example, Acharya and Murdock (2011) allege that The "Disciples" are the Signs of the Zodiac. He says that it is no accident that there are 12 patriarchs and 12 disciples, 12 being the number of the months and astrological signs. Indeed, like the 12 Herculean tasks and the 12 "helpers" of Horus, Jesus's 12 disciples are symbolic for the zodiacal signs and do not depict any literal figures who played out a drama upon the earth circa 30 AD/CE.<sup>226</sup> Each of the disciples can be shown to correspond to an earlier deity, folkloric hero, constellation or other figure. This "coincidence" did not escape the notice of the Christian world.

They further say that for example, Peter can be revealed to be a mythological character, while Judas has been said to represent Scorpio, "the backbiter," the time of year when the sun's rays are weakening, and the sun appears to be dying. It is interesting to note that, in the Egyptian story from pre-Christian times, Horus was said to have been killed by Set, in the form of a scorpion. James, "brother of Jesus" and "brother of the Lord," may be equivalent to Amset, brother of Osiris the Lord.<sup>230</sup> Massey says that "Taht-Matiu was the scribe of the gods, and in Christian art Matthew is depicted as the scribe of the gods, with an angel standing near him, to dictate the gospel.

#### **4.3.1.7. Historical Facts about Jesus**

These early non-Christian sources provide the following facts about Jesus Christ: Jesus was from Nazareth. He lived a wise and virtuous life, was crucified in Judea under Pontius Pilate during the reign of Tiberius Caesar at Passover time, being considered the Jewish king. His disciples believed that he died and rose from the dead three days later. Jesus' enemies acknowledged that he performed unusual feats. After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples multiplied rapidly, spreading as far as Rome. Jesus' disciples lived moral lives and

worshipped Christ as God. This general outline of Jesus' life agrees perfectly with the New Testament (Geissler and Bocchino, 2001).

Gary Habermas notes, "In total, about one-third of these non-Christian sources date from the first century; a majority originate no later than the mid-second century." According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* "These independent accounts prove that in ancient times even the opponents of Christianity never doubted the historicity of Jesus" (McDowell, 1979). The ancient world therefore speaks of Jesus.

#### **4.3.1.8. Early Christian Accounts**

Early Christians wrote thousands of letters, sermons and commentaries about Jesus. Also, creeds which speak of Jesus, appeared as early as five years after his crucifixion (Habermas and Licona, 212). These non-biblical writings confirm most New Testament details about Jesus, including his crucifixion and resurrection (McDowell and Wilson, 74-79). Incredibly, over 36,000 complete or partial such writings have been discovered, some from the first century (Geissler and Hoffman, 2001). These non-biblical writings could reconstruct the entire New Testament except for a few verses (Metzger, 1992). Each of these authors writes of Jesus as a real person. Christ-mythers disregard these accounts as biased. But the question they must answer is: How could a mythical Jesus have so much written about him within a few decades of his life?

#### **4.3.1.9. The New Testament**

Sceptics like Ellen Johnson also dismiss the New Testament as evidence for Jesus, calling it "biased." However, even most non-Christian historians consider ancient New Testament manuscripts as solid evidence for Jesus' existence. Cambridge historian Michael Grant, an atheist, argues that the New Testament should be considered as evidence in the same way as other ancient history.



If we apply to the New Testament, as we should, the same sort of criteria as we should apply to ancient writings containing historical material, we can no more reject Jesus' existence than we can reject the existence of a mass of pagan personages whose reality as historical figures is never questioned (Grant, 2004). The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke & John) are the primary accounts of Jesus' life and words. Luke begins his Gospel with these words to Theophilus: "Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus" (Luke 1:1-3). Even though noted archaeologist Sir William Ramsey originally rejected Luke's historical account of Jesus, he later acknowledged, "Luke is a historian of the first rank.... This author should be placed along with the very greatest historians.... Luke's history is unsurpassed in respect of its trustworthiness" (McDowell, 1999).

The earliest accounts about Alexander were written 300 years after him. But how close to the life of Jesus were the Gospels written? Would eyewitnesses to Jesus have still been alive, or was there enough time for a legend to have developed? In the 1830s, German scholars argued that the New Testament was written in the 3rd century, much too late to have been written by Jesus' apostles. However, manuscript copies discovered in the 19th and 20th centuries by archaeologists proved these accounts of Jesus were written much earlier. Albright (1993) dated all the New Testament books "between about 50 A.D. and 75 A.D." Robinson (1976) of Cambridge dates all New Testament books by 40-65 A.D. Such early dating means they were written when eyewitnesses were alive, much too early for a myth or legend to develop.

After C. Lewis, a former atheist, read the Gospels he wrote in his book *God in the Dock*, "Now, as a literary historian, I am perfectly convinced that...the Gospels are...not legends. I

have read a great deal of legend and I am quite clear that they are not the same sort of thing,” (Lewis, 1970, 158).

The average Roman citizen did not feel the impact of Jesus Christ until many years after his death. Jesus marshalled no army. He wrote no books and changed no laws. The Jewish leaders and Roman Caesars had hoped to wipe out his memory, and it appeared they would succeed. Today, all we see of ancient Rome is ruins. Caesar’s mighty legions and the pomp of Roman imperial power have faded into oblivion. Yet Jesus is remembered today, and his influence is enduring.

The quantity of manuscripts for the New Testament is enormous. Over 24,000 complete or partial manuscript copies of its books exist, putting it far above all other ancient documents (Bruce, 1984). No other ancient historical person, religious or secular, is backed up by as much documentation as is Jesus Christ. Historian Paul Johnson remarks, “If we consider that Tacitus, for example, survives in only one medieval manuscript, the quantity of early New Testament manuscripts is remarkable” (Johnson, 1986).

Whereas mythical gods are depicted as superheroes living out human fantasies and lusts, the Gospels portray Jesus as a man of humility, compassion and impeccable moral character. His followers present him as a real person for whom they willingly gave their lives. The non-Christian scientist Albert Einstein stated, “No one can read the Gospels without feeling the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates in every word. No myth is filled with such life... No man can deny the fact that Jesus existed, nor that his sayings are beautiful,” (Sylvester, 1929, 17).

Some people who have attempted argue that Jesus' death and resurrection was plagiarised from myths. An example is Peter Joseph. Their case against Jesus was presented in the YouTube movie, *Zeitgeist*, where Peter Joseph boldly claims,

“The reality is, Jesus was...a mythical figure.... Christianity, along with all other theistic belief systems, is the fraud of the age.”

Peter Joseph uses hand-picked sources in attempting to build a case that Jesus is a “copycat” of the ancient Egyptian god, Horus. Regarding *Zeitgeist's* sources, Witherington (2007), notes that not a single one of these authors and sources are experts in the Bible, Biblical history, the Ancient Near East, Egyptology, or any of the cognate fields. As a result they are not reliable sources of information about the origins of Christianity, Judaism, or much of anything else of relevance to this discussion. He goes on to say that the alleged parallels between Jesus and Horus have been analysed and systematically refuted by scholars.

As one compares the Jesus of the Gospels with the gods of mythology, a distinction becomes obvious. In contrast to the reality of Jesus revealed in the Gospels, accounts of mythological gods depict unrealistic gods with elements of fantasy. According to Stroebel, (2007) Mithra was supposedly born out of a rock. Mithraism was a religion that became a chief rival to Christianity in the second century and later.”(Strobel, 166-76). Horus is depicted with the head of a falcon. Bacchus, Hercules, and others were flown to heaven on the horse Pegasus, Osiris was killed, chopped into 14 pieces, and reassembled by his wife, Isis, and brought back to life, (Habermas and Licona, 90).

But could Christianity have copied Jesus' death and resurrection from these myths? His followers certainly did not think so; they willingly gave their lives proclaiming that the account of Jesus' resurrection was true. Furthermore, “accounts of a dying and rising god

that somewhat parallel the story of Jesus' resurrection appeared at least 100 years after the reports of Jesus' resurrection." In other words, accounts of Horus, Osiris, and Mithra dying and rising from the dead were not in their original mythologies, but were added after the Gospel accounts of Jesus were written. This adds another level to the perception of Jesus; he was so great even the world of mythology used his life as a template to produce their myths. In addition, because Jesus is not a mythological figure like epic heroes, people did not take stories about his life as a form of entertainment as they possibly regarded the stories about Hercules and his Twelve Labours, but as a life changing experience.

An emerging idea concerning the resurrection of Jesus is that the Gospel writers did not mimic the Hellenistic style of the time with respect to dying gods but instead they writers mimicked what the resurrection Jesus when writing their myths. T. N. D. Mettinger, professor at Lund University, writes, "The consensus among modern scholars — nearly universal — is that there were no dying and rising gods that preceded Christianity. They all post-dated the first century." In his interview with Strobel, Michael Licona states that Mettinger takes exception to that nearly universal scholarship by claiming that there are at least three and possibly as many as five dying and rising gods that predate Christianity. However, after combing through all these accounts and critically analysing them Mettinger adds that "none of these serve as parallels to Jesus." Mettinger writes, "There is, as far as I am aware, no prima facie evidence that the death and resurrection of Jesus is a mythological construct, drawing on the myths and rites of the dying and rising gods of the surrounding world.... The death and resurrection of Jesus retains its unique character in the history of religion" (Strobel, 160-61).

According to most historians there really are no true parallels between any of these mythological gods and Jesus Christ. However, as C. S. Lewis observes, there are some

common themes that speak to mans' desire for immortality. Lewis recounts a conversation he had with J. R. R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. "The story of Christ," said Tolkien, "is simply a true myth: a myth...with this tremendous difference that it really happened," (Colson, 2011). New Testament Scholar F. F. Bruce concludes, "Some writers may toy with the fancy of a 'Christ-myth,' but they do not do so on the grounds of historical evidence. The historicity of Christ is as axiomatic for an unbiased historian as the historicity of Julius Caesar. It is not historians who propagate the 'Christ-myth' theories," (Bruce, 1997, 119).

We can correctly concur that Jesus was not a myth; he actually existed, and this can be attested historically. Historians regard both Alexander the Great and Jesus Christ as real men. Yet the manuscript evidence for Jesus is far greater and hundreds of years closer to his life than the historical writings for Alexander are to his. Furthermore, the historical impact of Jesus Christ far exceeds that of Alexander.

Historians cite the following evidence for Jesus' existence: Archaeological discoveries continue to verify the Gospel accounts of people and places they record, the latest being Pilate, Caiaphas and the existence of first-century Nazareth. Thousands of historical writings document Jesus' existence. Within 150 years of Jesus' life 42 authors mention him in their writings, including nine non-Christian sources. During that same time period, only nine secular authors mention Tiberius Caesar; only five sources report the conquests of Julius Caesar. Yet no historian denies their existence (Habermas and Licona, 127). Historians, secular and religious, readily acknowledge Jesus Christ has influenced our world more than any other person.

After investigating the Christ-myth theory, the great world historian Will Durant concluded that, unlike the gods of mythology, Jesus was a real person (Durant, 553-4). Historian Paul Johnson states that all serious scholars acknowledge Jesus as real. Atheist historian Michael Grant writes, “To sum up, modern critical methods fail to support the Christ-myth theory. It has again and again been answered, and annihilated by first-rank scholars,” (Grant; 200). Perhaps the non-Christian historian H. G. Wells (1949) put it the best regarding Jesus Christ’s existence:

“Here was a man. This part of the tale could not have been invented”. “By this test, Jesus stands first.”

“I am a historian, I am not a believer, but I must confess as a historian that this penniless preacher from Nazareth is irrevocably the very center of history. Jesus Christ is easily the most dominant figure in all history.”

“Christ is the most unique person of history. No man can write a history of the human race without giving first and foremost place to the penniless teacher of Nazareth.”

Myths have little, if any, impact on history. The historian Thomas Carlyle said, “The history of the world is but the biography of great men” (Lee, 1997). There is no nation or regime which owes its foundation or heritage to a mythological person or god. More books have been written about Jesus than about any other person in history. Nations have used his words as the bedrock of their governments. According to Durant, “The triumph of Christ was the beginning of democracy,” His Sermon on the Mount established a new paradigm in ethics and morals (Durant, 1961).

#### **4.4. Christianity as a World Religion**

Christianity began as a movement within Judaism during the first century C.E. The story of Christianity is mainly found in the New Testament; it documents the rise of one of the most

remarkable religious and social movements the world has ever seen. At this time, the Jewish rabbi also known as Jesus of Nazareth undertook a public teaching ministry in which he preached about the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God. As reported in the Christian Scriptures (commonly known among Christians as the New Testament), Jesus assembled a core group of twelve Jewish disciples, along with many other followers. Together they ministered to the poor and outcast in present-day Israel and Palestine.

Around the year 33 C.E., Jesus was arrested and executed by the Roman governor. However, Jesus' followers claimed that he rose from the dead; they came to believe that he was the Son of God and that his death and resurrection saved them from their sins. As their conviction grew, they named Jesus the "Christ"—meaning Messiah or Anointed One—according to the prophecies of the Jewish Bible, the Hebrew Scriptures (commonly known among Christians as the Old Testament). This is the origin of the name "Jesus Christ" and it led to Jesus' followers being called "Christians." In their own day, the early Christians were accused of turning the world upside down with their message (Acts 17:6), and they have continued to influence every subsequent generation in history.

The twenty-seven books of the New Testament contain stories of their deeds, accounts of their activities, together with letters and other occasional writings produced by this innovative group of people in the process of taking their message to the furthest reach of the world as they knew it. The New Testament provides its readers with a unique archive of social history, for this is no domesticated, disinfected collection of writings: it bears testimony to the debates and disputes among the first followers of Jesus as they wrestled with the significance of his unique life and ministry, and even stories of Jesus' own life are presented not in one agreed version, but through perspectives of different writers, each of whom displays their own characteristic insights into the meaning of the events they describe .

For all its diversity, the New Testament has one central focus. These books are all part of the same story. They reflect the fervour and devotion of the first followers of Jesus, but more than that: they claim the story of Jesus is the grand mega narrative of all history- stories of everyday experience and insight (Drane, 1999). What makes the account more exceptional is that it is an on-going story, with the presence of the hero still being felt 2000 years after he walked on the face of the earth as a man. It is this that makes the New Testament a great epic.

Over several generations Christian writers, just like the writers of the traditional epics, compiled their collective memories of Jesus' teachings and sayings in various documents. Jesus was the core character of their narratives. Best known among these today are the four narratives of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that now appear in the Christian Scriptures. These are the "Gospels" of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. During these early years, many letters were also circulated among Christian communities about their belief in Jesus as the Messiah and the way Christians should live and worship. The letters of the apostle Paul and a few other authors were eventually included in the Christian Scriptures along with the four Gospels.

Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the saviour of humanity whose coming as Christ or the Messiah was prophesied in the Old Testament. Currently almost in any corner of the world, there are Christians and the number of converts continue to rise because of the numerous missionaries, evangelists and televangelists bent on spreading the word of the gospel to all mankind, because of the command Jesus gave in the Great Commission. The Bible, the book on which Christianity is based, has been translated into more world languages than any other book in order to enhance the spread of Christianity.

After Jesus' death, "Christians" became identified as a particular sect within Judaism. These Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in their Hebrew Scriptures, whose coming



they had long anticipated. However, as time went on, the majority of Jews did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and their differences with “Christian” Jews increased. Further, many non-Jewish people did come to believe in Jesus. In this way, “Christianity” gradually became a religious movement distinct from Judaism, as it is practiced today.

Christianity remains the world's largest religion, with about 2.4 billion adherents generally known as Christians worldwide. It is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as presented in the New Testament. During the time Jesus lived, in what is popularly called the Holy Land, 2000 years ago, the world was predominantly polytheistic. Only the Jews worshipped one God, Yahweh, but their neighbours worshipped a host of other deities that were believed to live on Mt Olympus. The Twelve Olympian gods and goddesses, as they are popularly known, include Zeus, the king of the gods, Aphrodite, the goddess of Love, Artemis, Apollo, Ares, Athena, Demeter, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Hestia, Poseidon, and finally Zeus, Supreme lord of gods, god of the sky, symbolized by the thunderbolt. These gods feature predominantly in the epic stories.

Blessington (2016), points out that the heroes in the epics were often in some form of dispute against one or more of the gods or goddesses; in *the Aeneid* Aeneas is troubled by Juno queen of the gods. In *the Odyssey*, Odysseus is hated by the god Poseidon, and similarly the anti-hero of *Paradise lost* Satan is in a war against God himself. Nevertheless in the history of epics the heroes are often helped by other gods or figures during their battles. It is only Satan who is cast to hell to suffer with other demons in *Paradise Lost*.

Jesus is very faithful to one God; Jehovah and it is to this God he pledges his allegiance as he constantly goes to pray in private. For him there are no hosts of rival gods putting him in trouble or aiding him during his tough moments. This must have been of great help to Jesus

in the establishment of Christianity because he had no need to contend with several gods with their own selfish agenda that they needed to be carried out. The monotheistic nature of the gospel must have made Christianity more appealing than the polytheistic religions of the time. Jesus had made it obvious during the temptation that he intended to follow only the direction of one God, his father who had sent him. The monotheistic nature of Jesus' Gospel played an important role in the universal nature of Christianity as a religion.

Bevan (1912) declares that the most striking, the most unchanging fact with regard to humanity is religion. Men's forms, colour, faces, languages are varied, differing; their customs, modes of life and organizations are many and totally unlike kinds. But everywhere man is religious. There have been cases where some have been presumptuous as to claim that some races have no religion. They have been proved wrong. According to Bevan (1912), everywhere in the world is a deep-seated belief in a supernatural being as all men worship. This is because religion is the belief that in the world around us there is some Power that possesses qualities like those we possess and to which man is related, and on which man depends, and with which it is of supreme importance that we should come into relationships of knowledge, communication and unity. This is where Jesus comes in. Because his followers believe he was God incarnate; they believe his experiences on earth make him more understanding. No epic hero, except Jesus, has this quality of a god who understands the human experience.

Religion takes many forms that can either be barbaric or civilised. The form the religion takes and what is done is because of the belief in the unseen Being. The worship can move from some of the most uncultured practices imaginable like human sacrifice, senseless slaughter and even cannibalism. The worship and adoration can also be seen in a refined setting like in a church, temple or mosque where there is fellowship between Man and the Spiritual Being,

with reading of the scriptures or Holy Writings, musical instruments and singing and giving of sacrifices and offerings to show love for the Power that makes all things possible. All these are done to be in good terms with the Power. Jesus introduced a religion that did not require human or animal sacrifice because he was the final sacrifice. This is good news that is welcomed universally.

Regardless of their religious beliefs or the faiths to which they ascribe, most scholars who have studied the evidence acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as the greatest teacher, the greatest leader and the greatest influence for good the world has ever known. Some say he is divine. The sacred book of Islam, the Holy Qur'an refers to him as "the greatest above all in this world and in the world to come." Jesus' teaching thereby finds relevance in Islam because the Muslims believe that Jesus is a great prophet. Mohammedanism has its own clear and distinct principle. It is the principle of monotheism; God is one and the sole object of worship. He is sovereign. His law is as absolute, certain, unconditioned as fate. There is only one form of divine service and that is final submission to the will of God. Judaism like Mohammedanism is emphatically monotheistic, with the personality of God most clearly declared and efficient through all the thinking of the religion. He is the Sovereign Lord of the world which he has created and sustains. The ethical teaching of Judaism is clear and direct. The commandments of God are definite, and the end of the law is a righteousness that is pleasing to God and includes men in its just operation. Such are some of the leading principles of life and thought embodied especially in the religious faith of different races.

When one closely studies Christianity, one thing that comes out clearly is its universality. The main tenets found in the world religions are found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Bevan (1912) believes that Christianity, properly understood, includes in its essence these great central principles of other Faiths and therefore it may regard it as the end to which these

Faiths will come. It is impossible to take any one principle and make that the essence of Christianity. The history of Christian thought has illustrated again and again the futility of basing the religion of Jesus upon one great principle. Bevan further points out that the Gods of all Faiths are found, sought after, and attained in the Christian Faith because it ever amplifies and enlarges the sphere of its significance.

We can correctly presume that what has led to the success of Christianity is its universality made possible by the teachings of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus are applicable to any religion in the world. Jesus packaged his teachings in such a way that people anywhere in the world can identify with and apply them in their daily lives. For example, as Gandhi maintains, people the world over should look at the Sermon on the Mount as the basis of all world religions because its tenets ensure that people live in harmony with each other. Gandhi lauded and emulated Jesus, non-violence approach in his life.

#### **4.5. Jesus as a Teacher**

Jesus has been given many titles but the one that stands out most is that of him as a teacher. Severally he is addressed as a Rabbi, which means teacher. Because Christianity as a religion is based on the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, he had to teach people how to live so as to be part of the kingdom of God. The fact that he was a great teacher definitely had something to do with his character and mission for mankind. As Bevan ( says, “The teaching of Nazareth’s prophet is wider than the largest of speculations. His life is more searching, more authoritative, than even the amplest interpretation of his words. His consummate act of sacrifice, and his triumph alike in the natural and the spiritual world, have impressed even the experience of the most advanced of his followers and people, and the world awaits with an ever-increasing sense of the greatness of the Christ, the manifestation of his person and kingdom, not merely to the world, but to all the universe” (Bevan, 1912, 4).

In New Testament times the teacher/learner method of intentional discipling was a widely recognized method of teaching, and Jesus used it to train the future leaders of his church. In a growing body of literature on Christian leadership, it is common to read about how Jesus developed leaders, as a model for developing leaders today. For example, according to the model based on Mark 3:13-19, used in *Growing Leaders* by James Lawrence (2004), Jesus chose the twelve disciples, appointed them to be with him, and appointed them to go out for him (identify/ invest/ entrust). Another model is based on Luke 5:1-11, where one can see how Jesus selected twelve people and trained them for future leadership. He used teaching as the vehicle with which to launch the kingdom of God. Such was the high quality of his teaching that he is esteemed by renowned personalities as the greatest teacher who ever lived (Ward, 2011).

Most of the traditional epic heroes, like Aeneas and Odysseus in the *Odyssey* are majorly accredited with being great warriors and lauded for their excellence in the art of war. They also possess great physical strength. An example is Hercules who is famous for his great strength, Odysseus for his cunning and Achilles for his anger, but not the unique quality of teaching that Jesus is celebrated for. What they are well-known for, though, is the ability to speak well before noble people but then this cannot really be classified under teaching. Some did this to boast or entertain their listeners. Like when Odysseus was asked to recount his adventures by the goddess of Calypso, he did so in a very articulate manner because he was a great speaker.

One of the reasons why the epic heroes are not referred to as teachers could be because they did not do a lot of teaching using words, but if they did, for they possibly taught their followers the art of war, Jesus surpassed them for he used a better teaching strategy than them. He had the foresight to package his teachings in such a way that any person anywhere

in the world could relate to and use his teachings practically. Jesus' teachings were very memorable and timeless. As Drane (1999) suggests, the parables have been recorded as a message explaining Jesus' teachings and its continuing relevance to the needs of the world and the church. It is only as the readers are able to identify with the lost sheep, the wicked tenants or the person who discovers a field of hidden treasure that their full impact is felt

A very thought-provoking quality that Jesus had unlike other epic heroes is that his personality and teachings are timeless in the sense that they surpass time and space. Though existed and taught almost two thousand years ago, his teachings are relevant today regardless of race or creed. Latourette (2010) points out that even though our accounts of Jesus Christ are brief, they make it possible for us to know him and his teachings as well as we can know any figure of like antiquity. This is because he made so profound an impression on those who were his intimates that their memories of him, some of them put into written form within a very few years after the events they record, enable us to have a vivid picture of him and his characteristics.

Jesus' sayings, given as they were in pithy sentences or in stories of extraordinary beauty and imagery, could not fail to fasten themselves in the memories of those who heard them. They lent themselves to the kind of repetition which did not blur or distort them. Even if we did not have the four brief accounts which we call the Gospels we could gain a fairly adequate impression of him and the salient points of his teachings, death, and resurrection from reference in letters of his followers written within generation of his death.

Jesus was not discriminating with regards to his teachings. He did not restrict his teachings to his Jewish audience alone but obviously intended it to be used worldwide. McKnight (1992) points out that Jesus' relationship to and teachings about the Gentiles comprise several main lines of thinking. Although Jesus adopted the typical Jewish stance that Gentiles were

sinner, he certainly distanced himself from the normal view that Gentiles were doomed to punishment. Furthermore, Jesus evidently knew that his mission was essentially directed towards the Jews and that after his death and vindication a worldwide mission would take place. He knew of man's need for religion

Wilkins (1992) asserts that the first century Greco-Roman world displayed a variety of religions, philosophical and political leadership, each whom had followers committed to their cause, teaching and beliefs. He further states that while several different terms designated those followers, *disciple* was one of the most commonly used. It also became the most commonly used term to designate the followers of Jesus, to the extent that in Jesus' so-called Great Commission the objective of the world-wide mission was to "make disciples" of all nations (Matt 28:19). The English word *disciple* normally designates a 'follower,' "adherent" or "student" of a great master, religious leader or teacher.

Jesus was very careful in his choice of follower. He broke away from the practice of the day and instead chose as his disciples, people who were not highly regarded in the society. No wonder he discerned that in any society, these people had the largest numbers. These comprised of the tax collectors like Matthew, simple fishermen like the two brothers Simeon Peter and his brother Andrew. From the beginning of his public ministry Jesus intended to teach his chosen followers. His first followers, according to Johannine tradition, were the disciples of John the Baptist. Since the Baptist's ministry prepared the way for Jesus, it is natural that some of John's disciples make the transition to following Jesus after John was murdered at the instigation of Herodias (Matthew 14:3-11).

Jesus called men from different walks of life who would become his disciples (students), in training to become apostles. The term 'apostle' is used in the Gospels to designate the twelve disciples called and sent out by Jesus to preach the Gospel of the kingdom of God. The

twelve disciples were Peter, Andrew, John, James, Phillip, Nathaniel (Bartholomew), Matthew, Thomas, James the Lesser, Simon the Zealot, Judas Thaddeus and Judas Iscariot, who is famous for betraying Jesus. These twelve men received intense, and extensive, as well as often private, one-on-one training, which would prepare them to take the gospel to other cities, territories, regions, nations and kingdoms.

#### **4.5.1. Jesus and Women**

In order to make his mission universal, in the sense that he wanted all mankind to be part of it, Jesus decided to make women part of it; he accepted women as his disciples. Women disciples of a great master was an unusual occurrence in Palestine in the first century, as even the early disciples' reaction to Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman reveals (John 4:27), yet these women exhibited the twin characteristics of Jesus' disciples- they had paid the cost and were committed to him.

Unlike most of the religions during the time of Jesus that put men on a higher status than women, Jesus sought to establish a religion that would embrace everyone, especially women. It is therefore important to note that Jesus, while choosing twelve men as his disciples, also began to develop women, changing inherited patterns and beginning to restore to the church and the world the partnership of men and women which was lost at the Fall (Genesis 3). The Gospels and Acts of the Apostles give prominent place to various women who were the disciples of Jesus. These women were part of the wider group of disciples around Jesus during his itinerancy

The fact that Jesus appointed twelve men as his disciples is sometimes used as a reason why women should not be in particular forms of ministry and leadership. However, it is more often seen as an inevitable concession to the culture of the day: the ministry of women apostles would have been unacceptable when the testimony of a woman was disregarded in a



court of law. The choice of twelve men was also a symbolic act: twelve male apostles, reminiscent of the ancient patriarchs, was an eschatological sign denoting that Jesus was reconstituting the ancient people of God (Ward, 2011).

However, while the twelve clearly have a special place, it is also clear that they were not intended to be unique in ministry, first because the nature of ministry had changed, and second because Jesus also chose and sent out others. Among this number, and like the twelve men, close to Jesus, were a number of women followers, whose pattern of discipleship and potential leadership closely mirrors that of the men.

The fact that women were followers at all, in a culture where few women were literate or had any formal education, is in contrast to the accepted practices of the day (women were discouraged in rabbinic laws from leaving their homes). By highlighting findings from recent scholarship on the Gospels, it is possible to argue that Jesus developed women as leaders by encouraging them to follow him in preparation for when they in turn would lead others.

By deciding to bring everyone (including women) as his disciples, Jesus was sending a message that the kingdom of God was for all people, regardless of gender or labelling. It is clear that Jesus believed that women are not inferior. This is because the Jewish world was especially very unjust to women with the result that there was nothing universal about Judaism as women were side-lined. Jesus must have known, in a perceptive way that women could be of great use in his ministry. This later proved to be the case. It is the women who are recorded to have supported Jesus financially.

It is not surprising therefore that among the most faithful followers of Jesus were the women. This is because he restored respect and dignity to them and naturally they rated Jesus very highly. In his male dominated patriarchal society, Jesus, in his dealings with women, just

brushed aside sex prejudices and biases and gave women their dignity and rightful role in society. Jesus treated women with sensitivity, dignity and equality.

#### **4.5.2. Status of Women in the Jewish World**

According to Specht (2002), in recent years more than one author has described Jesus as a champion of women. Among some of these are authors in the *Interpreters Bible*. A quick examination of the tradition as presented in the Gospels does not indicate that Jesus was a revolutionary, vocally contending for the rights of women. In evaluating the evidence one must carefully consider the Jewish environment in which Jesus lived, taught, and worked.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day women were not generally regarded as equal to men. Mark Norman, in his book, *Jesus and Women* compiled some disparaging remarks made by otherwise respectable rabbis, one Jesus ben Sirach in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC. It shows the attitude towards women at that time. Norman seems to make it obvious that women were the scape goats for all the ills in the society and their sins had more magnitude than those of men. Sirach believed that "any iniquity is small compared to a woman's iniquity...From a woman sin had its beginning and because of her we all die." It is possible with this saying he was referring the episode in Genesis 3 of the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden when the woman was deceived by the Snake and she persuaded the man to eat the Forbidden Fruit which led to man to be told "from dust you came and to dust you will return.

Jesus was not content with bringing women to a higher plane than their prevalent state but as a Saviour of all (Luke 7/36-50) he brings them before God on an equal footing with men (Matthew 21/31-32). Here again is evident the universality of Jesus' ministry; women were also included. Bailey (2008), sheds light on how Jesus considered women. According to Bailey, Jesus regarded women with special care and concern. Jesus was very compassionate to women. For example, he healed Peter's mother-in-law, raised the widow's son, healed a

woman on Sabbath and even his teachings connect with both genders. These teachings are found, for example, in the parable of the Lost Coin, the Widow and the Judge as well as the Poor Woman 'giver'.

Jesus also considered women with special care and concern by identifying them as part of the throng. He clearly brings this out when he is told his mother and brothers are looking for him,

Pointing to his disciples, he said "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, sister and mother" (Matthew 12:49-50)

After Jesus was crucified, it is interesting to note that it was the women followers of Jesus who remained to be with Jesus after the disciples had disappeared. Clearly, they truly appreciated what Jesus had done for them;

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and the mother of Zebedee's sons.  
(Matthew 27:55-56)

Graham points out that Jesus' honour and respect was extended to all women – an attitude largely unexpected and unknown in his culture and time. Jesus taught that women were equal to men in the sight of God. Women could receive God's forgiveness and grace. Women could be among Christ's personal followers. Women could be full participants in the kingdom of God.

Jesus special regard and concern for women was not superficial. He made them to be part of his followers by including them as 'disciples'. The women who were Jesus' disciples included Martha and Mary, women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases like Mary Magdalene from who seven demons had come out, Joana the wife of Cuza the manager of Herod's household, Susana and many others. These women supported Jesus out of their own

means. The women, because of how Jesus regarded them, were the first at the cross and last at the grave. After Jesus resurrected, he first appeared to women, specifically Mary Magdalene. As Sayers (2005) observes, perhaps it is no wonder that the women were the last at the cross and first to the tomb. They had never known a man like this Man – there never has been such another. A prophet and teacher who never nagged at them, never flattered or coaxed or patronized: who never made jokes about them and who took their questions and arguments seriously. In his treatment of women therefore, Jesus had a quality that outdid other epic heroes and led to the successful establishment of Christianity. According to Jesus, both men and women were important in the kingdom and he did not, therefore, side-line women in his ministry. This showed insight in the part of Jesus.

#### **4.5.3. Status of Women in the Greco- Roman World**

In the Greco-Roman world, as illustrated in the epic stories, women are not so highly regarded either, though not as degradingly as their Jewish counterparts. In the epics, they are not the heroines. This is because most accounts are about the adventures of men and their feats. The epics are mostly woven around the male person and women do not feature prominently and if they do, they normally do so in a secondary role. For example in Homer's *Odyssey*, though women are very important figures in the narrative, one of the most important roles they fulfil is that of the seductress. Circe and Calypso are the most obvious examples of women whose love becomes an obstacle to Odysseus' return in Homer's *Odyssey*.

The treatment of women in the Hellenistic world was almost similar but better than that of the Jews. The epic heroes like Achilles however, unlike the Jews, did not treat their women with so much contempt and in their own way, they valued women. Achilles even had the audacity to refuse to fight because of a woman. The *Iliad*, the classic in which Achilles is the epic

hero, is about his anger and it starts with how he refused to fight because a woman had been taken from him by Agamemnon.

Reflecting Greek culture, Homer (8th century B.C.) wrote, “One cannot trust women” (*The Odyssey*). The Greek playwright Euripides (d. 406 B.C.) said, “Women were the best devisers of evil” (*Medea*). Tacitus, the first-century Roman, pictured women as dominating and cruel (*Annals*). Aristotle, as did most Greek philosophers, believed that the male was superior physically and mentally to the female and therefore was destined to rule over her. (The Stoics held a somewhat higher view of women.) Except among the highest social classes, women were educated in the home. Greek women married early (e.g. 14 years compared to 35 years for men).

In Greek law, a woman was under authority to a male throughout her life. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus had to be under the rule of her son Telemachus when he failed to return home after the Trojan War. In Book 2 when Penelope becomes upset at the bard’s song because it reminds her of her husband Odysseus for whom she is still grieving, Telemachus chooses not to console her but rather to scold her. His unsympathetic treatment of her and his stiff reminder that Odysseus was not the only one who perished during the Trojan war are stereotypically masculine responses to tragedy that suit him to the demands of running his father’s household. He supplements these behavioural indications of manhood with the overt declaration, “I hold the reins of power in this house” (1.414).

In Greece, divorce laws were much more liberal for men than women. Under the Romans, rules were more generous (requiring consent for marriage by both parties). Divorce rates were high in Roman times. The most important role of women among the Greeks and Romans was childbearing. Women who worked typically worked in the home (there were a

few midwives and merchants). Occasionally a woman accumulated considerable wealth. An example is Lydia in the Acts of Apostles

Generally, women did not address public assemblies. However, they enjoyed the greatest degree of freedom in public religion, serving as priestesses/prophetesses (e.g. Delphi). Occasionally, women participated independently in religious ceremonies (such as the celebration of Bacchus, the god of wine).

In general, the role of Jewish women during the time of Christ was more restricted than for the Gentiles. There is some evidence; however, of exceptions (an inscription suggests that Rufinia was the head of a synagogue during the second century after the birth of Christ). Given this background, the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is remarkable both in the character of the woman and the interaction between the woman and Jesus.

Jesus' decision to involve women in his ministry was very uncommon in the world that he lived in. Nevertheless, this inclusion of women to a great extent was a wise decision because it contributed to the spread of Jesus' ministry. It is indicated severally that these women contributed to the support of Jesus and the Twelve. It was mainly women who contributed financially to Jesus' ministry. Most of them had been healed by Jesus and for that they were truly committed to him. As we shall see later, this same group of women followed Jesus up to Jerusalem, attended the crucifixion and was the last ones at the cross, and the first ones to arrive at the empty tomb.

From what we see in among the epic heroes, none had women as their followers. This is because their missions consisted of battle, and it was erroneously believed that women cannot fight because they are not as physically strong as men. But apart from that, they mainly used

women as sex objects. For example, Hercules received various forms of religious veneration, mainly because of his superior strength. Some of these include being venerated as a deity concerned with children and childbirth, in part because of myths about his precocious infancy, and in part because he fathered countless children. Roman brides wore special belt tied with the “knot of Hercules” which was supposed to be hard to untie (Festus & Fowler, 1908)

It is not difficult to imagine that even though Hercules was venerated, his feats could not result in universal spiritualism because of his outrageously immoral behaviour. Firstly, he was sexually immoral, fathered several children which makes him irresponsible because he could not have really been a father figure to all his many children. Secondly, he was more or less a sex icon. Most of the paintings and sculptures available in museums display him in the nude. Even when he died, he was rewarded with a wife on Mt Olympus after his resurrection. Here was a hero who could not live without a woman.

Another epic hero worth mentioning is Achilles. To Achilles, women were objects. He considers Briseis, a woman as a prize; part of the war booty. This is illustrated in Homer’s the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* is the most famous narrative of Achilles' deeds in the Trojan War. The narrative begins with Achilles' withdrawal from battle after he is dishonoured by Agamemnon, the commander of the Achaean forces. Agamemnon had taken a woman named Chryseis as his slave. Her father Chryses, a priest of Apollo, begs Agamemnon to return her to him. Agamemnon refuses and Apollo sends a plague amongst the Greeks. The prophet Calchas correctly determines the source of the troubles but will not speak unless Achilles vows to protect him. Achilles does so and Calchas declares Chryseis must be returned to her father. Agamemnon consents, but then commands that Achilles' battle prize, Briseis be brought to him to replace Chryseis. Angry at the dishonour of having his

plunder and glory taken away (and as he says later, because he loved Briseis), with the urging of his mother Thetis, Achilles refuses to fight or lead his troops alongside the other Greek forces. Such vengeful and petty behaviour could not possibly be the foundation of a world religion. This account reveals that Achilles was self-centred. Jesus definitely does not see women as objects or prizes. He instead sees them as valuable to his quest.

Yet another epic hero who did not have moral values was Odysseus. Women are very important figures in the *Odyssey*, and one of the important roles they fulfil is that of the seductress. Circe and Calypso are the most obvious examples of women whose love for Odysseus becomes an obstacle for his homecoming. Even though he is married to Penelope, he had love affairs with the witch-goddess Circe and the goddess Calypso. Extra marital affairs delayed Odysseus' homecoming. It is interesting to note that Odysseus is very crafty. He is a convincing and articulate speaker who can manipulate audiences with ease and, yet he is imprisoned on an island by a love-sick goddess and he is unable to talk his way out of the situation. This is contradictory. Jesus, on the other hand, had women in his life but in the Gospels, it is not recorded that he had love affairs with them. The women he related with did not interfere with his quest.

However, the most convincing proofs of the depth of Jesus' relationship with women are seen in the Gospel accounts of his death, burial and resurrection. During his passion, it was the women in his group that did far more than his chosen men – the apostles. From the gospel narratives, it is clear that it was the women who remained more steadfast and close to Jesus and did not desert him at his trial and at the hour of his death. An example is Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matt 27:61) who sat in his tomb where he Jesus' body was taken by Joseph of Arimathea.

.On the contrary, Judas sold him, Peter- the head of the apostles, denied him and all the other disciples, except John, ran away. St. Matthew, describing the scene of the crucifixion, says,



“And many women were there looking on from a distance, which had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him” (Matthew 27:55). Even after his death, when Joseph of Arimathea sought permission from Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, to bury Jesus, “the women who had come with Him out of Galilee followed after, and saw the tomb and how his body was laid, then they returned and prepared spices and perfumes” to anoint him. Again, it was the women who, after the Sabbath went early to the tomb to anoint him with the spices they had prepared. As a reward for their love and loyalty, it was to the women that the news of the resurrection was first made known. It was they who broke the good news of Jesus’ resurrection to the disciples. Furthermore, it was to Mary Magdalene that the resurrected Christ first appeared.

It is obvious that Women enjoyed a special relationship with Jesus among his followers because he respected them as persons, instilled in them a sense of self-worth and was sensitive to their needs, problems and aspirations. Jesus was not egoistical like Achilles who refused to fight because he was thwarted. In the piloting of the kingdom of God in Palestine, Jesus did not simply point to himself but looked at the bigger picture; the sustainability of his teachings when he was no longer with his disciples. He had a master plan or design that he used to ensure that Christianity would continue when he was no longer on earth. Hercules never taught any disciple to continue with his many adventures in the Greco-Roman world after his death.

#### **4.6. Jesus the Perfect Role Model**

One of the unique qualities that Jesus had unlike other epic heroes is that he behaved in a manner that was admirable and fit to be emulated by people from all walks of life regardless of race or continent. Sim (2010) suggests that from the very beginning the Christian tradition has viewed Jesus as the perfect model, whose life and teachings are to be emulated by his followers. In the first Christian generation, Paul looked upon Jesus as the exemplar for

himself and his congregations. He advised the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1) and this view is fleshed out with concrete examples in the epistle to the Romans (Romans 15:1-7).

According to 1Peter 2:21-23, Jesus provided an example which should be followed; he committed no acts of guile, did not insult those who insulted him and did not threaten when he suffered. Many other New Testament texts refer similarly to Jesus as the perfect Christian model who is to be imitated (e.g. John 13:15, 34; 15:12; Hebrews 12:2;13;12-13; 1 John 2:6), and further references are found throughout the writings of the church Fathers in a host of later Christian texts. Sim (2010) continues to say that the concept of *imitatio Christi* has had widespread and lasting influence on the Christian church over the centuries, and many saints and other holy figures have lived their lives guided by the example set by Jesus. These Christians have been inspired by the ethical teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel and by the life of Jesus as presented in the four canonical Gospels.

The other epic heroes had certain qualities that enabled them to succeed in their missions. These qualities were quest specific. Since their quests involved fighting, it was their prowess in physical battle that was essential. A cursory analysis of any epic, be it Greco-Roman, in Western Literature or Asia has one thing in common; bloodshed. The violence is spurred on by very negative emotions, for example vengeance. The amount of slaughter the heroes carry out is of monstrous proportions. Their reasons for fighting are as diverse as they are weird. One thing that is clear is that they kill for the sake of killing.

A fact that stands out is that the missions of the epic heroes were self-serving; the success of the undertakings meant to be to the advantage of the epic hero and no-one else for the most part. No other epic hero is on record for embarking on a spiritual quest the way Jesus did. Similar to Jesus, the classical epic hero had followers but did not have the foresight to teach

his followers all that they did so as to continue with his teachings after he died. For example, Odysseus, Hercules, Aeneas had a group of followers who were with them in their adventures, but at the end of the day, the epic heroes were the stars. After the death of these heroes, nothing else is heard of their followers. It can be said that their quest was for a particular time and place but the quest of Jesus surpassed temporal and spatial boundaries.

It is worth noting that epic heroes do not die but continue to live in the myths, legends and another form after physical death (Dean, 2000). After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples continued to implement the work he had piloted in Palestine to the rest of the world. This means that Jesus had not meant his work to end with him, but for his disciples to scale the work had piloted in Palestine to the rest of the world.. Most Christians believe that Jesus Christ will come back but only after the gospel has been spread to all the corners of the world. It is because of this that there is a concerted effort to spread the gospel using all means including the media.

Jesus was not guilty of excesses like the other traditional heroes. While we may not presume to know with certainty all that Jesus did, one thing is certain: the life, birth, death, and resurrection of Christ left this planet and its inhabitants reeling. Christianity did not come into the world with a whimper, but a bang. For millennia, Old Testament prophets sent forth their predictions about a coming Messiah. Suddenly, a multitude of those predictions was being fulfilled—before the eyes, and within earshot, of the common man. Christ, and his Gospel message, turned the world of the first century “upside down” (Acts 17:6). Even his worst enemies recognized the impact he was having. When the Pharisees and chief priests sent their officers to seize Christ on one occasion, the officers returned empty-handed. When asked why they had failed in their quest, the only answer they could offer was, “No one ever spoke the way this man does” (John 7:46).

There was about Jesus quickness and a directness which no observing reader of the Gospel narratives can miss. Jesus could blaze forth in anger, like when he went to the temple and overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves (Matt 21:12), but not like Achilles whose anger bordered on madness. In the *Iliad*, it is Achilles' anger, whether he is sulking or whether he is violent, that is paramount throughout most of the epic. In fact, his battle with the river is probably one of the most savage scenes in the *Iliad*. It shows us Achilles' insane wrath at its height. On first reading, the scene may seem confusing, but it is important to the reader's view of Achilles and to the mutilation theme. Mutilation of bodies and Achilles' excesses prompt the river god to charge him with excessive evil. He charges Achilles with not merely killing, but "outraging the corpse" but dragging the body through the streets. Jesus did not have such excesses even with his enemies. He never murdered any one. He had the ability to look at people. Men remembered his glance. It is interesting to note how often, even in our brief accounts, Jesus is described as looking at a person.

Jesus could be very patient. He could see one in whom he senses possibilities for good and had enrolled among his intimates one that would disintegrate morally and eventually betray him, yet seek to hold on to him. For his other disciples, who often tried him by their slowness to understand what was obvious to him, he had forbearance which must have been difficult for one of his quick and keen intelligence. Paul, who probably never knew Jesus personally, but who had heard much of him from those who did, was impressed by his meekness and gentleness, qualities in striking contrast with the quick anger which cruelty or callousness to human need evoked in him.

Another quality which has often been remarked was the nascence of having committed sin or of a basic corruption in him. It is highly significant that in one as sensitive morally as was

Jesus and who taught his disciples to ask for the forgiveness of their sins there is no hint of any need of forgiveness of himself, no asking of pardon, either from those about him or of God. Deep struggle of the spirit Jesus knew, but it seems to have been to discover what the will of God was and not from any inward division, any inability to follow what he knew to be right, such as Paul so poignantly describes himself, or from any sense of recurring fault or unconquered sinfulness such as the greatest of Christian faith have confessed.

#### **4.7. The Resurrection of Jesus**

The fact that Jesus has power over death, as is demonstrated by his resurrection, is without doubt the greatest quality that Jesus makes him transcend other epic heroes into universal spiritualism. If Jesus had not resurrected from the dead, he would have joined the mythical ranks of the other epic heroes like Hercules who resurrected, went to heaven, married a goddess and continues to live only in the stories narrated for entertainment, and not because of any form of religion but his feats that cannot be accomplished by man. The resurrection is a climactic witness of what Christ is. It was the greatest miracle he ever performed. It is because of the resurrection that the Christianity spread.

Hanegraaffe (2000), states that Christians consider the resurrection of Jesus to be the cornerstone of their faith. The resurrection of Jesus is the basis for the Christian faith (1 Corinthians 15) and the most important event in Christian history. Among Christian beliefs, the death and resurrection of Jesus are two core events on which much of Christian doctrine and theology is based. According to the New Testament Jesus was crucified, died a physical death, was buried within a tomb, and rose from the dead three days later.

The New Testament mentions several resurrection appearances of Jesus on different occasions to his twelve disciples and apostles including “more than five hundred brethren at once,” (Icor.15:6) before he ascended to heaven. Jesus' death and resurrection are

commemorated by Christians in all worship services, with special emphasis during Holy Week which includes Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The fact that Jesus appeared to his followers, not as a spirit but as a real person, is very significant in Christianity.

The reason why death and resurrection of Jesus are usually considered the most important events in Christian theology is partly because they demonstrate that Jesus has power over life and death and therefore has the authority and power to give people eternal life. Christian churches accept and teach the New Testament account of the resurrection of Jesus with very few exceptions. Some modern scholars use the belief of Jesus' followers in the resurrection as a point of departure for establishing the continuity of the historical Jesus and the proclamation of the early church (Fuller, 1965). Some liberal Christians do not accept a literal bodily resurrection, seeing the story as a richly symbolic and spiritually nourishing myth. Arguments over death and resurrection claims occur at many religious debates and interfaith dialogues (Lorenzen, 2003). Paul the Apostle, an early Christian convert and missionary, wrote, "If Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your trust in God is useless." (I Corinthians 15:14).

Despite the arguments about the validity of the resurrection of Jesus, there is strong historical evidence that supports the assertion. In addition, most scholars support the claim. Scholarly historical examination has used three criteria to support the above claims. These include; relevant sources, responsible method and restrained results. They say that is an undisputed fact that Jesus was murdered and buried. Three days afterward his body went missing. Subsequently there were appearances of Jesus over the course of forty days to various people, including his disciples and nonbelievers. Christ's appearance transformed his followers and some sceptics became the central focus of their teaching. Interestingly, it is worth noting that

Scholars-whether atheist, agnostic, or Christian who have thoroughly studied the case of the resurrection and agree to these four facts (Drane, 2000).

The following are some of the facts given as evidence of Jesus' death and burial; the burial is recorded in all the gospels, Joseph of Arimathea petitioned Pilate for the body and put the body of Jesus in his own tomb (Matt.27:57-60). Since Joseph was a member of the Sanhedrin, it is unlikely that this would be a lie. Another fact is that the burial of Jesus was witnessed by close friends and the tomb was guarded by soldiers. The Jews have also never denied that Jesus was dead and buried. The evidence for this is found in the Jewish Talmud which states:

“On the eve of Passover, Yeshua was hanged, since nothing was found in his favour ...since nothing was found in his favour, he was hanged on the eve of the Passover!”  
*Jewish Talmud, Sanhedrin, 43 a.*

The agnostic and sceptic Bart Ehrman says that one of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. Several scholars attest that Jesus died and was buried. There has been contention that Jesus did not actually die or that if he did, then his disciples stole his body so as to claim that he had resurrected. But some facts lay claim to the belief that Jesus actually resurrected as he said he would. Some have tried to explain the resurrection in the following way. According to the Psychological explanation, the disciples and others imagined a risen Christ, changed from unbelieving cowards into courageous evangelists, and went to their deaths for something they were wrong about or ultimately knew to be untrue. From the Biological: Jesus survived the beatings, scourging, cross, and spear thrust into the heart, fooled his executioners, recuperated in the tomb, rolled away the stone, and had his 'resurrection' falsely proclaimed. Theological explanation asserts that Christ's resurrection was a true, historically valid, and divine miracle where Jesus died and came back to life three days later, which is in keeping with the theme of miracles in the gospels (David, 1999).

It is important to note that the earliest Christians unanimously and passionately believed that Jesus was alive. After Jesus was crucified, the hopes of his followers were dashed. When they heard he had risen, all of them must have been doubters; not just Thomas. The disciples were sceptical because Jesus had actually died. Something must have happened that totally changed them to an extent that they were willing to die for their faith. All the disciples apart from John died as martyrs. All of them were willing to launch what Jesus had piloted. It was this belief that caused the Jesus movement to survive and thrive (unlike, say, that of John the Baptist or even bar-Kochba a century later). This conviction allowed Christians to overcome both the discouragement of their leader's death, and later persecution. For another, the criticisms of the empty tomb tradition and of the appearance stories that are typically given by critics can be answered.

Finally, opponents of the resurrection face one huge embarrassment: No one has ever produced a plausible naturalistic explanation of what happened after the crucifixion that accounts for all the accepted facts (e.g., Jesus was crucified and died; early Christians believed in the resurrection). None of the explanations that have been suggested — wrong tomb, swoon, hallucination, mistaken identity, myth — have any compelling evidence in their favour, and many are so weak as to collapse of their own weight once spelled out. Resurrection of Jesus is an important quality in the history of Christianity. If Jesus had not resurrected, there would be no basis for Christianity. This is because resurrection gives hope for eternal life. It also demonstrates that there is life after death making the call for self-sacrifice in this life meaningful. The atoning value of His death is confirmed. The power of sin is death and the resurrection demonstrates that death has been conquered. The fear of death is broken. The problem of pain and death is answered with the hope of anew heaven and earth, a new body, and the fullness of life without the sting of death.



#### **4.8. The Great Commission**

Jesus had great foresight. He prepared his disciples well to ensure the continuity of what he had come to establish; the kingdom of God. In all the gospel accounts, it is recorded that before Jesus left the world he called his disciples and commanded them to spread his teachings in the entire world. In the *Gospel according to Matthew* the concluding verses are with the words of the Great Commission;

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

When a new king was ready to assume his throne in ancient times, tradition required a ceremony of pomp and power. In regal splendour the ruler stepped forward to assume the symbols of authority: a sceptre, or a throne. The former king was gone, defeated or deceased. The new ruler was now elevated to his rightful place (Matthew suitably places Jesus on a mountain as he delivers the final words to his disciples) and would from this time rule all territory under his dominion.

In the climax of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has finally defeated the “prince of this world.” On the cross and in the resurrection, he has taken away Satan’s power, and now resplendent in glory he speaks to his followers as the one enthroned over all the powers of this world: “All authority and power has been given to me.”

The first command of this new king Jesus was to “go and make disciples of all nations” is also the first blessing of the enthroned king. It is a blessing that promises the sharing of his power, and of his presence with the words: “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of age” (The Devotional Bible, NIV Version).

These words of the Great Commission are still being used to date during graduation ceremonies in Theological colleges, the ordination of ministers or when missionaries are being sent to spread the Gospel. Jesus knew that he had done a good job and the disciples could now carry on effectively as he empowered them to do so. He also prohibited them from starting to preach the Gospel without the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. The spreading of the gospel started officially when the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The fact that the disciples spoke in different languages and were understood by the several people who spoke many other different languages is indicative of the universal nature of Christianity as established by Jesus Christ. This is important because it means Jesus' influence, unlike that of the other epic heroes, was more far reaching. It has historical significance in the sense that his impact is not limited geographically.

Incidentally, no known epic hero has been known to command his adherents after their death to continue with the work they were doing. For the epic heroes who have resurrected, they attain a new status which makes it impossible for them to associate with their followers the way Jesus did. The glorious death results, for the Greco-Roman epic heroes, into going to Olympus to stay with the gods and not have their teachings perpetuated as Jesus did. A good example is Heracles. Heracles was also known as Hercules among the Romans. He was the greatest hero of Greek mythology. Heracles was the only hero to become a full-fledged god upon his death but even in his case there was his mortal aspect to be dealt with. By virtue of his spectacular achievements, even by heroic standards, he was given a home on Mount Olympus and a goddess for a wife. But part of him had come not from his father Zeus but from his mortal mother Alcmena, and that part was sent to the Underworld. As a ghost, it eternally roams the Elysian Fields in the company of other heroes. It is indicated nowhere that he taught disciples to start a religion or a new way of life in his name. People marvelled

at Heracles because of his feats but he did not do anything to show that he had a personal relationship with his father Zeus. He was just used as a pawn in the war of the gods.

Jesus Christ therefore had some unique qualities that transcend the epic heroes into universal spiritualism. These qualities were quest specific. In establishing the kingdom of God, he needed to have the qualities that are in line with what people would expect from God to who everyone goes to for help when in need. The main foundation was love and compassion as well as teachings on how to be a member of the kingdom by living in harmony through love with God and man.

#### **4.9. Conclusion**

This aim of this chapter was to identify the unique qualities of Jesus that transcend other epic heroes. The study revealed that Jesus Christ is beyond the epic hero. This is because of the exceptional characteristics that made him to establish a kingdom not limited by time or space. The first quality was because he has love, was a teacher who used teaching techniques that speak to people anywhere in the world, he was also the perfect role model, resurrected from the dead and put into place strategies that ensured Christianity as a religion would be spread all over the world. That were limited to specific geographical locations but the one Jesus, the Kingdom of God, is for all the people in the world.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides a summary of the outcomes of this study. The detailed analysis of the research study can be found in chapters two, three and four of this thesis. In addition, conclusion from the analysed data will be drawn, and recommendation for further study given as well.

### **5.2. Summary of the Findings**

In chapter two, the study found that the Bible is indeed literature and that the *Gospel according to Matthew* is undeniably an epic. This is because of the stylistic and thematic concerns of the text that demonstrates the Hellenistic influence of the day. The text has the characteristics and elements of the epic that include; a plot that centres around a hero of unbelievable character, deeds of superhuman strength, supernatural and-or otherworldly forces, sustained elevation of style with the author remaining objective and omniscient and an invocation of the Muse or statement of the theme. By its being a religious text, it fits under the specialised genre of the Biblical epic.

In chapter three, the study established that Jesus Christ is an epic hero. This was done by discussing him against the backdrop of the hero and heroism after which he was analysed using the characteristics and elements of the epic hero. It was realised that Jesus for the better part has the characteristics of the epic hero. Such characteristic includes a noble birth (Miraculous Birth Motif) being capable of deeds of great strength and courage and a great Warrior (Cultural Hero Motif), travels over a vast Setting (Journey Motif), national heroism (Sacrificial self-Motif), humility, faces supernatural foes and/or receives supernatural help ((Miraculous Deeds Motif.)

Chapter four, the unique qualities of Jesus that transcend other epic heroes into universal spiritualism were found to reveal several things about Jesus Christ and his quest. It was found that Jesus' quest was the founding of the kingdom that would never end- the Kingdom of God that would bring back Man into harmony with God. His life and teachings are the basis for Christianity. Christianity, unlike other religions, is universal in the senses that not only is it one of the largest religions, but the teachings of Jesus are universally applicable. His quest, unlike the classical epic heroes, was a spiritual and not a worldly one and therefore his character had to be commensurate with his mission. He is not portrayed as a murderer like the other heroes. Instead he is called the prince of peace.

He succeeded in establishing his kingdom because he was a strategic planner; he started by choosing his disciples with care and taught them. He had no discrimination and chose the rejects of the society which included women and the people he chose were committed to him. He performed miracles but mainly out of compassion to the suffering and not for his own glory. Finally, he was obedient and died a shameful death on the cross as was predestined but had no vengeance for the people who put him to death in a cruel manner. His resurrection resulted in Christianity and his followers are perpetuating his teachings.

### **5.3 Conclusions**

The findings of the research presented above formed the basis for several conclusions for the study.

Firstly, the study reveals *the Gospel according to Matthew*, written under Hellenistic influence, is an epic because it has the characteristics of the epic.

Secondly, the study concludes that Jesus Christ is an epic hero because of the way he is portrayed. He has the characteristic of the epic hero.

Finally, the study concludes that even though Jesus is portrayed as an epic hero, he transcends the other epic heroes because he had greater influence historically compared to them.

#### **5.4. Recommendations**

In view of the fact that Bible has and continues to influence literature because most literary artists draw from the Bible when writing texts, and because literature has evidently influenced the way the Bible was written as the writers employed literary techniques, there is need for more research in this area so that the two co-exist harmoniously. This would help even the preachers to prepare their sermons in such an interesting way that their faithful do not fall asleep during the sermon. In addition, the depiction of some of the characters, like Jesus Christ, would be enhanced as he would become real.

#### **5.5 Suggestions for Further Research**

Having contributed in this research and come across several challenges, the researcher makes one recommendation for further research:

On the subject of Jesus Christ in the context of literature and religion, more studies on how literature enhances the appreciation of Jesus Christ as an important figure in both in Christendom and literature would be helpful as the existing scholarship is sadly lacking and subjective.

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