

Getting to the Promised Land

*Black America and the
Unfinished Work
of the Civil Rights Movement*

Kevin W. Cosby

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Contents

<i>Foreword by Cornel West</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	1
1. Replace the Exodus Hermeneutic with a Postexilic One: Regain a Singular Focus	9
2. Solomon: No Coalitions with the Mighty Until We've Lifted Weights	17
3. Daniel: Put on Ethnic Armor and Reject the Illusion of Inclusion	23
4. Cyrus's Decree: No Liberation without Reparation	31
5. Ezra: Lineage Alone as a Call to Specificity for ADOS's Unique Justice Claim	35
6. Esau: A Good Lesson from a Bad Example	41
7. Hanani's Mission to Expose Pseudo Innocence: Most of Us Ain't Movin' On Up	57
8. Nehemiah Wept: ADOS Leaders Must Weep and Speak Up for Our Community	73

9. Nehemiah's Leadership: Mobilizing ADOS to Take Care of ADOS Business	79
10. Servants, Not Celebrities: Nehemiah, Ella Baker, and Exemplary Leadership for ADOS	87
<i>Conclusion: Beginning to Name Tenets of ADOS Theology</i>	95
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	99
<i>Notes</i>	101

Introduction

In America, a certain tension has long characterized the relationship between Black political activism and Christian doctrine as it is traditionally preached throughout the country. That conflict, perhaps, is to be expected. After all, given the ongoing oppression of the Black population in the United States, it is reasonable to question Christianity's relevance when it is so ambivalent toward those numerous violences and existing iniquities.

On one hand, it is a Christianity that claims to reprove such injustice. And yet, if one visits any number of Black churches across America, that person will surely observe how that same Christianity seems to merely counsel us (the principal victims, no less) to exercise patience and forbearance while living under precisely those conditions of provocation. This version of Christianity curiously encourages its Black congregations to accept that the fulfilment of their freedom is to be found in eternal salvation, this despite our nation's apparent bedrock of truth that God has endowed each and every one of us with the right to liberty *here* on earth. What are we supposed to make, then, of a Christianity that remains essentially reticent about the fact that from the very beginning, with respect to its Black population, the United States has acted in direct contradiction to that supposed belief? Rather, it has sought to radically attenuate the "freedom" of our community to the point of meaninglessness.

Given these circumstances, how are we ever to see the message of Christ and the collective effort to free ourselves from oppression as being divinely consistent with one another?

In his seminal work, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Rev. Dr. James Cone confronted these questions of compatibility head-on. He forcefully argued the essential emancipatory nature of Jesus' ministry and demonstrated how the Black freedom struggle, with its aim of liberating Black people and setting them on a course of self-determination, embodied a distinctly Christian mission. In so doing, Dr. Cone established the theological underpinnings for a religion that could meaningfully engage with our people's resistance to exploitation and injustice. This Christianity recognized the singularity of the Black experience in the United States and respected the indissolubility of Black identity: "It is impossible for me to surrender this basic reality [of Blackness] for a 'higher, more universal' reality," Cone wrote. "Therefore, if a higher, Ultimate reality is to have meaning, it must relate to the very essence of blackness."¹ This was Cone's governing proposition, and for him it would locate God at the very core of Black liberation as realized through Black Power, a conception of freedom described by Stokely Carmichael wherein Blacks are controlling the economics, education, and politics in the Black community.

There can be no doubt, however, that in the United States of America today (now nearly fifty years since Carmichael articulated that sublime vision of the Black community in full possession of their own affairs in national life), we fall woefully short in actually inhabiting such a space. Nowhere is this lamentable scenario more obvious than in the present-day wealth gap that divides white America from Black America. For the former group, the median wealth stands at \$120,000. For African Americans, it is an astoundingly low \$1,700 when you subtract depreciating assets such as the family car.² This disparity is naturally reflected in our homeownership rates, which, at 41.3 percent in 2016, marked the lowest number recorded in fifty years. That very same year it was also reported that African Americans were the only racial group earning *less* than they had been at the turn of the century.³ Whites, Asians, and Latinx all saw gains in their incomes at the

median, while Black median income languished at its pre-2000 level. And while President Trump touted record-low unemployment numbers for Blacks, this apparently laudable achievement conceals the millions of Black men whom our criminal justice system has, over the last several decades, committed to prisons at rates unequalled in the modern world. In lauding “record-low” Black unemployment, we celebrate nothing so much as the terrifying adaptability of our institutions to simply absent the Black man from American society.

All of which is to say that in virtually every area of racial progress, we have reverted to a much darker period in our nation’s history. And yet we seem today surer than ever of our supposedly improved race relations. We have a sense of progress that is totally at odds with what the available data tells us about ourselves and our present condition. The question we must consider is how have we arrived at such a point of deep contradiction? How is it that the gesture of the closed, raised fist that signifies Black Power (while no doubt defiant and evocative of the historic struggle out of slavery and an overcoming of its legacy of seemingly insuperable odds) is a fist that has *never truly held the economic power for which it is owed*? More importantly, how do we interpret this situation religiously? Dr. Cone wrote, “While the gospel itself does not change, every generation is confronted with new problems, and the gospel must be brought to bear on them.”⁴ If this is true, then ought we not be critical of the orthodox consensus shaped by Christian intellectuals of a totally different time—intellectuals whose interpretations of the Scripture may not address our current predicament? Is a reevaluation of Black theology necessary in order to point the way toward a new horizon of possibility for Black people in America? And if so, then what religious ideas are now required to further Black people in our aim of freedom in order to facilitate, as Dr. Cone wrote, “[our] becoming what [our] Creator intended”?⁵

It is my contention that Black America in 2020 is standing upon the threshold of tremendous possibility. And that if we are to imagine a theology that seeks to meaningfully involve the Christian doctrine in the current stage of our struggle, then

the principal task before us is to recover the meaning of “the very essence of blackness” of which Dr. Cone spoke, and to properly anchor that in the American context in order to understand our condition as a population uniquely excluded. After all, if we accept Cone’s premise that what separates true Christianity from false doctrine is the former’s ability to connect to the core of our experience as Black people in America, it then would seem to greatly behoove us to incorporate *new* knowledge and *new* insights gleaned from the last half century into our analysis of what exactly distinguishes our experience today in national life.

Writing in the 1960s, Dr. Cone said that our condition as Black Americans was defined by “living under unbearable oppression.”⁶ While that description no doubt rings true yet today, the need to speak of that oppression in the most precise terms possible is now more urgent than ever. What I hope to communicate in the following pages is that if we fail to identify the *specific* manner in which we as a group have been made to inhabit our circumstance in America (namely, that abhorrent racial caste system in which we are accorded status in the *exact inverse relation* to our ancestors’ great contributions to this country), our group’s efforts at freedom from that condition will be all naught.

Avoiding this fate will require us to reevaluate what it means to be Black in America. Of course, we must adhere to Dr. Cone’s injunction that we cannot lay aside that most salient fact of our experience—that “basic reality” of our Blackness—in favor of some universal alternative. However, in a critical way, we must also recognize the ways in which Blackness itself has become a de-particularized and quasi-universal concept of exactly the sort that Cone himself warned would diminish our relation to the sort of radical Christianity that would aid us in fulfilling our destiny of earthly freedom.

In other words, the way forward will require us to get very honest about the fact that while the tapestry of Blackness in the United States has grown evermore rich in the twenty-first century, it is the American Descendants of Slavery (ADOS) who, as a group, remain its poorest expression. And if we are to see in Scripture that which is analogous to our struggle in the present,

we must first and foremost recall that our struggle as ADOS is, in its essence, a singular one. Therefore, our identity must be understood in the particular as well. Because while it is true that the essence of our Blackness is in part the tragedy of being made to occupy a station in life so obscenely incommensurate with what should be our rightful inheritance as ADOS, it is in equal if not greater part a *justice-driven* essence. As a group we have perpetually striven toward this end against such tremendous odds and against the most un-Christian instincts of this country. Our identity, which is anchored in the dramatic totality of economic exclusion from American society, has necessarily demanded it.

Today we encounter new obstacles that complicate our cause. We must contend with not only a rapidly changing set of demographics within the nation but also a rigid attitude toward that shift that prefers to see all Black people—whether native born or immigrant—as being impacted by systemic racism in essentially the same way. It appears the intent is to lump together all Black people who reside in America—whether they be ADOS or immigrants from Africa and Latin America—just because we bear a superficial likeness to one another. Such an inclusive project, however, threatens to postpone justice indefinitely for ADOS and only hasten our destruction as a people. There is also today, more so than ever, a dogmatic insistence that ADOS conform to the sort of partisan politics that have so obviously produced nothing in the way of positive outcomes for our group.

However, a countervailing and corrective force has emerged in response to this host of factors deepening the wedge between ADOS identity and its attendant, *specific* demand of economic justice. The ADOS movement declares lineage to be the organizing principle in a grassroots campaign for reparative justice. That is, American Descendants of Slavery—as the only group to have experienced the whole spectrum of economic exclusion from chattel slavery and Jim Crow to redlining and mass incarceration—have a unique justice claim in the United States. By clarifying this, ADOS has effectively cleared a new path forward on which to recommence the Black freedom struggle in America. ADOS offers a form of unique fellowship among

the forgotten through an identity that gathers the group under one coherent history and experience—namely, a shutting out of possibility maintained across generations. It reaffirms that history and experience at a critical moment.

And so just as the moment in 2021 demands a decisive break from a body of established opinion and political thought that has patently reversed our progress over the last half century, so too do we now find ourselves at a theological crossroads with similar implications. As I intend to demonstrate, a Black theology that stubbornly clings to an interpretation of Christian doctrine that is against a conception of liberation as embodied by ADOS is one that necessarily consigns itself to irrelevance to the American Descendants of Slavery who today are struggling to survive in the United States. In the ADOS movement's call for a collective reorientation away from the decoys of multiculturalism and toward a program of political action anchored in our particular cultural memory, there is an undeniable sense of something vital. Something that, for so long, has been kept apart from our experience, and which is now rupturing into our present so as to properly shape our political response to the moment. It is a thing from which we have been made to feel estranged but which nonetheless has endured faithfully. It has preserved the whole past that makes up our community as one people, one tribe. Now newly arrived and articulated most forcibly by the ADOS movement's cofounders, Yvette Carnell and Antonio Moore, it provides us with much needed placement—a feeling of home, belonging, and determined intention. In many ways what the ADOS movement is aiming to do is the very thing for which authentic ministry should always strive: to introduce the congregation to its *undiscovered self*. And by doing that, give the people the power to pursue what they already know to be true. As ADOS works both locally and nationally to bring our group toward that profound encounter with our undiscovered self, we will need our leaders to cooperate with us and work to strengthen our institutions so that we are able to have our will expressed at the highest levels of power in this country. Naturally, the Black church has a crucial role to play among the ranks of leadership in helping bring about this

transformative state of affairs, one that sees the interests of our group as the ultimate object to be considered, as that which lies beyond all others and constitutes the final aim.

I believe the church's efforts in this regard will be helped considerably by bringing a fresh perspective to one of the Old Testament's most justice- and group-centered leaders: Nehemiah. While correctly understanding him as a figure who is wholly devoted to the advancement of his tribe in Jerusalem, traditional interpretation of Nehemiah has presupposed this identification with his people to have been a constant throughout his privileged experience in Babylon. However, for a Black liberation theology that is invested in making Scripture maximally relevant to ADOS in the twenty-first century, this account lacks a necessary nuance. Nehemiah was initially unaware of the situation of his people. His story is one of discovery and change and radical action. It is in fact in the arc of consciousness by which Nehemiah arrives at that unwavering loyalty that we as American Descendants of Slavery are able to witness in him a process of self-discovery and focused action not at all dissimilar from what is now required to further our cause.

That trajectory from a place of relative nonengagement and detachment to a place of committed, justice-minded leadership of the oppressed is a mode of *becoming* and *belonging* that Dr. Michael Eric Dyson describes as becoming "intentionally black."⁷ Intentional Blackness is a mindset in which ADOS commit themselves to a course of action grounded in the awareness that their specific identity is part of a greater shared history and experience in this country. Dyson posits this as one of three optional subjectivities available to Black individuals in America today, the other two being "accidental blackness," in which persons attribute their blackness to mere chance, preferring instead to emphasize other qualities beyond their Black skin as that which constitute their identity, and "incidental blackness," which incorporates a definite degree of pride in Black culture but which, at the same time, sees that pride as but *one* characteristic within a matrix of greater or lesser interests and concerns that make up their personhood.

The flaw in Dyson's formulation, however, is the notion that

these “strategies of blackness” (at least for ADOS) are in flux. Dyson even goes so far as to say that they are *necessarily* in flux. As he writes, “These strategies permit black folk to operate in the world with a bit of sanity and grace.”⁸ It seems to me, however, that the very opposite is true for the ADOS community—that it is insanity to not understand ADOS life in the twenty-first century as that which dictates but *one* strategy of Blackness, definite and fixed and informed entirely by a recognition of how that dimension of our identity—*our Blackness*—was never at any time in our group’s history understood by systems of oppression as accidental or incidental.

Indeed, in all three arenas—the political, the economic, and the social—we now see more than ever how our Blackness has always been intentionally made to manifest in a manner of thoroughgoing exclusion. Nothing else—not a single thing in our lives—has so served to determine and fix the extent of what is achievable for our group in America. And so it is neither sanity nor grace but pure recklessness to proceed as though we somehow have the luxury or privilege of transitioning here and there into a less consequential relation to our lineage. Grace would be not only accepting this reality but recognizing that, in the pursuit of justice for being made to inhabit this condition, we as ADOS are decidedly bound by it!

And so let us, beginning now, enter into that pursuit anew, suffused with the awareness that a withdrawal from intentional ADOSness is neither possible nor desirable. In our continued fight for authentic economic inclusion in America, let our spirits be buoyed and our resolve fortified by that basic inescapability of our ADOSness! Because in it is contained the glorious promise of Christ establishing justice here on earth.

Replace the Exodus Hermeneutic with a Postexilic One

Regain a Singular Focus

Foundational to ADOS theology is demonstrating how the post-Babylonian exilic period is the most appropriate biblical referent to help us understand the situation with which we as ADOS are confronted today. Unlike the Exodus model, which has long enjoyed favor among Black preachers, the post-Babylonian exilic period, as we will see, proves exceedingly more relevant to our group's predicament and far more valuable in terms of providing solutions.

The post-Babylonian exilic period refers specifically to the years 537–430 BCE. At the time, Jerusalem was in ruins following its conquest at the hands of the Babylonian army. Prior to that, during the years 596–586 BCE, waves of forced deportations of the population had left those Jews who remained on the land poor and leaderless (Jer. 52:16). In a separate chapter, we will discuss how those deportation efforts—having specifically removed the most educated and economically privileged of the Jewish population in Jerusalem—mirror America's siphoning off of ADOS leadership. However, for our purposes in this chapter, we will look at how, in the absence of Jewish human capital, the remaining Jews were left uniquely vulnerable to the surrounding tribes that Assyria (which had conquered Israel two hundred years earlier) had brought in from other regions and resettled in the nearby provinces. It was these displaced peoples whom the

Jerusalemites were made to compete with in order to survive. And it was also these surrounding tribes that would exhibit the greatest opposition to the initiatives to rebuild the city.

This ambitious project of restoration—which was as much about the spiritual as it was the material—was central to the post-Babylonian exilic period. It was undertaken by the once exiled Jews who, having experienced a profound renewal of Jewish faith after the fall of Babylon to the Persians, returned to Jerusalem intending to rebuild the temple that had earlier been destroyed by the Babylonian army when they had first laid siege to the city. Their efforts at rebuilding were continuously hindered, however, owing to both internal and external issues. Externally, the hostilities of the nearby provinces frequently beset the Jews. And within the community itself, the intermarriages that were taking place between the male Jews and the women who belonged to foreign tribes were seen as greatly undermining the Jewish people's collective identity and empowerment. Such arrangements were strongly discouraged under Mosaic law, which, upon their return, the Jews were eager to reinstate in order to help cultivate the people's sense of being a *specific* tribe. On those occasions where marriages to members of a foreign tribe did occur, a severe penalty was imposed: "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants for ten generations may be admitted to the assembly of the LORD," Deuteronomy 23:3 (NLT) tells us. This was meant to encourage the Jewish people to live their lives in a way that strengthened their bond with God and also to consolidate resources *inside* the community. Indeed, it was principally by way of the foreign tribes' ability to deprive Jewish descendants of land ownership that the economic integrity of the Judean collective was threatened; having violated the precept in Mosaic law that would have guarded against this threat of assimilation, Jerusalem (and the Jewish community in turn) languished.

In other words, it was during the post-Babylonian exilic period when the Jewish people's newfound perception of who they were as a distinct ethnic group became critical to their continued existence. In this way, the period is highly resonant with precisely the kind of realization that American Descendants of Slavery are

making today, a realization upon which our group's survival is similarly incumbent.

Nonetheless, much of Black theology today appears content to remain grounded in an Exodus-focused hermeneutic. And as such, those who use it to interpret our struggle do a tremendous disservice to our people. They ill equip us with a model that is incapable of teasing out salient issues of group identification, which is right now so very necessary in terms of informing our collective political action. We cannot continue looking to a biblical model that pertains to a much earlier circumstance for ADOS in this country, a time when white supremacy was in a more rudimentary form. To be sure, while it was equally brutal in outcome, it was far less abstruse in its design and machinations in achieving its primary goal—namely, the total domination of our group. White supremacy today reveals itself to be a remarkably fluid and inclusive system of dominance over ADOS. And in its modern incarnation, “white” is a criterion satisfied less by actual skin color and more by economic advantage relative to the bottommost group in American society. ADOS have always been made to occupy that position. And while today we are encouraged to understand ourselves in a position of disadvantage that uniformly corresponds to other oppressed and marginalized groups, the fact is that there is nothing at all universal or common about the unique condition that has been manufactured for ADOS. The level of immiseration that we experience in America is one that can only be known by *sustained generational inheritance*. Ours is a specific history of exclusion that anti-ADOS public policy ensured would be passed down through our lineage. And while it is our families that continue to inherit that immobilizing economic reality of what it has historically meant to be ADOS, other groups who are not a product of that specific past are able to inherit access to a fuller citizenship. They can realize a level of stability because of the permanence of that basic economic interval between ADOS and everyone else. As such, when staking out our terrain in the political arena, the very first thing we should do is to claim our history as ours *alone*. It needs to be the line we draw in the sand. And insofar as we enter coalitions, we should

demand that our plight—which has been made to provide so much in the way of opportunities for others at our expense—be respected as a priority.

Here, the attitudes and strict commitments of the returning Jews in the post-Babylonian exilic period prove instructive. Led by Zerubbabel, who was a grandson of Jehoiachin, a former king of Judah, the first delegation of Jews in Babylon made the pilgrimage back to Jerusalem in 537 BCE. Following the Persian conquest of Babylon, King Cyrus had issued a decree that the Jewish people who had been in Babylonian captivity were to go to Jerusalem and “rebuild the house of the LORD, the God of Israel” (Ezra 1:3). And while the returnees’ aim was to rehabilitate the temple, it was at the same time very much a work of Jewish collective empowerment. True, Zerubbabel intended to return to Jerusalem so that the people there would have an appropriate place to worship. However, we cannot say that his focus was only on improving the spiritual lives of the people. Zerubbabel believed that by rebuilding the temple, the community itself would be rebuilt. He believed renewal would ripple outward from the temple, and the people, spiritually rebuilt and fortified, would begin rebuilding their community and institutions. What was unexpected was the reactionary resistance shown by Jerusalem’s neighboring enemies.

Shortly after the work on the temple began, Zerubbabel and the workers were approached by neighboring enemies who implored them to allow their participation in the reconstruction. Doubtless the goal of these tribes was to impede the progress that the Jewish community was making for itself. However, to effect this sabotage, they opted for a subtle approach, using the language of solidarity to appeal to an idea of a shared, common project: “Let us help you build,” they petitioned, “because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here” (Ezra 4:2 NIV). At once, Zerubbabel and the workers perceived their deception. For these tribes had never pursued the sort of singular monotheism that God demanded; they merely incorporated “the god of the land” (as they referred to Yahweh) into their pantheon

of deities and continued to worship their own gods wherever they settled (2 Kgs. 17:32–33, 41). “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God,” Zerubbabel responded to them. “We alone will build it for the LORD, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us” (Ezra 4:3 NIV).

This clear delineation of who is to be included and who is to be excluded from involvement in an oppressed community’s restoration efforts is central to ADOS politics. And just as those outsiders sought to infiltrate the Jewish people’s movement to rebuild the temple—wishing to hijack it and undermine its long-term interests—so too do other marginalized groups routinely set their sights on the ADOS movement. While their intent might not be to do us explicit harm, the usual outcome of these coalitions (in which we remain a bottom caste while our allies achieve greater inclusion into America) cannot but speak to a hollowness in their core claim that we are united in progress. This is precisely why Yvette Carnell, cofounder of ADOS and founder of the new Black media outlet Breaking Brown, consistently emphasizes how part of establishing a durable movement lies in determining and enforcing who is in and who is out. Exclusion, in other words—as Zerubbabel and the workers recognized—is every bit as important as inclusion.

Our specific history of oppression—the thing for which *we* are owed—has been treated as a steppingstone. It has become, obscenely, the thing that allows other groups to do politics in a way that permits them to contest their place in the supremacy over us. Is it not our fundamental right to object to strategies in which we are just another set of hands in the tug of war against the patriarchy? Against imperialism? Against global capitalism or some other such hegemon? How can we be expected to just empty our hands of the things that we specifically still hold too much of—slavery, Jim Crow, domestic terrorism, lynch mobs, redlining, and mass incarceration—in order to take up others’ oppressions and causes? After four hundred years, we can simply no longer enter into such alliance-based enterprises when, in the final analysis, there is no guarantee that we will gain anything.

As ADOS move toward the next decade of the twenty-first

century, and as the situation for our group becomes increasingly dire, we cannot content ourselves with assisting and celebrating the legislative gains of other groups whose strength relative to ours is what inhibits us from participating in coalitions in a recognizably normal manner in the first place. We must demand that we will be the principal beneficiaries in a politics of collaboration. After all, our political capital is our greatest asset. And yet we seem to have developed a reckless habit of all too freely lending it out. How have we—the group who has been doing emancipatory politics longer than any other people in this country—become so politically naïve and weak? Surely the Black church must accept its share of blame for that deplorable situation. The Black church cannot exist solely as a place where the community goes to experience a Sunday respite from the pressing burden of our people's history and present. As the preeminent institution for ADOS, Black churches in America must fill their sanctuaries with exhortations to carry out the sort of justice work that will relieve us of that burden! And insofar as mass movement politics threatens to generalize and oversimplify our struggle, then the Black church must seek to rescue our cause from being plunged into such a perilous amalgam. But where is a Black theology that can inform such a message? Where in the Bible can our people turn to find that which supports the clarion call now sounding for a new consciousness to be formed among ADOS, one that recognizes the primacy of building a specific political agenda around our needs before volunteering our advocacy in other causes that do not directly benefit us? How do we bring Black theology into closer alignment with the language of self-interest that (while it has fallen out of fashion as of late) has in fact traditionally been an essential feature in our group's political discourse?

In the next chapter, we will dig deeper into these questions and look at what the understanding of a singular Jewish identity meant to the group's political empowerment. Specifically, we will examine how the sin of Solomon—his prodigious desire for foreign women—was a rejection of the need for such a consciousness and how that rejection ultimately divided the kingdom of Israel and engendered great political turmoil. By looking at Solomon's

capitulation to his many wives' requests that the gods they worshiped also be shown reverence in Jerusalem, we can observe the ways in which political alliances can function to encourage distraction from (and deterioration of) a necessary commitment to a specific people. That outcome, for ADOS, seems especially pronounced in the post-civil rights era, as it is during these intervening years when our leaders have most urged us to coalesce with other marginalized groups.