
RE-READING THE GOSPELS FROM AN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT IN THE MIDST OF CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

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Abstract

The advent of the Age of the Enlightenment has ushered in critical thinking, which challenged the traditional understanding of the Gospels using scientific-historical lenses rather than faith-based and religious methods to evaluate the words and life of Jesus. This modern scholarly approach has been making Jesus' studies become explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian and anti-dogmatic movement. Using historical-critical and theological methods, this paper evaluates an alternative approach to the study of the Gospels from an African religious perspective. It has reviewed the various issues raised by the historical-critical scholars over the years, which have been consistently knocking Christian religious' doors in Africa. This work also argued that relying and engaging an objective textual, historical-critical and theological studies of the Gospels will create viable critical scholarship in Africa, which also will recognize the Gospels as inspired, divine and unadulterated Word of God.

Key words: Gospels, critical scholarship, Historical-critical studies, historical Jesus, Africa, supernaturalism

Introduction

The emergence of the Age of Enlightenment has opened the Gospels to total scrutiny with scientific-historical lenses to understand the message and words of Jesus. This historical-critical approach to the study of the Gospels has challenged the traditional understanding of Jesus, which has been maintained by the Church fathers to the Reformation. The quest for the Historical Jesus came up as scholars began to question the supernatural deeds of Jesus in the Gospels, an attempt to use historical and literary rather than religious methods to reconstruct the life of Jesus (Harley, 2006:221-58; Verhoef, 2016:1-7; Ellens, 2003:437-40; Meier, 2003:52-79; Meier, 2000:740-46; Thomas, 2014:447-97). The quest began as an explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian and anti-dogmatic movement with Reimarus as its founder in 1776. Its agenda was not to find a Jesus upon whom Christian faith might be based, but to show that the faith of the church could not be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth (Porter, 2004:29).

By re-reading, this work refers to the ability to inject fresh thought and view of the problem associated to the Gospels and Jesus from an African perspective for global consideration. The work evaluates and re-reads such an approach to the study of the Gospels within African religious mind-set. Perhaps being mostly western problems, Jesus and the Gospels have become subjects of interaction on the African continent as African scholars also sought for answers to the questions raised by global scholarship. Although there have been faith-based understandings of Jesus in Africa as Lord, King, and being Divine rather than human, the Gospels have always remained reliable documents for faith in African Christian religious tunes. Despite that the Gospels have been among heavy criticism for over two centuries, African culture and religiosity could relate with a naturally developed biblical

Christianity without tampering with its core Christian religious beliefs and systems.

The Gospels under Fire

The Gospels have been exposed to scientific criticism over the years by a consortium of biblical scholars, predominantly from the West. The overriding framework for the critical-historical depiction of Jesus was that the supernatural and divine portraits of Jesus in the Gospels cannot be explained for the Gospels are merely human documents rather than inspired books. This resulted to redefining a Jesus, which is unfriendly to the New Testament. Affirming this, N. T. Wright (2000:4) elaborated, “Many Jesus scholars of the last two centuries have, of course, thrown scripture out of the window and reconstructed a Jesus quite different from what we find in the New Testament.”

To the higher critics, the problem with the Gospels was that they could not merge the critical-historical Jesus with the life of Jesus in the Gospels, which made them to develop anti-supernatural bias's view about the Gospels. This change of view raised a difficulty in theology, which has been in contrast to the Christ proclaimed in the New Testament texts (Grenz and Olson, 1992:87). Such an understanding of Jesus is classified as the “Jesus of Evangelical Christology” and the “Jesus of Liberation Christology” (Strimple, 1995:5). To the critics, the historical Jesus has been theologized by the early church and to this, they have criticized the birth, miracles, teaching kingdom, death and resurrection of Jesus as stated in the Gospels (Porter, 2004:29).

Historical Jesus studies have been done by both Christians and non-Christians. As a result, the life of Jesus of Nazareth has attracted the attention of people and the critical scholars, who sought critical approaches for understanding Jesus in the Gospels. New approaches surfaced in order to depict the life of Jesus contrary to what has been revealed in the Gospels.

Some scholars believe the four classifications while others believe in three. Stanley E. Porter (2004:31-32) elaborates, “...there have been four periods in the quest for the historical Jesus, a first from the eighteen century to 1906, a no-quest period from the 1906-1953, and a new or second quest from 1953 to say 1988, and a third quest from around 1988 to the present”. Though many scholars hold to the four periods (cf. Wright, Blomberg, Burer and Bock), some scholars such as Bock and Habermas believe that the designation No Quest is probably an overstatement because they find the end of the first quest to have been classified as the no-quest. A similar view is held by Porter that it is hardly a period of no-questing after the first quest (see Bock, 2002:141-52; Habermas, 1996:18-24). Attempting to consider the no-quest as a period, Porter (2004:32) believes that the classification is wrong for most of them and argues that the quest has begun with some texts after the death of Jesus and that the church fathers engaged in some quest through their writings.

A related problem which has dominated the minds of scholars is the placement of scholars within these periods. With this, for example, Porter stresses that the classifications have misrepresented most of the scholars within the periods and argued that the works of Farrar, Weiss, Edersheim, and Sanday (Farrar, 1874; Weiss, 1883-4; Edershim, 1883; Sanday, 1904:603-53) among others, should not be dismissed for they believed that the Gospels sources could be reliably used to discuss the historical Jesus. Also, the depiction of the end of the first quest by Schweitzer is wrong, for many issues, which Schweitzer raised have already been analysed in some forms in the works of other scholars as far as Schweitzer criticized such works in *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Porter, 2004:32-3). Also, Crossan (1998:44) rejects the fact that Wright classified him and many contemporary scholars among the second

quest and Crossan inquired that he is a “part of the discarded past”.

The first Quest for the Historical Jesus in Critical Studies

It was the German sceptic Hermann S. Reimarus (b.1694-1768) who declared that Christianity was based on a mistake and rejected the divine nature of Jesus (Schweitzer, 1961:48-57; Strimple, 1995:21-24). To Reimarus, Jesus of Nazareth has no role to play in modern religious faith and thinking following the scepticism, rationalism and agnosticism before the Enlightenment (Farnell, 1998:87-117). He denied the resurrection, saying that the disciples stole his body and then wrote stories about his life and his words which were nothing but “tissue of lies” (Wright, 1992:2; Bock, 2002:143). Reimarus composed a treatise rejecting miracles and accusing Bible authors of fraud on the ascension story who reconstructed the Second Coming passages in their preaching for they were disappointed in Jesus. Gotthold Lessing published Reimarus' conclusions in the Wolfenbuettel Fragments. Though not popular, his work ushered in critical thinking and new forms of inquiry which were brought into the studies of scriptures (Gwamna, 2009:5). To Wright (1992:3), his work appears to be the first in the modern period and “variations on well-worn themes”.

David F. Strauss (1808-74)'s *Life of Jesus Critically Examined* exposed the mythic approach to the study of the Gospels particularly on the miracles of Jesus though Strimple (1995:30) states that Strauss was not the originator of the mythic theory. Strauss advanced the mythic approach although he held that there had been a historical Jesus, a real man upon whose image the myth had been drafted (Rops, 1960:271). Strauss believed that it was impossible to write the life of Jesus because there are discrepancies in the Gospels and that there are no chronological presentations of materials in the Gospels. This led him to place the Gospels against the Gospel of John and also to overlook the most obvious fact of all –the existence of the Christian church (Neill, 1975:12-19). His major contribution is the book *the Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*. His works were considered threats by “many ordinary Christians” (Wright, 1992:3) and scholars of the Gospels.

In the 1860s, F. E. Renan (1823-92) published his portrait of Jesus which saw Jesus more as a great moral teacher who won the hearts of the Jewish masses. Like Reimarus and Strauss, Jesus, to Renan, was a mere man than divine. Renan aims at presenting a Jesus in the proper geographical and technical setting involving the topography and customs of Palestine as a “fifth Gospel” (Rops, 1960:273) a task reconstructed by the Jesus Seminar when they added the Gospel of Thomas as their fifth Gospel.

William Wrede also held a more radical view of Jesus though a reconstruction of the view of Reimarus and Renan on the depiction of the life of Jesus as any other man on earth. To him, Jesus was a Galilean teacher or prophet who did and said some striking things and was eventually executed. To Wrede, “if Jesus really knew himself to be the Messiah and designated himself as such, the genuine tradition is so closely interwoven with later accretions that it is not easy to recognize it” (qtd in Schweitzer, 1961:339). To Wrede, the life of Jesus was not messianic for it was the resurrection that convinced the disciples of the Messiah. At this, the disciples then realized that he had been Messiah all the time (Neill, 1975:249). Wrede's position was taken by John Hick in 1977 that Jesus did not think of himself as God incarnate or the Messiah (Qtd in Strobel, 1998:134; Abogunrin, 2003:29-30), a position Witherington III, in an interview with Strobel, counteracted (Strobel, 132-41). Wrede in his Markan theory as a basis of the studies of the Gospels, a more theological fiction, left us with the notion that Jesus is a first-century Jewish prophet who was a teacher in Galilee, had disciples and taught them special things, a mere man, as Reimarus and Renan stated, rather than being divine.

Martin Kähler in *The So-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ* criticizes the liberals of his time on the historical Jesus and the limits of historical inquiry stating his background to what he called “The Real Christ of Faith and History” and has given a foundation for the faith in Jesus from the biblical point (Kähler, 1964). Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Wright, 1992:5; Witherington III, 1995:9-11; Keener, 2009:6) raises the issues that Jesus was a failed Jewish messiah in the face of the people; hence, the people put their trust in him to rescue them from the Romans but later he announced that he will be killed which got fulfilment as recorded in the Gospels. Schweitzer believed the thoroughgoing eschatology of the kingdom of God against the view of Weiss. He depicts Jesus' suffering and death as part of the kingdom of God's fulfilment.

Schweitzer (1961:339) rejects any historical attempt to use historical finding to search for Jesus Christ and observes that “Jesus as a concrete historical personality remains a stranger to our time, but in His Spirit, which lies hidden in His words, is known in simplicity, and its influence is direct” (Schweitzer, 1961:401). Schweitzer depicts Jesus as prophetic-apocalyptic figure who taught a quite demanding interim ethic (Weren, 1999:257). Schweitzer concludes that the name in which men expressed their recognition of Him as such, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, have become for us historical parables. We can find no designation which expressed what He is to us. He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not (Schweitzer, 1961:403). It is evident that Schweitzer believes in an unknown Jesus which no designation can explain.

The Emergence of Form Criticism in Critical Studies

After Schweitzer, Jesus discussions continued through some different manner known as “form criticism” which according to C. Brown (1992), was pioneered by K. L. Schmidt, Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. This was the study of the forms of individual paragraph in the Gospels particularly the parables and miracle stories, and has questioned the nature of the Gospels (McCain, 2005:106-110). Form criticism sprang as a result of the weaknesses of source criticism. The inability to produce a documentary theory of Mark's origin led to form critics to suggest form criticism as a method. Source criticism has left a gap of 20 to 30 years after the death of Jesus before any written document had appeared. According to Abogunrin (2003:16), “Source criticism has proposed a four-document hypothesis as sources of the Synoptic documents but could not push the study beyond the written document, which form criticism attempts to fill the gap”. With this, Kee (1970:20) observes, “Form criticism has not found unanimous acceptance, but it has nevertheless affected a revolution in the study of the gospels”.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) stated that no portrait of Jesus could be found in the work of Schweitzer (Wright, 1992:7) which led to form criticism in the study of Jesus. His views have shaped liberalism on the Gospels and New Testament generally dominantly in his book *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*. Bultmann, like Dibelius and others, rejected the miracle materials and the historicity of the miracle accounts. Bultmann believed that all the miracle accounts in the Gospels are creations of the early church. As such, miracles in the Gospels are legendary and that all their elements are unintelligible today. Most of Bultmann's ideas were developed in *Theology of the New Testament* (2 Vols.), *The Gospel of John* and *Jesus Christ and Mythology*. Although Bultmann believed that nothing could be known about Jesus in the Gospels historically, he accepted in *Theology of the New Testament* (Vol. 1, chapter 1) a number of historical facts concerning the life and message of Jesus (Habermas, 49). In line with other scholars, Gwamna has made clear the error of Bultmann particularly

when he concluded that we cannot transpose ourselves into the first century world of the New Testament which Bultmann saw as “primitive” and “prescientific” and therefore was “unintelligible” and “unacceptable” (Gwamna, 2009:6).

On the sayings of Jesus, Bultmann divided them into 7; wisdom words, “I” words, prophetic and apocalyptic sayings, law words, rules and parables (Guthrie, 1990:218). He accepted only about forty sayings as genuine and the mere event of the life and death of Jesus on the cross which formed the background for his Christ of faith, a belief based on certain historical criteria as discussed in the Jesus Seminar. Kähler's influence (1964:57) made him to ask, “What is the life-of-Jesus research really searching for?”. Kähler (1964:65) preferred the real Christ of faith and history as the historic Christ of the Bible. Despite the effort of Kähler, Bultmann revisited the discussions and compounded the entire studies.

The Jesus of History and Christ of Faith discussion got rooted very largely from the basic assumption of most form criticism that the *sitz im leben* must be found in the post-Easter period and could not have existed in the pre-Easter period. Of recent, Borg underscores that the Jesus Seminar's work, *The Five Gospels*, with its coding should not be used as a new authority but it should be used for the scholarly understanding of the Gospels. To this, he stated that the phrases “the pre-Easter Jesus” and “post-Easter Jesus” should replace the phrases “Jesus of History” and “Christ of Faith.” By “pre-Easter Jesus, Borg (1994:195) means the historical Jesus and by “post-Easter Jesus” he means the Jesus of Christian experience and tradition in the years and centuries after the death of the pre-Easter Jesus”. Abogunrin (2003:35) also stated that interest in Jesus of faith to the almost total neglect of the Jesus of history almost naturally leads to historical scepticism and flight from history and believes that the past's reconstruction must remain relevant to faith in order to be meaningful.

Despite the distinction, I. H. Marshal (1977:61) asserts, “They are the same”, a view shared among conservative scholars the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history discussion. Matthew Michael (2011:194) also is with the view that the “dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith is actually a Western fad, which unfortunately sought to impose a Western twenty-first century academic agenda on ancient New Testament writings”. Michael (2011:193-4) believed that such a characterization of Jesus is nothing but a “misunderstanding of the merger of historical and theological elements in the practice of ancient narration”. Jesus is the Lord of history and the faith.

The Second Quest for the Historical Jesus in Critical Studies

The designation new quest or second quest was given after the book of James M. Robinson *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1959) though Robinson did not start the movement. This movement got started in the 1953 although Crossan (1998:44) argued against Wright that there is no such thing as the new quest. The second quest does not admit the possibility of ever regaining complete knowledge of the historical Jesus in the sense of biographical and psychological details, but attempted to fill out the content of the kerygma with some knowledge of Jesus. It is an attempt to get away from complete scepticism without returning to the older view that Mark presents a reliable account of the history of Jesus.

Ernst Kasemann clearly disagreed with the works of Barth/Bultmann that a life of Jesus could not be written and criticized Bultmann's total disconnection of history and faith. Unlike Bultmann, Kasemann found his cue in the preaching of Jesus. He wrote that “Our investigation has led the conclusion that we must look for the distinctive element in the earthly Jesus in the preaching and interpret both his other activities and his destiny in the light of his

preaching” (qtd in Guthrie, 1990:224). To prevent this, Kasemann insisted on the need of criteria for studying Jesus through the questioning of the authenticity of the sayings than the deeds of the Gospels and the proliferation of the criteria of authenticity.

Like Kasemann, Ernst Fuchs's *Studies in the Historical Jesus* drew attention to the conduct of Jesus and also introduced a psychological element by suggesting motives behind Jesus' action. He concentrates on the social concern and attitude of Jesus towards the wayward and social outcast. To him, the death of John the Baptist had some significance for Jesus as he approached his own death, which led to historical-psychological interpretation which has been regarded by Bultmann as a relapse.

Bornkamm's *Jesus of Nazareth* centred on the acts of Jesus rather than Kasemann. Bornkamm insisted that Jesus is the only reality of God who confronts men and calls them to a decision (Abogunrin, 2003:27). Bornkamm (1960:24) writes, “Quite clearly what the Gospels report concerning the message, the deeds and the history of Jesus is still distinguished by an authenticity, a freshness, and a distinctiveness not in any way effaced by the Church's Easter faith. These features point us directly to the earthly figure of Jesus.”

Bornkamm believes that we can before our minds see a picture of Jesus of Nazareth as he was. Understood in this way, he said, “the primitive tradition of Jesus is blimful of history” (qtd in Neill, 1975:278). He stated that the historical Jesus never used the title “Son of Man” for himself. After the Resurrection, the title is no longer used, what follows the resurrection is testimony about Jesus nor the testimony of Jesus. To him, the title is for the old Palestinian church, to which we owe the transmission of the words of the Lord, an expression of the essence of their faith and was to be invested with the authority of Jesus himself (Neill, 1975:282-3).

James M. Robinson maintained the need for some historical quest and has concentrated his appeal on what he at first called the understanding of self-hood by Jesus, but what he has since, changed to the understanding of existence, because his former position was criticized for being indistinguishable from the quest of the liberal school in the first quest. To Robinson, we need to replace the historical view of Jesus which the original quest held with the existential historiography. Robinson underlined the illegitimacy of trying to work back to pure history since what we have in the Gospels are interpreted stories and sayings. He too believed that not very much could be traced back to the life of Jesus. According to Robinson, the task of the historian is to recognize the intention behind past historical records, since history is a matter of interpretation in which the interpreter may find himself being interpreted. He concludes that the Gospels are therefore an interpretation of facts and it is illegitimate to go behind them since the historical Christ remains inaccessible (Robinson, 1983:39ff; Marshall, 1977:128ff; Abogunrin, 2003:25).

The second quest makes full use of critical tools such as source and form criticisms which have caused considerable difficulty when it comes to serious historical reconstruction. The Jesus of the new quest was more of an existential philosopher whose presence in history was barely discernible behind the kerygma. The two periods discussed, a critical evaluation of the two periods for the historical Jesus would reveal “what Jesus actually did, said and was two thousand years ago and what has the historical-critical method can discover and conclude about it” (Witherington III, 1995:11-12).

The Third Quest for the Historical Jesus in Critical Studies

The third quest has witnessed a more intense study of Jesus than the first and second quests in

the entire historical Jesus research (Holmen, 2001:175-97; Evans, 2006:35-54). The major problem facing scholars is the classification of scholars within this period. For example, Wright classified the Jesus Seminar under the new quest and views Crossan and some of his contemporaries to be within this period (1992:10), however, Crossan rejected the idea in his book, *The Birth of Christianity* (1998:44). Is Crossan and some members of the Jesus Seminar part of the second and third quests, a notion created by Wright? It can therefore be stated that the historical Jesus research has reached its peak under the third quest with the Jesus Seminar emergence and *The Da Vinci Code*. This research rejects the classification of such people under the second quest for the historical Jesus in line with Crossan and others hence he is a chief figure.

The third quest for the historical Jesus has been on the scene of providing somewhat higher positive answers to the study of Jesus. It stands among the liberal-conservative lines although scholars have not agreed totally on the place of Jesus. The study of Jesus within the third quest takes to cognizance the Jewishness of Jesus and it is influenced by archaeological findings which is shedding light and provoking the understanding of Jesus in terms of the Kingdom of God and the Politics of Palestine.

Examples of some views within this period are the works of Geza Vermes which insisted Jesus being a Jew, a popular Jewish rabbi and a Galilean holy man (Vermes, 1973; Vermes, 1993). Ben Meyer also portrayed Jesus as preaching to Israel, God's chosen people, with a renewed offer of community (Meyer, 1979). Richard Horsley (1987) viewed Jesus as favouring nonviolent social dissent and there are other groups and movies which picture a fictional Jesus such as the Jesus Seminar, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Smith, 2007:24; Strimple, 1995:1; Brown, 2003:332) and *the Colour of the Cross* among many others.

E. P. Sanders (1985:299) focuses on the account of Jesus' actions as he offended Judaism. According to Sanders, Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah and rejected the scene of the death of Jesus as accurate in the Synoptic Gospels. According to Sanders, the writers of the Gospels (Matthew and Mark) did not know why Jesus was executed from the point of view of the Jewish leaders (cf. Borg, 1991:178) but preferred John's account (Sanders, 1985:318) which has been rejected by many critical scholars.

J. D. Crossan is a key figure in the controversy around the third quest for the historical Jesus. Most of Crossan's works are mostly on the extra-facts about Jesus which have become the basis for ideas in the Jesus Seminar. Wright commented on Crossan that he is "one of the most brilliant, engaging, learned and quick-witted New Testament scholars alive today" (Wright, 1996:44). Crossan believed Jesus to be a Jewish Cynic philosopher who was a peasant, a view followed by Burton Mack and F. Gerald Downing. According to Crossan, Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist. He classifies the Gospels into; the saying gospels, the biographical gospels (a view denied by Reimarus and Bultmann), discourse gospels and the biographical-discourse gospels and he questions the validity of the Gospels. Crossan referred to the Synoptic Gospels as dependent upon the independent gospels such as Q, the Cross gospel and Thomas which are dated around 50s CE and believed that when they are merged altogether we can get the actual life of Christ. Crossan denied the nature miracles, virgin birth, and the raising of Lazarus. According to Crossan, Jesus was a magician and like Reimarus, Strauss, Bultmann and Robinson, held that the Gospels were not meant to be taken literally hence to him, they are filled with propagandas added by the early church. Crossan (1995:117, 159) believes that Jesus was not tortured and did not die and denies the resurrection of Jesus

(Crossan, 1995:210).

All biblical records about Jesus have been scrutinized by Crossan and to him, Jesus did not claim being the Lord and Messiah, it is the first century that made him Lord and Messiah, a view shared by Reimarus, Wrede, Schweitzer, Bultmann and Sanders. He denies the apocalyptic eschatology to Jesus as well as the coming Son of man sayings. Jesus, to him, did not understand the Kingdom of God as an apocalyptic event in the near future, but as a mode of life in the immediate present. According to Crossan, the kingdom which Jesus spoke was a sapiential kingdom, not an apocalyptic kingdom (Borg, 1994:36). Crossan (1995:210) concludes that the “empty tomb and the risen body” “were dramatic ways of expressing that faith” and “were dramatic ways of organizing and managing that faith”. Crossan (2007:22) has troubled with the Bible's inspiration which he reveals “is now not innocent”.

Marcus J. Borg in *Jesus: A New Vision, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship and Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* believed that the popular image on Jesus is not accurate and indeed seriously misleading (Borg, 1991:4). Borg (1991:10-14) views Jesus to be an eschatological prophet and argues for a non-eschatological understanding of Jesus. Borg (1994:27) states that on the coming Son of man sayings, “there is very little exegetical basis for affirming that Jesus had an imminent eschatology” and that “Jesus was much more concerned about Israel's historical direction and shape than about a kingdom beyond the eschaton”. Borg also saw him as the Spirit-filled person in the understanding of the historical Jesus and understood Jesus to have not merely believed in God, but he experienced God and had what we would call visionary or mystical experience through whom, the power of God flowed into the world and into human lives (Witherington III, 1995:263-7). According to Borg (Borg, 1991:115; Borg, 1984:247-256), Jesus should be seen as a “transformative sage” and a prophet. He considers the miracles as part of the history and story of Jesus but denied the “healing and exorcisms reported about Jesus were not unique” (Borg, 1991:70). However, Borg like Crossan has not underlined the place of the eschatological acts of Jesus, particularly the second coming of Jesus texts.

N. T. Wright (1992:18) believes the third quest centred on the relationship of Jesus with the Judaism of his day, the aims of Jesus, the deeds of Jesus, the carving of the early church, and the nature of the Gospels. To this, Wright suggested that “these are questions that ought not to be addressed in serious historical study of Jesus” and are “starting-point for serious theological study of Jesus”. Wright believes that Jesus was a good first century Jew and that Israel functioned to the rest of the world as a hinge to the door, what Jesus had done for Israel he has done for the whole world. To this, Wright sees Jesus as the light of the world and discussed Jesus within Judaism, in the Gospels and stated his view about the kingdom of God (which became the root of the historical Jesus quest). Wright reveals the aim of Jesus as to summon Israel to repent and the tribulation which would come upon the earth. According to Wright, Jesus is a Jewish messiah and that Jesus saw himself as Israel or the new temple or both.

Like Borg, Wright does not foresee the near end of the world, but rather thinks Jesus expected that when God intervened, he would bring to an end a certain world order. Wright also believes Jesus saw himself as the new temple, the new focus of true religion (Witherington III, 1995:246). By this, we see Wright rejected the Parousia of the Son of Man's texts (Mk 14:62; 13:26) like Borg and argued that they are about the vindication by God after his death at which he will be taken to heaven. On the resurrection of Jesus, Wright believed that the resurrection of Jesus was physical and transphysical and that the accounts of the

resurrection are quite clear. Wright (2000:112) states, “We had better learn to take seriously the witness of the entire church, that Jesus of Nazareth was raised bodily to a new sort of life, three days after his execution”.

A most scholarly work that fits the third quest is the work of Ben Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (1995). This is mostly an immediate evangelical response to the historical Jesus particularly the third quest. Witherington III (1995:185) believes Jesus as the Sage. He believed that a sapiential approach by Jesus would explain how he heals and exorcizes, spoke in aphorisms and parables, why he gathered disciples and how he spoke as one having independent authority. According to Witherington III (1995:187), Jesus saw himself as the very Wisdom of God who came in the flesh. He has believed in the Jesus of the Gospels with many historical facts that prove the existence of Jesus.

In sum, one sees the third quest scholars attempting to focus on the early textual layers of the New Testament for data to reconstruct a biography for the historical Jesus. Many of the third quest scholars rely on a redactive critique of the hypothetical Q gospel (Kloppenborg, 1996:307-44) and on a Greco-Roman “Mediterranean” milieu as opposed to a Jewish milieu and see Jesus as a philosopher who endeavoured to disrupt the economic status quo. Some scholars also rely on a critique of non-canonical texts for early textual layers that possibly give evidence for the historicity of Jesus. They use the archaeology of Israel and the analysis of formative Jewish literature, including the Mishna, Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament (as a Jewish text) and Josephus, to reconstruct the ancient worldviews of Jews in the first century Roman provinces of Judea and Galilee - and show how Jesus could be pictured. They tend to view Jesus as a Jewish proto-rabbi who announced the Kingdom.

African Christians and Critical Jesus Scholarship

In an attempt to discuss the historical Jesus in Africa, Abogunrin (2003:37-8) has asked relevant questions for the African society. To him, of what value is the current debate on the historicity of the Gospels, as well as the question of the historical Jesus? What can African Christianity benefit from the critical study of the Gospels, which has dominated the West for more than two centuries? These questions are basic for the understanding and the reviewing of the problem in the African setting and culture. African Christianity has been relying on Western Christianity in terms of ideas and materials. Western scholars have been asking questions for us in biblical scholarship, which have triggered influence in diverse ways. Many Africans went to the West to study, the internet is here, books and journals, which are written from the West and the social media are available for promoting conflicting ideas and values to Africa. The points below highlight a better direction to understand the Gospels in Africa contrary to the extreme historical scholarship.

New Testament World and the African Worldview: It is worth noting that while the Western worldview does not conform to the cultural and supernatural beliefs of the Jews in the first century, many Africans, according to Abogunrin (2003:39), “still live in the world of the New Testament, where belief in demons and a host of unseen supernatural powers is still potent and real. A Jesus emptied of all such supernaturalism as is contained in the Gospels would therefore be meaningless in the African setting”. Africans are still conscious of the fact that demons are in our societies and can cause havoc to people's lives. This makes the message and exorcisms of Jesus in the Gospels more relevant to our situations (Cook, 2009:668-92; Siker, 2007:26-53). The Jesus of the Gospels is still believed to do exorcisms and has removed the

fear of demons in people's lives. Africans need to know that "Christology is not, for instance, in competition with a disinterested historical investigation of the life of Jesus..." (Macquerrie, 103).

Africa and Oral Tradition: In Africa, people still live in the world of oral tradition as in the time of writing the Gospels. They better understand the words of Jesus as orally transmitted to what we have as the Gospels since African ancient traditions are still cherished in the form of songs, family eulogies and genealogies. These were classified by John S. Mbiti as symbolic theology which is expressed through art, scriptures, drama, symbolic rituals, dance, etc. when he observed that African theology has three main aspects; written theology, oral theology and symbolic theology. However, Mbiti concluded that visible theology must and should have a biblical basis (Mbiti, 1979:83-90; Foster, 2012:191-227). This is a similar fact that we have about the early church, 20 to 30 years before the Gospels were written.

Supernatural Deeds of Jesus can be explained: The New Testament has attested to the supernatural deeds of Jesus on the aspect of miracles, exorcism and great powers in the teaching about the resurrection (Lemerson, 2002:61-87; Bock, 2011:3-25; Dewey, 2016:1-8; Hurtado, 2013:35-52). The modern historical Jesus research has rejected that such supernatural thoughts cannot be explained. The African continent does not have a conflicting belief about the supernatural, and such a belief best explains the Jewish context emphasized by the third quest. Christians in Africa believe in demons, spirits and exorcisms. The miracles and exorcist deeds of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels are accurate and explainable in the African context. More importantly, these aspects of the biblical Gospels are self-consistent with the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. They were also testified by eye-witnesses in their own historical context even at the threat of death among the early Christians. Another critical supernatural issue is the resurrection of Jesus which many of the critical Jesus scholars have rejected. For the resurrection, the historical Jesus research and the Jesus Seminar have denied it solely because they rely on Thomas and other Gnostic gospels, that do not have the sayings on the death and resurrection of Jesus (1Cor. 15).

Theology should be done in Context: Africans need to uphold the Bible and be ready to stand for the task of theologizing for the African continent. They need to understand that the Bible was written in a historical and theological context and that theology is done in context. Contextualization should be at the top of all discussions. They should aim at making the discussions of the Bible relevant to our own African setting (*sitz im leben*).

Rereading of Western Literature: There is the need for African biblical scholars to judge the positions of the historical Jesus scholars prudently. The biggest mistake would be the usage of the position of critical scholars to defend sound teachings in our scholarship. African scholars should know who the critical scholars are in order for them not to recommend books by scholars like Borg, Crossan, Mack, Thierring, and Price. Others like Wright should be evaluated to know where they are helpful (as in exposing problem with the Jesus Seminar) and where they are not (issues of inerrancy and soteriology). A critical scholar, agnostic, atheist and a Gnostic should not be used to defend biblical constructions.

The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith are One: African scholars should affirm that there is no distinction between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history in the Gospels, against the works of Bultmann and followers. All these refer to one person, the Jesus Christ who was crucified, died and resurrected to life, and the one who death does not have power over. African Christians, who believe in this Jesus, will resurrect with him someday and live forever. This is the hope Christians have in the Jesus of the Gospels. Jesus should be seen as the

same person religiously, theologically, morally and historically.

The Gospels are better for Spiritual Developments: African scholars deserve to be informed that God allowed the higher criticisms on the Gospels for the purpose of expanding the knowledge of the Gospels. The higher criticism with its historical-critical method has helped establish an overall attitude toward the historicity of the Gospel materials and expanded the understanding of Jesus. Affirming this Daniel Rops observed, "The use of historical method, in conjunction with the remarkable discoveries of archaeological research, of comparative semantics and textual criticism has, for more than half a century now, greatly enlarged the scope of the study of Jesus" (275). The scholarly pressure on the Gospels exerted by the higher critical scholars in the West has caused many people in the West to fall back and check the Gospels to see the reality of the things they believe. This, to me, led to a revival on the study of the Gospels for better spiritual developments.

Faith is Ultimate: All what is needed as African Christians is faith because traditional Christianity taught us these things and there is the belief that our ancestors do come back in the form of spirits. This is not brought here to justify the traditional beliefs of the Africans on the ancestors but to buttress the point that the concept of biblical presentation of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels and the epistles can be easily explained because of such background in African society rather than in the West. Our aim is to make African Christianity maintain its integrity rather than compromising to African traditional beliefs. The attestations to the resurrection by the apostles in the preaching and their writings form the basis, for the resurrection gives hope to African Christians.

As critical scholarship continues to flourish on the African continent, traditional beliefs about Jesus as being Lord and Saviour of the world would also be maintained and propagated. African Christians continue to struggle with the wing of western critical scholarship, which has been sweeping the Western world and creating a dichotomy on the African continent. However, many African Christians have closed their hearts and spirits towards accommodating any belief system, which is contrary to the faith of their forefathers. Adequate studies of Jesus should view him from the critical and faith-based perspective in Africa in order to avoid subjective tendencies. Reasoning and faith should be merged for an objective study of Jesus from the texts about him in Africa.

Conclusion

The Western issues surrounding the Gospels have been consistently knocking the Africa's door but it seems Africa is not yet awake to confront the persistence of these Western issues. Despite the various issues raised concerning the Gospels and Jesus, the Africans always find the Gospels to be inspired, divine and unadulterated Word of God. The paper reviewed the various issues raised by the historical-critical scholars over the years. However, there may be some questions under the carpet but the Gospels have worn sheep clothing over the centuries of the Christian faith. While reasoning is suppressing faith within the Western world, secularism has always been challenged by faith within the African continent. Many Africans seem not to be interested in critical questions particularly when perceived would be detrimental to faith. The wind of secularism is blowing and Africa may not have enough glasshouses to accommodate some thoughts. Whether relying or engaging on textual, historical-critical and theological studies of the Gospels, configuring our minds to be objective in raising related issues concerning the Gospels for reconsideration will leave some people thinking in search for strategic and improved approaches in the midst of critical scholarship of Jesus in Africa.

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