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## **The Inklings and Race: Whiteness, Mythology, and Jesus**

by Andrew T. Draper

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The Inklings' views on race are not presented systematically. As literary and linguistic scholars, their research interests were not directly related to academic treatments of identity. As men of their times and traditions, they did not consider questions of race and gender in the same manner as more contemporary versions. However, it is possible to construct a reasonable analysis of their perspectives on race by means of their mythical narratives. I will focus my treatment on passages from C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. I will attempt to avoid a reductionism that would present either scholar as simply "racist" or "not racist," as the question of race is more complex than such categories.

Having been thoroughly acquainted with both series in my youth, much of my imaginative experiences of good and evil, Christ and cross, Church and world, longing and hope, have been shaped by both authors. As I now share these same series with my own children, I am struck by the subtle yet clear manner in which the Occidental mythologies used by both Lewis and Tolkien encourage us to imagine a battle between good and evil as a contest between lightness and darkness, or more accurately, between whiteness and blackness. As I find myself censoring my reading of their stories by substituting more "palatable" words for their descriptions of the darker skin colors and unfamiliar cultural practices of the "bad" guys, I am increasingly aware of how Christian tradition has been largely enmeshed with Western philosophical and mythological traditions. The resultant

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mythical appropriations often unwittingly serve to catechize younger generations in a Christian faith that is subtly but powerfully enfolded into myths of white superiority. In other words, I am contending that Eurocentrism and ecclesiocentrism have developed hand in hand. The suggestions I have for disentangling these bedfellows will become apparent throughout this paper.

I am continuously drawn to the works of Lewis and Tolkien because they draw me into an emotive and imaginative experience of the presence of Christ. At the same time, as I am drawn to their Jesus, I find that I have also been drawn into racialized ways of imagining the world, into narratives of non-Western inferiority that reinforce and reestablish my own biases and the ways in which I experience and interpret others. In a globalized world and the pluralistic milieus in which we find ourselves, there is something both comforting and insidious about the ways in which white mythologies allow us to reinforce and reconfirm our own sense of peoplehood and self, our ways of being in the world, and our understandings of flesh and bodies. In an American society in which the lines of racialized being are often policed violently, it is of utmost importance that the manner in which we view bodies (both our own and those of others) is exposed and evaluated according to satisfactory theological criteria.

While Lewis can be considered an apologist and a lay theologian, neither he nor Tolkien were theologians proper. As a theological ethicist, I am interested in the intersection of doctrine and lived commitments, particularly in the realms of Christology and theological anthropology and their concomitant identity issues (especially race and gender). My own scholarly work has centered on the emerging theological race theory of Willie James Jennings and J. Kameron Carter, professors of theology and black church studies at Yale and Duke Divinity schools. While many scholarly accounts of identity have been relegated to the social sciences, what if the problem of race is at heart a theological problem? Jennings and Carter work to fill in the lacunae in theological accounts of race with a more robust account of the origins and maintenance of the racialized imagination. They offer an analysis of race that transcends the narrow contemporary focus on “racism” as primarily a matter of the will or intentions. I will utilize the theological race theory of Jennings and Carter to elucidate what I contend are the racialized imaginations of Lewis and Tolkien.

Unearthing this deeper soil in relation to race is especially needed in Evangelical circles. Evangelicals tend to focus on sin as primarily an individual matter dependent on personal “motivations” (and tend

to have an overly optimistic view of their ability to exercise such discernment). They are often reluctant to recognize the systemic nature of the “principalities and powers” and the structural ramifications of the Fall. Many modern Christians seem to believe that if they don’t actively harbor animosity in their hearts toward an individual of another ethnicity, then race must not be a factor in the way they view others. This theological naiveté influences the “different languages” spoken by liberals and conservatives in relation to issues of race.

My interest is not in attempting to discern the personal motivations of Lewis or Tolkien but in demonstrating that their mythological imaginations invoke a racialized understanding of the world that harbors racist assumptions and in which racism thereby becomes tenable. From the time of early-modern colonization, this imaginary is the palette from which we as Western Christians have tended to paint the world. Before moving to a summation of Jennings’ and Carter’s theses, which offer a genealogical account of the missteps to which I am referring, I will first ground my contentions in several passages from Narnia and Middle Earth that demonstrate the manner in which Lewis and Tolkien view “good” and “beautiful” as “white” and “Western” while viewing “evil” and “ugly” as “black” and “non-Western.”

Both Narnia and Middle Earth are under attack from forces that threaten all that is true, good, and beautiful. For Tolkien, the gathering menace comes from the East. It is dark and brooding; it threatens the “fair” people of Middle Earth<sup>1</sup> (read “white”: an aesthetic description of light-skinned beauty), who are defended by “the captains of the West.”<sup>2</sup> Conversely, the peoples who are susceptible to being tricked by the forces of evil and siding with them in battle are the Easterlings and Southrons, described by Tolkien as “black-skinned” and “swarthy”<sup>3</sup> (as opposed to the tall, light-skinned people of Gondor and Rohan whose hair is straight, long, and flowing). Ugliness is likewise embodied in orcs, who are described as “squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes,”<sup>4</sup> while the Uruk-Hai, who refer to the Riders of Rohan as “white skins,”<sup>5</sup> are called “black.” Conversely, beauty is embodied in the pale skin and austere countenances of the women of the West. Tolkien presents goodness and beauty as virtues

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1 Tolkien, *The Two Towers*, 152.

2 Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 200.

3 Tolkien, *Return of the King*, 148.

4 Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Letter 210.

5 Tolkien, *The Two Towers*.

inherent to whiteness and unnatural to darker, non-Western peoples. In Tolkien, physical descriptions introduce a sort of naturalized, essentialized racial taxonomy by which the peoples of Middle Earth are distinguished from one another.

Lewis's racialized language is equally explicit. In *The Horse and His Boy*, the Calormenes are thinly veiled references to Arab peoples with their dome-shaped architecture, curved scimitars, and lyrical style of storytelling (think "Arabian nights"), which Lewis derides as flattering and deceitful rather than truthful and brave like the heroic poetry of the West.<sup>6</sup> In *The Last Battle*, Lewis describes the Calormenes as "dark, bearded men" from "that great and cruel country that lies... across the desert to the south," thereby contrasting them with "the fair-haired men of Narnia."<sup>7</sup> The blue-eyed and honest-faced King Tirian<sup>8</sup> is surrounded by these "dark men... in a thick crowd, smelling of garlic and onions, their white eyes flashing dreadfully in their brown faces."<sup>9</sup> According to an evolutionary logic, the antagonistic darker people of a foreign tongue are less developed and more animal-like, serving the ape instead of the Lion and, much to the enjoyment of a Narnian crowd, revert into a donkey at the command of Aslan.<sup>10</sup> While both authors at times present evil as "white" (e. g. the "white witch" or "Saruman the white"), it should be remembered that the characters' whiteness functions literarily as a mask of beauty and truth over the blackness of their hearts.

Many scholars have evaluated the manner in which Lewis and Tolkien present race, with one side maintaining that they are little more than misogynistic racists and the other side softening their offenses by presenting them as men who sought to call stereotypes into question by presenting several females and people of color as exceptions to the aforementioned rule.<sup>11</sup> In my estimation, both of these accounts miss the point. The question at hand is not an evaluation of Lewis's and Tolkien's personal praxis or the aesthetic impact of their mythological works, but the manner in which their Christian identity is maintained by paganizing and marginalizing the

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6 Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, 113.

7 Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 21.

8 Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 12.

9 Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 25.

10 Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, 210-211 and *The Last Battle*, 26.

11 Chism, J. R. R. *Tolkien Encyclopedia*, Young, *Race and Popular Fantasy Literature*, Ezard, *The Guardian*, and Brown, *Are the Chronicles of Narnia Sexist and Racist?*.

flesh of non-white bodies. I contend that the Occidental mythologies of Lewis and Tolkien operate according to a supersessionist logic that centralizes white being by pushing Jewish and Muslim bodies to the periphery, thereby recreating them as racialized “others.”

This is the point at which the works of Jennings and Carter may shed light on the problematic imaginations of the Inklings by helping us disentangle the convolutions of Christian formation and racial identity. In Jennings’ *The Christian Imagination* and in Carter’s *Race: A Theological Account*, both scholars contend that the ascendancy of the white male body as constitutive of “Christian” identity is grounded in the marginalization of the Jewish body as religious (and racial) “other.”<sup>12</sup> Jennings and Carter use language of “supersessionism,” the view that the Church has “replaced” Israel in the plan and purposes of God, to name what they contend is the greatest distortion in Christian theology. Developing out of the Constantinian church’s articulation of theological orthodoxy in terms drawn from Hellenistic philosophy (primarily Platonic idealism), and the late medieval church’s theological scholasticism (expressed in terms of Aristotelian realism), the Church increasingly imagined her identity at the expense of Jewish (and other near-Eastern) ways of being in the world.

Jennings relates that at the height of the Renaissance, at the dawn of the Age of Exploration, a series of Iberian taxonomies were articulated for the purpose of protecting Christian (read “white”) identity by defining Jews and Muslims as “darker” peoples: as racialized “others.” In the Spanish *limpieza de sangre* (“blood purity”) laws, Jews and Muslims became the “contagion within” the populace, respectively termed *conversos* (“converts”) or *cerranos* (“swine”), serving as a buffer to protect “white” identity from the “black” body, which became the “contagion without.”<sup>13</sup> “Being” was racialized along a hierarchical scale, a spectrum of skin color. These laws formalized a growing racialized consensus as *blanco* was placed on top and *negro* was assigned space at the bottom with various “blood mixtures,” including that of *mulatto*, placed somewhere in between. The most insidious aspect of these laws was that a sufficient dilution of non-white blood made it possible to be counted *blanco*. In other words, Christian conversion was expressed as the possibility of “becoming white.” A powerful ecclesiology of assimilation took hold, around which many contemporary theological projects still orbit, including,

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12 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, and Carter, *Race*.

13 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 79.

as I contend, those that represent Christian identity by means of European mythology. As indigenous peoples were displaced and spatially-constituted identities disrupted through colonization, the newly systematized category of “race” was called upon to do what place no longer could: reveal identity. According to Jennings, race became an essentially movable schema capable of binding peoples together in a relentless aesthetic comparison.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, modern race is a distortion of the Christian doctrine of creation. “Whiteness” is not so much a skin color as an *ordo*, an *oikonomia*, a political arrangement organized around the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities of European peoples.<sup>15</sup>

Carter extends Jennings’ genealogy of the origins of race into the Enlightenment project. He suggests that Kant’s rationalized religion and his use of Jesus Christ as a sort of “ur-human,” or a moral ideal for emulation, effectively unhinged the Center of Christian faith from the flesh of the Jewish Jesus and presented it back as a “cultural reflex” Christ, a white male body into which all flesh could be grafted as it ascended out of “crudity” of nature.<sup>16</sup> In this sense, *Aufklärung*, or “the modern project,” begins to look like “the racial project,” through which certain conceptions of rationality, beauty, morality, and being itself ascend to the “enlightened” heights while others are relegated to the depths of “darkness” and “savagery.” I am building the case that many accounts that uphold Western virtue as the antidote to the morass of liberal modernity, including the mythological narratives of the Inklings, centralize the white body in similar ways through appeals to what Hauerwas refers to as the “unity of the transcendentals” (“ontology,” “ethics,” and “aesthetics”).<sup>17</sup> In the Enlightenment and the proto-modern theological rationality that was its genesis, Christian language became the means by which the relative value of non-white bodies was assessed. The non-white body became the soteriological counterweight to the salvific hope extended from a Christian European center. The Jewish center of divine salvation was deposed in favor of a “great white hope” for all the peoples of the earth. Countless historical missiological programs and contemporary soteriological debates could serve as examples.

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14 Ibid., 40ff.

15 Carter, *Race*, 8.

16 Carter, *Race*, 80.

17 Hauerwas, *The State of the University*, 203. He utilizes MacIntyre’s conception of the “transcendentals” to ground his own account of education in the university.

As Lewis and Tolkien conflate Eastern modes of being with evil, they fail to acknowledge the ways in which their own Western mythologies (Dryads, knights, castles, kings, dragons, elves, dwarves, centaurs, fauns, witches, Minotaurs, and Satyrs) are themselves constitutive of the manner in which they envision goodness, truth, and beauty. In his allegorical narratives, Lewis does not hesitate to syncretize pagan British and Greek mythology with the Biblical story of redemption (consider how he represents Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation). At the same time, he is extremely resistant to imagining that Near Eastern cultural and religious imagery could serve a similar iconographic role. This suggests that Lewis has not sufficiently considered the theological relationship between the universality of the Gospel and the scandalous particularity of the Jewish Messiah. He appears to have forgotten that Gentile Christianity is itself a contextualized appropriation of faith in the Jewish God (remember Acts 15) and that Western Christian orthodoxy is itself a syncretism of Greek philosophy and Jewish theology (recall Chalcedon and the fierce debates between *homoousios* and *homoiousios*). I am neither faulting the accommodation of Gentile ways of living into the Jewish faith, nor am I calling into question the veracity of Christian orthodoxy's attempt to safeguard the mystery of faith in Jesus from the comparably systematic heresies that raged in the first few centuries of the Church.<sup>18</sup> Rather, I am simply tagging the fact that the Inklings' racialized imagination is a symptom of the virus of supersessionism coursing through the veins of the Western Christian tradition.

Lewis's admirable (albeit somewhat convoluted) attempts at a nuanced soteriology can be read as an attempt to push against the logical conclusions of the supersessionist vision he had inherited.<sup>19</sup> Even if Lewis's views on the eschaton and the relationship between various "religions" as such are somewhat amorphous, he should be commended for striving toward a more inclusivist theological

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18 My thinking on this point has been influenced by Justo L. Gonzalez's *A History of Christian Thought*. I am sympathetic with Gonzalez's claim that the development of orthodox Christology was both necessarily and yet problematically reliant upon Hellenistic philosophy. At the same time, I am convinced by Gonzalez's assertion that such rationalization was a faithful buttress against the even more speculative and philosophically systematic heresies against which orthodox doctrine was developed. (See particularly *Volume I*, 394–395 and *Volume II*, 88–89.)

19 See Lewis, *The Great Divorce*.

trajectory. I suggest that his limitations in this regard are due to a problematic conflation of the relationship between Church and world and that of Jew and Gentile. Even when his reflections take on a more universal tone (as we see in regard to the Calormene Emeth's service to Tash that was counted, eschatologically, as service to Aslan<sup>20</sup>), Lewis reads Christian identity as Western *at the expense of* Eastern ways of being in the world. Lewis seems to forget that Christians have been written into another people's story, dine as guests at another people's table, and worship another people's God. The Calormene Emeth calls himself a "dog," invoking the Canaanite woman's posture toward Israel's Messiah,<sup>21</sup> suggesting that Lewis imagines European Christianity as the Israel into which the "races," as Gentiles, can be grafted. Jennings and Carter claim that this way of imagining salvation renders non-white peoples the *ethnos* and the Church "the people of God" while evacuating the Incarnation of its historical particularity.

Like Emeth, Aravis, the Calormene who marries the Archenlandian Shasta, is "grafted in" to the narrative of Occidental qua Christian mythology. Like Rahab, Aravis is effectively brought out of her Gentile identity through inclusion into the people of God by marriage into the genealogy of the great kings and queens of Narnia. The line had been sired (at the dawn of creation) by King Frank I and Queen Helen of Great Britain<sup>22</sup> and would be most fully embodied in four British children fleeing attacks on the United Kingdom by escaping from a castle through a wardrobe.<sup>23</sup> While it is understandable for Lewis's protagonists to be of the same nationality as their author, Lewis demonstrates that he imagines his own tradition as central in the story of redemption in a way that marginalizes the traditions of others (rather than enfolding both those traditions into another story: the story of the Jewish people and their Messiah). The question should not be whether the Calormenes worship the same God as the Narnians, but if either worship a God with a history, and of a people, not their own.

Jennings proposes a Christology of Gentile remembrance as the first step in resisting the racialized imagination. As my family and I have lived for twelve years in a diverse urban community and have worked in relationships of reconciliation across ethnic lines, I have learned that images and myths that resonate with me often do not translate well into the cultural idioms of my non-white neighbors, friends, and colleagues. How can it be that something holding such deep iconographic significance for me is not comparably meaningful to those with whom I share life? The lowest-level answer is that different peoples

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20 Lewis, *The Last Battle*, 161-166.

21 Matthew 15:21-28

22 Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*.

23 Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*.

have different cultural memories and that the images of European mythology are not significant to those whose history is constituted by different cultural stories, which is one explanation for why “classical” approaches to education consistently fail students of color. However, through participation in relationships marked by difference and through submission to scholarly resources from traditions not my own, I have come to recognize that the issue is not simply one of “differing mythologies in need of translation.” Rather, because Christian identity was married to imperialism and colonization, the images of conquest and victory throughout the mythologies of Narnia and Middle Earth remind non-white peoples of the marginalization and oppression of their own bodies.

This is not simply an issue of form or medium, nor does it relate to the Idealist quest to embody the supposedly timeless truth of the Gospel in various contingently occurring enculturations. Rather, this is an issue of Christology: Whose Jesus are Christians worshipping? Is it the triumphant Christ of political empires, militaristic campaigns, assaults on the “Black Gate,” and battles against the followers of Tash? Or is it the Jesus whom Ted Smith proclaims as beaten, chained, enslaved, lynched, and raped at gunpoint,<sup>24</sup> whom James Cone calls “the Jesus of... the Spirituals” and “Fanny Lou Hamer,”<sup>25</sup> the Moltmannian “crucified God,”<sup>26</sup> the Biblical “Suffering Servant” of Israel?<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther would remind us that the human temptation is always to proclaim a “theology of glory” above a “theology of the cross.” As devotees of the Inklings, we would do well to consider in which direction we are being disciplined by the mythical images that we so adore.

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24 Smith, *Weird John Brown*, 153–54.

25 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xiii.

26 Moltmann, *The Crucified God*.

27 Isaiah 52:13–53:12

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