Review Articles

THE PSALMS OF ISRAEL AS AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN PRAYER

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The Book of Psalms has been recognized as a summary of the whole Old Testament, encapsulating the high points of the Pentateuch, the historical books, the wisdom literature, and the Prophets. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it “the Prayer Book of the Bible,” and used the psalms to sustain his faith and hope during his years in a concentration camp. His suggestion that the Psalms and New Testament be published together as a single book for Christian prayer was materialized in the special edition of the Good News for Modern Man. This vividly reflects the Christian reverence for and praying of the Psalms from the earliest days of the Church, and down through the centuries, in congregations, monasteries, churches, assemblies, and in private devotion.

In recent years there has been a torrent of books and commentaries on the Psalms, some scholarly and technical, many more semi-popular with theological and devotional emphases. James L. Mays has written two volumes that span both poles. One is a handbook, explaining the nature and characteristics of the psalms, individually as well as a collection, their usage in Israel’s prayer and worship throughout its history, with an
orientation towards their use in the New Testament and adaptation in Christian worship and tradition. This is a scholarly work with technical apparatus in end notes — a feature that might annoy scholars preferring the convenience of footnotes, but will be less daunting for general readers. The second is a commentary on all the psalms in which the principles enunciated in the Handbook are applied in expositions of the individual psalms. The emphasis is theological, with Christian interpretations that make the book eminently practical for teaching and preaching.

THE HANDBOOK

The Handbook, partly composed during the author’s writing of the Commentary, can be used as companion and supplement to it and has been designed primarily for theological students and ministers in their use of the psalms. Ten out of the fourteen essays were published over the past two decades. The author’s long years of study have deepened his understanding of the psalms as both scripture and liturgy for the Church, as these have been interpreted, preached, and sung by the worshipping community as expressions and sustenance of their faith.

The title, “The Lord Reigns,” is the proposed theological center of the Book of Psalms, the organizing center that unites the psalms, and is expressly stated in some of them, though Yhwh is understood as king or ruler in many more. Part 1 treats the psalms as “the Liturgy of the Kingdom of God.” Parts 2-4 deal with the main purpose of the psalms: prayer, praise, and testimony to the Messiah. Throughout there are references to the psalms as instruction, an idea further explained in Part 5, “The Psalms as Book and Scripture.” Each part concludes with an exposition of a representative psalm: Psalm 13 for the prayers, 100 for the songs of praise, 2 for the king and Messiah, and finally 118, which echoes many psalms and has been used extensively in the liturgies of Judaism and Christianity. The focus of the book is not on the literary forms and original settings of the psalms, as in the usual treatment of critical-historical analysis, but rather on their actual use and possibilities for continued use as scripture and liturgy of the Church.

Part 1 starts with the example of Augustine’s intense study
and use of the psalms especially during his conversion, which
is adduced as a representative experience of the early Church.
Just as in Israel the psalms originated as songs for public
worship and ultimately became scripture, God’s word, so too
throughout the history of the Church, the psalms were used as
scripture and liturgy. They were explained and proclaimed as part
of God’s revelation. When they were sung devotionally in the
liturgy, they became the prayers of the people, who identify
themselves with the “I” and “We” of the psalmists. The psalms
were used from the beginning “to pray and praise and teach”
and are important for the theological, liturgical, and pastoral life
of the Church.

According to Mays, the root metaphor of the psalms that holds
them together as religious texts is the key sentence in the
enthronement psalms (47:93-99), Yhwh malak, most appropri-
ately translated “the Lord reigns.” Throughout the psalms, Yhwh
is addressed as king and the royal characteristics of warrior,
shepherd, savior, lawgiver are applied to him. As sovereign Yhwh
has a special people (Israel), a special place in the world (Zion),
a special person as his regent and servant (David), and he orders
the lives of his people. The people respond as servants of Yhwh,
praising him with wonder, praying with hope, and accepting his
guidance and instruction.

Part 2 deals with the prayers of need, gratitude, and trust.
Since the psalms of thanksgiving and trust are closely linked to
the prayers for help, which are the most numerous in the Psalter,
analysis is concentrated on this latter type, and the basic themes
of this type are common to the others. The author sees the
“theological setting-in-life” as the relation of servants to God
their king, with the servants speaking to the Lord about all
troubles in life. Short sections discuss the persons praying (the
“lowly” and the just), the various troubles described or implied,
and enemies, with special attention to the problems they present
for theology and liturgy.

Chapters 4 and 5 are particularly helpful for motivation and
present the background of the psalms as a divine gift for prayer,
offer instruction and encouragement. In “A Question of Identity,”
the author contrasts the traditional Jewish and Christian use of
the 50 or so psalms of prayer with the contemporary situation in which Christians find the psalms strange and difficult to pray. But he also notes a revival of their use and appropriation in private prayer and public worship. He then asks pointed questions that challenge and stimulate believers to consider how they can pray these psalms.

The praise of the Lord in various psalms and the whole Psalter is discussed in Part 3, “The Psalms as Instruction in Praise.” Their functions are cited as doxological, giving glory to God; confessional, expressing faith in who God is; and evangelical, inviting all peoples on earth to join in the praise of the Lord who reigns over all.

Part 4 portrays David as Psalmist and Messiah in three chapters. They move from the historical David in the books of Samuel and Chronicles, through his theological significance in the Psalter and the ideal portrayal of the Messiah in the royal psalms, to an explanation of Psalm 2. This chapter includes an overview of the history of hope in kingship leading to a future ideal king, and with a climax highlighting the Church’s understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of these hopes.

In Part 5, the latest approaches to the Psalter that deal with “The Psalms as Book and Scripture” are summarized, with focus on the book as a literary unit. Rather than as a mere collection of psalms, with emphasis on the literary types and their origin in different settings of Israel’s life, the Book of Psalms is investigated in itself and as it stands in its final literary context. Mays identifies the function of the whole book as torah, instruction or teaching that can be given in different literary types, arguing from Psalms 1 and 2 that act as introduction and from the fivefold division that corresponds to the Mosaic Torah of the Pentateuch. He also finds here the central and key topic of the book: the kingship of the Lord. He underlines the importance of David to the psalms by citing the literary attribution of Psalm 3 and indicating the place of David throughout the psalms and the various collections. Stress is laid on the last six psalms expressing David’s resolve to “praise the Lord” and its fulfillment with an exhortation for all the world to join in that praise. More evidence for the Psalter as a book of instruction comes in the chapter dealing with the positioning of the torah
psalms: 1, 19, and 119. An example of canonical analysis in the discussion of Psalm 118 concludes the book, together with a bibliographical postscript.

Mays has produced a book on understanding the psalms that is crystal clear, well organized, and suitable for private and communitarian devotion. His magisterial expertise also elucidates the nagging problems of suffering and enemies in the prayers of need, along with ways to utilize these psalms in the religious life of Christians. He makes a good case for the instructive quality and purpose of most (all?) of the psalms, but only in a commentary can the method and objects of teaching be detailed. Especially new and noteworthy are his emphases on the figure of David and its importance throughout the Psalter, and also on the whole Psalter as a helpful guide to reading individual psalms.

THE COMMENTARY

In his commentary Mays summarizes most of these ideas in the introduction of almost 40 pages. There he also touches upon the usual preliminary matters related to psalms: their importance, structure, history, collection(s) in the Book, literary types and theology. The last section offers concrete suggestions about using certain psalms for the liturgy and devotion.

The principles expounded in the Handbook are enfleshed in his explanation of each psalm in the commentary. What makes the work particularly valuable is the author's theological and Christian orientation, together with his use of new approaches to Psalm research.

The series Interpretation, subtitled as a Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, is written by scholars seeking to create an interpretation, "both faithful to the text and useful to the church." In keeping with this policy, Mays emphasizes the theological aspects of the psalms, and particularly as they were used in the New Testament and appropriated in Christian liturgy and traditions. He is guided often by the traditional commentators on the psalms, like Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Barth.

Mays covers the usual and essential elements of background and exegesis, although not in clearly delineated sections as in most commentaries. But he has provided somewhat free-flowing
expository essays that suit the nature of each psalm, with theological insights and contemporary applications wherever in the text they are pertinent. This method tends to add depth to the understanding and appreciation of the psalms as relevant to contemporary Christian life.

The Reign of God, which is the root metaphor and theological center of the Psalms proposed by Mays, dominates these expositions, as would be expected. Wherever creation or salvation occurs in the psalms, explicit reference is generally made to God’s kingship. This theme is the touchstone that tends to unify and lend theological depth to the interpretations. Especially in the so-called enthronement psalms and the royal psalms, it is oriented eschatologically towards the glory of God’s reign and specifically to the final victory of Jesus Messiah.

The Christian nature of the work is emphasized by the frequent and at times lengthy quotations and references to the New Testament, as well as the connections of individual psalms with Christian feasts and liturgical usage. All of this helps for an authentic Christian understanding and praying of the psalms.

The results of contemporary research are reflected in what Mays pedagogically emphasizes, and even in what he deemphasizes. In his literary method, he presumes the basic results of form-critical and historical research, but subordinates them to questions about the language and literary shape of individual psalms as part of the Book of Psalms, and in relation to the vocabulary and theology of the Old Testament in general.

He identifies the literary types of the psalms, but speaks in general terms of the original life settings. This is partly because they are difficult if not impossible to recover, partly because, by the continual use over the centuries in various historical circumstances, the psalm texts have frequently been revised and adapted to different life settings. The author continually indicates the different levels of revision and highlights the varying hermeneutical situations in Jewish and Christian usage. (Cf. Psalms 22, 38, 132.)

In keeping with his observation that “Psalms 1 wants the whole [Psalter] to be read as instruction,” Mays often notes how “the psalm teaches” or the “prayer, praise, and instruction” or the “lessons taught.” He himself instructs how the psalms relate to
one another and are structured within the Psalter, and comments on the connections of individual psalms with other books of the canon. This canonical approach sheds light even on obscure references in the headings (superscriptions) and helps for an appreciation of their "heuristic" value, a religious interpretation suitable for preaching and instruction, based on the model of David. (See general comments in Psalm 3.)

Due to the pastoral nature of the Interpretation series, the theological significance of the psalms is treated at length, with limited attention given to philological analysis and historical matters. Controversial and obscure lines are rarely noted. Moreover, the author gives detailed exposition of the theologically more important psalms and only brief, summary treatment of numerous psalms that are less familiar. Consequently, anyone desiring a complete study of the psalms will have to consult more technical commentaries. Scholars and students of the Bible, however, can profit from the theological insights in this masterful work, and ordinary educated people can deepen their understanding and appreciation of these age-old prayers of God’s people. Instead of a book of exegetical information on the psalms, Mays has rather given us a book to form preachers and teachers, and all believers, into true worshippers who pray and praise God and receive his instruction from one of the most loved books of Holy Scripture.