Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey


Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey tackle one of the more vexing historical problems at the nexus between racial discourse and christological discourse – how whiteness became deified through the iconic American representation of the white Jesus. How, they ask, did a Judean peasant under Roman occupation from the first century world of antiquity become a symbol of white supremacy, power, and privilege? The central idea of the book is summarily stated as follows: “At the center of this book is the story of white Jesus figures made, embraced, challenged, and reformed over the last five centuries; how he rose to become a conflicted icon of white supremacy; how he changed appearances subtly with shifting perceptions of who was considered genuinely white; and how he was able to endure all types of challenges to remain the dominant image of God’s human form in the nation and throughout the world” (7). Blum and Harvey tell a bold narrative that traces how the white Jesus first rose to dominance – and how that image was vigorously contested and variously negotiated by white Protestants, black Protestants, Native Americans, white Mormons, white supremacists, black abolitionists, and freedom fighters alike. The Prologue opens with the bombing of 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. On September 15, 1963, members of the Ku Klux Klan set dynamite underneath the steps of the church leaving four little girls dead (Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley) and many others wounded. The tragedy is significant not only because it served as a lightning rod for the Civil Rights Movement, but also because it offers a microcosm of a racial paradox of how a white Jesus in a black church could simultaneously “sancify white supremacy for some and opposition to racial injustice for others” (5). This is an important thread Blum and Harvey develop throughout the book.

The narrative is structured by three main parts, each consisting of three chapters. Part I (“Born Across the Sea”) begins in the age of exploration, arguing that whiteness as a racial category was very much in flux in the early history of the United States. Chapter 1 (“When Christ Crossed the Atlantic”) posits that Jesus was spiritually but not visually present for the Puritans (39). There were no images of Jesus in early colonial America of the 17th century; this was rather a period characterized by “destructive iconoclasm” (29, 52). Moreover, whiteness did not yet exist as a marker of racial power and identity (35). Chapter 2 (“Revolutionary Visions in Colonial Confines”) continues this argument, sug-
gesting that in the years of the American Revolution there was no explicit connection between Jesus and whiteness (57). Instead, a more prominent depiction of Jesus was through the imagery of light or the “imagery of blood” as depicted by Native Americans (61). During this period, there were many images of Washington but not of Jesus (74). Chapter 3 (“From Light to White in the Early Republic”) explores how Jesus imagery was first mass-produced as “a white sacred symbol” and as “a cultural icon of white power” in the early 19th century (78). A significant depiction of the white Jesus is William S. Pendleton's Letter from Publius Lentulus, to the Senate of Rome concerning Jesus Christ (1834). In this letter of dubious origins, Jesus's physical appearance is described in Eurocentric terms: “His hair is of the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to the ears ... His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without a wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly ruddy complexion ... His aspect is simple and mature, his eyes are changeable and bright ... He is the most beautiful among the children of men” (20–21). New Protestant organizations such as the American Bible Society (founded in 1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825) served as a vehicle for the production and distribution of these first images. For example, it is estimated that the American Tract Society distributed more than 800 million tracts and visited 25 million families (80).

Part II (“Crucified and Resurrected”) shows how the white Jesus image was entrenched in antebellum America and in the years leading to and following the Civil War. Chapter 4 (“Body Battles in Antebellum America”) introduces William Apess, an ordained Methodist ministry of mixed racial descent who was the first American to critique the white Jesus (105). In a pamphlet, entitled, “An Indian's Looking-Glass for the White Man,” Apess argued “Christ as Jew is recalled as a man of color” and that the apostles “certainly were not white” (105). This alternative depiction of Jesus functioned as leverage in the debates over Native American rights and slavery. But by the end of the Civil War, what emerged was a “neo-Confederate Christ ... an overt physical symbol of white supremacy” (122). Chapter 5 (“Christ in the Camps”) examines a theological link between Jesus and whiteness in Henry Ward Beecher’s The Life of Jesus, the Christ (1871), the first American biography of Jesus. Beecher noted the lack of biblical evidence for Jesus’s outward appearance and acknowledged that his racial identity was Semitic. Yet he included five visual depictions of a white European Christ who, in his words, “spiritually united in himself all nationalities, so in art his head has a certain universality. All races find in it something of their race features” (139). In this way, the particularity of whiteness and universality of Christianness were merged theoretically and marked visually in the five white Jesus images printed in the biography. Chapter 6 (“Nordic and