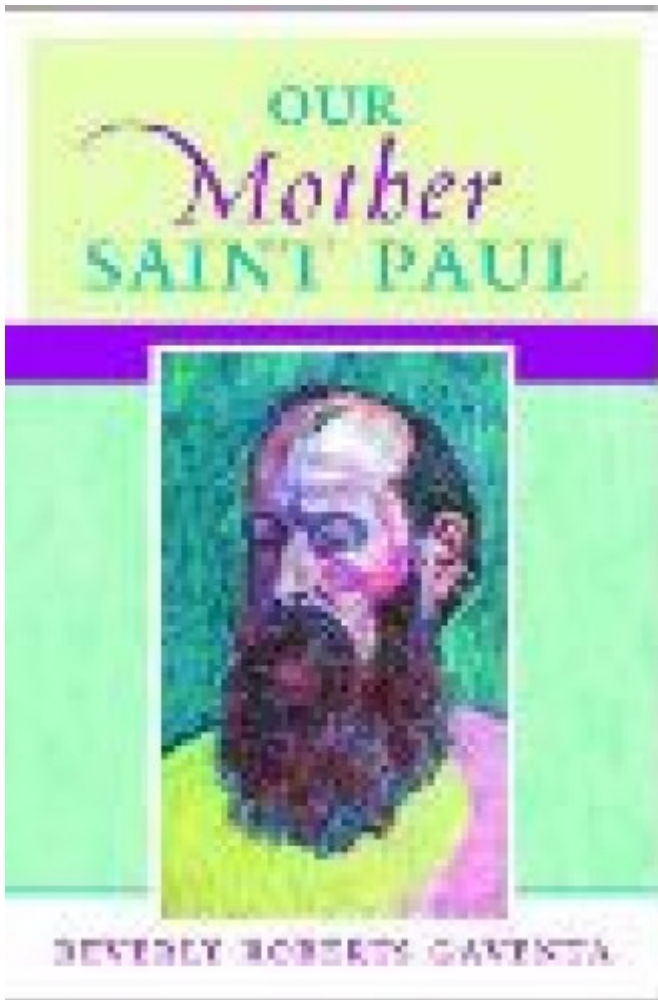


Our Mother Saint Paul

reviewed by [Sandra Hack Polaski](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Our Mother Saint Paul

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Paul is the New Testament figure that many Christians love to hate. To gain a new hearing for the apostle, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, professor of New Testament at

Princeton Theological Seminary, offers a new way to think about him: by means of his mothering imagery. In particular, she focuses on the provision of milk in 1 Corinthians 3:1-2, the nurse caring for her own children in 1 Thessalonians 2:7, and Paul in “the pain of childbirth” in Galatians 4:19. A mother, Gaventa points out, is an authority figure, but a very different one from a father or patriarch. By imaging himself as mother, Paul offers his readers an intriguingly different way to consider authority.

Gaventa does not claim that maternal imagery is a major theme in Paul’s letters or that Paul is the only ancient writer to use such imagery. Through careful exegesis, however, she shows that Paul places himself in the maternal role to an extent that is uncommon in ancient writers and that he relates the maternal role quite closely to the apostolic task. From this foundation she builds the argument that maternal imagery, and the kinds of relationships it causes us to envision, offers an important insight into Paul’s understanding of himself and of the apostolic role.

Gaventa’s discussion of the “Paul as mother” imagery is used to open the reader’s mind to a consideration of her deeper hypothesis: that we misunderstand Paul’s theologizing if we do not read it in a cosmic and apocalyptic context. Gaventa connects the maternal metaphors with the epistemology of new creation: “Paul takes the position that the gospel proclaims Jesus Christ crucified to be the inauguration of a new creation.” She argues that God’s salvation, in Paul’s view, is triumph over the powers of this world and deliverance from “this present evil age” (Gal. 1:4).

Such antitheses as law/gospel and cross/circumcision are not primary arguments in Paul’s thought, she argues, but conclusions drawn from the central antithesis between Christ and the present cosmos. Similarly, Paul’s claim that “God handed them over” in Romans 1:24, 26 and 28 is a pointer to his understanding that there exist anti-God forces in the world to which God temporarily surrendered humanity, only to reclaim humanity victoriously by “handing over” Jesus Christ.

The essays span 20 years’ worth of Gaventa’s scholarship on Paul, revised for this volume from various previous publications. Gaventa’s writing is full of apt observations about the apostle—some her own, some summaries of the thinking of others, but all pithy, clearly stated and apt to stir important rethinking of Paul’s theology. The Paul who relates himself to the members of his congregations as a mother to children may indeed be a Paul we would be glad to meet, and in these pages Gaventa introduces him to us.