

JESUS, THE HELPLESS JEW:

A Forgotten Portrait of Jesus in the “Third Quest”

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Abstract:

This paper surveys the “Third Quest” (TQ) and the various portraits of Jesus within the first century using historical-critical method. It argues that such studies and portraits of Jesus have overlooked a significant portrait of Jesus, which sets Jesus in the first century socio-economic context as being helpless, an additional portrait to the various existing portraits of Jesus. A search for the true historical Jesus should recognize Jesus being a helpless Jew as revealed in the Gospels for such a portrait stands a chance of redefining the entire life of the critical historical Jesus and still places Jesus within the confines of the Gospels.

Vital Points:

Third Quest, Historical Jesus, helplessness, the Enlightenment, Jesus studies

A. Introduction

The person and work of Jesus (e.g., his divinity, humanity, message) and the Christ-event (esp. the death, resurrection and ascension) as documented in the Gospels, in contrast to the non-canonical gospels, have attracted the attention of both critical and conservative scholars.¹ Such attention has resulted in perspectives on Jesus and has created a dichotomous view of Jesus: the Jesus

¹ A J Dewey, “The Memorable Invention of the Death of Jesus,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 72 (2016) 1-8, and W L Craig, “Accounting for the Empty Tomb,” *America* (2013) 11-17. As part of the larger task of biblical interpretation, see the comprehensive historical treatment, esp. of historical criticism in the wake of the enlightenment, by G L Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996).

of the Gospels, and the Jesus sought from historical critical lenses whose image is highly supplemented by non-canonical gospels.

The Jesus of the Gospels, over the years, has been stressed and the traditional or orthodox views about him have been maintained for centuries until the Age of the Enlightenment, which created different portraits of Jesus from the traditional understanding of Jesus. Within the study of the historical Jesus, there have been different dimensions of the quest: the first, second and third quests for the Historical Jesus.² The third quest started perhaps in the 1970s with special consideration to the Jewish understanding of Jesus predominantly by Jewish scholars. While the third quest is recent, it has underscored Jesus within the confines of his Jewishness in Palestinian configurations. Despite the various portraits of Jesus by the third quest scholars, a review of literature has observed that the helplessness of Jesus has not been properly discussed.

This paper concentrates on seeing Jesus as a helpless Jew, a neglected portrait of Jesus in the third quest for the historical Jesus. It develops the helplessness of Jesus which started during his birth and extended in the course of his ministry and to the cross. Inculcating this portrait of Jesus to the existing ones would add value to the understanding and interpretation of Jesus within the third quest for the historical Jesus.

² See E Verhoef, "Why did People choose for the Jesus-Movement?" *HTS: Theological Studies* 72 (2016) 1-7; J H Ellens, "The Jesus Quest," *Pastoral Psychology* 51 (2003) 437-40; J P Meier, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Law: Some Problems within the Problem," *CBQ* 65 (2003) 52-79; idem, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Herodians," *JBL* 119 (2000) 740-46; J D Thomas, "Mapping the Word, Reading the World: Biocartography and the "Historical" Jesus," *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014) 447-97.

B. Jesus Studies in Western Scholarship

The historical Jesus quest which started after the so-called Enlightenment has generated many biased and anti-supernatural views of the Gospels and Jesus, despite the traditional view or understanding of Jesus from the early church to the Reformation.³ This generated the first quest⁴ and the second quest⁵ for the Historical Jesus although some scholars hold to four quests by adopting a 'no quest' period.⁶ The 'no quest' period refers to the end of the first quest in the works of Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann, particularly from criticism and the dichotomous view of Bultmann on the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith."

³ G L Bray, "Christology" in S B Ferguson and D F Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988) 138, and idem, *Biblical Interpretation*; R S Wallace and G L Green, "Christology" in W A Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

⁴ For more studies, see R B Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus* (New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1995); S O Abogunrin, "In Search of the Original Jesus": An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at the University of Ibadan, on Thursday, July 16th 1998. (University of Ibadan, 2003); A Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (New York: Macmillan, 1961); H C Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970); C Brown, "Quest of Historical Jesus," in J B Green, S McKnight and I H Marshall, eds., *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992).

⁵ See J M Robinson, *A New Quest for the Historical Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); G Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper Collins, 1960); E Fuchs, *Studies in the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1964).

⁶ Though many scholars of Jesus studies tend to call the end of the First Quest, the No Quest, thinking Jesus discussions were muted after Schweitzer's work, it has been argued that the designation 'No Quest' is probably an overstatement because what is called 'No Quest' was the end of the First Quest. For more analysis see C S Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997) 84; D L Bock, *Studying the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 18-24, 141-52; S E Porter, "Reading the Gospels Today and the Historical Jesus," in S E Porter, ed., *Reading The Gospels Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 31-34.

The understanding of Jesus in these quests failed to supply adequate views of Jesus which are convincing and conform to the *vox populi*.

The third quest has witnessed a more intense study of Jesus than the first and the second quests in the entire historical Jesus research. One of the major issues facing biblical scholars is the classification of scholars within this period. For example, Wright classified the Jesus Seminar under the new quest or the second quest and he views Crossan and some of his contemporaries to be within this period,⁷ an alternative position Crossan rejected in his book *The Birth of Christianity*.⁸

It can, therefore, be stated that the historical Jesus research has reached its peak under the third quest with the emergence of the Jesus Seminar. This work rejects the classification of such people under the second quest for the historical Jesus in line with Crossan and other scholars. It is quite reasonable to say that Crossan's tripartite division of the Jesus studies would make sense in the overall classification of the entire Jesus studies.

Crossan divided the entire matrix of Jesus studies into three stages. The first is the traditional Jesus which was established by the apostles and continued to the Reformation. The second is the historical Jesus that came as a product of the Enlightenment, which sought scientific approaches to the study of Jesus and the Gospels. The third is the fictional Jesus which started with the Jesus Seminar and continues to the present.⁹ Crossan's approach has been adopted in considering the entire matrix of Jesus studies, with the view of presenting new insights into the studies which have challenged the minds of scholars for several centu-

⁷ N T Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 10.

⁸ J D Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1998) 44.

⁹ J D Crossan, "In Their Own Words," *BAR* 33 (2007) 22.

ries. Such a tripartite approach to the historical Jesus becomes relevant to scholarship as we move to consider Jesus within the confines of alternative religious enquiry.

The third quest for the historical Jesus falls within the second division of Crossan matrix of Jesus studies and has been on the scene of providing somewhat higher positive answers to the study of Jesus since perhaps 1970s¹⁰ although scholars (critical and conservative) have not agreed on what place Jesus should be given.¹¹ The study of Jesus within the third quest takes into cognizance the Jewishness of Jesus in his socio-economic context in Palestine.¹² This period has been influenced by archaeological findings and non-canonical gospels, which illumine and provoke thoughts about the life of Jesus. The period tends to view Jesus and the Kingdom of God, and Jesus and politics within the context of first-century Palestine.

Some views within this period are basic to understanding the focus of this period. Famous examples are the works of Geza Vermes who insisted Jesus was a Jew, a popular Jewish rabbi and

¹⁰ Gary Habermas suggests that the designation third quest was probably given by S Neill and T Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1961-1986* (Oxford University, 1988); see also B Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 1997).

¹¹ For more analysis on the radical and conservative traditions within this period, see Brown, "Quest of Historical Jesus"; S Lamerson, "Evangelicals and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," *Currents in Biblical Research* 1 (2002) 61-87.

¹² A Le Donne, "The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Revisionist History through the Lens of Jewish-Christian Relations," *JSHJ* 10 (2012) 63-86; T Holmen, "A Theologically Disinterested Quest? On the Origins of the 'third quest' for the Historical Jesus," *Studia Theologica* 55 (2001) 175-97. C A Evans, "Assessing Progress in the Third Quest of the Historical Jesus," *JSHJ* 4 (2006) 35-54.

Galilean holy man.¹³ Ben Meyer also portrayed Jesus as preaching to Israel, God's chosen people, with a renewed offer to the community.¹⁴ Richard Horsley considered Jesus as favouring nonviolent social dissent.¹⁵ Several Jesus novels, such as *The Passion of Christ*,¹⁶ *The Last Temptation of Christ*¹⁷ and the *Colour of the Cross*,¹⁸ among others, consider the humanity of Jesus and even place Jesus within such a Palestinian human context.

It is natural to limit our attention to some of the third quest scholars within this period in line with the Jesus Seminar. A nota-

¹³ See G Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); idem, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

¹⁴ See B F Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London SCM, 1979).

¹⁵ See R Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

¹⁶ A F Segal, "How I Stopped worrying about Mel Gibson and Learned to Love the Quest for the Historical Jesus': A Review of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*," *JSHJ* 2 (2004) 190-208.

¹⁷ The movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* was a production of a Martin Scorsese picture based on the book *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960). See D M Smith, "Painting a Portrait of Jesus," *BAR* 33 (2007) 24 by Nikos Kazantzakis and produced by Harry Ufland on September 15, 1988 (see Strimple, 1). The movie was banned by the French government for it revealed Jesus having sex with a woman, see D Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2003) 332. This Jesus of *The Last Temptation* was a carpenter and a traitor. The entire attempt of this book *The Last Temptation* is, in my assessment, to reveal the picture of a Jesus different from the Jesus of the Gospels. This Jesus could not withstand the temptation of the Devil and rejected the cross. It reveals Jesus in sexual relationship with Mary Magdalene, who gave birth to children. Their picture of Jesus is a social and human Jesus rather than a divine Jesus who has a divine relationship with the Father. The book and movie are all a menace to the Christian faith for they all present teachings which the Gospels have not.

¹⁸ The movie features Arimathea AD 33 and depicts Jesus being a black man with some black disciples. The movie, at the end, does not agree with the facts that we have about Jesus in the Gospels. Mary Magdalene was never a girlfriend of the Jesus presented in the Gospels.

ble work is E. P. Sanders' *Jesus and Judaism* (1985) which focuses on the account of Jesus' actions as he offended Judaism. For Sanders, Jesus did not claim to be the Messiah in any way. Sanders rejects 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.¹⁹ But Sanders preferred John's account of the story,²⁰ because it was considered to be dated to the first century which qualified John's gospel as canonical. However, John's account has been rejected by many critical scholars as being a viably later gospel of the second century, which does not have the historical weight that the Synoptic Gospels contain on the life of Jesus.

John D. Crossan is a key figure in the controversy around the third quest for the historical Jesus. Most of Crossan's works,²¹ along with other members of the Jesus Seminar, concentrate on the extra-"facts" about Jesus which have become the basis for the ideas in the Jesus Seminar. Wright has written that Crossan is "one of the most brilliant, engaging, learned and quick-witted

¹⁹ E P Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 299; cf. M J Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991) 178.

²⁰ Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 318; J H Charlesworth, "The Historical Jesus in the Fourth Gospel: A Paradigm Shift?" *JSHJ* 8 (2010) 3-46; P Foster, "Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research," *JSHJ* 10 (2012) 191-227.

²¹ Some of these significant works by Crossan include; *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (2001); *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand up?: A Debate between William Lane Craig and John Dominic Crossan* (1999); *The Jesus Controversy: Perspectives in Conflict* (Rockwell Lecture Series) (1999); *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (1991); *The Essential Jesus: Original Sayings and Earliest Images* (1994); *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (1994); *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (1995), and *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (1992).

New Testament scholars alive today.”²² Crossan believes Jesus to be a Jewish Cynic philosopher, who was a Jewish peasant, a view followed by Burton Mack and F. Gerald Downing.

According to Crossan, Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist. Crossan classified the Gospels into; the saying gospels, the biographical gospels (a view denied by Reimarus and Bultmann), discourse gospels and the biographical-discourse gospels and questions the validity of the Gospels. Crossan sees Matthew and Luke as dependent upon the independent gospels such as Mark, Q, Cross gospel and the *Gospel of Thomas* which he dated early around 50s CE. This early dating by Crossan has been argued as lacking evidence, being an unoriginal source. Crossan’s dating represents late and forged documents that are dependent on the canonical gospels, as argued in the works of mainstream scholars such as Craig Evans, Craig Keener and John Meier.²³

Crossan believes that when the various gospels and sources are merged together, we can get the actual life of Christ. He denies the nature miracles, virgin birth, and the raising of Lazarus. According to Crossan, Jesus was a magician, and like Reimarus, Strauss, Bultmann and Robinson, he holds that the Gospels were not meant to be taken literally; hence, they are filled with propagandas added by the early church. He doubts the torture and death account of Jesus and denies the resurrection of Jesus.²⁴

All records about Jesus in the Gospels have been scrutinized by Crossan. To Crossan, Jesus did not claim to be the Lord and Messiah; it is the first century church that made him Lord and

²² N T Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) 44.

²³ See C A Evans, *Fabricating Jesus: How Modern Scholars Distort the Gospels* (Downers Grove/Nottingham: IVP, 2007) 56, 98. C S Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 47-59, 69. J Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (vol. 1; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 112-66.

²⁴ J D Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995) 117, 159, 210.

Messiah. This is a view shared among scholars like Reimarus, Wrede, Schweitzer, Bultmann and Sanders. Like Borg, Crossan denied the apocalyptic eschatology of Jesus, as well as the coming Son of Man sayings. Jesus, for Crossan, 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. To Crossan, the kingdom which Jesus spoke about was a sapiential kingdom, not an apocalyptic kingdom, an understanding Borg also shares.²⁵ He concluded 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.”²⁶

Marcus J. Borg, in *Jesus: A New Vision, Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* and *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, argues that the popular image of Jesus is not accurate and is indeed seriously misleading.²⁷ Borg viewed Jesus to be an eschatological prophet.²⁸ But he argued for a non-eschatological understanding of Jesus. He writes on the coming Son of Man sayings, that “there is very little exegetical basis for affirming that Jesus had an imminent eschatology”²⁹ and that “as a prophet, Jesus was much more concerned about Israel’s historical direction and shape than about a kingdom beyond the eschaton.”³⁰ Borg also portrayed Jesus as a Spirit-filled person within the historical Jesus. He underscored that Jesus had not merely believed in God, but that Jesus experienced God and had what we would call a visionary or a mystical

²⁵ M J Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1994) 36.

²⁶ Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?* 210.

²⁷ Borg, *Jesus*, 37. M J Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991) 4. M J Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of the Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1995).

²⁸ Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, 10-14.

²⁹ Borg, *Jesus*, 27.

³⁰ Borg, *Jesus*, 27.

experience through which the power of God flowed into the world and into human lives.³¹

Borg argued that Jesus should be seen as a “transformative sage” and a prophet.³² He considered the miracles as part of the history and story of Jesus; yet, Borg stated that the “healing and exorcisms reported of him were not unique.”³³

The question of eschatology has not been agreed upon among the historical Jesus scholars within the third quest. While a good number of scholars, such as Sanders, Wright, Meier, underscores the ministry of Jesus within eschatological sense in respect to the kingdom of God, Crossan and Borg believe Jesus did not expect the imminent end of the world which raised the understanding of a non-eschatological Jesus. Seeing Jesus within the non-eschatological framework will make the movement which Jesus began to be seen not as an end-of-the-world movement unconcerned with culture, but as a “contrast-society” or “alternative community,” a community seeking to live in history under God’s kingship.³⁴ Borg, like Crossan, did not underscore the place of the eschatological acts of Jesus, particularly the texts of the *parousia* or future return of Jesus.

N. T. Wright in *Who Was Jesus?* (1992), *The Original Jesus* (1996), *Jesus and the Victory of God* (1996), *The New Testament and the People of God* (1992) *The Challenge of Jesus* (2000), and *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* (2006) argues that the third quest revolves around the relationship of Jesus with the Judaism of his day, the

³¹ Cited in Witherington III, *Jesus Quest*, 236-7; also see, J D Thomas, “Mapping the Word, Reading the World: Biocartography and the ‘Historical’ Jesus,” *Religion and the Arts* 18 (2014) 447-497.

³² Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, 115; Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998) 247-56.

³³ Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision*, 70.

³⁴ M J Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1994) 60-61.

aims of Jesus, the deeds of Jesus, the craving of the early church, and the nature of the Gospels. To this, Wright suggested that “these are questions that ought now to be addressed in serious historical study of Jesus” and should be the “starting-point for serious *theological* study of Jesus.”³⁵

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. Wright also considered Jesus as the light of the world. He discussed Jesus within Judaism, in the Gospels and stated his view about the Kingdom of God (which became the root-cause of the historical Jesus Quest). Wright suggested the aim of Jesus was to summon Israel to repent following the tribulation which would come upon the earth. To Wright, Jesus was a Jewish messiah, who also saw himself as Israel or the new temple or both.

Like Borg, Wright did not foresee the near end of the world, but rather he thought Jesus expected that when God intervened, he would bring to an end a certain world order. Wright also believed Jesus saw himself as the new temple, the new focus of true religion.³⁶ By this, Wright rejected the *parousia* of the Son of Man’s texts (Mk 14:62; 13:26); like Borg, he 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. He stated, “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.”³⁷

³⁵ Wright, *Who was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 18.

³⁶ Witherington III, *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1995) 246.

³⁷ N T Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 2000) 112.

A most notable work that belonged to the third quest is that of Ben Witherington III,³⁸ *The Jesus Quest: The Third Search for the Jew of Nazareth*. This work is an immediate evangelical response to the historical Jesus particularly the third quest. Witherington III viewed Jesus as the sage and believed that a sapiential approach by Jesus would explain how he healed and exorcized, spoke in aphorisms and parables, why he gathered disciples and how he spoke as one having independent authority.³⁹ To him, Jesus saw himself as the very wisdom of God who came in the flesh.⁴⁰ Also, Witherington III believed in the Jesus of the Gospels with many historical facts that prove the existence of Jesus.

John Meier, in his three volumes of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, depicts Jesus as a marginal Jew considering his personal and social background in first-century Galilee, his chronological life as stated in the Gospels. This was considered by Meier in respect to the ministry of John the Baptist, the kingdom of God, and the miracles, the rapid following of the crowds and the various Jewish groups (especially the Pharisees and the Sadducees) that he encountered during his ministry.⁴¹

One of the most recent works which presents a conservative critique of the third quest is *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels* by

³⁸ Among his works are: B Witherington III, *What Have They Done with Jesus?* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006); idem, *The Gospel Code: Novel Claims about Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Da Vinci* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004); idem, *Jesus the Seer, The Progress of Prophecy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999); idem, *Jesus, Paul and the End of the World, A Comparative Study in New Testament Eschatology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1992); idem, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990).

³⁹ Witherington III, *Jesus Quest*, 185. For an evangelical response, see Lamerson, "Evangelicals and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," 62-70.

⁴⁰ Witherington III, *Jesus Quest*, 187.

⁴¹ J P Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (2 vols.; ABRL; New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994, 2001).

Craig S. Keener. This work discussed the early stage of the Jesus studies from the Harnack's civilized Jesus, the apocalyptic Jesus underscored by Weiss and Albert Schweitzer to Bultmann's existential and the de-Judaizing Jesus.⁴² Keener also critiqued Crossan's understanding of Jesus as a 'Peasant cynic' Jew and the positions of some third quest scholars who believed Jesus to be a charismatic healer, prophet and sage, an eschatological prophet,⁴³ Jesus the Galilean Jew and teacher.

Keener also presented a wide range understanding of Jesus in the Gospels following the historicity of the Gospels as written sources that relied on oral sources. Historically, the Gospels have become the best sources that portrayed Jesus as a Jew from Galilee, a good teacher who preached discipleship, the Son of Man, the prophet and the messiah who was arrested, executed and resurrected.⁴⁴

One sees the third quest scholars attempting to focus on the early textual layers of the New Testament, using the data to reconstruct a biography of the historical Jesus.⁴⁵ Many of the third quest scholars rely on a redactive critique of the hypothetical Q gospel,⁴⁶ the Greco-Roman Mediterranean milieu and the Jewish

⁴² Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 5-9.

⁴³ Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 14-45.

⁴⁴ Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 178-347.

⁴⁵ F B Rubio, "The Fiction of the 'Three Quests': An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Historiographical Paradigm," *JSHJ* 7 (2009) 211-253; J P Meier, "The Historical Jesus and the Historical Law: Some Problems within the Problem," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65:1 (2003).

⁴⁶ Q (Gospel) is from the German *Quelle* meaning "source," which has been adopted in New Testament studies to refer to materials not found in Mark but common to both Matthew and Luke. Many critical scholars held that Q also exists in the *Gospel of Thomas*. Scholars believe that this gospel was lost though the first to be composed while many deny its existence. For various discussions on Q see H C Kee, *Jesus in History: An Approach to the Study of the Gospels* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1970), 102ff; D Guthrie,

milieu. Also, they tend to view Jesus as a radical philosopher of wisdom literature, who strived to destabilize 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 only afterward investigate how Jesus fits in. They tend to view Jesus as a proto-rabbi who announced the Kingdom of God.

There is another arm of the Jesus studies identified as the Jesus Seminar which started in 1985 and holds to an anti-supernatural Jesus who did no miracles and did not rise from the dead, a belief held by the first quest. Crossan calls the quest for Jesus, beginning with the Jesus Seminar, the quest for the fictional Jesus.⁴⁷ The group aims at analyzing the words of Jesus (like the second quest) but it uses different technical criteria.⁴⁸ This view of

New Testament Introduction (4th ed. Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 147-179; M Sato, "The Shape of Q-Source," in *The Shape of Q* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994); B Witherington III, *The New Testament Story* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 33-36; Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 61; J S Kloppenborg, "The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus," *HTR* 89 (1996) 307-44; W H Kelber, "Sayings Collection and Sayings Gospel: A Study in the Clustering Management of Knowledge," *Language & Communication* 9 (1989) 213-24.

⁴⁷ Crossan, "In Their Own Words", 22.

⁴⁸ Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 68. G Y Tambiyi, "A Critical Appraisal of the Current State of the Historical Jesus Research with Higher Implications to African Biblical Scholarship," (Master of Arts Thesis at the University of Jos, May 2012) 40-41, 96; Evans, *Fabricating Jesus*, 48-51; D Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (4th ed.) (Downers Grove: IVP, 1990) 243-247; W J C Weren, *Windows on Jesus: Methods in Gospel Exegesis* (Trans. John Bowden; Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999) 263. M E Boring, "The Historical-

Jesus by the group questions the Gospels' records of Jesus and emphasizes non-canonical Gnostic documents to portray an "alternative Jesus" that differs from the biblical Gospels with the aim of correcting the portraits of Jesus.⁴⁹ Most of the higher critical scholars are attempting to set Jesus in his socio-historical context.⁵⁰ They consider the hypothetical Q and Gnostic gospels, which were discovered in the twentieth century (e.g., the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Phillip* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene*) to be authentic and reliable, at the expense of the canonical Gospels (so, the Jesus Seminar). This makes the historical Jesus scholarship extensive with innumerable contributions based on their criteria for authenticity.

These critical scholars lay emphasis on the Gnostic gospels which were discovered in the twentieth century at Nag Hammadi, Egypt such as the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Phillip* and the *Gospel of Mary Magdalene* and date them around third and fourth centuries AD, as stated particularly in the works of Norman Perrin and S. J. Peterson.⁵¹ But these gospels have all been judged to be forged and later documents rather than belonging to the first century and they are dubious documents to us for reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus.

Critical Method's 'Criteria of Authenticity': The Beatitudes in Q and Thomas as a Test Case," *Semeia* 44 (Atlanta: SBL, 1988) 9.

⁴⁹ R B Hays, "The Corrected Jesus," *The First Things* 43 (1994); R Neave, "The Real Face of Jesus," *BAR* 29 (2003); J D Turner, "The Gnostic Sethians and Middle Platonism: Interpretations of the *Timaeus* and *Parmenides*," *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006) 9-64.

⁵⁰ A van Aarde, "Methods and Models in the Quest for the Historical Jesus: Historical Criticism and/or Social Scientific Criticism," *HTS: Theological Studies* 58 (2002) 419-36.

⁵¹ N Perrin, "Recent Trends in Gospel of Thomas Research (1991-2006): Part I, The Historical Jesus and the Synoptic Gospels," *Currents in Biblical Research* 5 (2007) 184-206; S J Patterson, "The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (n.d.) 111-19.

A similar view on the prominent place attributed to the Gnostic Gospels is held by *The Da Vinci Code* which has become a popular blockbuster in the world. There are works which are more on the extreme that deny the existence of Jesus (cf. Robert M. Price's *Jesus is Dead* [2007]).

Also, the ascendancy of Mary Magdalene has been a debatable issue in the entire quest.⁵² Jesus has been suggested to have gotten married to Mary Magdalene, had children and has lived a normal life like anyone else on this earth. His marriage to Mary Magdalene has been debated or doubted for lack of evidence. However, Karen King claims Jesus' marriage has been 'confirmed' (during the *International Association of Coptic Studies* in Rome on 18th September, 2012) in a fourth century Coptic papyrus which claimed that Jesus made reference to "my wife...."⁵³ This has been tagged "Mrs Messiah"⁵⁴ but mainstream Coptic scholars are convinced that this Coptic fragment is not capable of

⁵² D Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (London: Corgi Books, 2003) 312-334. T McGirk, "The Titanic Claim: Jesus Still Dead." http://www.time.com/time/letters/email_letters.html Accessed 6th June, 2011. The movie *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 also gave that impression. See also S Jacobovici and B Wilson, *The Lost Gospel: Decoding the Ancient Text that Reveals Jesus' Marriage to Mary the Magdalene* (HarperCollins, 2014).

⁵³ K King, "Jesus Said to them, 'My Wife...': A New Coptic Gospel Papyrus" [http://www.rts.ch/la-1ere/programmes/hautes-frequences/4290894.html/BINARY/La%20communication%20originale%20de%20la%20professeure%20Karen%20King%20\(pdf%20en%20anglais\)](http://www.rts.ch/la-1ere/programmes/hautes-frequences/4290894.html/BINARY/La%20communication%20originale%20de%20la%20professeure%20Karen%20King%20(pdf%20en%20anglais)) Accessed 28th December, 2012.

⁵⁴ R M Price, "Mrs Messiah?" <http://www.robertmprice.mindvendor.com/zblog/?s=Mrs+Messiah%3F> Accessed 8th October, 2012. G Y Tambiyi, "Mrs Messiah?: Modern Scholarship Searching for a Wife for Jesus" <https://gideon-yohanna.wordpress.com/2014/11/13/mrs-messiah-modern-scholarship-searching-for-a-wife-for-jesus/> Accessed 26th November, 2014.

defending the marital relationship of Jesus which has been scrutinized by Coptic experts as a forged document.⁵⁵

Evangelical scholars have found these positions to be against the teachings of the biblical gospels and the Bible in its entirety. Most of these teachings and perspectives attack the old biblical fundamentalism. It has been a matter of challenge to subdue the Bible via modern approaches through scientific lenses with the effort to uplift the lost and forgotten Gospels (non-canonical) into contending with the canonical Gospels.

Faith has always dominated the understanding of the Bible in the midst of the historical Jesus research.⁵⁶ The Gospels are books which would be better understood in their historical contexts accompanied by faith rather than employing modern human ap-

⁵⁵ D B Wallace, "Jesus' Wife Fragment judged a fake"

www.danielbwallace.com Accessed 26th September 2012. D B Wallace, "Reality Check: The 'Jesus Wife' Coptic Fragment"

<http://danielbwallace.wordpress.com> Accessed 22nd September, 2012. J Patten-gale, "How the 'Jesus' Wife' Hoax Fell Apart"

<http://www.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702304178104579535540828090438> Accessed 4th January, 2015. T McCoy, "How Harvard scholars may have been duped by a forged 'Gospel of Jesus's Wife'"

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/05/05/how-harvard-scholars-may-have-been-duped-by-a-forged-gospel-of-jesus-wife/> Accessed 4th January, 2015. L Goodstein, "Fresh Doubts Raised About Papyrus Scrap Known as 'Gospel of Jesus' Wife'"

http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/05/us/fresh-doubts-raised-about-papyrus-scrap-known-as-gospel-of-jesus-wife.html?_r=0 Accessed 4th January, 2015. O Jarus, "'Gospel of Jesus's Wife': Doubts Raised about Ancient Text"

<http://www.livescience.com/45020-gospel-of-jesus-wife-questioned.html> Accessed 4th January, 2015.

⁵⁶ See Lamerson, "Evangelicals and Quest for Historical Jesus," 61-87; D L Bock, "Faith and the Historical Jesus: Does a Confessional Position and Respect for the Jesus Tradition Preclude Serious Historical Engagement?" *JSHJ* 9 (2011) 3-25; Dewey, "The Memorable Invention of the Death of Jesus," 1-8; L W Hurtado, "Resurrection-Faith and the 'Historical' Jesus," *JSHJ* 11 (2013) 35-52.

proaches to try to read the mind of an infinite God and an understand an ancient holy Book which was given for people to believe. This ancient Scripture has succeeded in giving Africans a familiar and preferred Jesus of faith and history, rather than some quasi-scientifically derived figures of Western scholarship. This would make consider the helplessness of Jesus as means to address a missing link in the third quest on the historical Jesus from an African perspective.

C. The Helplessness of Jesus

The total matrix of the historical Jesus has been challenged by a number of evangelical scholars. While the critical scholars feel downgraded, they feel their pictures of Jesus have remained incredible in scholarly discourses on Jesus. The helplessness of Jesus within human configuration has not been engaged in scholarly works. This is being argued from an African perspective but not within the search for the black Jesus.⁵⁷ Jesus was utterly a helpless Jew who was helped tremendously by many of his contemporaries in Israel.⁵⁸ The helplessness of Jesus was linked to the humility of Jesus, being God but took the form of man (Phil 2) and his understanding that he does not belong to this world and does not have a part in this world (Matt. 8:20; John 17:16).

The entire historical Jesus enterprise is based on historical-critical enquiry into the life of Jesus in the first century. The enquiry into the helplessness of Jesus is based on a set of criteria.

⁵⁷ M L Cook, "The African Experience of Jesus," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009) 668-92. J S Siker, "Historicizing a Racialized Jesus: Case Studies in the 'Black Christ,' the 'Mestizo Christ,' and White Critique," *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007) 26-53.

⁵⁸ C R Erdman, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966) 36. J H Ellens, "The Jesus Quest" *Pastoral Psychology* 51 (2003) 437-40. Evans, "Assessing Progress in the Third Quest of the Historical Jesus," 35-54. Tambiyi, "Historical Jesus Research," 172.

The first criterion underscores the multiple attestations of scriptural references in the Synoptic Gospels particularly in the early childhood of Jesus, his ministry and prior to the cross. Attestation in multiple forms could also play a significant role in the understanding of the various traditions in the narrative accounts by the Synoptic Gospel writers which were given by the Holy Spirit. The environment and the circumstance of the relevant passages for the helplessness of Jesus were not the same but all have been tailored into understanding the matrix.

Jesus was helpless at birth and in his childhood. This was made clear by the writers of the Gospels. The socio-political and economic-religious unrest during the time of his birth created helpless moments for him until he was taken to Africa. This was clearly pictured in the status of his parents who had nothing of their own within the social strata as compared to many people in Palestine. Their poor economic situation caused some people to have agitated for the humility of Jesus; hence, God has caused him to be born to such a family.

The situation in Israel at that time grew so tense and was above the capacity of his parents that it involved the Roman soldiers and the Roman government. The movement to Egypt, Africa as recorded in Matthew has been attempted to be explained by scholars. R. T. France argued that "the choice of Egypt as a place of refuge was natural" but stated that with Matthew, such understanding had an "extra meaning as the place where Israel's history as the people of God began."⁵⁹ Within his line of arguments, it is clear that Egypt had been the dawning of ages in Jewish history. It happened with Moses and now the Messianic age, as an age of salvation for Israel and the whole world, dawning from Egypt. Although Egypt is considered a place of sin, France did not spec-

⁵⁹ R T France, *Matthew* (Leicester: IVP, 1985) 86.

ulate about the significance of God appearing to a member of the Holy Family in Egypt.

Unlike France, W. Carter concentrated on the child which to him, is significant and argued that the depiction of Jesus as a child “not by name or by a title” reveals “such experiences of marginality and vulnerability”. Such understanding, within the political and religious power, was dangerous for the baby Jesus.⁶⁰ But how powerful was Africa that it could make Jesus strong and shielded him from the enemy? With this, Carter observed that “it is with the marginal, not the powerful and elite of the center, that God’s power, protection, and presence are encountered.”⁶¹

Carter also revealed that though the Romans were in-charge of the world since 30 BCE, “Egypt traditionally provided refuge for those who were fleeing the deathly power of rulers.” With this, he revealed that “the reference to Egypt evokes other stories of people whom God delivers from Egypt.”⁶²

One assertion in the work of Carter is the ironical view of the place of Egypt played. He stated, “Ironically, Egypt, the place of bondage in Moses’ story, becomes for Jesus a place of refuge....”⁶³ Carter explained the purpose of the flight to Egypt of the Holy Family. He stated that the verb used “to destroy him” reveals the “goal of the religious leaders’ opposition to Jesus” and stated the collaborative effort by the angel and Joseph to protect the life of Jesus.⁶⁴ David E. Garland stated that Joseph obeyed the command from God to retreat to Egypt without asking how long he will

⁶⁰ W Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Socio-political and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000) 80.

⁶¹ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 80-81.

⁶² Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 83.

⁶³ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 83.

⁶⁴ Carter, *Matthew and the Margins*, 84.

have to stay or what will happen to him there.⁶⁵ The soil and the geographical terrain played significant role to preserving the life of Jesus. Egypt accepted the Holy Family under the divine calendar of God.

Considering the situation at that time and being the king of the Jews, could Jesus have faced Herod at that time being the King of the Jews? Did he display some supernatural acts to the African children? Was Mary the mother of Jesus helped to take care of Jesus by compassionate and caring African women? God knew how disastrous it would have been that He had to command Joseph and Mary to take Jesus to Africa. The move of the Holy Family to Egypt has been a remarkable story told and retold particularly by the Coptic Christians. But was Africa the only place of refuge at that time? Was Jesus accommodated and shielded as revealed by the Coptic legends? Was he fed? Was he given clothes to wear? Did Africans contribute to the life of Jesus in line with their hospitable and communal way of life?

It could be said that a lot of traditions has been preserved and told by the Copts which helped explain his helplessness.⁶⁶ But the

⁶⁵ D E Galand, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon: Smyth and Hellwys, 2001) 29.

⁶⁶ For elaborate studies, see P Perry, *Jesus in Egypt: Discovering the Secrets of Christ's Childhood Years* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003); G Gabra, ed., *Be Thou There: The Holy Family's Journey in Egypt* (Cairo: American University, 2001); I H el-Masri, *Story of the Copts: The True Story of Christianity in Egypt* (Merry Spring: St Anmny Monastery) http://www.saint-mary.net/coptic_faith/TheStoryoftheCoptstheTrueStoryofChristianityinEgy.pdf Accessed 14th April, 2015; A Koschorke, *The Holy Family and Its Legacy: Religious Imagination from the Gospels to Star Wars* (trans. Thomas Dunlop. New York: Columbia University, 2003); A Suci, "'Me, This Wretched Sinner': A Coptic Fragment from the Vision of Theophilus Concerning the Flight of the Holy Family to Egypt," *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013) 436-450; N S Atalla, *The Escape to Egypt according to Coptic Tradition* (Cairo: Lehnert and Landrock, 1993); O F A Meinardus, *The Holy Family in Egypt* (Cairo: American University,

passage of the Holy Family's flight has been denied existence in the text of the Bible by a group of North American scholars, the Jesus Seminar for not meeting a major criterion, the multiple attestations. They have argued that the story is historically unreliable as it was not told by another gospel writer. They have succeeded in editing the text of the Gospels and accepted 18% of the words in the Gospels to be exact words of Jesus while the 82% are words attributed to him. Critical works against the Jesus Seminar are found in *Jesus under Fire*, a compendium by a number of scholars which was edited by Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland.⁶⁷

Another work is *The Jesus Crisis*, edited by two conservative New Testament scholars, Robert L. Thomas and F. David Farnell of The Master's Seminary in California. This work has argued how historical criticism has influenced evangelical scholarship. It has rightly accused evangelical scholarship for adopting a similar method, i.e. historical criticism. It reveals some similarities between evangelical scholarship and the Jesus Seminar.⁶⁸ Thomas

1986). Y N Youssef, "Notes on the Traditions Concerning the Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt," *Coptic Church Review* 20 (1999) 45-55.

⁶⁷ M J Wilkins and J P Moreland eds., *Jesus under Fire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

⁶⁸ R L Thomas and F D Farnell, eds., *The Jesus Crisis* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 14-15. Evangelical scholarship has to revisit its focus in the study of Jesus and develop viable methodologies that would enable a meaningful study of Jesus and the Gospels. For some major reassessments of (non-)evangelical (mis-)appropriation of biblical criticism, see now: D W Baker and B T Arnold, eds., *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); S McKnight and G R Osborne, eds., *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004); and, esp., K L Sparks, *God's Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

and Farnell believe that "The Jesus Crisis should be a source of serious concern for the Christian church."⁶⁹

Also, Keener in *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, agreed with L. T. Johnson's critique of the Jesus Seminar and also evaluated the members, beliefs and influence of the Jesus Seminar and observed that their claim "to speak for the broader range of scholarship is inaccurate" and that most of the Jesus Seminar's participants have not produced major academic work in Jesus research. Keener states that the Jesus Seminar represents its "narrower range of scholarship" and that it does not "have the right to speak for scholarship as a whole."⁷⁰

Jesus was also helpless in the hands of the government officials. Even during the ministry of Jesus, the helplessness of Jesus has been witnessed as people contributed to his work on earth because he could not do everything despite his being God. Women gave their possessions for the good of the ministry (Mark 15:41; Luke 8:2-3). People invited him to banquets during his ministry (Luke 5:29-30). People's properties were used for the good of his ministry (Matt. 21:2-6; Luke 19:30-34).

Jesus was helpless during the trial, crucifixion and death. Before the death of Jesus, Simon of Cyrene, who was an African, helped carry his cross which he could not carry (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).⁷¹ But, why must it be an African in history? It is good to say that a doctrine should not be based on one verse of Scripture unless it reoccurs and has unfolded in other

⁶⁹ Thomas and Farnell eds., *The Jesus Crisis*, 383.

⁷⁰ Keener, *The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 16.

⁷¹ W J Lyons, "The Hermeneutics of Fictional Black and *Factual Red*: The Markan Simon of Cyrene and the Quest for the Historical Jesus," *JSHJ* 4 (2006) 139-54; F Harley, "The Narration of Christ's Passion in Early Christian Art," in J Burke et al. eds., *Byzantine Narrative: Papers in Honour of Roger Scott* (Virginia, Queensland: Melbourne, 2006) 221-58.

texts. Africans have contributed immensely in the making of Jewish history.⁷²

It should be remembered that God is in control of history. God has helped and protected the life of Jesus during his birth through arranging the flight to Egypt but it seems the effort has been devalued as such passages have been questioned by the critical scholars. If God had not wanted the helplessness to be recognized, why did he pick the Jews, Africa and Africans to help him at the beginning, during and at the end of his life? The helplessness of Jesus remains absolute and it would contribute to solving the matrix of the historical Jesus within the third quest as it places Jesus within his socio-historical context in Palestine and in the biblical context.

D. Conclusion

The Jesus studies, which surfaced in the eighteenth century, have triggered a scientifically biased view of the supernaturalism of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels. It has introduced fresh questions which challenged the traditional beliefs about Jesus from the first century to the Enlightenment. This scientific study has staged the Jesus studies into three quests although some scholars believe in four classifications adopting a period of “no quest” which is the closing of the first quest in the days of form criticism

⁷² There is need to weigh and accord merit properly to contributions of Africa and Africans in the Bible; see esp. the several works by D T Adamo, *Africa and Africans in the New Testament* (New York/Oxford: University Press of America, 2006); and the move to (de-)Africanize the scriptures: see idem, *Africa and Africans in the Old Testament* (Benin: Jeco, 2005); on the American version of this problem, see M G Cartwright, “Wrestling with Scriptures: Can Euro-American Christians and African-American Christians Learn to Read Scriptures Together?” in D L Okholm, ed., *The Gospel in Black and White* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1997) 71-116; and G Usry and C S Keener, *Black Man’s Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

and Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann. The second quest for the historical Jesus criticized the thoughts of the first quest, and concentrated on the sayings of Jesus and rejected the dichotomous perspective of Jesus by Bultmann as Jesus of history and Christ of faith.

A lot of efforts has been put in depicting Jesus within the Third Quest. The Third Quest with the new arm, the Jesus Seminar under the fictional Jesus quest dramatized in a number of movies and novels, has given new insights into the Jewishness of Jesus. In the overall conversation, the helplessness of Jesus has not been properly envisaged in scholarly discourses despite the various depictions of Jesus within his socio-economic context in Palestine. The ongoing third quest for the historical Jesus should consider Jesus as a helpless Jew whose humanity has not put such a helpless portrait into the box. A thoroughgoing approach for the true historical Jesus should recognize Jesus being a helpless Jew who was rendered help by the Jews and the Africans in history as revealed in the Gospels. Such a portrait provides a chance to rethink the entire life of the historical Jesus and still put this Jesus within the divine confines of the biblical Gospels.

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