



### **James Luther Mays, 1921–2015**

Numerous colleagues, students and friends in the Society of Biblical Literature and the church mourn the loss of James L. Mays, who died on October 29, 2015, at the age of ninety-four. He was the Cyrus McCormick Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Old Testament and President of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1986. Mays was born in Louisville, Georgia, educated at the Louisville Academy and Erskine College. After graduation in 1942, he enlisted in the US Army Air Corps, where he was trained as a flight radio operator. He served on crews that shuttled aircraft throughout the world during World War II. He saw service in the European, Pacific, and India-Burma theaters.

In 1943 he married his college classmate Mary Will Boyd. They had two daughters, Sarah Mays Rogerson Passard of Alameda, California, and Mary Frances Mays of Richmond, Virginia.

After the war he was a graduate student in Philosophy at Columbia University, but after a call to ministry he entered Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Upon graduation, he was ordained a minister in 1949 by the Presbytery of Lexington, serving as pastor of churches in Virginia and North Carolina. During that period he studied as a Fellow at the University of Basel. He later was a Fulbright Professor of Old Testament at the University of Goettingen. Throughout his career, students and colleagues could recognize the influence of Karl Barth and other Continental theologians and biblical scholars on his thought.

In 1955 he received another call, this time from Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. The school would sponsor his graduate work in biblical studies, after which he would join the faculty. He undertook his doctoral work at the University of Manchester with H. H. Rowley. Later he was instrumental in Union's acquisition of Rowley's entire library. He joined the Union Faculty in 1957 and spent his entire academic career there, some thirty-five years, retiring in 1991.

Scholars influence their disciplines by teaching, by research and publications, and by leadership. James Mays is that rare individual who put his stamp on biblical scholarship through all three of those. His central concern in teaching was exegesis. Numerous students have testified to his skill in teaching exegesis as a discipline and as an art.

As a scholar and writer, Mays has left us with a large and significant corpus. His primary research interests were the minor prophets of the eighth century and, above all, the Psalms. He wrote widely used commentaries devoted to both corpuses, including commentaries on Amos, Hosea, and Micah in the Old Testament Library series and several commentaries and other works on the Psalms. Mays was also a consummate editor, serving for many years as editor of the journal *Interpretation*. He founded and was general editor of the series *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. In addition, he was general editor of the

*HarperCollins Bible Commentary* and also a member of the Old Testament Library editorial board.

As editor of *Interpretation* he made that journal a major voice in the discussions about biblical theology in the 1950s and 1960s, brought the fruits of scholarship to a wider public, and insisted that biblical studies and theology work hand in hand.

As President of the Society of Biblical Literature in 1986, he led the Society through a major transformation, the move from a totally voluntary Secretary to a paid Executive Director and staff, thus helping to set into motion the present form of this organization.

Throughout his life Mays enjoyed the world of nature. He was a life-long birder, not in any competitive sense but because, he said, observing birds enhanced his appreciation and enjoyment of God's creation. He was a Fifty-Year member of the Audubon society of Virginia. He was an accomplished fly fisherman long before the practice became popular and a founding member of the Old Testament Fishing Society.

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