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THE HERMENEUTICAL QUEST

**Essays in Honor of James Luther Mays
on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday**



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Edited by

Donald G. Miller

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FOREWORD

To some it is given to be flamboyant. Like Roman candles, they light up the sky momentarily as each new fad appears, flaming gloriously as nine-day wonders, then spurt and fizzle until their next effete explosion. Their final legacy is a memory of brief excitement and a few burned out spots on the landscape. Others run deeper. Like the quiet dignity of the incoming tide or the noiseless rising of the sun, they do their work with power and leave a lasting deposit of warmth and light on the landscape of their endeavors. Without ostentation or self-glorification, they give themselves to lives of quiet thoughtfulness and disciplined toil, leaving to their fellow creatures a heritage of truth and values to guide and nurture generations yet to come.

Of the latter type is James Luther Mays. Following his undergraduate study and three years of active service in the Air Force during World War II, he has spent four decades as a graduate student, pastor in both rural and town churches, professor, Fulbright lecturer in Germany, editor of the quarterly journal *Interpretation* and two series of books, author of several volumes of lasting value, churchman, stimulating colleague and friend. It is fitting that he should be honored on his sixty-fifth birthday by this volume of essays. The list of contributors could have been lengthened indefinitely, but to keep the book within limits only Old Testament scholars were invited to write, with two exceptions for special reasons, and only a very select group of them.

In a statement not intended for publication but written in correspondence with a friend, James Mays himself set the theme of the volume. He wrote:

“What should be the fundamental and directive hermeneutical question brought to the text in the biblical interpretation that is taught in seminaries and practiced in the church? . . . to my mind it is the question that needs to be thought about seriously when seminary curricula are planned, courses designed, and all the projects of biblical interpretation for preaching and teaching in the church carried out.”

This statement, in somewhat longer form, was sent to all the con-

tributors as a guide to their choice of subjects for the volume. The writers were also asked, where possible, to relate the hermeneutical themes with which they dealt to issues current in the theological world. In this way, the volume has been given a unity of theme and a relation to contemporary subjects not always present in a collection of essays by different authors.

John H. Leith, a former college mate of James Mays and a present colleague, gives us a personal appreciation of him from the standpoint of one who has known him most of his lifetime.

James Barr deals with the broad, comprehensive demands which "theological" exegesis imposes upon biblical scholarship, then applies his thought critically to both the Old and the New Quest for the historical Jesus. He contrasts what is often held to be "theological" exegesis, the bringing of a prior theology to the text, and genuine "theological" exegesis which allows the text to challenge the theologies brought to it, and influence, enrich and modify them.

Claus Westermann shows how biblical thought avoids mere ideas and speculations, and always deals with reality, whether it be in the creation stories, the patriarchal accounts, the prophets, the psalms, the wisdom writers or the parables of Jesus, and points out the interpretive significance of this for the contemporary church, summoning the church to abandon its abstract, theoretical language for the concrete realities which confront humankind both in the Bible and in their lives.

Ronald S. Clements presents a reassessment of the effort to discover behind written prophecy the original oral content which it sought to preserve, a reassessment necessitated by the rise of canon criticism and redaction criticism. He affirms that the formation of the written prophetic canon in its fixed form had theological significance in the developing faith of Israel, and suggests some ways in which this is to be understood today.

Brevard S. Childs appraises approvingly the contribution Gerhard von Rad made to the theological understanding of the biblical witness but notes a weakness in von Rad's failure to see the theological and exegetical importance of the formation of the canon, which has opened the door for succeeding scholars to champion a process of development which tends to negate the decisive and final revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

Roland E. Murphy raises the question why the Book of Proverbs has been subjected to a theological "benign neglect" and almost decanonized, then proceeds to develop a theology of Proverbs

based on Israel's experience of God as the essential dimension of reality for them, and the personification of the figure of Lady Wisdom as "the Lord's self-revelation through creation."

Elizabeth Achtemeier brands the church's discrimination against women as "a scandal to the gospel of Jesus Christ," and calls for a new affirmation in action of the freedom that women have been given through the gospel. She brings into question, however, the almost universal demand of feminist theologians to use female language for God. This she finds wholly unacceptable in the light of the biblical revelation, and fears that if we create a theology out of experience rather than the Word of God, the feminist movement in the church could lead to a denial of the gospel even worse than that from which it seeks to deliver us.

F. Wellford Hobbie's article was his last piece of creative work produced before his untimely death. A classmate of James Mays and a faculty colleague for the past eleven years, he had capitalized on James's strong interest in preparing students to interpret the Scriptures properly through the pulpit by commandeering him on occasion as a "team teacher" in courses on Homiletics. In this article he gives some of the fruit of that common endeavor in an analysis of the hermeneutical process involved in sermon preparation.

Patrick D. Miller, a former colleague of James Mays, proposes the theme of God as sovereign as "the foundation stone of both Old Testament and Reformed theology," then lifts up three primary images—God as King, Judge and Warrior—as Old Testament vehicles for presenting this truth. The hermeneutical significance of these is that they are not mere human metaphors to quicken the imagination about God, but are controlling features in the life and thought of Israel as they developed their faith in God as the divine governor both of history and of the universe.

James A. Sanders raises the question of the proper relation of the theological seminaries to the believing communities, and suggests clues to an answer through his own concept of canonical criticism as outlined in some of his books. He views the canon not as a fixed body of documents selected by the ancient church as authoritative over all subsequently developing tradition, but rather as a paradigm, in its "pluralistic richness," for the church's pilgrimage in every generation. He suggests that its categories of pilgrim, witness, servant and steward should guide both seminaries and congregations in their search for the wholeness of truth in our time, by an ongoing monotheizing process which will destroy all current idolatries.

Paul D. Hanson expresses wholehearted approval of the current effort to remove gender-biased language from our speaking about God and one another in the church's worship and life, and gives his reasons for so doing. He raises a caution, however, concerning the recent attempt of the *Inclusive-Language Lectionary*, making a clear distinction between the *interpretation* of biblical writings and their *translation*. He argues that a translation should be faithful to the historical meaning of the text, and that "the dynamic, progressive quality of biblical faith is blurred by attempts to remove historical/cultural-specific aspects."

John B. Trotti, a colleague of James Mays, has prepared a complete bibliography of his writings, arranged in the chronological order of their appearance.

It is plain from these essays that there is at present no unanimity of judgment about the task of interpreting the meaning of Scripture for our time, and that the hermeneutical quest is by no means over. Trends are currently in a state of flux. An interchange of opinion such as is here represented, however, is a part of the process by which progress into the future may be made.

This volume is presented as a tribute to Professor Mays in the hope that it will be a worthy stimulus to genuine theological interpretation of the Scriptures to which he has devoted his career.

Donald G. Miller

Former teacher, colleague and abiding friend of James Mays.

James Luther Mays

by John H. Leith

James Luther Mays was invited to teach at Union Theological Seminary in 1955. This invitation established his calling in biblical studies and placed him in an Old Testament department which had been given distinction by John Bright. The persistence and the devotion with which James Mays has fulfilled his calling is characteristic of his personality. The action of President Benjamin Rice Lacy in seeking out James Mays from the pastorate and bringing him to Union Theological Seminary has now culminated in twenty-nine years of teaching theological students and in his election as the president of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1985.

James Mays was born in Louisville, Georgia on July 14, 1921. His father, Allen Mays, was the son of an established farmer in the Louisville community. One of James Mays' best memories is visits to his grandfather's home and farm. He once openly expressed his anguish when on a visit to Louisville, Georgia he found all evidences of the farm erased by the tree planting of a paper company. His mother, Ruth Irene Mosteller, was from North Carolina, moving from Hickory to Louisville in 1918. The Mostellers were Lutheran and Holshousers were German Reformed. James Mays was told very early in life that his grandfather, Luther Mosteller had been called home from seminary to assume responsibilities on his father's farm and that he wanted his grandson to fulfill the vocation which had been denied him. The extent to which human freedom and self-determination modify the heritage of family and the social matrix of community is much debated. However, there can be little doubt on the part of those who know him that all three factors are significant in James Mays' own development. According to his own faith the personal, social, physical factors which shaped the life of James Mays have to be set in the more basic context of the Divine Providence and Election about which he has taught and preached and which can be discerned only by faith.

Louisville, Georgia was a small southern town situated in an area that has been celebrated by Erskine Caldwell's novels. The poverty which Caldwell depicted was true enough and was pervasive throughout the South. The impact of living in the South during the 1930s left its mark on all persons who experienced the depression. The story which James Mays related in a chapel service at

Union Theological Seminary testified to the vivid imprint on his memory of the human reality of those years. It was Christmastime and he had secured a job sacking groceries in a local store. One day a young white boy from the country came in with his brogans, his overalls, a ragged denim shirt and a heavily knit sweater. He pressed his face against the window of the store looking in at the fruit and Christmas food for which he had no money to buy. The poignancy of this scene was obvious to Jim Mays, to another clerk and to the owner of the grocery store who picked up a bag of oranges and rushed out and gave it to the boy as he was leaving. The putting of this story into writing destroys its poignancy; in the original setting the human reality was communicated without words in the context of a common human experience.

The tobacco road literature, however, failed to communicate the existence of very strong and powerful cultural traditions that maintained human dignity in the midst of poverty and adversity. Louisville was a southern town with a Scotch-Irish culture. This culture had placed a premium on human dignity and self-responsibility, even in the midst of or perhaps especially in the midst of poverty and adversity. Other characteristics of this culture were a great sense of reality, an abhorrence of the ostentatious, the pretentious, the pompous, the contrived and the artificial. This culture placed value upon self-determination, upon personal privacy and dignity, upon consistency and integrity of action.

The religious heritage into which James Mays was born was Presbyterian, though his mother had a Lutheran background. The Presbyterian community had existed in Louisville at least from the 1790s. The particular form of Presbyterianism into which James Mays was born was that of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. The Associates and the Reformed were secessionist churches from the Church of Scotland. The experience of withdrawal from the Church of Scotland had also been tempered for most of the Associates and the Reformed in America by life in northern Ireland before their emigration.

The secessionist churches were both more radical and more conservative. They were less influenced by the general culture than Presbyterians generally. The Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, for example, continued the tradition of exclusive psalmody until 1946. It also maintained a strong Sabbatarian influence which had developed among the Puritan Presbyterians in Britain. More than most churches, up until the 1940s, the Associate Reformed Presbyterians as a small group had maintained the integrity

of their ancient heritage from dilution in the American culture better than Presbyterians generally.

Louisville was also a center of culture. It had been the capital of Georgia during the period 1795-1804. The existence of the capital had left an aristocratic leadership tradition. It had also left a strong cultural tradition that centered in the school system. The Louisville Academy had been chartered in 1796 by the University of Georgia School System. This academy emphasized classical and liberal learning. It later became part of the public school system of Georgia, but when James Mays was a student it still was informed by this long-established cultural tradition. William L. Pressly, who served as president of Westminster Schools and as president of Southern Association of Schools and Colleges, had grown up in the Louisville community in the decade before the birth of James Mays. He has attested the unusually high quality and the emphasis on classical learning which were maintained in the school and which prepared students for careers in the best educational institutions in America. This emphasis of an institution committed to classical learning, to teaching students to read and to discriminate among values, to analyze and to reflect critically upon data and events had a lasting impression upon James Mays as well as other young people who left Louisville for distinguished careers.

The character of the school is reflected in the unusual qualifications of the faculty who taught James Mays in high school. Moffatt Plaxco was pastor of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and also superintendent of the school. He had received an excellent education: an A.B. degree from Erskine College, Bachelor of Divinity degrees from Erskine and Princeton Theological Seminaries. He also held an M.A. degree from Princeton University. In the Louisville Academy he taught Latin and senior literature.

Mrs. Herschel E. Smith, another teacher in the Louisville Academy, was an A.B. graduate of Wellesley and had done graduate work at the University of Grenoble and at the Sorbonne. Other teachers were Raiford McMillan who had degrees from Clemson College and Erskine College; Charles Cofer with degrees from Erskine College and the University of Georgia; Mrs. Frank Hardiman with degrees from Wesleyan College and Georgia State College at Milledgeville.

The culture in which James Mays grew up with its peculiar Scotch-Irish emphases and its union of classical learning with piety represented Presbyterian influence at its best. Such a culture no

longer exists except perhaps in very isolated spots and without this culture such persons as James Mays will be increasingly rare.

James Mays entered Erskine College in 1938. Erskine was a liberal arts institution of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. It attempted to unite piety and learning, but it suffered under the incredible poverty of most institutions in the South during that period. Its library actually numbered 12,000 or fewer volumes. Its professors were distinguished by their personal qualities but not by their intellectual attainments. Yet in a remarkable way it did represent cultural integrity and dignity and a commitment both to piety and learning.

One of the strongest characteristics of Erskine College at that time was a student body composed of persons who had similar backgrounds to James Mays. While at Erskine, James Mays distinguished himself not only as a scholar but as a participant in many campus activities. He was a member of the Garnet Circle which was limited to the 20 students with the highest academic records. He was also active in music and a member of the Glee Club for four years. He sang in the Octet for three years. His senior year he was editor of the college annual.

James Mays was especially active in forensic affairs. He participated in debate and won the state debating tournament his junior year. He was a member of the Philomathean Literary Society and was a winner of the annual debate between the Philomatheans and the Euphemians, also his junior year. The importance of this kind of forensic activity is documented by the number of distinguished Presbyterian ministers whose names appear on the debate trophy which lists the winners of the annual Philomathean-Euphemian commencement debate.

James Mays developed an increasing interest in philosophy and in critical reflection while a student at Erskine. He was influenced by Professor Harold J. Ralston who held degrees from Princeton University and Iowa University. Harold Ralston was later professor at Monmouth College and a member of the Board of Trustees at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. At Erskine he taught a wide variety of courses including Bible, psychology, and philosophy. During James Mays' years at Erskine there was an overwhelming pressure for good students to major in science and then become medical doctors. Over against the urging of at least one prominent faculty member, James Mays declared himself for the liberal arts. There is a rumor that he enjoyed raising critical

philosophical and historical questions for the discomfort of students at the Erskine Theological Seminary.

James Mays married Mary Will Boyd, his college sweetheart, on August 23, 1943. She was from Covington, Tennessee, a town with similarities to Louisville. Her father was a ruling Elder and church school superintendent in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. Two uncles were ministers: John L. Boyd in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church and Charles M. Boyd, a minister in the Presbyterian Church U.S. whose pastorates included the First Presbyterian Church, Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The Mays have two children, Sarah Mays Rogerson of Los Angeles, California and Mary Frances Mays of Richmond.

Military experience followed his college work. He spent the years 1942-45 in the United States Air Force and the Air Transport Command. He was in the Pacific, American and European theaters and received four battle stars and the Air Medal. These were influential years in developing a keen sense for reality, a vision of how large the world is and of the true context in which our parochial lives must be lived.

The year following military service was spent at Columbia University studying philosophy. This, as has been indicated, was an interest from college days, but as a student at Columbia University he became aware that philosophy lacked the vitality of theology, that his real vocation was in theology and in the church. Hence, in 1946 James Mays came to Union Theological Seminary. He was an independent student who thought for himself. He did not exactly fit the Union Theological Seminary mold in that era. Yet he distinguished himself as a scholar.

As a student at Union Theological Seminary, James Mays had preached at Mt. Carmel Church in Steeles Tavern, Virginia and on graduation received a call there. On April 19, 1949 at the meeting of Lexington Presbytery in Bethel Church, Staunton, Virginia he was examined for ordination. His sermon on Acts 8:30 was approved. On August 7, 1949 at 8 p.m. he was ordained to the Christian ministry. The sermon was preached by Rev. Charles M. Boyd, D.D. of Mecklenburg Presbytery, an uncle of Mary Will Boyd, his wife.

The Mt. Carmel Church was situated between the Blue Ridge and the Allegheny Mountains. Here James Mays' love of the rural, of nature generally, of bird watching, and of fishing was nurtured. It also is reasonable to assume that this old congregation with deep Presbyterian commitments and biblical knowledge was a very suit-

able context in which James Mays could develop as a pastor and as a church theologian.

The pastorate at Mt. Carmel was interrupted for a year of study, 1951-52, at the University of Basel. The impact of this year on James Mays was considerable. It placed him in the presence of theologians who commanded his respect, especially of Karl Barth; and it gave him a knowledge of such seminal thinkers as Rudolf Bultmann. The impact of Karl Barth on James Mays was very considerable and was still pronounced when he began teaching at Union Theological Seminary.

James Mays was accompanied to Basel and Palestine by Union Theological Seminary friends, including Wellford Hobbie. He also developed new friendships which would be very influential later. Brevard Childs who is now a professor of Old Testament at Yale University and James Barr who is professor of Hebrew at Oxford University became close friends.

James Mays accepted a call to the First Presbyterian Church in Lincolnton, North Carolina in 1954. Members of the Mt. Carmel congregation at the meeting of Lexington Presbytery on March 12 expressed their appreciation of James Mays and their reluctance in concurring with his request. Presbytery granted the request, and he was dismissed to Kings Mountain Presbytery effective April 1, 1954. On Sunday, May 23, 1954 James Mays was installed as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Lincolnton with Fred Stair of Concord Presbytery preaching the sermon. This was to be a very short pastorate of 14 months and was terminated on June 30, 1955 when James Mays accepted a call to Union Theological Seminary.

The call to Union Theological Seminary was presented to James Mays by Dr. Benjamin Rice Lacy, the President of the seminary. Dr. Lacy was determined that the new professor of Old Testament should have a demonstrated competence as a pastor of the church as well as competence for learning. He gave the call to James Mays to come to Union Theological Seminary as both the call of the church and of God to the critically important task of training persons to be pastors of Presbyterian Churches.

The call to Union Theological Seminary brought James Mays into close association with John Bright, one of the most distinguished Old Testament scholars of the twentieth century. Professor Bright says that James Mays was chosen to be his colleague because of his promise of scholarly competence, of judicious temperament, of critical capacities to examine in an objective way the data that were laid before him.

The call to teach Old Testament at Union Theological Seminary required special preparation as James Mays had not planned to be an Old Testament scholar. It is interesting to speculate whether he would himself have chosen to be a professor of Old Testament or would have chosen another field. It is significant that the call to teach Old Testament was not the result of career planning but came as the calling of the church through its agency, Union Theological Seminary. The Seminary made arrangements for James Mays to study under Professor Harold H. Rowley who was an active churchman and a professor at the University of Manchester. Rowley was an outstanding Old Testament scholar, particularly gifted in the field of bibliography. He had a wide acquaintance not only with Old Testament literature but with theological literature in general. He was also an Old Testament scholar with a new awareness of the message of the Old Testament for our time. The years of study under Professor Rowley not only brought James Mays in contact with a great scholar but also with British culture. He received the Ph.D. degree from the University of Manchester in 1957. The respect which Professor Rowley had for James Mays is attested in Rowley's agreement for Union Theological Seminary to acquire his library in 1969 over the bids of other institutions.

In the fall of 1957 James Mays began his teaching career at Union Theological Seminary. In 1960 he was installed as a full professor. In the 29 years that have elapsed since his coming to Union Seminary, he has taught the following courses:

- Pentateuch
- Exegesis of the Psalms
- Advance Hebrew Reading
- Exegesis of Mark
- Old Testament I
- Genesis and Exodus
- Interpretation of the Psalms
- Biblical Hermeneutics
- Introduction to Literature of the Old Testament
- Interpretation of the Wisdom Literature
- Preaching the Bible
- Old Testament II: the Prophets
- Readings: Biblical Theology
- Readings: Bible and Theology
- Doctrine of Scripture
- Ezekiel

With Professor Bright
Advanced Hebrew Exegesis
Introduction to Literature of the Old Testament
Theology and Hermeneutics of the Old Testament

With Professor P.D. Miller
Introduction to Study of the Bible
Basic Bible

With Professor Balmer Kelly
Intertestament Literature

With Professor John H. Leith
Theology of Hope

With Professor Cameron Murchison
Introduction to the Ministry

(Courses taught are listed only once. Some courses were taught repeatedly. Seminars on doctoral level are not listed.)

As a teacher, James Mays has always commanded respect. He demands a high level of achievement and emphasizes the mastery of basic texts that make possible theological reflection in preaching. He has great respect for the responsibility of the minister to interpret and apply the Word of God in preaching, teaching and pastoral care. Hence, he has always insisted that theological students meet the same standards of competence as apply in the best professional schools. He has opposed "social passes" to the ministry.

Professor Mays' own position in Old Testament cannot be designated by any particular motif or membership in any school. His work is characterized by meticulous scholarship, highly methodical work habits, and persistent pursuit of goals. One biblical colleague said that Professor Mays' position in the biblical field is distinguished by its great attention to and respect for the text, by allowing the text to say what it meant in the intention of the author. His work is also marked by judiciousness and caution. A further characteristic is attention to blocks of material, paragraphs, themes, books rather than the minute analysis of words, phrases, or sentences. A final distinction is a concern for the meaning of the text for the life of the church today; that is, in particular the meaning of the text for preaching and teaching in the church.

Professor Mays was involved in the work of *Interpretation*

from the time of his arrival as a professor of Old Testament. He became editor of *Interpretation* in 1966 and he maintained this position until 1983. His editorship was very distinguished. Under his leadership, the circulation rose to over ten thousand. As editor he maintained an unusually high standard for theological competence and writing. He secured the allegiance of the best biblical scholars in the world and insisted that they write not for other scholars but for Christian readers generally. The editorship of *Interpretation* was not only a contribution to Christian scholarship and to the work of the church, but it also contributed to the enlargement of Professor Mays' own theological horizon.

In 1966-67 Professor Mays was a Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Goettingen in Germany. Here he had close association with Professor Walther Zimmerli, one of the outstanding Reformed Old Testament scholars in the world. Other distinguished Reformed theologians at Goettingen included Otto Weber, a Barthian and a systematic theologian. In 1964-65 Professor Mays commuted to Pittsburgh to help with the Old Testament courses there.

While maintaining his work as a scholar, teacher, and editor Professor Mays has continued to lecture in theological seminaries and colleges and to preach in churches. He has participated in the Old Testament Colloquium, a group of distinguished Old Testament scholars and in 1985 he was elected president of the Society of Biblical Literature.

Professor Mays is a writer of distinction. He has the unusual capacity to express abstract ideas in intelligible English with clear and precise words and syntax. The logical sequence and the coherence of his thought is always obvious. A bibliography included in this volume lists his published works.

James Mays has also been active in the affairs of the church. He and his family participate in the worship of the Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, and he is a member of Norfolk Presbytery. As a churchman he has served on the Board of Christian Education (1962-1971) and also as chairman and a member of the Committee on Theology and Culture (1973-1979). He has continued to serve on special committees assigned to work on the Presbyterian understanding of the authority of scripture and the nature of revelation.

Every human being made in the image of God is unique, but in Professor Mays the strength of human individuality is obvious. His friends would find it impossible to confuse him with other individuals. He has a remarkable capacity for self-determination, for organizing the energies and vitalities of his life to achieve a deliber-