

3.08 Jesus Had Brown Skin

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SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw

Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00

You're listening to the First Name Basis podcast Season Seven, Episode Eighteen: "Jesus Had Brown Skin."

Jasmine Bradshaw 00:13

Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the confidence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together, we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want: a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.

Jasmine Bradshaw 00:48

Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. So this week, we have a really interesting episode. Sometimes I feel like the title just says everything I want to say. I want to get on the mic and be like, "Okay, hey, everybody. Jesus had brown skin. And that's the show." Because I feel like that in itself can be jarring for some people. But of course, I've done a lot of research and reading and have so much to share with you. Because even though most of us know that Jesus had brown skin, we rarely see him depicted that way. So let's do a little untold story. Let's do a little deep dive and figure out where in the world did white Jesus come from, and why is he's the Jesus that we see so often.

Jasmine Bradshaw 01:39

Before we begin, I have to remind you about our First Name Basis Patreon community. So if you are unfamiliar with Patreon, it is an amazing membership site where you can support the show. So if you have learned or gained something special from listening to First Name Basis, we would love to have you on our Patreon community supporting us and also digging in to this important work with parents and caregivers just like you. Our Patreon is full of people who are really digging deep and trying to live a life that is anti-racist and anti-bias. We are all in this journey together, and we are digging in. We're asking questions, and we're learning how to teach those children in our life that we love what it looks like to really fight for justice. So I wanted to remind you about our Patreon, because next week is our

live monthly question and answer session. So this is where we get on Zoom all together, and I can answer any and all questions that you have. So if you have a question, you're listening to an episode or you run into something in your life, and you're just like, "Oh man, I really want someone to talk through this with me or give me the context of this," that is the perfect place to ask your question. So that's patreon.com/firstnamebasis. And once you become a member of our Patreon community, you will have access to all of our Q&As. Please do not fret. If you are listening to this after the fact, or if you miss the Q&A, we always always always post the replay in our Patreon group, so you can listen to them for forever.

Jasmine Bradshaw 03:16

Alright, y'all, let's get to it. Before we start, I have to give a trigger warning for my Black brothers and sisters. As usual, we will be talking about white supremacy, and we will briefly touch on the KKK. So if that is not something that you can hold today, please, I will never ever be offended if you have to step away from this. I forever and always want you to take care of yourself first. I also need to give a trigger warning for my Jewish brothers and sisters; we will talk a little bit about eugenics today, and I know that that can be really heavy for you. So take care of yourself and know that this will always be here for you if and when you have the energy and the space.

Jasmine Bradshaw 04:04

All right, so it seems like this time of year especially we see depictions of Jesus everywhere we go. And in these depictions, Jesus is overwhelmingly portrayed as a white man. But as I said in the title, that's not historically accurate. Of course, no one knows exactly what Jesus would have looked like, but historians believe that Jesus would have been brown. And I was able to find a few different historians who described what Jesus would have looked like physically. So one of them said that he would have had darker skin, hair, and eyes. Another said that he would have been brown short, non-substantial, muscularly average, and ordinary. And then a third, a Duke professor of religious studies, his name is David Morgan, he said, quote, "Some of the earliest images of Jesus showed him with very dark skin and possibly African." End quote.

Jasmine Bradshaw 05:11

So if the consensus among historians is that Jesus had brown skin, then why do we so often see these portraits of Jesus as a white man? Is this a coincidence? Of course not. If you've been here for any amount of time, you know that there's very little coincidence when it comes to matters of race. If someone is considered white or portrayed as white, it's because there was a very intentional effort to make them that way. And Jesus is no exception.

Jasmine Bradshaw 05:45

Before I share the research with you, I have to thank Steve Peterson, he is a member of our First Name Basis Patreon community, and he's been a supporter from the very beginning. And ever since he connected with me on Patreon, he will just randomly send me these messages, and almost every time it has a link to an article about how Jesus became white. So a great deal of the research that I'll share in this episode is all thanks to Steve. And as always, I will link all the research in the show notes.

Jasmine Bradshaw 06:18

First, we're going to dig into how Jesus became white. And then we'll take a look at the effect that white Jesus is having on people. We're going to focus on the history of the imagery of Jesus in the United States. He has a really long European history as you can imagine, but we're just going to be focusing on the US today. And there is one researcher in particular who really lays out the story of how Jesus became white in the United States. His name is Edward Blum, and he wrote a book called "The color of Christ, the Son of God, and the Saga of Race in America." Blum starts off by talking about how the Puritans thought that it was actually a violation of the second commandment to have images of Christ. If you are like me, and you don't have the commandments memorized in their exact order, it's okay guys. I'm here for a little refresher. So the second commandment in Exodus 20, verse four, says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." So the Puritans feel like if they are living true to that commandment, it means that they should not have pictures of Christ.

Jasmine Bradshaw 07:36

Now, when I was reading this, I thought, Okay, wait a minute, what's the difference between Puritans and Pilgrims? Or are those the same thing? And I was like, they're probably the same thing. And then I realized that every time I think that, I'm usually wrong. So no, they're not the same thing. The Puritans and the Pilgrims were two separate religious groups. So in England, everyone had to go to the Church of England. Not attending church was not an option. You had to worship in the way that was taught in the Church of England or else it was considered treason. So the Pilgrims were separatists from the church. They didn't agree with the teachings of the Church of England, and they broke off to worship in a way that they felt was more aligned with what they believed God wanted. So at first, they tried staying in England and just going off and worshiping by themselves, but they were found out, and they were persecuted. So they fled to the Netherlands. They went to Holland, and they were living their lives. They're worshipping in the way that they wanted to, but what they decided was that their children were not holding on to their English culture enough. They felt like they're being too influenced by the culture in the Netherlands, and so they decided that they were going to leave and go to North America. So that's the Pilgrims, they are separatists. They wanted to leave the Church of England, and that's what they did.

Jasmine Bradshaw 08:56

The Puritans are different. They also had problems with the teachings of the Church of England, but instead of leaving, they felt like what they needed to do was stay and make changes from the inside. So they felt like there are things that we really want to change about this church, but we should stay here and try to help change things. So their motivation for coming to North America was not because of religious persecution. It was because they saw that there were great financial opportunities in the land here in the United States. So the Pilgrims came to North America in 1620. And the Puritans didn't come until 1630. So those are two different religious groups. And the Puritans are the ones who are like, "No, we should not have pictures of Christ, because that is against the second commandment." And Blum says that they would talk about having dreams of Christ, and in their dreams, they would always describe him as being behind a spiderweb or in a fog, just in a way where they couldn't quite make him out, but they knew that he was there. He was just behind this film. And they didn't know exactly what he would look like.

Jasmine Bradshaw 10:08

As more Europeans began to come to North America, come to the United States, they brought lots of different depictions of Jesus with them. But then in the late 1800s, immigration was a big point of contention for America. So there were a lot of Catholic immigrants and Jewish immigrants that were coming to the US, and because white supremacy creates this mindset of scarcity, there are a lot of people who did not want to welcome these immigrants. And one of these people was a lawyer named Madison Grant. Madison Grant was a lawyer, a writer, and a eugenicist from the early 20th century. So yes, you heard that right. A eugenicist. He believed in eugenics. If you're unfamiliar, eugenics is one of the justifications that the Nazis used for the atrocities that they committed during the Holocaust. So Madison Grant is one of those types of people, and he was actively pushing for immigration restrictions. Grant wrote a book about race and the, quote unquote, "science" behind race. As we all know, race is a social construct. It is not scientific in the slightest. But Grant, and people like him, really believed that there was a master race and that we should weed other people out in order to preserve this master race. So he was definitely against immigration. And he and other people like him began to distance Jesus from his Jewish roots. So they started perpetuating these stories about Jesus. And they started saying things like, "Wait a minute, haven't you noticed that the Jewish people were actually the ones who were meant to Jesus?" So by telling these stories, and by planting these seeds of hatred toward Jewish people, they began to spread this idea that Jesus was more European than he was Middle Eastern. And in the interview that I was listening to with Edward Blum, the author of "The Color of Christ," he said something that really stuck with me. He was like, "How can you keep Jewish immigrants out if you believe in a Jewish savior? Well, all you have to do is make him not Jewish." And that's how they justified their stance on immigration. So if they distance Jesus from his Jewish heritage, then it's okay to treat Jewish people poorly. I mean, obviously, that's so un-Christian, but that's what they did, and that's what they believed.

Jasmine Bradshaw 12:44

So we see white Jesus really starting to take shape when these anti-immigrant feelings are being spread far and wide. And then, during the Harlem Renaissance, Black artists begin to depict Jesus as Black. So the Harlem Renaissance is from the 1910s to the mid 1930s. And this really made me think of something that we learned when we were doing the research for the statue episode. If you remember in our episode "Cancel Culture, Part Three: Removing Statues," and I will totally link the episode in the show notes if you haven't heard it. But in that episode, we talked about how one of the reasons why Confederate statues were put up was in response to Black people who started to make progress. So during reconstruction, and during the Civil Rights Movement, we saw the Black community starting to progress and starting to gain traction in their fight for equality. And in response to that, the white community would build these Confederate statues to remind the Black community of who was in power, and who made the rules. So Edward Blum does not say this in his book, and none of the other historians confirmed this, but I thought it was really interesting that right after the Harlem Renaissance, when Jesus is being depicted as Black, white, Jesus really starts to gain traction. A man named Colonel Henry Todd paints a portrait of Jesus, and it's called "Christ the Nazarene." And in this portrait, Jesus has blond hair and blue eyes, and of course, very light skin. So in 1932, his painting gets a lot of positive attention, and there was this article written in a newspaper called "The Long Islander." So in the article, the church federation is quoted saying, quote, "The hand of the Lord must have been on Henry Stanley Todd when he painted the picture of the Nazarene. This conception of Christ as a blue-

eyed, golden-haired, broad-shouldered figure of strong masculinity, rather than the man of sorrows, the pathetic, drooping, sad Latin-type, has attracted a great deal of attention." End quote. It was so interesting to me that they were really specific and saying that the things that they liked about this portrait of Jesus was that he was blue-eyed and golden-haired. And the things that they don't like about pictures of Jesus that they had seen before it was that he was "drooping, pathetic, and Latin."

Jasmine Bradshaw 15:27

So from here, white Jesus really takes off. And then in 1940, a painting of Jesus comes out that most of us would recognize super quickly, because there was a campaign to make sure that everyone saw it. One of the best articles that I read for this episode is called "How Jesus Became White" by Emily McFarlane Miller. And in this article, she talks about a painting by a man named Warner Sallman. It's called "Head of Christ," and "Head of Christ" is considered to be the best known American artwork of the 20th century. So if you saw this picture of Christ, you would recognize it immediately. And I will link her article in the show notes because she puts a picture at the very top of the article. So Warner Sallman is asked to draw a picture of Christ for the first issue of a magazine called "The Covenant Companion," and this is a youth magazine for the Swedish Evangelical Mission Covenant. The gallery director at Indiana's Anderson University, Ty Lippen, explained that Sallman really wanted to make his Jesus feel familiar. They said that he gave his Jesus quote, "A very similar feeling to an image of a school or professional photo of the time, making it more accessible and familiar to the audience." End quote. So he really wants this painting to resonate with young adults. And of course, "Head of Christ" is very similar to "Christ the Nazarene" in that he has golden hair, light eyes and light skin.

Jasmine Bradshaw 17:16

In talking about "Head of Christ," Matthew Anderson, a professor at Concordia University said, quote, "This particular image of Jesus met the dawn of the Madman of the marketing agency." End quote. So this is because there was a movement called the "Christ in Every Purse Project," and that is where they got this image printed on everything. So the goal was to get "Head of Christ," this photo, into everyone's hands. They had it printed on pencils, bookmarks, lamps, clocks, and of course, they had tons of pass-along cards printed up, and they gave them out everywhere. So they were given to soldiers who are leaving for World War Two. They were given to the Salvation Army, and they were given out at the YMCA. They truly wanted to get Christ in every purse. And this project was endorsed by President Eisenhower. So the President of the United States says, "Yeah, this is a great idea, and this is the picture to do it. 'Head of Christ' should be everywhere, and whenever someone thinks of Jesus, we want them to think of this photo." So we can see the journey that began by distancing Jesus from his Jewish roots, to trying to get this very whitewashed image of Jesus into every purse.

Jasmine Bradshaw 18:38

Now, how has this white Jesus affected people? Does Jesus's race even matter at all? Okay, do you know me? Have you been here for longer than five seconds? Of course Jesus's race matters. And here's why: white Jesus has been used to justify so many horrendous actions. White Jesus has been used to justify slavery, indigenous genocide, segregation, family separation. White Jesus has even been used by white supremacist organizations like the KKK to support their racist actions and their terrorism. And if you remember, there was a horrendous act of terrorism done by a man named Dylann Roof. In 2015, Dylann Roof went to a Black church in South Carolina and opened fire on them, killing

nine parishioners. And his prison journals have shown that he has drawn this white Jesus in his journal. So those are all extreme examples of how white Jesus has been used to justify really terrible atrocities. But what about the average person? What about the rest of us? How does White Jesus affect us?

Jasmine Bradshaw 19:54

There is a psychologist named Simon Howard from Marquette University, and he studies this exact thing. So he studies how depicting God and Jesus as white affects how people see the world. In his study, he uses an RIAT, a race implicit association task. And in the RIAT, he would show images of people, and white Jesus was mixed in those images. So they would see lots of different people, and one of the images would be white Jesus. And here was his conclusion: he said, quote, "When people are exposed to images of white Christ, it makes those implicit associations more pronounced, which means that they had a more pro-white bias after being exposed to an image of white Jesus. White supremacy is an ideology that is both conscious and unconscious. I don't mean that as like a white supremacist in the white sheet running around terrorizing, burning crosses, but an ideology that associates whiteness with superiority, and Blackness with inferiority. And this image reinforces that ideology consciously and unconsciously." End quote.

Jasmine Bradshaw 21:08

Dr. Howard's research shows that white Jesus can reinforce white supremacy. It can teach people that whiteness is superior and Blackness is inferior. And he shared another conclusion that I thought was really, really important for all of us to remember. He says that if you want to keep pictures of white Jesus, that's okay. But what you need to do is put up pictures of Black Jesus and brown Jesus. He explained that this is especially important for children, because we do not want our children to automatically associate godliness for whiteness. We don't want them to see whiteness and think that is what God looks like, that it's the only option for God is to be white. So the problem isn't depicting Jesus with white skin. The problem is depicting Jesus with only white skin, and excluding the other depictions of Jesus that are more historically accurate. Not only does this depiction of white Jesus lead to implicit bias, but it leads to just straight up inaccurate thinking.

Jasmine Bradshaw 22:19

I was reading about how Megyn Kelly was talking about Santa, and she was explaining that Santa needs to be white. And in it she said, quote, "Just because it makes you uncomfortable doesn't mean it needs to change. Jesus was a white man, too." End quote. The thing about this quote is that Megyn Kelly is wrong all around. Jesus was not white. Jesus had brown skin, and Santa was not white either. Santa is based on a man named St. Nicholas who was from Turkey, so his skin was also brown. And there are so many churches who are perpetuating this depiction of white Jesus, and it's really problematic. My very own church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has recently put out a guide for the artwork that we can have in our church buildings, and in every single piece of art, Jesus is white. I actually did an entire episode about this with Michelle Franzoni Thorley from Flora Familiar, and we talk about the guide, and we break down how it makes us feel and what we feel like the church needs to do in order to change and be more inclusive. I will link that episode in the show notes. It is Season Two, Episode 15: "Diversity and Inclusion in LDS Art."

Jasmine Bradshaw 23:37

And one of the other things that I thought was really interesting from Edward Blum's book that I talked about at the very beginning, "The color of Christ," he speaks specifically about the LDS Church. And he explains that one of the reasons that LDS people in the LDS Church seem so obsessed with white Jesus is because we were told for so long that we were not American enough. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has faced a lot of persecution and has been told that we aren't Americans. And so in response to that, in order to prove our Americanness, we have latched on to white Jesus and shown "No no, we are the most American. We embrace blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus. How much more American could you get?" So I thought it was so interesting that Edward Blum would take the time to talk about our church specifically, and the way that we will not loosen our grip on white Jesus. Well, as a member of the church who is also a person of color, I would really love to see brown Jesus, Black Jesus, lots of different depictions of Jesus. There are people who believe that white Jesus should go away altogether. There are some activists who you'll talk to who think that white Jesus needs to be done with, but I don't think that. I think that white Jesus is all right as long as we include lots of different versions of Jesus, because that's how we will tell people that they are welcome. That's how we will make people feel included, and that's how we will begin to fight against biases—by including Jesus of all different shades. So if you are a disciple of Christ, if you are someone who has paintings of Jesus in your home, I would really challenge you to take an inventory of your home and figure out what you need to do to include pictures of brown Jesus and pictures of Black Jesus, all the different colors of Jesus.

Jasmine Bradshaw 25:45

My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you, and how deeply I know that when we work together, we can make real change in our communities. Any of the books, podcasts, or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site. I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes and everything is linked there. So you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram at [firstname.basis](https://www.instagram.com/firstname.basis). If you're interested in partnering with First Name Basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org. All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon.