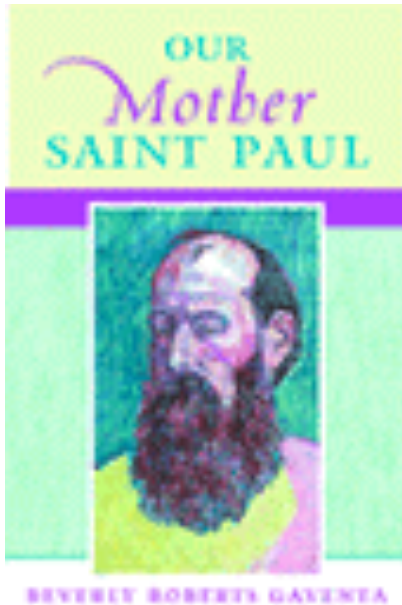


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Gaventa, Beverly Roberts

Our Mother Saint Paul

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The title of Beverly Gaventa's new book sounds like some new-age biography of Paul revealing the apostle as a transgendered mystic whose feminine side turns out to be his true self. But it turns out that is not the case. *Our Mother Saint Paul* is a serious work of scholarship that carefully and insightfully attends to exegetical and theological issues in Paul's letters.

The book is divided into two sections. The first deals with maternal imagery in Paul's letters, the second with Paul's apocalyptic orientation. Although the book is a collection of essays, most of which were previously published, they cohere into an effective presentation on the two topics. There is, however, some dissonance between them.

The most significant and creative contribution occurs in the first part of the book. Gaventa begins by calling attention to the importance of maternal imagery in the Pauline letters, as well as the fact that it has been egregiously overlooked in scholarship. Gaventa identifies seven passages where the imagery of birthing and infancy occur: 1 Thess 2:7; 5:3; Gal 1:15; 4:19; 1 Cor 3:1-2; 15:8; Rom 8:22. Statistically speaking, there are more passages where Paul employs maternal metaphors than paternal ones, yet there is almost no discussion of the matter. Scholars who do discuss the maternal passages usually

combine them with the paternal ones into one amalgamated understanding of Paul as parent. In other words, the texts in which Paul likens himself to a mother figure and his congregants to children whom he has either birthed or nursed are considered to be mere variations of the texts where Paul likens himself to a father who “begat” his children.

Gaventa demonstrates how important it is for interpreters to take Paul’s use of this imagery into consideration when exegeting the text. It matters quite a lot, for example, how one understands Paul’s conception of apostleship, particularly his understanding of *himself* as apostle. She observes that when Paul uses maternal metaphors such as pregnancy and the nurture of infants, he is stressing his ongoing care for his congregants. Pregnancy is a condition that occurs not in a moment but over an extended period of time; the same is true of nursing. In contrast, Paul uses paternal imagery to refer to the initial stages of his relationship with them, that is, his preaching and their conversion. The paternal imagery of “begetting” works better to conjure those moments in the congregants’ experience, but maternal imagery is more effective for evoking Paul’s ongoing relationship with them.

In her essay on 1 Cor 3:1–3, where Paul says he speaks to the Corinthians as infants whom he must feed milk rather than solid food, Gaventa persuasively shows how the standard interpretation has missed much of Paul’s rhetorical force. Scholars have shown that this imagery occurs elsewhere to illustrate different stages of learning. Using these texts as analogies, they then debate whether Paul is actually referring to two different levels of Christian instruction. What they have failed to notice, however, is that none of the parallels portrays the speaker or teacher as the nurturer. Yet Paul says “I gave you milk to drink.” Paul uses the metaphor so as to portray himself as the caregiver of his infant congregants; in Gaventa’s words, “Paul is the nursing mother of the church” (45). It is an astonishing image and a risky one for the apostle to have used. “By speaking in first person as a nursing mother, Paul compromises his own standing as a ‘real man’” (50). Paul’s use of maternal metaphors then reveals a genuine humility on the apostle’s part. This vision of apostleship is not exactly the typical ideal of leadership in antiquity.

Building on observations like these and others, Gaventa addresses the debate among feminist scholars about whether Paul’s teachings reflect an egalitarian ethic or a hierarchical one and whether he views himself as holding a higher status than others because of his special apostolic position. She demonstrates the way paying attention to the maternal metaphors contributes to the discussion. Gaventa points out that the relationship between mother and child cannot be easily classified as either hierarchical or egalitarian, which means Paul’s use of these metaphors may indicate a more subtle understanding of the role of power in the relationship between Paul and his followers. On the face of it, of course, the parent is the one with authority in the relationship; insofar as

mother and infant are an example of parent and child, the mother holds a superior position over the infant. Thus one could conclude that the apostle's use of this imagery is just another way of Paul reinforcing his power over his charges. But parents—especially mothers in the ancient world—are also responsible for the care and upbringing of children, which means that the child's needs and successful development are primary in the relationship. For mothers in particular, the role of mother or wet nurse is in some ways analogous to the role of servant. Attending to Paul's use of maternal imagery makes the question of Paul-as-hierarchical versus Paul-as-egalitarian more complicated and more interesting.

Gaventa also argues that maternal imagery helps us see the importance of apocalyptic in Paul's conception of apostleship. In her essays on Gal 4:19 and Rom 8:22, Gaventa demonstrates how the evocation of a woman in labor connects Paul's work as an apostle with his apocalyptic expectation of the birth of a new creation. Although Paul connects himself differently to the image of a woman in labor pains in each of these texts—in Galatians Paul is the one giving birth, while in Romans God is the one giving birth and Paul functions as a kind of midwife, helping to facilitate the birth of the new creation—in both cases apocalyptic urgency and passion form a part of Paul's view of himself as an apostle.

The second half of the book carries discussion of the apocalyptic theme further. Unfortunately, however, Gaventa leaves off the discussion of the role of maternal metaphors in Paul's thinking and focuses exclusively on Paul's apocalypticism. While Gaventa provides a positive exegetical-theological reading of the apostle's apocalyptic theology, which may offer readers a way to embrace apocalyptic in modern terms, her readings constitute mainly a synthesis of current trends rather than ground-breaking new insights. The essays in this part of the book do not possess the same creativity as the first part. It would have been interesting to see Gaventa incorporate some of the recent philosophers, such as Badiou, Taubes, and Agamben, who have reflected on Paul's thinking about the end time, particularly Agamben in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Nevertheless, Gaventa's interest in gender issues and in theological exegesis more broadly in this book mean that her work fills a void for many readers, and as always, her scholarship is rock-solid.