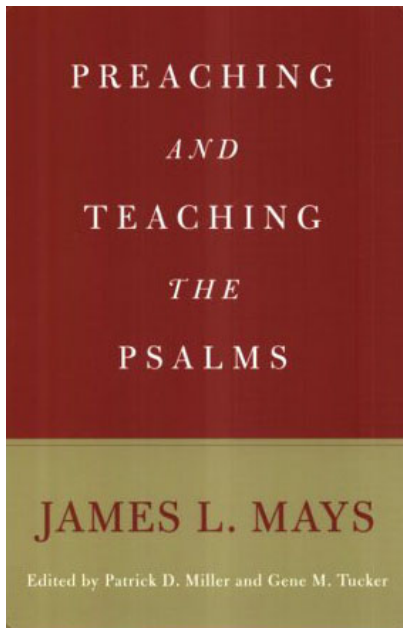


RBL 08/2006



Mays, James L.

Preaching and Teaching the Psalms

Edited by Patrick D. Miller and Gene M. Tucker

Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006. Pp. ix + 189.
Paper. \$19.95. ISBN 0664230415.

Robin Gallaher Branch
Crichton College
Memphis, Tennessee

Preaching and Teaching the Psalms by James L. Mays is a beautiful book. Too bad it is so short! Written with brevity and succinctly edited, it leaves the reader wanting more. Furthermore, it propels the reader to the Psalms. It encourages the reader to do what the Psalms do best: center on God. Whether as a cry of hurt, a song of praise, a shout of victory, a pout, an angry outburst, an entreaty or a lament, the Psalms—Israel’s and the church’s songfest—share the present moment of individual or corporate pilgrimage with God.

Like the Psalms, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* is a rich feast. The volume is divided into three sections: “Studying the Psalms” (the longest, 3–93); “Interpreting the Psalms” (97–157); and “Preaching the Psalms” (161–85). The sections follow a master teacher’s mind and strategy and combine his lectures, earlier published articles, and sermons. But even more than that, a reader gets a feel in the book for Mays’s life, a life not only well lived but also well prayed, a life not only nurtured in Presbyterian denominations and academic structures but also enthusiastically growing and excited about the seasons of life. Indeed, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms* celebrates, explores, confronts, and debates life’s seasons, following the pattern set out so well in the Psalms.

Mays comes to this volume laden with credentials and experience. He is Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament Interpretation at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia. He served as president of the Society of Biblical Literature and drew from the Psalter for his presidential address (vii). Probably his primary lasting legacy, however, is being the series editor for the acclaimed Interpretation commentary series.

In contrast to most of contemporary biblical scholarship, Mays takes not only a canonical approach to the Psalms but also unabashedly reads the canon with Jesus the Christ in mind. He links Hebrew Bible/Old Testament with the New Testament. Seeing that the Testaments complement each other; he stresses the Psalms' ties with Jesus. For example, he includes in his seven sermons (and ends the majority of them) with an emphasis on Jesus. He links a theme of Ps 1, namely, that the instruction of God is the spring to nourish the life of a believer, with the saying of Christ, "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37) (163). Similarly, the language of Lent, found in Ps 142, points to "the salvation given through the crucified and risen Jesus" (185).

Mays sees the Psalms as one way Jesus answered his disciples' question, "Lord, teach us to pray" (3). While acknowledging that the entire book of Psalms has been used corporately and liturgically by Christianity and Judaism, he chooses to focus this volume on the petitions of individuals (5). He faces the challenge that the Psalms are difficult "for contemporary Christians to own" (5) by providing extensive and solid teaching.

He acknowledges difficulties facing this generation. The Psalms are poetry (which "departed from American culture and education over two generations ago" [6]); they may involve a different etiquette in terms of addressing God; the circumstances of the writer of a psalm and the circumstances of a contemporary reader may be different; and most certainly the identity of the psalmist and a reader's identity are different (6-7). But like the excellent teacher that he is, Mays encourages his readers to try out the Psalms. Slowly and surely he walks a reader through psalm after psalm and difficulty after difficulty. His confidence passes quickly to a reader. He ends up showing why the Psalms throughout millennia have blessed, encouraged, strengthened, challenged, and comforted person after person. Section 1, "Studying the Psalms," focuses on various themes in the Psalms, such as prayer, creation, God's reign, the self, and the image of God.

In the second section, "Interpreting the Psalms," Mays tackles Pss 8; 22; 23; 51; 103; 133; and 82; 24; and 98 as a unit about the kingdom of God. For Ps 23, an almost too-familiar psalm, Mays sees a theological revolution. For the first time the psalmist takes a first-person approach and audaciously in a breakthrough calls the Lord "my shepherd." Most Old Testament Psalms focus on the communal relationship of God and his people. Mays

adds that “(w)hat is going on in Psalm 23 is the location and recapitulation of God’s relation to his people in the living of one individual person” (120). Mays links this to Jesus’ personal statement that “I am the good shepherd” (John 10:11).

Mays concentrates on a canonical approach to Ps 103 by expounding on the uses of the *hesed* (loving-kindness or steadfast love) of the Lord and showing how it is paired and linked to compassion (*rahamim*) in verse 4 and in Exod 34:6, God’s self-declaration (131). Psalm 103 begins and ends with a command to praise the Lord (vv. 1–2, 20–22). A theme is how the Lord’s loving-kindness has prevailed over Israel’s sinfulness (132). The psalm is a hymn written on God’s self-declaration in Exod 34:6–7; throughout its verses it draws on events in Exodus and from prophecies in Isa 40–66 (vv. 9, 11, 15) (132). The center of the psalm, verse 10, blesses the Lord for what he did not do but certainly could have done, namely, deal with his covenant people according to the merits of their sin. “This astonishing fact,” as Mays calls it, combines the *hesed* of the Lord, his *rahamin*, and his graciousness (*hanun*, vv. 4, 8, 13) (133). Significantly, remembering the dealings of the Lord always leads to the proclamation of the kingdom of God (135).

Surprisingly, in the “Preaching the Psalms” section the sermons are streamlined, even short. Over and over again I was left wanting more. This section covers Pss 1; 9:19; 13; 51; 98; 100; and 142. Mays writes as he speaks, and virtually each sentence is quotable and memorable. Not venturing overly into word studies or belaboring structure and setting, Mays instead focuses on a psalm’s overview. For instance, he notes that Ps 13, a seven-line psalm, makes an “incredible transition from anxiety to trust, from fear to faith, from pain to praise” (167). Its writer “looks down the narrow corridor of his future and can see its lines converging on only one possibility: death” (167). Psalm 13 appeals to God for life to take the place of dying. The psalm mirrors the desperation of humanity, for it accuses God and adores God in the same breath. This is the plight of humanity’s fallen nature—and so Mays, because he is Mays and a Christian, must end in surety and hope. He must end his sermon in the New Testament and centered on Jesus. The contradictions of life for the psalmist and for us in 2006 continue because of our humanity, for “we are simultaneously the anxious, fearful, dying, historical people who cannot find God where we want God to be—and the elect with a second history, a salvation history, a life hid with Christ in God” (169). Mays stresses that Jesus and we, too, pray for life in the midst of our daily dying, and we pray for life all the more compellingly because as Christians “we bear already in us a foretaste of the life to come” (169).

Throughout the Psalms and this slim volume about them, praise dominates. Praise matters. The Psalms join God’s multiple creations in praise. “Praise in the world is united with praise above the world so that the name of the Lord is declared as the truth about all reality” (50). The Psalms define the human being as a creature whose nature and destiny

in life are incomplete when seen apart from God (67). The wonderful mystery that the Psalms touch is that humans confess their vulnerability and fallibility to God and indeed hold these attributes and conditions up to God as essential elements of being human. Yet part of the mystery is that God has committed himself irrevocably to those whom he has created “in order that by call and commandment they may be drawn to a fulfillment of their created destiny in ministry to all human beings” (67).

Beautifully written, as these quotations show, Mays’s book is one to be taken down and read both at times devotionally and at other times as a mind-sharpener for further study and sermon preparation, all the while as one wrestles alternately with the Psalms, with one’s humanity, and with God.