

Forever in Thy Path

The God of Black Liberation

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Introduction

As we now have the eightieth anniversary of the 1938 publication of Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*, in our rearview mirror, we are indebted to Mays for the first landmark study on African Americans' diverse understandings of God. It still serves as the most comprehensive study on God in the history of Black people in this country. Mays's masterful work examines the different time periods in which Black people's understanding of God evolved: first from 1760 to 1865 (Emancipation); then from 1865 to 1914 (World War I); and finally from 1914 to 1938 (the publication of the book). From those three periods, Mays was able to identify four images of analysis: physical and emotional security; otherworldly/compensatory; atheistic; and social reconstruction. Let us now examine these different periods more closely.

The Negro's God

The first theme, *the belief in the God of physical and emotional security*, is understandable given that there was no sense of earthly remedy in the beginning and in the early stages of the slave trade. Kidnapped from Africa and brought to an unknown land, the new slaves had no earthly relationships with those who could provide avenues to emancipation. Furthermore, the hostility of slavery and the physical and emotional trauma associated with its subhuman condition—breaking up of families, naked public auctions, rapes, brandings, and merciless labor and whippings—lent itself to embracing a God who would provide some type of escape from the

daily grind of inhuman labor and no recognition as human beings. Yet, even after emancipation and into post-Reconstruction, when the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 legally sanctioned racism once again, Black people felt a morbid sense of déjà vu in that they had no earthly outlets for social redress from white terror and so turned to the God of physical and emotional security. It was this God that Black people “fell back on” in the era of Jim Crow when public forms of racial humiliation such as lynchings, and the American government’s legal approval of it, began to increase dramatically. Black people began to leverage God in spirited worship services and frequent prayers as a measure of relief from the daily indignities of legal separation and the often violent means by which whites maintained order in Dixie! Ultimately, for Mays, this approach to God and divine activity was a test of human will to endure slavery and segregation whereby Black people began to adjust themselves to thinking that racism was a permanent fixture in American life. Thus, Black people began to reason that this God was testing them to be obedient to their bondage not for a radical change in the racial demographic but for acceptance into heaven after death—a model of God, no doubt, taught to slaves by white pastors in plantation life!

Mays, however, found this model of God suspect inasmuch as it offered no freedom-seeking remedy for Black people in this world but ultimately showed its limitations by keeping Black people in a state of subordination, with God’s apparent approval. His concern with this God was that it had no connection to the Black freedom struggle; and, therefore, God was still viewed as a condoner of white privilege, no matter the comfort brought to Black people through spirited worship services and frequent prayers. Mays writes,

The belief that God is testing us out when trouble falls upon us thick and fast is one that makes it possible for us to bear the load without complaint. It is equally soothing and comfortable if one can believe that God is with him in the midst of his trouble. The person is less lonesome if he believes this. The idea seems to strengthen one to endure and to hold on

rather than to work to eliminate the source of irritation. . . . It gives one confidence but the idea adheres closely to traditional, compensatory patterns. It is a call to complacency and there is no effort at constructive rehabilitation of the idea of God in terms of social and economic adjustment.¹

Importantly, Mays saw in this model of God a propensity on the part of Blacks to trust in God to make things better in the personal realm if they endured their collective troubles, that is, slavery. In this model, God is seen as the author of Black suffering who is demanding that Black people, as a test of faith, take on this suffering in order to receive blessings in the hereafter that will be incomparable to the current troubles experienced. This is exemplified in songs like “Trouble Don’t Last Always” and “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel from the Lions’ Den?” Here, deliverance is understood as an alleviation of one’s temporary suffering in exchange for a heavenly blessing. In other words, faith in God means holding steadfast for an extraordinary blessing. The biblical character Job is often the model for this approach to God.

The thing to do in a crisis like this is to be patient and trust God. If you trust God, he will multiply your riches and give peace and rest. This was the situation in Job’s case and it is implied that what God did for Job, He will do now.²

Yet, for Mays, this image of God still lends itself to shortcomings. For not only does it call for Black people to suffer in the name of God, it keeps God’s efficacy in personal fulfillment.

The implication is that for one to get riches and prosperity is to trust God and never doubt or question his (God’s) ways. If troubles are prerequisites for great blessings from God, they should be welcomed and they should be easy to bear. If troubles are sent by God incident to showers of blessings,

1. Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro’s God as Reflected in His Literature* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing, 1969; orig., 1938), 190.

2. Mays, *The Negro’s God*, 190.

one has no right to try and avoid them, and he (she) should be able to carry them with a smile and with comparative ease. The idea serves as an opiate for the people and it supports and tends to perpetuate the traditional, compensatory views so prevalent among the Negro masses.³

Thus, for Mays, the image of God as providing physical and emotional security is inauthentic in that it never considers the possibility of freedom in this world. Devoid of any physical and emotional security, Black people came to rely on a God who authored a highly emotionalized faith expression that has been more palliative than a call to freedom. In short, trying not to think about white racism by using religion as an escapist rather than a transformative phenomenon diminishes the impact of Christian experience on emancipation and keeps faith focused on personal concerns.

Mays's second model is that of *otherworldliness*, which has been implied by the first model. In Black literature, this is the model of God for which Mays has the least patience. To that point, Mays takes his place with most if not all freedom fighters in the Black prophetic radical tradition by exposing the connection between an otherworldly approach to God and white Christian teaching to Black people that God would accept them in heaven after death if, and only if, they were faithful servants to whites on earth, that is, did not subvert the slavocracy. In other words, the God of compensatory reward favors a kingdom devoid of Black freedom and considers human participation in bringing about freedom the highest sin. The compensatory God encourages waiting on God until the end time and maintains that human strivings for freedom betray God's wisdom. In so doing, passive toleration of injustice by the oppressed is understood as ideal Christian behavior. In short, the essence of religious experience is found in a "spiritual" clinging to God, not fighting for justice.

Here, Mays employs two terms to express "otherworldliness." The first term is *shallow pragmatism*—an image of God that is

3. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 191.

unrelated to racial injustice in this world. The pragmatic intervention of God still holds sway but is not an intervention that usurps historical realities of collective human suffering. Mays finds this approach unacceptable, especially given God's intervention in the Israelites' bondage in Egypt. Furthermore, this model not only condones total capitulation to whites as the epitome of what it means to be Black and Christian, but it offers no solution to Black suffering on earth; there is no hope or even belief that Black people should ever be free in this world. Rather, God's purpose is to provide fulfillment in other areas of human existence—healthy children, long life, limited illness, food, clothing, shelter of a reasonably good quality, and gratitude for creation but no fulfillment in social justice. He writes,

The ideas are compensatory when used or developed to support a shallow pragmatism. That is, a belief or idea may be accredited as true if it satisfies our desire, “if it uplifts and consoles”; or if it makes us “happier to believe it,” even though the belief or idea does not fit observed facts.⁴

For Mays, such an image of God was irrevocably compensatory in that it diverted Black people's attention away from collective suffering and ignored the “observed facts” of racism in all its manifold expressions. Those “observed facts” reveal the contradiction between freedom and enslavement that should drive any community's theological energies to rectifying that contradiction. Mays is clearly more inclined to a God who calls us to the task of ending racism as a primary concern rather than treating it as an ancillary concern.

The second term Mays uses to convey an otherworldly God is *negative goodness*. Mays recognizes that he is dealing with well-intentioned, sincere people engaged in an expression of faith that seeks to fulfill them and please God but ultimately runs itself to an impotent end in that it prolongs Black suffering rather than ends it. He is convinced that “ideas of God that are used to support an oth-

4. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14.

erworldly view are ideas that adhere to traditional, compensatory patterns, those ideas that encourage one to believe that God is in heaven and is all right with the world, and finally, those that tend to produce a negative goodness in the individual based on a fear of the wrath of God here or in the next world,⁵ run counter to the God of the Bible. Based on this understanding of God, the wrath of God will be incurred for getting involved in any “subversive” behavior to end slavery. Mays saw this as the intent of white Christian leadership—to produce obedient slaves rather than militant slaves!

Mays saw this image of God present in the poetry of both Jupiter Hammon and Phyllis Wheatley. He was particularly repelled by Hammon’s excessive dependence on the slaveholding community for the necessities of life and his contentment with slave life causing him to gladly relinquish freedom in this world. More disconcerting for Mays was Hammon’s admonitions to slaves to frown on rebellion and think of their bondage as little as possible.

Let me beg of you, my dear African brethren, to think very little of your bondage in this life; for your thinking of it will do no good. If God designs to set us free, he (God) will do it in his own time and way; but think of your bondage to sin and Satan, and do not rest until you are delivered from it.⁶

As for Wheatley, her renunciation of Africa’s goodness and her joy at being enslaved served as a prime example to Mays of the impact that the pervasive nature of slavery and white Christian teaching to Blacks about Africa’s “darkness” can and did have on Black self-image. This had in large part to do with Wheatley’s good, even highly gratuitous, treatment by her masters in comparison to other masters, especially in their teaching her to read and write. Thus, Wheatley’s writings reflected her particular existence and did not extend to the critical analysis of the toll slavery exacted on the psyche of Black people, nor did her writings render a larger theological valuation of an institution that treated other Blacks in a far

5. Mays, *The Negro’s God*, 14–15.

6. Mays, *The Negro’s God*, 99.

more ungodly way. In short, Mays would have liked to have seen Wheatley transcend her personal treatment and place the moral depravity of slavery itself at the forefront of her literary contribution. He notes,

It seems that Phyllis Wheatley was equally thankful that God had brought her from ignorant and benighted Africa to enlightened, “civilized” America. Her attitude toward life and slavery, like Jupiter Hammon’s, was greatly influenced by the kind treatment she received at the hands of the Wheatley’s. . . . Hammon, therefore, could advise Negroes to obey their masters and Phyllis Wheatley could write almost ignoring the facts of slavery—certainly showing no progressive, militant attitude toward its abolition.⁷

In short, neither Hammon nor Wheatley views God in terms of social change. Consequently, Mays saw in this image a negative goodness in that it conveyed a well-meaning Christian commitment but had a negative impact on authentic Black progress.

The third image of God is what Mays calls the God of *atheism*, which he found in the theological literature of the Black community. This terminology, however, is not an accurate characterization. Mays does not imply that the literature affirms the literal nonexistence of God as is understood in Greek philosophical tradition, but, rather, it portrays a God who seemingly has no interest in the Black freedom movement.

Mays identifies the thought of AME Bishop Daniel Payne as a prime example of the “atheist” typology. A stalwart in the Black freedom struggle throughout his life, Payne publicly posed the question that many a Black person has surely pondered in private, and that is, whether God is as interested in Black suffering as God

7. Mays, *The Negro’s God*, 104–105. Such a critique is not lost on contemporary discourse in the African American community regarding those who have ascended to the middle and upper classes and have no substantive worldview regarding institutional racism and its impact on less fortunate Black people!

was with Israelite suffering in the Exodus account. Payne became disillusioned with living life through a faith lens when the school he created in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1829 to educate slaves was abruptly shut down in 1835 by the South Carolina state legislature. That body ratified an anti-slavery teaching bill that fined, imprisoned, or administered fifty lashes to anyone, Black or white, who was caught teaching slaves how to read or write. The ratification led to Payne having to close the school, and from there to question the divine will. Payne questioned how a God who liberated the Israelites from Egyptian bondage could continue to allow a racist status quo to prosper when that God had come to be known as a liberator in the Black faith community. More particularly, how could God not end a lily-white political system that frames laws so diametrically opposite to God's will and so severely truncates the achievement of Black aspirations? Payne expresses his disappointment and then continues to leverage the power of God to act as a liberator in the future.

Sometimes it seemed as though some wild beast had plunged his fangs into my heart, and was squeezing out its life-blood. Then I began to question the existence of God, and to say: "If he (God) does exist, is he (God) just? If so, why does he (God) suffer one race to oppress and enslave another, to rob them by unrighteous enactments of rights, which they hold most dear and sacred?" Sometimes I wished for the lawmakers what Nero wished—"that the Romans had but one neck." I would be the man to sever the head from its shoulders. Again said I: "Is there no God?" But then there came into my mind those solemn words: "With God one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day. Trust in him (God), and he (God) will bring slavery and all its outrages to an end." These words from the spirit world acted on my troubled soul like water on a burning fire, and my aching heart was soothed and relieved from its burdens and woes.⁸

8. Bishop Daniel A. Payne, "Recollection of Seventy Years," in Mays, *The Negro's God*, 49.

What you see from Payne is more of a lapse in judgment about God's power as opposed to an outright disavowal of God. Also, you do not get from Payne the relinquishing of the struggle for freedom, as was the case with Wheatley and Hammon. What emerged was a reasonable questioning of God's "existence" in the face of such deadly racial violence and structural injustice, especially after the ratification of such a devastating piece of legislation by the South Carolina General Assembly. More important, Payne is firmly focused on the Black freedom struggle as his ministerial calling and is prepared to continue with that struggle, even if God is not enlisted as a copartner. In short, Payne's passion for justice led him to have unshakable faith in the realization of Black freedom with or without the help of God! His "trust in God" was not an invitation to human inactivity, as was the case with the compensatory model. His was an unburdening trust—more akin to an emptying of an evil spirit that sidetracked him from singular focus on the Black struggle for freedom than a complete break with seeing the world through the lens of a liberating divine presence. Consequently, the atheistic image has more to do with a lack of patience with God's seeming disinterest in Black freedom than a refutation of God's literal existence.

Connected with this image of God for Black people was the idea that God permits tragedies to occur as an expression of God's omnipotence. This dimension of God's "atheistic" leanings is seen most prominently in personal strivings and physical death, representing the morbid prospect of God permitting overwhelming difficulties over the course of a lifetime, and if that were not enough, then sending one to physical death. Mays references a sermon reflective of the time.

If death comes to you, it comes because God permits it, and if God permits it, you ought to take a Christian view of the situation. If God permits it to come to you just say, "I am no better than anybody else." We ought not to set ourselves against God and say God has done injustice by us.⁹

9. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 71.

For Mays, his concern was that this image of God affirms too uncritically that every occurrence in the universe was an intentional product of the mind of God. This was and still is a staple part of orthodox Christian faith and is in large part the cornerstone of the white Christian establishment's argument that Black subordination/inferiority is at the behest of God. This idea of God adheres closely to traditional compensatory patterns, not only because it is expressive of orthodox Christianity and lessens the grief sustained by death but also because it has the tendency to lead one to take a complacent, laissez-faire attitude toward life in that the believer sees the will of God in all that happens.¹⁰

Mays's theological concern is justified. Christian tradition has been more interested in instilling a fear of God in its adherents for obedience to its directives with the assurance that a harmonious relationship with God will ensue and God will fulfill human desires. This is accomplished through the attribute of God's omnipresence lurking diligently to punish those who do not adhere to the divine will. The common denominator throughout the Christian tradition, unfortunately, is that Black suffering is not seen as sinful but rather as the key to salvation for both Black and white alike. More importantly, Mays discerns that we have inherited a Christian tradition in which the ultimate goal regarding freedom is a meek, mild, and disengaged Black community. This is why Black insurrection in plantation life was branded as sinful and still has a difficult time finding its place in constructive Christian discourse. Consequently, the atheistic model is not so much about God's existence/nonexistence as about one that is rooted in a dreaded fear of usurping the American status quo: white privilege, Black constraint, and the destiny of the religious individual.

Though based on fear, the idea that God is everywhere and sees all that one does has a restraining influence upon conduct. It makes a difference in one's life for it promotes goodness that lacks positive action. This idea of God is also

10. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 72.

compensatory in its effect because its restraining influence is based on the traditional idea that God is to be feared and that the end sought is other-worldly.¹¹

Certainly, that fear originates in the link that white Christian leadership placed between divinity and slavocracy with the understanding that for slaves to seek its demise was likely to incur God's wrath. Mays saw this coercive theological construction as the principal motivation for white Christian leadership exposing Blacks to Christianity. Thus, Mays discerned correctly that the will of God was leveraged in the legitimation of the slavocracy and, therefore, was removed from the equation of Black freedom. Mays "found Black people's extensive otherworldly/compensatory understanding of God in the early colonial spirituals, that is, they lead one to repudiate this world, consider it a temporary abode, and look to heaven for a complete realization of the needs and desires that are denied expression in this world."¹²

The fourth image of God is that of *social reconstruction*. This idea of God does not entertain human oppression in any form nor does this God allow religious faith to be used to legitimate Black suffering. This God does not create oppressive contexts but acts in history to destroy them. More importantly, this God sees Black freedom as the most pressing issue in human existence, not spirited worship services or a strong prayer life. In short, this idea of God, for Mays, inverts the God of Christian tradition and frees Black people to fight for freedom. Mays clearly wanted to direct the reader to the God of social reconstruction—the God who empowered Black people to change their condition and not simply use the names of God and Jesus to escape their suffering in a white racist world, no matter how satisfying that may have been on Sunday morning!

Given the history of Black oppression, Black people's walk with God has been therapeutic if not necessary. But for Mays, this God,

11. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 73.

12. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 72.

no matter how therapeutic, was more compensatory than socially engaged. Referencing his own upbringing in the church in Greenwood County, South Carolina, Mays explains,

Long before I knew what it was all about, and since I learned to know, I heard the Pastor of the church of my youth plead with the members of his congregation not to try to avenge the wrongs they suffered, but to take their burdens to the Lord in prayer. Especially did he do this when the racial situation was tense or when Negroes went to him for advice concerning some wrong inflicted upon them by their oppressors. During these troublesome days, the drowning of Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, the deliverance of Daniel from the Lions' Den, and the protection given the Hebrew children in the Fiery Furnace were all pictured in dramatic fashion to show that God in due time would take things in hand. Almost invariably after assuring them that God would fix things up, he ended his sermon by assuring them further that God would reward them in Heaven for their patience and long-suffering on the earth. Members of the congregation screamed, shouted, and thanked God. The pent up emotions denied normal expression in everyday life found an outlet. They felt relieved and uplifted. They had been baptized with the "Holy Ghost." They had their faith in God renewed and they could stand it until the second Sunday in the next month when the experience of the previous second Sunday was duplicated. . . . This idea of God had telling effects upon Negroes in my home community. But it kept them submissive, humble, and obedient.¹³

Mays makes little secret for his partiality to the God of social reconstruction. The "realness" of God, for Mays, was not best understood as one who encouraged Black people to patiently endure their suffering until the end of human history or to take solace in a better world beyond this one.

Mays opted instead for the God of social reconstruction, identi-

13. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 26.

fyng those approaches to ministry and leaders who saw resistance to white supremacy as the most viable appropriation of God for Black people. Even though the spirituals that reflected the compensatory model of God far outnumbered those that reflected the God of social reconstruction, their minority presence in the life of the church did not diminish their theological substance.

Although the majority of the Spirituals are compensatory and other-worldly, it would be far from the truth to say that all of them are of that character. Even in the Spirituals the Negroes did not accept without protest the social ills which they suffered. “Go Down Moses,” “Oh Freedom,” and “No More, No More, No More Auction Block for Me” are illustrative of the Spirituals that revolt against earthly conditions without seeking relief from Heaven.¹⁴

In the light of the origins of Black suffering in slavery, Mays saw “Go Down Moses” as a contemporary fit for the Black condition and God’s desire to see oppressed people go free in this world, thus contradicting models of God that teach an oppressed people that they have no hope of freedom in this world. But more galvanizing, Mays saw in “Oh Freedom” the true spirit of resistance to white racism and in the slaves’ cry, “Oh Freedom o-ver me! an’ befo’ I’d be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave, an’ go home to my Lord an’ be free”—God’s disdain with human bondage. Heaven then became not an escape from engagement with earthly oppression but an honorable destination for the martyr who dared challenge a racist status quo. Thus, heaven was given a liberating and not a compensatory meaning.

Sitting at the core of the God of social reconstruction is the affirmation of the equal worth of all human beings. The notion of valuing racial superiority as a supreme virtue while claiming to worship a God who is “no respecter of persons” is itself a sinful falling away of human relationships.

14. Mays, *The Negro’s God*, 28.

Has God who made the white man and the black left any accord declaring us a different species? Are we not sustained by the same power, supported by the same food, hurt by the same wounds, wounded by the same wrongs, pleased with the same delights, and propagated by the same means? And should we not then enjoy the same liberty, and be protected by the same laws?¹⁵

Not only have Black people not been protected by the same laws but, at every turn, white legislators have been working to establish an America of white privilege and Black subordination. They have enacted egalitarian laws only after protracted demonstrations by Black people in which many lost their livelihood and their lives. America's lawmakers, mainly white, male, and Christian, have not only sanctioned white privilege historically but also divinely, because American laws have been intrinsically connected to the God of Christian experience and thus legitimized racism both historically and theologically.

Making human oppression legal is not only confined to the United States. We only need to look at apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust during the Second World War, and the caste system in India to appreciate how formidable human oppression becomes through legal status. Thus, the true adherent of the God of freedom is not only committed to challenging the legitimacy of oppressive laws but also sees the true meaning of discipleship as intimately connected to exposing the corruptness of these contexts globally. For Mays, this meant understanding God as being able to transform any context of human oppression, no matter the nuances. In that sense, the God of social reconstruction calls us to the world of broken relationships and is therefore not given over to ascetic flights from the suffering of this world but compels us to leave the comfortable confines of the contemplative life and seek the redemption of humankind in the blood shed, symbolically or in reality, in the fight for freedom.

15. Words of abolitionist James Forten in Carter G. Woodson's, *Negro Orators and Their Orations*. Taken from Mays, *The Negro's God*, 112.

For Mays, the yearning for freedom is a gift from God based on the affirmation that the image of God resides in all human beings, including Black human beings! Consequently, we also reside in God. There is divine value in every human life, and every recipient is under obligation to God to respect that value, for all human life is precious unto God.¹⁶ In other words, human longing for freedom is essential to the core of God's creation, and humans are required not to subvert that creative plan but to realize it through the reflection of the divine within.

God and humanity are one. God has set no geographical boundaries nor racial limitations. There is no divine right of race. The rights of humanity are divine and they cannot be divested by reason of race. We are all God's creatures. God has created the Negro in His own image. He has made no superior races and no inferior races.¹⁷

In short, the Negro is God's most perfect handiwork. The human family is united in God. The Negro is on a special errand for God. . . . He is on the side of right, actively engaged in the struggle, but in cooperation with humanity.¹⁸ Mays affirms a God who not only imbues Blacks with the ability to make right what whites have made wrong, but demands it in every oppressive context where undeserved human privilege and undeserved human suffering are in traumatic and violent relationship with each other. In such a context, God is the virtual balm in Gilead who can cure a racist heart of its evil and cure a passive heart of its fear. God has put the Negro and the white man in America to prove to the world that two races varying in culture and color can live together, each contributing to the welfare of the other.¹⁹ For Mays, God is using this opportunity of racial strife as a proving ground to demonstrate God's majesty in realizing the kingdom, which is the full reconciliation of the Black

16. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 248.

17. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 250.

18. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 250.

19. Mays, *The Negro's God*, 250.

and white races. Mays is not engaged in a pipe dream but in realizing a world where the lamb and lion truly lie down together and share the resources of the earth equally. For this to happen, racist hearts must continue to be the spiritual target for Black people. At the same time, Mays was clear that Blacks must also exorcise white demons that have spawned a distorted adoration for white culture and aesthetics and an existential fear of the white power structure. This distorted adoration for whites is an invitation, a clarion call from God, for Black people to love what God had made them culturally and aesthetically! It is the God who demands that Black people sing with James Brown, “Say It Loud; I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

In this sense, Mays was a *pre-liberation theologian*. He envisioned a faith that sees an intimate relationship between the God of the Bible and the freedom of the despised prior to the emergence of liberation as a school of theology. Even though he uses the term “social reconstruction,” he uses it before it became known in theological circles as liberation theology. This is clear in *The Negro’s God*, where Mays is critical of ideas of God that are compensatory/otherworldly, and yet he affirms ideas of God whose essence is expressed in the struggle for socio-political liberation. In close connection, he is also fond of the term “militant religion,” or religious faith that inspires aggressive resistance, not docility, to white privilege.

The God of Black Liberation

Now that we have taken an in-depth look at Mays’s analysis of African Americans’ experience of God, the reader is entitled to know its connection to this work. This book seeks to pick up where Mays left off—not with Mays’s commitment to objectively demonstrating African Americans’ diverse understandings of God (where death still disproportionately visits Black people, who has time for objectivity?) but with his clear partiality to the God of social reconstruction—a God who calls the faithful to militant religion . . . to societal reconstruction out of its bigoted ways. That God is more aptly referred to today as *the God of Black liberation*. This

is the God who has taken Black people from slave quarters to the White House—the God who not only revealed that we are somebody despite white pronouncements to the contrary, but also the God who has been a transformative presence from the holds of the first ships, to the auction blocks, to the whipping posts, to the lynching tree, to the prison industrial complex, to the ghettos, to crumbling schools, and to staring down the gun of a white police officer. Present in each of these confrontations has been the God of Black liberation standing with strong Black men and women, instilling in them a courage “not given by this world,” and, therefore, not able to be “taken by this world”—a God who demands that the world no longer operate the white way but the liberated way! Because this God has committed to transforming the context of oppressed Blacks in our time as God has done for the oppressed in previous contexts, James Cone proclaimed, “that it is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with the insistence on his blackness.”²⁰ This proclamation is not intended to isolate other races. It is, rather, an affirmation of the faith of a community that has had to encounter God in the bowels of white hostility. The God of Black liberation identifies with that hostility, given that Black suffering emerges out of one major crucible—blackness! God, therefore, makes the ultimate identification with blackness as a badge of shame historically as a basis for forging a decisive response to that shame. Thus, the freedom of Black people *becomes not just a historical issue but a salvific issue*—an issue of ultimate concern for God. As Major Jones writes,

The task of conceiving God’s reality has visited the Black religious community by a different route than it took to the White counterpart. Nevertheless, that problem has come. The shape of this visitation concerns what God is doing in the world today, and how God is involved in the liberation, freedom, and ultimate salvation of Black people. . . .

20. James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 121. First published in 1970.

The reality of God bears directly on questions of the earthly struggle for liberation.²¹

Like the Israelites who were led out of slavery in Egypt, the God of Black liberation has led Black people out of institutionalized slavery and segregation. Most importantly, this God has sent messengers like Moses to the Israelites to inform the world that Black people are not slaves by nature (Aristotle) nor does the God of Jesus Christ ordain their subordination to whites as a natural order (white Christianity) but that Black humanity is a direct reflection of the *imago dei*, despite white Christian proclamations to the contrary. Whether it was Frederick Douglass running north to freedom or Harriet Tubman leading thousands to freedom on the Underground Railroad or demonstrators staring down tear gas, water hoses, dogs, billy clubs in peaceful public protests demanding constitutionally what should have already been theirs, the God of Black liberation has been an ever-present mainstay in the abyss of white trauma. For Black people, that mainstay hinges on the promise that “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). It is that God, the God of Black liberation, who, according to Mays, has brought Black people to this day—still with crucial struggles ahead but ever more empowered by the giant examples of courage that have preceded them!

When the God of Black liberation lodges in the heart, what seems to be impossible suddenly becomes pregnant with the hope of freedom. While the fears of economic reprisal and even death are well founded, given what the white power structure has perpetrated on Black people and what it has done to weaken Black leadership, what God gives in Jesus—the gift of eternal life—removes fear in the oppressed, and transhistorical faith removes historical fear. Given that we have come this far by faith, a faith “the size of a mustard seed” that has moved the mountain of white supremacy and will prove in the end to be its ultimate nemesis,

21. Major J. Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987), 24.

the cries of “move” will continue to resonate throughout America and the world without fear, and the intellectual, aesthetic, and cultural denunciations of Black humanity will cease, and all barriers preventing the full participation of Black people as equal human beings in society will come down. This is the meaning of Black liberation! This must be the meaning of divine essence for our time!

It is to the God of Black liberation, the God that James Weldon Johnson describes in the last verse of the Negro national anthem, “Lift Ev’ry Voice,” as “The God of our weary years, / the God of our silent tears, / the God who has brought us thus far on the way, / thou who has by thy might led us into the light, / keep us *forever in thy path* we pray,” to which we have pledged our eternal allegiance. That light has been the fulfillment of hope in a hopeless world . . . of hope in a world of physical and mental devastation, a light that has been the fulfillment of divine presence as a liberator in a nation where white privilege is pervasive, and a light that has been the fulfillment of conquering enemies, turning them into “footstools.” It is an eternal light that has illumined our path from slavery and beyond, and it is a path in which the psalmist proudly proclaimed, “your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light for my path” (Ps 119:105).

This work elaborates further on the meaning of that path that God has created and illumined in our darkest moments in this American sojourn. A path constantly forged by the God of Black liberation in the spiritual DNA of Black people that compels them to resist encroachments on their humanity, to not let any racist “turn us around,” and to “keep on walking, keep on talking, marching up to freedom land.” A path of several dimensions, seven of which will be our focus—freedom, conversion, submission, righteousness, justice, liberation, and eternity—and which have proved indispensable in our quest for human liberation.