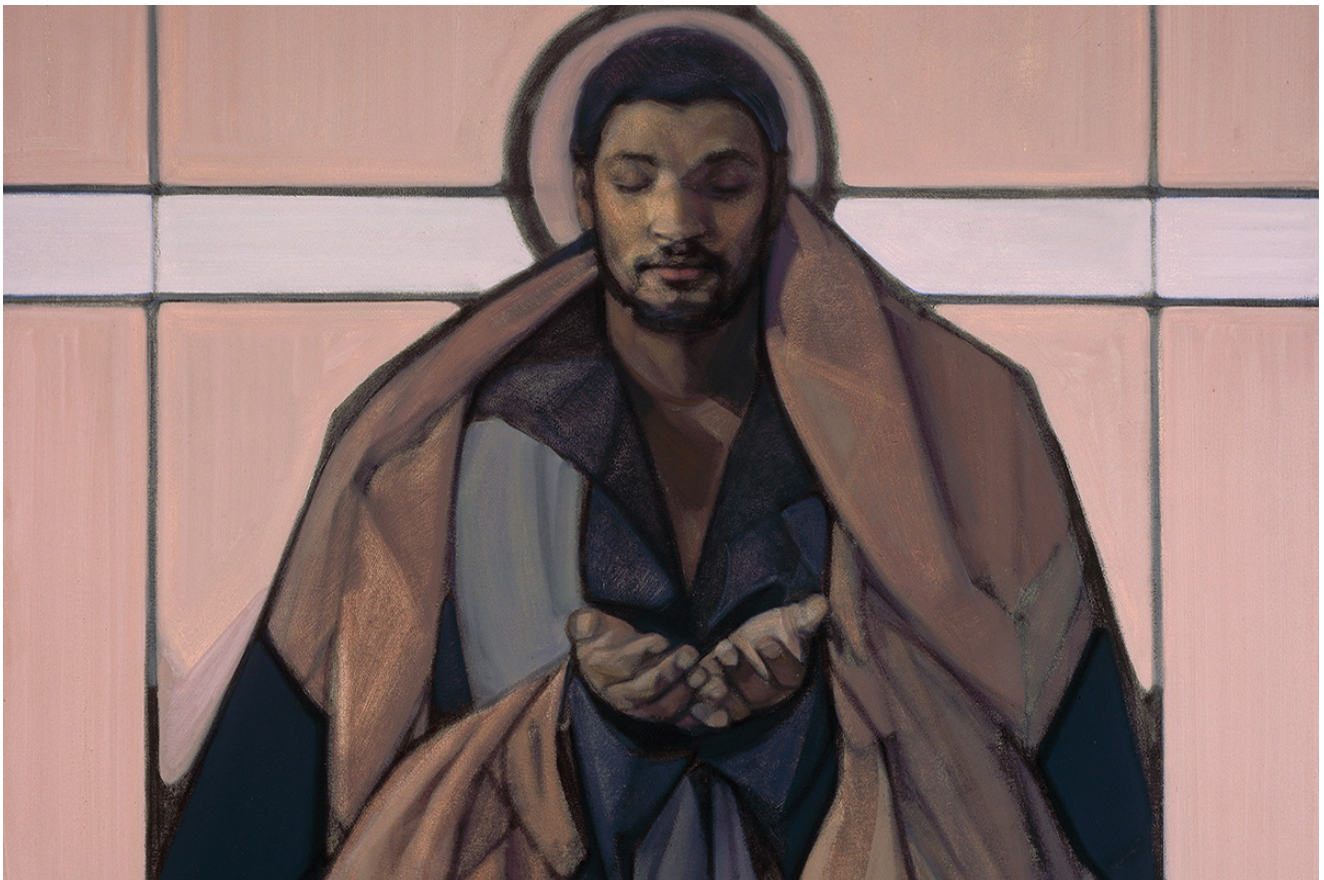


In America, Jesus is Black because he was Jewish

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Critical Essay

As James Cone argued, the universal is revealed in the particular.

by Brad East

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(Body and Blood, © 2007 Janet McKenzie | www.janetmckenzie.com. Collection of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany, Danville, VA)

Outside the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth, along lengthy walls that enclose the church's courtyard, there is a series of portraits of the Madonna and Child. Each portrait is labeled with the nation whose culture and artistic traditions it represents. Ethiopia, Singapore, Thailand, France: each contribution is not only designated by its origin but marked as such by its features. Many are unmistakable; one knows where they come from at a glance. Some combination of aesthetic style, garb, skin tone, and ethnic and cultural features define the newborn Jesus and his mother as members of a particular people. They belong among them, and in so belonging the Christ Child claims that people as his own. By an unfathomable mystery, he is incarnate as one of them.

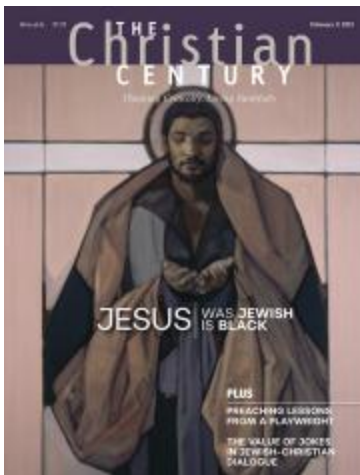
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Inside the basilica, pilgrims descend to the cave where it is said that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary what was to come. On the altar in the cave is inscribed an amended version of John 1:14: *verbum caro hic factum est*—the Word became flesh *here*. The eternal God assumed humanity in the womb of a virgin at a place one can visit, at a date one can locate on a calendar. To the question, “When and where did it happen?” the church has a ready answer.



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If that is so, why then a gallery of portraits of what we know Jesus and his mother did *not* look like? Representing times and places to which Jesus did *not* come some two millennia ago?

Before addressing that question, let me raise another.

In the wake of tragedy, Christians of various traditions have long found themselves compelled to commemorate the victims of injustice, and to do so visually. Such commemoration is christological at its heart. It understands that Jesus, in drawing near to the oppressed, assumed their condition as his own; and vice versa, that those who endure abuse or suffer unjustly represent or embody the power of Christ in the world. The Passion of Christ, hence, can be “written”—whether in words or in icons—in terms of those he especially loves, whom the world would render powerless victims; and they in turn can be “written” in terms of his triumph in and through death. The one interprets the other.

This impulse not only illuminates ancient Christian art. It also uncovers the emotional power and internal logic of contemporary popular iconography of Black victims of injustice today. Consider George Floyd, whose haloed image has circulated far and wide following his death. Consider in particular the haunting portrait by Kelly Latimore, titled simply *Mama*, which reinterprets Floyd as the adult Jesus, taken down from the cross and held lifeless in Mary’s arms. We see at once the ineffable iconic exchange: each interprets the other.

Is such art licit, from a theological perspective? What underwrites its practice, and how should we understand and receive it in real time, as the names of victims and reports of tragedies continue one after another?

Jesus’ identity is not only past, but present; not only historical, but spiritual.

Half a century ago, James Cone reflected deeply on this mystery of divine identification. Like us, he lived in the midst of civil unrest, racial strife, and political nihilism. He wrote in the wake of the civil rights movement, a spate of political assassinations, ongoing national upheaval, roiling social division, and even a presidential impeachment and resignation. Black Power was on the rise, protests were on the move, institutions were being transformed, cities were on fire, and new moral, social, and theological questions were being asked in American churches.

The work of Cone—who died four years ago, in his 80th year—is as relevant today as ever. What makes his thought so potent is his balance of rhetorical passion and theological nuance. This balance is nowhere more impressive than in his account of the capacious particularity of Jesus, the incarnate Word. He begins from a nonnegotiable premise: “Jesus was a Jew.”

In starting here, Cone affirms the nontrivial ethnic and religious identity of the man Jesus, who lived and died, as all human beings do, in a particular time and place. The Jewish Jesus, born to a people and a land under imperial occupation by a pagan foreign power that alternately terrorized, enervated, and seduced his kinsmen, was neither ghost nor demigod. He did not pass unmolested through this world, an apparition or myth. He was no superman from another planet. He was flesh and blood, like all of us—and he belonged to a particular people. The son of Mary was a son of Abraham.

But that is not the end of the story. The identity of Jesus is not only past, but present; not only historical, but spiritual. It is complex, extending beyond his own context into the lives and bodies of others, even into the here and now—of the 1970s and of the 2020s. Christology, in other words, authorizes and even mandates Cone’s subsequent transposition: “He *is* black because he *was* a Jew.”

The confession—and it is a confession, a product and expression of faith—is theological in nature. If the incarnation is not a sham, if the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, if from the womb of Mary to the hill of Golgotha the life of Jesus is one and the same as the life of God, earthly and visible and vulnerable—then it is also true to say that Jesus, the selfsame Jew who died under Pontius Pilate, is Black. For he was not only human: he was divine. His divinity encompassed, transcended, and anchored his humanity, as it does still. It is what burst the bonds of death on Easter morning. It is what shatters all restrictions on his power and presence. And it is what, by his Holy Spirit, enables his radical solidarity with the poor and the powerless distributed across so many contexts, continents, and cultures since.

In short, that Jesus was truly human, *vere homo*, displays God’s solidarity with us: he suffered our condition entirely, without qualification. That he was truly divine, *vere Deus*, means that this solidarity was not a onetime affair, not limited to the particularities of his person: male, Jewish, Galilean, artisan, pre-Copernican, what have you. Through his

resurrection from the dead and the outpouring of his Spirit on all flesh, the intimate presence of Jesus expands to all—in particular to those in need, rejected or abandoned by the world just as he was.

And that is why Jesus is Black. His identity incorporates Black people as his own. He thereby identifies with them. As they are, he is. Christ the Lord of heaven and earth is Black.

Cone's claim is not meant to be freestanding, as though devoid of context. Theology never is, though it has sometimes aspired to be. Cone wrote Black theology from his context as a Black theologian. Perhaps the most salutary of his initial instincts as a Christian thinker, one he inherited from Karl Barth but repurposed to his own ends, was that the move to universality is not found in the generic—in stripping away one's tribe and tongue, race and class, to reach that evanescent Enlightenment Everyman who supposedly is inside each of us. No, Cone argued, the universal is revealed in the particular. Nowhere is this fact more profoundly displayed than in the story told in the scriptures and encapsulated in the gospel. God is the maker, sustainer, lover, and liberator of all peoples. But his comprehensive love takes concrete expression for a singular people, a representative of all the others. God loves the Jews, and in them the nations. God became a human being, therefore, by becoming one of them: a Jew. As Jesus said, salvation comes from the Jews.

This interval or dialectic—between the particular and the universal, the one and the many, the Jews and the gentiles—is of immediate relevance to the questions and crimes of race that have bedeviled this nation since its inception. Cone saw that with clarity, and the most thoughtful among his successors, such as J. Kameron Carter and Willie James Jennings, have noted the same dynamic. The Blackness of Jesus' Jewishness is at once racial, historical, social, and theological.

Jesus' Blackness, like his Jewishness, names his membership in a *people*.

It is racial because the invention of Blackness is rooted in the Christian denial of Jewishness. Whiteness as a racial concept—which is to say, as the racist assignment of superiority to people of a certain hue hailing from a certain territory or culture—forgets that, for Christians, the only relevant distinction among the peoples is that between Jew and gentile. It forgets, moreover, that that distinction, being a God-cloven difference transmuted by sin into division and opposition, has been overcome in and through the one body of the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, on the cross. Thus all other distinctions among the peoples (region, language, class, station, nationality, ability, and more) are not, in Christ, and may not, through his Spirit, be occasions for discord or enmity. In Christ all are one: the Black-White racial partition is therefore a wholesale repudiation of Christ and of what he, Israel's son, accomplished on behalf of all nations. It is the pretension that the election of Israel was misbegotten, that the White race is instead the elect beloved of God. It is not.

Jesus' Blackness is historical in the sense that just as he belonged to a time and place, so those who belong to him do as well. Put differently: in order to come to know Jesus truly, we must not pretend that the accidents of history do not pertain to him—or even that they are accidents strictly speaking. As Barth wrote, the inclusion of the name of Pilate in the Creed means that the passion of Jesus “did not take place in heaven or in some remote planet or even in some world of ideas; it took place in our time, in the centre of the world-history in which our human life is played out. So we must not escape from this life.”

But if we must not escape from this life in order to know Jesus as he lived and died on this earth (and on no other), how much more must we pay attention to the minute details of those lives and bodies to whom Jesus has bound himself? We must avoid glossing over what makes Jesus' people his; we must resist the temptation to deracinate his beloved into the undifferentiated blob of “all.” Paul teaches that each and every member of the body of Christ is picked out by his or her unique and irreplaceable gift, some irreducible graced contribution to the whole. The eye is not the foot is not the hand. If we know Jesus as Jew, and if Jesus has made common cause not with people in general but with specific people marked by specific features, then who they are and why he has done so make all the difference.

In this case, the relevant feature is Blackness, and Jesus' solidarity with Black people is a function of their social status and generational experience. It is not their color, their culture, or even their virtues that afford them identification with Christ. It is their subjugation and domination by those who invented their Blackness in the first place (by those, in the words of Ta-Nehisi Coates, who believe they are White). It is their membership in that category of people the Bible calls “the poor”: not only or always materially impoverished, but counted among *les damnés de la terre*. As Cone writes:

The cross represents the particularity of divine suffering in Israel's place. The resurrection is the universality of divine freedom for all who “labor and are heavy laden.” It is the actualization in history of Jesus' eschatological vision that the last shall be first and the first last. The resurrection means that God's identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world. And the Risen Lord's identification with the suffering poor today is just as real as was his presence with the outcasts in first-century Palestine. His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them.

His presence with the poor is not docetic: the poor are Black, but Jesus is one of the poor, therefore Jesus is Black. In Cone's usage these categories are corporate and historical, not literal or individualistic. Jesus' Blackness, like his Jewishness, names his membership in a *people*. To deny it, in our context, would be to risk the heresy of Docetism, which teaches that Jesus merely appeared to be in the flesh: since such carnality ill befits the dignity of the Lord God, it must have been a kind of illusion. Not so, says Cone.

The incarnation of the Word in and as the Jewish man Jesus was, once and for all, a singular event. But precisely because Jesus was raised from the dead and exalted to God's right hand, presiding as Lord over all the empires and affairs of men, his flesh takes representative shape in countless iterations of cultural forms and human bodies. The body of Christ is carnal; it contains multitudes of members. Each of them partakes of Christ and is Christ, in and to the world. Accordingly, Christ's body in *this* country has long been and continues to be Black. No wonder then that Cone could write, in his final book published only a decade ago, that

Jesus was the "first lynchee," who foreshadowed all the lynched black bodies on American soil. He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America. Because God was present with Jesus on the cross and thereby refused to let Satan and death have the last word about his meaning, God was also present at every lynching in the United States. God saw what whites did to innocent and helpless blacks and claimed their suffering as God's own. God transformed lynched black bodies into the re-crucified body of Christ. *Every time a white mob lynched a black person, they lynched Jesus.* The lynching tree is the cross in America. When American Christians realize that they can meet Jesus only in the crucified bodies in our midst, they will encounter the real scandal of the cross.

The Blackness of the Jewish Jesus is thus theological in multiple respects. First, White American Christians cannot truly perceive the significance, redemptive or otherwise, of the cross of Christ apart from the Black experience in the United States. That experience is not limited to lynchings, chattel slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, or mass incarceration. It is the sum total of four centuries' worth of second-class status, subhuman treatment, perpetual suspicion, condescension, and humiliation. The message of the gospel, which is nothing less than the scandal of a lynched Messiah, is blocked when this chronicle—comprising countless stories, many told and many lost forever—is elided, ignored, or avoided. To hear the one requires hearing the other.

Second, the Black body of Christ in America exists quite physically: Black Americans are, by and large, believers. This is something of a miracle, since their faith is the same one professed by those who kidnapped, transported, enslaved, and oppressed them. (As David Walker asked in 1829: "Have not the Americans the Bible in their hands? Do they believe it? Surely they do not. See how they treat us in open violation of the Bible!") Indeed it is a miracle, for the faith of the Black church is a living testimony to the power of the risen Jesus both for liberation and for forgiveness. Who knows suffering better than the Black church? Perseverance? Hope? Love? Who has shown the world what it means to imitate Jesus, to put his teachings into practice? What this means for White Christians is that Black Americans are not only our neighbors or fellow citizens. They are, more often than not, our sisters and brothers in Christ. They are fellow members of his body. In that way, too, Jesus is Black.

Third and finally, there is the rationale for Jesus' Blackness in his own words. Toward the close of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the end times, when he will separate the faithful from the unfaithful. To the faithful he will say, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me." The faithful will reply, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?"

His answer: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it to me." The least among us—the poor, the hungry and thirsty and homeless and naked and sick and imprisoned—these are the kin of Christ. More than that, they are him, for he has made their lot his. What one does to them one does to him. What happens to them happens to him. What they suffer, he suffers; what blessings they receive, he receives too.

This is the premise of Christian teaching about Jesus and the disinherited. This is the rationale of Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed. This is what obliges Cone's confession about Jesus' Blackness.

Further still, it is what licenses the iconography of Jesus as Black. It's not that such visual tokens, rooted in such a confession, conscript Black people *in toto* into a symbolism not of their choosing, much less reify them into a monolithic victimhood. The art in question, rather, is a function of popular faith, a collective expression of shared sentiments that give public voice to communal grief and hope alike. Far from an imposition from without, it is an outgrowth from within.

And as we have seen, its particularity is the very source of its universality: it does not deny but begins from the fundamental truth that the humanity of the God-man encompasses all people. Yet in our time, in this land, it insists that this comprehensive scope must not render Jesus in generic, unrecognizable skin—much less the pale hues of Warner Sallman. In offering a glimpse of who Jesus was and is for us, it forbids the gaze that would turn away from the wrongs inflicted against his body here and now, each and every day. For Jesus was a Jew; and because Jesus *was* a Jew, Jesus *is* black. Each interprets the other.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Jewish Jesus, Black Christ."