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Perspective: Jesus was a Palestinian Jew—not white (page 14)

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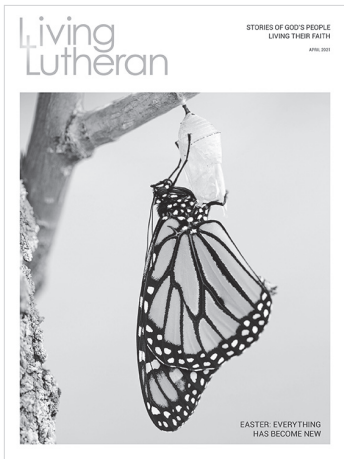# Jesus was a Palestinian Jew

By Robert C. Blezard

God came and dwelled among us, Emmanuel, incarnated as Jesus for the salvation of all of humanity in all our wonderful diversity. Though all humans may lay claim to Jesus as their "brother" and savior, he came into the world with a specific identity as a Jewish man from Palestine. Depicting Jesus as a white European is not merely inaccurate, it may subtly reinforce racism by implying that white culture is superior to others.

EXERCISE 1: JESUS, FOR ALL

Jesus lived as a Palestinian Jew who, scholars believe, undoubtedly had physical and facial characteristics similar to Palestinians today—dark skin, dark eyes and hair. That Jesus—God incarnate—was executed by crucifixion but rose again in three days in triumph over death and the grave. Through our faith in Jesus the Christ, we also live in triumph over death.

- God came to us in the person of a Palestinian Jew. Does this mean that God identifies with Palestinian Jews more than people of other cultures? Does it mean that Jesus the man and Christ the risen Lord are in solidarity more with Palestinians and Jews than people of other races, nationalities and cultures? Explain.

- Does Jesus' identity indicate that Palestinian Jewish culture is superior to other world cultures? Explain.

- As far as our faith is concerned, which is the more important fact: that the fullness of God was incarnated as a human being or that the fullness of God was incarnated as a Palestinian Jew?

- How relevant to our salvation is it that God came to us in the person of a Palestinian Jew in the ancient Near East?

- Would it have made a difference to our faith and salvation if God had chosen instead to live, die and rise again in Asia, Africa, South America or Europe?

- Jesus is God-made-flesh. How, then, may all people of all cultures and times and places claim kinship with Jesus? Do any people of any particular culture have a greater claim over Jesus? Why or why not? Is not Jesus in equal solidarity with every person of every age and culture?

EXERCISE 2: WHITE JESUS

In the wildly popular movie version of the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the lead role of Jesus was played by Ted Neeley, a man with distinctly European facial features, light brown hair and gray eyes—essentially a white American of European descent. By contrast, the historical Jesus was a Palestinian Jew who had dark skin, eyes and hair. *Jesus Christ Superstar* was a recent instance of what many see as the dominant world culture's promotion of Jesus as a white man of European descent. It's something that artists from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to modern times have done, some say with disastrous effects on other cultures.

- In what ways was it inaccurate for influential Italian artists of the Middle Ages and Renaissance to depict Jesus as an Italian man? How might that portrayal have assisted the dominant Christian culture of the time to brand itself and grow?

- Similarly, in what ways is it inaccurate for an American-made international film to depict Jesus as an American of European descent? How might it assist today's dominant Christian culture to brand itself and grow?

- If Jesus is portrayed as a white European, in what ways might that imply that Europeans and white culture in general is superior to non-white and non-European cultures?

- How might the Western church work to help correct the image of Jesus in our context? What concrete steps could be taken? Why would it be important to do so?

- What can you and your congregation do to promote a more accurate depiction of Jesus as a man of Palestinian Jewish heritage? Why would such work be important?

EXERCISE 3: IMAGES OF JESUS

As a study group, conduct an inventory of images of Jesus in your church. Make a list and note for each image how Jesus is depicted in ethnicity and race, especially in such factors as facial features and eye, skin and hair color. Look for images on the walls, in Sunday school materials (especially for children) and videos. When done, discuss:

- What did your investigation reveal about the way Jesus is depicted?

- Were there characteristics that dominated the portrayals of Jesus? If so, describe the most common ones.

- What were the other portrayals like?

- How true to Jesus' identity as a Palestinian Jew were the depictions?

- Why might artists and other creative people envision Jesus as something other than a Palestinian Jew? How might that be helpful to some people of faith? How might it be harmful?

- What concrete steps could our church take to promote a more accurate depiction of Jesus? What could your congregation do? You personally? Why would such an undertaking be worthwhile?

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EXERCISE 4: GOD IN OUR IMAGE

A popular quotation, in several variations attributed variously to Mark Twain, Voltaire, Henri Rousseau and Blaise Pascal, goes something like this: *"God created man in his own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since."*

- From your own religious and faith experience, what do you find true about this statement? Not true?

- Why might it be natural, and even helpful, for a person or culture to envision God as "like us"?

- What could be the downside of this?

Imagine Jesus as a human being, God incarnate, coming into the world today. Consider the following questions and explain your answers. What evidence from the Bible would support your responses?

- Do you think Jesus would look like you?

- Would Jesus choose to live in your home or neighborhood? Choose to drive a car like yours?

- Would Jesus have a job like yours? Take vacations like yours?

- Would Jesus vote the way you voted and hold your political beliefs?

- Would Jesus befriend your friends and avoid the people you avoid?

- Would Jesus share your ideals and values in such areas as economics and social justice?

- Would Jesus choose to read the books you read and watch the shows you watch?

- In general, how far might you and your culture go to create God in your own image? What can you do about it? Why is it important that you do something about it?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- If the actual Jesus was a Palestinian Jew with dark skin, dark hair and dark eyes, why are images of him as a man of European descent so prevalent?

- In promoting the image of Jesus as a white man of European descent, how does the dominant Western culture send the subtle message that white European culture is superior to other cultures?

- If Jesus was a Jewish man of Palestinian descent, does that imply that God is a Palestinian Jew? Does it mean that Palestinian Jewish culture is superior to other human cultures? Explain.

- Jesus came as God incarnate to save us. How important was his historical ethnicity and culture to Jesus' saving work?

About the study guide author:

Rob Blezard is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Aberdeen, Md. He earned a Master of Divinity degree from Boston University School of Theology and has done further study at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg (Pa.), now called United Lutheran Seminary.

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- In what ways do you, personally, envision Jesus as being similar to you? How is that helpful to your faith? Why is it appropriate that people of every age and culture envision Jesus as "one of us?" At the same time, what are the limitations of envisioning Jesus "like me" or "like us"? How might it be helpful to keep in mind that Jesus walked the earth as a Palestinian Jew with brown skin, dark hair and eyes?

- How does it affect your faith life to envision that Jesus lived and died as a Palestinian Jew who had dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin and non-European facial features? Why does Jesus' characteristics have this affect on you?

- Since the dominant Western culture has, for centuries, been promoting the image of Jesus as a white European, why is it important that we now work to correct that image? What would it mean for our relationships with people of non-Western culture? What are concrete steps we can make? What can you and your congregation do?

Jesus
was a Palestinian Jew —not White

By Niveen Ibrahim Sarras

Jesus as he is portrayed in a film produced by LUMO, a resource that provides a visual translation of the four Gospels.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, I've been preparing virtual worship services for my congregation. Instead of reading the Gospel lesson, I use LUMO, a visual translation of the four Gospels. Through LUMO, I can engage my congregation from afar with rich, authentic images of Bible stories.

A person from my congregation told me that the actor who plays Jesus scares her. LUMO's Jesus looks like a Middle Eastern man, with dark skin and short, black, curly hair. The congregant went on to say that she's scared because she's used to the image of Jesus portrayed as a white/European person with blue eyes, light skin and long blond or light brown hair. She believes I should stop using LUMO.

What is the actual image of Jesus?

In the later second century, Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian used the image of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53:1-3 to describe Jesus as an ugly man (he had "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"). But church fathers such as Origen used Psalm 42:2 to describe Jesus as a handsome man ("When shall I come and behold the face of God?").

The falsely attributed letter of Lentulus from the 13th century also portrays Jesus as a handsome man, tall and admirable, his eyes hazelnut-colored and his hair shoulder-length. Jesus' face was free of wrinkles or spots, and his beard was short. This letter spread across Western Europe in the 14th century and has influenced portraitists and church art.

In the Western and Eastern churches, icons of Jesus Christ depict him with long hair and usually with light skin.

Why did the Western church uproot Jesus from his Palestinian culture and context and give him a foreign culture and color? Over the centuries, white scholars have interpreted the gospel to support the supremacy of white culture and to give people of European descent political power. Western European missionaries carried the white Jesus image to the colonized continents and turned white Jesus into an ideology. Missionaries opened boarding schools to indoctrinate colonized students to accept white domination. And colonized people naturally associated white dominance with white Jesus. In Nazi Germany, some scholars tried to strip Jesus of his cultural identity by proposing that Jesus was an Aryan, not a Jew.

White Jesus is a product of white culture and white theology. In the United States, this combination has advanced political power that has created systemic racism and Jim Crow laws. White Jesus becomes a norm of truth and a symbol of spiritual superiority.

Alexander Jun, co-author of *White Jesus: The Architecture of Racism in Religion and Higher Education* (International Academic Publishers, 2018), explains that Jesus was made white because the white evangelical churches in America, unable to distinguish between politics and faith, created Jesus according to the image of the dominant people.

These descriptions of Jesus are based on cultural stereotypes rather than historical and archaeological analysis.

Christians are continually exposed to the image of Jesus as a white man, which implies that God is white and affirms the superiority of the white race. Whether we admit it or not, many of us envision a white Jesus.

But these descriptions of Jesus are based on cultural stereotypes rather than historical and archaeological analysis. Usually, these descriptions don't match the features of first-century Palestinian Jews.

The New Testament doesn't tell us what Jesus Christ looked like. Instead, it emphasizes his identity as a Jew and a descendant of David. His parents were Jews; he was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth. So that means Jesus must look the same as just about everyone else in Palestine.

When white–skinned people welcome a brown–skinned Jesus into their homes and churches, they embrace and live Jesus' message and stand in solidarity with the disadvantaged.

In *What Did Jesus Look Like?* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), Joan E. Taylor draws on the Bible, archaeology and anthropology to determine Jesus' features, studying Jews' bones dating back to first-century Palestine. Taylor refers to genetic analysis of Israeli and Palestinian men that found "over 70 percent of the Jewish men and 82 percent of the Palestinian men … came from the same ancestors of the past few thousand years."

She also depends on biohistorical analysis to assert that Iraqi Jews approximately resemble what Judeans looked like in Jesus' time. Jesus, she concludes, was a man with brown eyes, olive brown skin and short black hair, likely bearded and probably around 5 feet, 5 inches tall, somewhat slim and muscular. In short, Jesus was a Palestinian Jew.

If somebody asks me what the historical Jesus looked like, I will answer that he looked Palestinian as I do—as my father, brother or cousin does. The question I have for Christians is: Are you willing to worship and follow a brown-skinned, Palestinian Jesus? When you close your eyes to pray, can you picture a dark-skinned and short-black-haired Jesus?

The white Jesus represents white privilege and spiritual superiority, but a brown-skinned Jesus represents the minority and the disadvantaged. Usually, we overlook the fact that the historical Jesus and his people were in the minority and were the underprivileged ethnic group in the Roman Empire. Jesus and his people suffered from Rome's imperialism and oppression. He ministered to the disadvantaged and challenged the established power of his time that oppressed a colonized people.

I believe white congregations should put a brown-skinned Jesus image in their church buildings to remind themselves of who Jesus was and what he calls all of us to do in response to his grace and his sacrificial act of love on the cross.

When white-skinned people welcome a brown-skinned Jesus into their homes and churches, they embrace and live Jesus' message and stand in solidarity with the disadvantaged. White Christians who venerate a brown-skinned Jesus express solidarity with the world's refugees, because brown-skinned Jesus was a refugee. They support the poor and the hungry because brown-skinned Jesus was poor and hungry. They challenge the oppressive status quo because brown-skinned Jesus spoke up against injustices. They follow the way of Jesus. ✝

To learn more
- LUMO, the Gospels for the Visual Age: **lumoproject.com**.
- *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English Translation Based on M.R. James* by J.K. Elliot (Clarendon Press, 1993).
- *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* by Susannah Heschel (Princeton University Press, 2008).
- Download a study guide at **livinglutheran.org** by clicking on the "Spiritual practices & resources tab."