

# THE DEPICTION OF THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MATTHEW AS AN EPIC

Julie E. Ogonya

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

**Keywords:** Literature, Bible, Epic, Epic Hero, Deconstruction.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

The importance of the epic has been emphasized by scholars in the literary world. Gunim (2002) also notes that most literary critics of the Renaissance and Baroque periods considered the epic to be the highest ranking literary genre. He describes the epic as a supreme genre, only comparable with the supreme literary text; the Bible. Innes (2013) agrees with this view as well. He says that the epic was once thought to be the highest literary form; a poet's greatest achievement. He adds that its cultural importance was such that ancient Greece produced Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Rome had Virgil's *Aeneid* and further suggests that in Judeo-Christian tradition, the first five books could be considered an epic. According to them, the first five books of Moses, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy* are epics of ancient Israel as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are epics of ancient Greece.

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

The aim of this paper therefore, is to explain why the *Gospel According to St Matthew* is an epic. This will be done by analyzing the Gospel using the summary of attributes of the epic as suggested by Abram (1999) as well as the characteristics of the epic as listed by Harmon and Hugh (2003) in addition to other elements found in classical epics by Homer in the *Iliad* and Virgil's *Odyssey*. This is because any study involving the epic as a necessity refers to Homer because as Hogan (1979) points out, Aristotle, the father of literary criticism, frequently referred to Homer in his *Poetics* as Homer's methods are recognised as dramatic. He also argues that epics can be identified by their formal features; great epics share in a tradition by which the new epic refers consciously to the epic that came before it. Therefore to even have a chance to be recognized in this tradition, epics have to meet the criteria for such great poems. Howatson (1983) also points out that it is useful to define the epic by looking more precisely at historical models upon which the writer may have drawn while examining the state of the epic at the time he possibly wrote. It is hoped that this paper will explain why the Gospel according to Matthew is an epic.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Deconstruction as its theoretical framework. This is because a text as linguistically and creatively rich as the Gospel according to St Matthew is ripe for a deconstructive reading. Deconstruction is the platform through which one can investigate the relationship between text and meaning. Notable proponents of this theory include Jacques Derrida, Renee Descartes and Frederick Nietzsche among others. This theory deals with conducting readings of texts with an ear to what runs counter to structural unity intended for a particular text. When one reads a literary text, it is possible to find that it consists of a multiplicity of overlying, inconsistent meaning in dynamic, fluid relation to another and to the reader. Deconstructive critics believe that meaning in literature is created during the act of reading a text (Tyson, 1950). For this reason, it is possible to find more than one meaning of the Gospel according to St Matthew as one reads it. This may of course be different from what the author may have originally intended while writing the gospel. Deconstruction theory is therefore relevant in this study since it is possible to study Matthew's gospel as a literary text and not necessarily as a religious one. This is because meaning is always uncertain and it is not the work of the literary critic to determine meaning in a given text.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

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

Most writer are in agreement to what an epic is, mainly that it is a long story about heroic deeds of heroic characters, and that it is told using heroic language. Bowrah (1945) says that an epic poem is by common consent a narrative of some length and deals with events which have certain grandeur and importance and come from a life of action such as war. Sidney (1958) referred to the epic as the best and most accomplished part of poetry. Dryden (1667) defined it in the same way as a narrative of some length and deals with events of certain grandeur and the importance comes from a life of action, especially violent action such as war. He further says that it is along poem narrating the exploits of an individual central to the beliefs and culture of his society. He adds that the epic tells of fabulous adventures and superhuman deeds, by using majestic or elevated language with artistry that employs the full range of literary device- lyrical and dramatic. Epics were mainly performed in preliterate era: they were either sang or recited with an accompaniment of instruments though most used oral transmission.

Cuddon (1984) says that an epic is a polygonal 'heroic' story incorporating myth, legend, folktale and history. He also adds that they are often of national significance in the sense that they embody the history of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner. Epics are of different types depending on the audience and historical period; whether literate or orate. Draper (1990) suggests that there are two kinds of the epic; the first one is the primary epic also known as the oral or primitive epic and the second one the secondary or literary epic and the second one is the secondary or literary epic.

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

The *Gospel according to St Matthew* fits in the primary epic category because its authorship is not clear. Luz (1999) says that the literary character of the gospels as we have them leave no doubt that the material was handed down for some years by word of mouth. Apart from that there is no agreement as to who actually wrote the book though it is attributed to Matthew, the Tax Collector, a disciple of Jesus.

Dean (2000) states that primary epics seem to be generated by seasons of upheaval and of struggle and adventure. More often than not the protagonists are larger than life characters, normally descendants of deities or great men or heroes. The characters represent cultural ideals like bravery, fairness and all round virtue. Primary epics have certain features in common: a central figure of heroic even supernatural caliber, perilous journeys, various misadventures, strong elements of the supernatural, repletion of fairly long passages of narrative or dialogue, elaborate greetings, digressions, epic similes, long speeches, vivid direct descriptions of the kind favoured by the ballad maker.

Like most epics, Matthew's Gospel was composed when the Jews were under harsh Roman rule. Because of this, they were waiting for a military messiah to deliver them from the Romans. Matthew writes a narrative that has most of the elements of the primary epic noted above. He constantly refers to the Old Testament to validate Jesus as the promised Messiah.

Epics have existed for a very long time in most communities in the world but, according to Draper(1990), Homer, who existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century, is said to be the father of the epic. He is regarded with reverence and used, particularly as the author of the *Iliad*, as the model of subsequent attempts.

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

PubliciusVigilioMaru, or simply put, Virgil, a literary poet born in 70 bc in Mantua, is regarded as the first national epic poet. His epic poem, the Aeneid, which falls in the literary epic category, records and celebrates the foundation of Rome by Aeneas after many hazardous adventures following the fall of Troy.

The Christian epic is another category relevant to this study. The establishment of Christianity in the European context as the one true monotheistic religion resulted in the Christian epic. Epic poets like Milton (1608-1674) wanted to see Christian beliefs and theology reflected in their epics. In the Christian epic, the distance between man and God was both increased and contracted. This process was aided in the Renaissance by a critical movement which sought to justify the classical epic by moralizing it so the exploits of heroes could be regarded as paradigms of virtue or figurative steps to salvation. The main proponents of the Christian epic included writers like Dante (1265-1321) who wrote the *Divine Comedy* and Milton the writer of *Paradise Lost*.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the hybrid research design which is the result of a blend between the exploratory and descriptive research designs. According to Neumann (2003), the exploratory research design is employed when the study topic is either new or relatively little has been written about it. It is conducted for a problem that has not been studied more clearly, establishes priorities and develops operational definitions to improve the final research (Shiels, 2013).

Descriptive research, on the other hand, is regarded as a picture of the specific details of a situation, social setting or a relationship. A research design that blends the aspects of both exploratory and descriptive research designs and effectively responds to the demands of research questions is the most appropriate in this research since it intends to discover the literary characteristics of the Gospel according to Matthew, which is a phenomenon and provide its details. In addition, as Newby (1997) suggests, the use of hybrid design is justified because no single method suffices in any study. Cohen and Marion (1994) posit that a combination of methods compensates for the inadequacies of each individual method..

#### 5. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

The study was mainly library based. It commenced with an initial study of available related literature in the library which formed the basis of secondary data.

The primary data was produced through content analysis of the selected text. Nachmias (2009) says that content analysis refers to any technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics of messages. Qualitative content analytical approaches focus on analyzing both the explicit or manifest content from a text as well as interpretations of latent content of texts-that which can be interpreted or interpolated from a text, but is not explicitly stated in it ( Granhein &Lundman, 2003)

In the current research reading, analysis and interpretation of the selected text was done to establish the extent to which *the Gospel according to St Matthew* is depicted as an epic.

#### 6. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected through content analysis of the selected texts was coded according to thematic concerns, the mode of characterization and vision of the author. Deconstruction theory, a textual strategy, was applied to the textual analysis to establish the extent to which *the Gospel according to St Matthew* is depicted as an epic.

#### THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ST MATTHEW AS AN EPIC:

Since the Bible is a book with religious authority, often referred to as the word of God, there is a tendency to assume that it is purely a religious book. However, a close study of how the Bible presents its material shows that it resembles a literary work because it is filled with stories, poems, visions and letters. Therefore to say that the Bible is a very literary text should not be controversial (France, 1990). In addition, the Bible in actual sense may be defined as an epic because it is instantly recognizable that it has several stories that fall under the epic category. These are categorized as Biblical epics.

Such situations as those experienced by the Jews are the right literary condition for the birthing of an epic story. Most epics are born at a time of national crisis. The biblical epics are found in both the New and Old Testament. According toInnes (2013), the gospels can be considered an epic.

The New Testament of the Bible has provided inspiration for the generation of some epics. These epics, based on the New Testament have been written extra biblically as well. Examples of these include Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno* and La Ceppedes*Theoremes*.

The story of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is in keeping with the definition of an epic. This is especially so in the Gospel according to St Matthew. The epic is usually defined as a long narrative that recounts, in formal language, the exploits of a larger than life hero. The epic hero is a man of high social status who is often important in the history of his people. It is clear that Jesus Christ is the main character in Matthew's narrative. Jesus' high status is emphasized by Matthew's portrayal of him as a king. Epic plots typically involve supernatural events, long periods, distant journeys and life and death struggles between good and evil. In an epic the hero always represents good, and the forces that threaten the people, evil.

Like most literary pieces, *the Gospel according to Matthew* is a product of the literary environment of the period in which it was written. During the time of Jesus Christ, the dominant power was Greece. The 'golden' or classical age of Greece began about 400BC. The customs and ideas of the Greeks therefore formed an important part of the life and culture of Palestine in the New Testament (Zondervan Handbook to the Bible, 1999). It is possible that because of the Greek influence at the time of writing the gospel, the writer adopted classical Greek style such as was used by the epic poets like Homer and Virgil. This adoption of the Greek style by the writer supports the idea of the gospel as an epic in terms of technique.

Edwards (1992) suggests that the gospel writer belonged to a society that constituted part of the ancient world and, despite the uniqueness of their message; they still had much in common with their contemporaries. They shared with the Greeks, Romans and other people of the Hellenistic world certain presuppositions, such as stratified social structure with women insubordinate to men. These presuppositions were reflected in the subject of literary works of the time. There are therefore similarities between some of Jesus' teachings and that of Greek philosophers. These similarities draw.

It is not only in terms of subject matter that the Gospel according to St Matthew shares similarities to the epic but in style as well. Drane (1999) observes that in some instances, the Gospels share certain stylistic characteristics of popular Greco-Roman biographies. An example is where both Matthew and Luke have genealogies in their subject. Apart from that, the New Testament writers shared with their contemporaries a basically pre-scientific approach to such subjects like the physical universe, sickness and miracles. This therefore means, as Edwards (1992) suggests, that Hellenistic parallels can be found in many features of the Gospels. These features include writers' understanding of demon possession and natural phenomena.

It is interesting to note that the structure of the *Gospel according to St Matthew* is similar to that of the epic genre. Drane (1999) points out that one way of understanding Matthew's structure was proposed in the early part of the twentieth century by Bacon (1918) who suggested that Matthew divided his book by analogy of the books of Moses, into five blocks that they can be considered to be five books. This structure of dividing a story into blocks or books was common in classical epics. Both the *Aeneid* and *Odyssey* have a similar structure.

Some the events associated with Jesus' birth and death appear to have parallels in the so-called prestige myths in Greco-Roman folklore. These include tales of astronomical portents and dreams heralding the birth of famous people or marking their death. There are also classical stories of heroes born of mortal women and divinity. There are also details of the return of the hero from the dead to life and descent to heaven.

An interesting fact about Matthew's gospel is that the writer used the paratactic model. This was a technique used by ancient epic poets. For example, Homer used it in the *Iliad*. Fitzgerald (1979) says that since Aristotle frequent references to Homer in his *Poetics*, it has been recognized that Homers methods are more dramatic. Aristotle saw that the *Iliad* had an organic plot developed in few key episodes. Hogan (1979) posits that at its most elementary level, parataxis is simply a kind of opposition in which the poet modifies a word, phrase or clause without a connective. Often one oppositional element calls for yet another, as if the poet was tempted into an infinite regression from his narrative. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, each verse has no connection to the verse immediately after it.

In order to read and appreciate Matthew's story as an epic, one must be attentive to the codes and conventions that govern the literary and social context of the first century when classical epics prevailed. Knowing the category of a literary genre of a text enables us to be informed of the features and intentions that characterize the writing.

The Gospel according to Matthew has certain characteristics and elements of the epic. In classical epics, the first line is always an introduction to the theme before proceeding with the story. At the very beginning of the gospel, the writer seeks introduction to the theme. Stanfield (1999) suggests that from the first verse 'The genealogy of Jesus the messiah the son of David the son of Abraham', the writer states his purpose. He has written to show Jesus to be the promised messiah and begins by establishing his kingship by referring to him as the son of David, the son of Abraham.

As had been mentioned, it is very common for epics to begin with a genealogy. Nineham (1976:424) defines a genealogy as “the standard form of propaganda, a way of demonstrating the true status or character of some individual or a group of people.’ Genealogies were important in the Greco-Roman world, more so in literature. According to France (1988), the genealogy was about the fulfillment of Israel’s story in the coming of their true king. It is important to note that epic heroes were not common people but royalty.

After the genealogy is an account of the wise men’s visit to Jesus’ birth site, Herod’s attempt to destroy the newborn child and subsequent flight to Egypt. It is common for most epic heroes to face danger of death as a child. For example, the mother of Hercules, in the epic Hercules, feared he would be killed when he was a baby and therefore dipped him in the River Styx to protect him.

In epics, a common characteristic is the use of epic catalogue lists of warriors and armies. Keener (2007) says that lists were a common rhetorical form including names as found in Matthew 10:12. He further states that Homer’s catalogue of ships is a model and further notes that a catalogue of names, for example deities and human genealogies, flourished as a literary form in the classical world.

In an epic, the story starts *in medias res* (in the middle of things). According to the genealogy of Jesus, Matthew wants to portray Jesus as the full culmination of the work God began with Israel. This is therefore a story that began in a distant glorious past when God and man fellowshiped together. After the Fall of Man (Genesis 3), there is need to renew the fellowship.

The characters in epics are of national and legendary importance. The genealogy serves to highlight this, by implying that Jesus is from an illustrious line. Since epics are composed to honour the deeds of heroic ancestors, such narratives often have an aristocratic bias; peasants and servants (unless of aristocratic birth) are insignificant. In ancient epics heroes could only be recognized and respected if they came from good lineage. Jesus Christ, the main character in the Gospel according to St Matthew, is portrayed as a king and the writer uses the genealogy to highlight Jesus’ pedigree. Since an epic centers around a hero of royal background, the aim for Matthew is to show Jesus as the true king descended from the royal line of David, as promised by God. The mission of Jesus Christ on earth, establishing the kingdom of God was the serious subject matter. Epics are concerned with serious issues.

Epics present narratives of sustained obligation, handed down from heaven to earth; they require interaction of higher and lower beings, gods and mortals. In Matthew’s gospel, there is evidence of the supernatural and divine elements. In the first chapter, there is the appearance of angels, Jesus is of semi-divine nature. This is demonstrated by the supernatural happenings prior to and on the night he was born. Other manifestations of the supernatural include the dove that appeared during his baptism, the miracles he performed, demon possession and finally the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Most epics originated from oral tradition because the earliest one dates back to when people could not read. Recited by poets, these epics were the cinemas of the day. Spectators were fascinated by monsters, hazardous journeys and fierce battles described in grave and stately language. Some of the epics were eventually written down. It is important to note that oral tradition was generally regarded in the ancient world as a reliable method of preserving information and teaching. Drane (1999) suggests that this was particularly true in the Jewish world where Rabbinic scholars developed a sophisticated system of memorization, which they valued more than written records.

It is evident that the Gospels, like epics, originated in oral tradition. Burkett (2002) proposes that the gospels as we know them went through four stages during formation. The first one is the oral tradition that comprised of stories about Jesus healing the sick, debating with opponents and parables and teachings passed down by word of mouth from one person to another. In the second stage, the oral traditions began to be written down as collections of stories by various people. In the third stage, Christians began combining the written collections and oral traditions in what became known as ‘proto-Gospels’. Finally the authors of the gospels drew on these to produce the canonical gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

According to Harmon and Hugh (1999), a feature of the epic is that of a vast and lengthy setting covering many nations, the world or the universe. Other scholars add that the action spans not only geographical but also cosmological space across land, sea and into underworld through space or time. In the *gospel according to St Matthew*, the vast and lengthy setting is evident in the fact that the story covers many geographical locations like Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Egypt. Other locations include the desert, synagogue, mountain, sea and the temple. The Matthean narrator is not bound by time or space the coverage of the story.

In epics, there is courtly manner of address among characters. The address is circumlocutious and courtly. Characters often address one another in the patronymics such as 'son of Peleus' with regards to Achilles in the *Aeneid*. In the *Gospel according to St Matthew*, there are several such addresses. Jesus is referred to often as 'Son of David' Son of God. His disciples are addressed in the same way as 'James son of Zebedee, James son of Alpheus, Simon son of Jonah and so on.

Another feature common in epics and found in the Gospel according to St Matthew is the use of epic machinery. Epic machinery include bardic recapitulations (like the Trojan Horse recounted in the *Odyssey*), a chief god's balancing of scales, long and arduous journey for the hero, weapons of supernatural origin, descent to the underworld and nephew listic rescues.

In most epics, the hero undertakes a journey, normally referred to as the Hero's Journey. In the narrative of Matthew, there are several accounts of arduous journeys undertaken by Jesus. This include The Fight to Egypt (Matthew 2: 13-15), his temptation in the desert, journeys to the mountain to teach, to Jerusalem during the triumphal entry. The worst and most grueling journey is the Journey to the Cross that started in the Garden of Gethsemane and culminated in his death on Hill of Golgotha.

The story ends with a climactic combat that comprises battle between good and evil which leads to the death of the hero, Jesus Christ. In a reversal, in dying, the epic hero, Jesus Christ, wins the battle because his death was actually the intended purpose, a sacrifice to save mankind. In keeping with Aristotle's requirement for a plot, the story has a happy ending with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Good has defeated evil. The hero resurrects from death, glorious.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to explain what makes *the Gospel according to St Matthew* an epic by carrying an analysis using Abram's(1993) summary of attributes of the epic as well as the characteristics of the epic as listed by Abram and Harpnan (1993). In addition, other elements and characteristics found in classical epics especially by Homer and Virgil from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were used.

The superiority of the epic is affirmed in Hainsworth's (1991) assertion that the genre depicts a continuous supernatural presence which in turn underscores that most epics are characterized by religiosity regardless of whether or not they correspond to the specialized genre of Biblical epic.

By analyzing the style of Matthew's Gospel and applying the elements of style and characteristics of the epic to it, to a great extent, the story is an epic.

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