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Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus

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readable for the layperson while raising enough questions to hold the interest of the scholar.

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Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus

Barbara Roberts Gaventa
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999
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Mary, the mother of Jesus, generally plays a fairly insignificant role in Protestant expressions of Christianity. Her presence in the canonical gospels is rather sparse, and extracanonical texts about Mary are not widely known in Protestant circles. Enticingly, Gaventa draws our attention to the character of the mother of Jesus in these tidbits of first- and second-century narratives. From a Protestant standpoint, Gaventa endeavours to reveal the multiple pictures of Mary in these texts, not so much historically or theologically, but in a literary sense.

In a respectful and informed manner, Gaventa begins with a brief survey of Catholic and Orthodox perspectives of Mary, along with recent historical quests, liberation theological views and feminist queries concerning the mother of Jesus. Gaventa's own approach is to analyze the characterization of Mary in the New Testament narratives of Matthew, Luke-Acts and John, as well as in the full text of a second-century apocryphal work, the Protoevangelium of James (the text of which she includes in full in an Appendix).

Gaventa studies the biblical texts in their final form, as whole narratives, mentioning but largely avoiding debates about sources. This allows her to develop thorough sketches of Mary in each gospel (except Mark, where Mary is barely mentioned). Though the gospels contain relatively few "glimpses" of the mother of Jesus, Gaventa "teases out" an amazing amount of material regarding the various roles and functions Mary fulfills in each of these separate stories.

Gaventa points out that the biblical passages that mention Mary always center more on Jesus than on Mary. Likewise, the questions and debates regarding Mary in the second century church remained christological rather than mariological. Therefore, as a narrative that focuses on Mary, the Protoevangelium of James is an excellent addition to her study of the characterization of Mary. The Protoevangelium at least presents some ideas about the person of Mary herself, and provides ancient context for many Marian traditions of which Protestants may be unaware.

The main theme in the Protoevangelium, as interpreted by Gaventa, is Mary's "sacred purity." As she does with the biblical texts, Gaventa expounds this theme in fruitful literary detail. Yet, this theme desperately requires an explanation to bridge the gap between the cultural milieu of second-century Christians and readers of today. When Gaventa introduces her methodology at the beginning of the book, she largely rejects previous attempts at studying Mary with social-scientific perspectives (including anthropological ideas). However, her analysis would have benefited greatly from recent scholarship that utilizes anthropological concepts regarding family, purity and chastity in the ancient Mediterranean world.

Overall, Gaventa strikes a wonderful balance between acute awareness of and references to critical scholarship, on the one hand, and engaging, insightful and careful exegesis of the narratives on the other. This informative study would be appropriate for lay persons, students, scholars and pastors. It offers fresh literary insights, unassuming language, and solid scholarship. Gaventa's logical and systematic study of the New Testament texts about Mary should provide a very useful tool for sermons and teaching, both devotional and scholastic.

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