

Two Covenants, not One. A Book Review

Colleagues,

If you wonder why the pace of these posts is being suddenly stepped up, it's because there's suddenly a heap of material to pass along. Expect to see a temporary return to the old weekly schedule, at least through Lent.

Our offering this week is a three-month old review by Ed Schroeder of a recent book by Michael J. Gorman, the Raymond E. Brown Professor of Biblical Studies and Theology at [St. Mary's Seminary and University](#) in Baltimore. The book is entitled [*The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant*](#). Ed is less than thrilled with it, as you're about to see.

Among you are many who will tangle with [Genesis 15](#) this Sunday, the Second in Lent, whether as listeners or preachers. Of texts that define "covenant" in Christian thought, none are more essential, not least for its eerie illustration of an ancient covenant-"cutting" ritual and the breathtaking twist it applies to that. The hours between now and Sunday are few and getting fewer. I encourage you even so to take some time with Ed's review before you wade in.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce

**THE DEATH OF THE MESSIAH AND THE BIRTH OF THE NEW COVENANT: A
(Not So) New Model of the Atonement**

By Michael J. Gorman

Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers (Cascade Books)

278 pages. Paper. \$33.00

Reviewed by Edward H. Schroeder

An un-funny thing happened on the way to Reformation Day this year, October 31 in the Lutheran liturgical calendar.

In the same week that I heard the Reformation Day pericopes proclaimed in the liturgy—Jeremiah 31, Romans 3, John 8—I also read Professor Gorman’s book. They didn’t match. Not fun. But they were supposed to match. His book is all about the birth of the NEW covenant. So are these three texts.

Here’s the heart of the mismatch:

In Gorman’s 237 pages of text the cantus firmus is: the new covenant and the old one are fundamentally the same. Over and over again we hear the equation: “the NEW covenant renews the OLD one” (p.28, 39, et passim).

The three Reformation Sunday texts say the New Covenant is BRAND NEW. Not a re-run of the old one. In fact, it’s clean contrary to the old one.

FIRST OFF, [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), the Promise of the Coming Birth of the New Covenant.

Jeremiah says that the radical newness of God’s new covenant is that sinners get forgiven. It’s “not like the covenant that I made with them when I took them ...out of the land of Egypt (v. 32).”

The fundamental “not like” is that in the Egypt-exodus-Sinai covenant, there is no forgiveness of sins. It is not to be found

in the specs of the “old covenant that they broke”—broke by non-performance of their part of the contract. Read Exodus 20 or Deut. 5 again to see what the specs were of the Sinai contract. There is no forgiveness there at all. It’s “perform, or else!”

What happens to sinners in the SINAI contract is clean contrary to Jeremiah’s specs about the NEW one. In the Sinai contract iniquities get “visited,” not forgiven. That visit is pay-off, getting your just deserts. And what is the just deserts payoff? The wages of sin is death. Forgiveness, no. Death sentence, yes.

A sidebar: Here’s what Blessed Fred Danker, New Testament Greek superstar, and NT theologian superstar too, frequently did when we students challenged his interpretation of a Biblical text. He’d read it out loud again in Greek, put that Greek into English (which translation none of us would ever challenge, for he was “BDAG Fred”—superstar editor of the standard New Testament Greek lexicon—then close his NT and the discussion with these words “That’s what the text SAYS!” I will quote him hereafter via acronym: TWTTS. Again, “That’s What The Text Says!”)

So here too, “That’s what the Jeremiah text says.”

NEXT [Romans 3:19-28](#), the Good News that came with the Birth of the New Covenant.

“But now, apart from the law (!)” is God’s new deal, Christ’s redemption, his cross, faith trusting that redeemer. What did the law-covenant do? “Through the law comes the knowledge of sin (v 20).” Au contraire the New Covenant. Through it comes a new sort of righteousness, sinners “justified by his grace as a gift (v. 24).” If that’s not BRAND new, not only “apart” (different) from Sinai, but contra-Sinai, what is? TWTTS.

FINALLY, [John 8:31-36](#), the One who delivered at the Birth of

the New Covenant.

Here is the clincher. Already in the first chapter, the prologue, John lays out the either/or. Law came through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Jesus does not RENEW Moses; he REPLACES him with something new, a new deal/covenant. Moses gets antiquated, not updated, when Jesus comes along. That's a major motif throughout John's entire Gospel. Here too in John 8: The old covenant, so says Jesus, to which his critics are clinging, doesn't/can't rescue anyone from being a "slave" to sin (v. 34). Moses leaves sinners in bondage to their affliction. But hear now the newness of the "grace and truth" covenant: "If the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (v. 36). TWTTS.

That's the gist of the mis-match. One voice says "new renews old." Both old and new are fundamentally good news. The other voice says "new replaces old," with the sub-text: "And aren't you glad!" That's why it's good news. Slaves move into freedom.

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A bit of back-story:

I expected Gorman and these Reformation Day texts to match ever since I saw the title in the blurb that publisher Wipf and Stock posted to me.

"Death of the Messiah" must be theology of the cross, I thought. "Birth of the New Covenant" must be what's New about the New covenant, signed, sealed and delivered in Christ's crucifixion. That newness is the forgiveness of sins that is at the core of this NEW divine-human contract which was patently NOT there in the OLD Sinai contract. Sinners forgiven in the Sinai contract? Uh-uh. Sinners get "visited." That visit is not pleasant. In that visit iniquities get "remembered." Ouch! Even worse, they get recompensed. And not only with you, but to the third and

fourth generation—your kids, your kids’ kids, their kids, their kids! It is NOT pleasant. No wonder the first ever response to that covenant in Exodus 20 was “Moses, get him to shut up! If he doesn’t, we’re dead meat!” (Exodus 20:19, RSV, as in Revised Schroeder Version).

That’s what I expected, hoped for. So I ordered the book. It’s gotta be good. The author is a major-leaguer among NT professors today, holding the Raymond Brown chair (!) at a major Roman Catholic university. It sounds like he’s going to be talking “Lutheran.” Googling his name, I learned that he is a Methodist—yes, at a Roman Catholic school! Well, then, I surmised, possibly even a crypto-Lutheran after the fashion of Ur-methodist John Wesley. I recalled Wesley’s famous line that upon reading Luther’s introduction to the epistle of Romans “my heart was strangely warmed.”

It was not to be. Gorman’s presentation is a “second opinion” to Luther’s “Aha!” about God’s two different, very different, covenants. “The NEW covenant renews the OLD one.”

If that axiom is true, then any theology of the cross marshaled to support it is likely to be a second opinion to Luther’s *theologia crucis* too.

Who might have led Gorman down this path, I wondered. Not Wesley. Then I noticed this: the only big-name systematic theologian who gets cited in the book is Karl Barth. Three times. Hmmm. Where did Gorman do his doctorate? I googled. All his graduate work was done at Princeton Theological Seminary, where Barth reigned during the 20th century. (And maybe even now. I don’t know. I’m out of nearly all the loops in these days of my antiquity.)

My surmising that possible configuration doesn’t prove anything, of course, but it is interesting. Barth’s major criticism of

Luther is that Luther was wrong in distinguishing the Sinai covenant of God's Law from God's Gospel covenant in Christ. Barth counters Luther with his famous mantra: "That God speaks to us at all is already grace."

Luther's Aha! came when he saw that God's law and God's gospel are different speeches. Very different. Even different "grammars," as he argues in his Galatians commentary. (See more below.) Grace appears only in the second speech, the Jesus speech, as John's gospel specifies that speech's contents. The other speech is something else: law.

Luther himself said that the difference about those two speeches came as an Aha! to him, that it was his Reformation breakthrough. Here's my summary of one of his statements to that effect: "I used to see no fundamental difference between Moses and Christ. Both were the same. Moses was just farther back in history, Christ closer. Moses was not yet the full story, Christ was the full story. Then as I was reading Romans 1 again one day, the 'difference' (*discrimen*, in Latin) jumped off the page before my eyes. There are two very different kinds of righteousness in the Moses and Christ covenants. When I saw the *discrimen*, that God's law is one thing, God's gospel something else, *Da riss Ich herdurch*—that was a breakthrough for me."

Gorman's 237 pages argue the case that they are both the same, "the new covenant renews the old one." Renews it so that it will (finally) "work," which the old one patently did not. What's new about it is "the death of the Messiah" at the center of the renewal. But Christ's cross does not bring anything BRAND new to the specs of the old contract. No substantive NEW deal. The cross is "revelation" (a term used umpteen times) of what God was up to all the time—including what God was up to in the old contract. What's different here with the radical "going to the cross" is that God is making his old covenant so perfectly

clear that we just can't miss its message, the same old message, if we but open our ears and open our eyes. Ay, there's the rub.

Actually that is not the main "case" Gorman is arguing in this book. It's his constant presupposition. He doesn't actually "argue" for it. He seems to think "everybody knows" that covenant is a term used univocally throughout the Bible. All God-and-people covenants are of the same basic contract, an agreement wherein God specs out his part and God specs out our part as well. And the specs of the Moses-contract and the Jesus-contract are the same. What's called "new covenant" in NT texts is old covenant renewed, even when Jesus himself speaks of his "new covenant."

"The covenant-keeping that the New Covenant will effect can be summarized in two phrases: love of God and love of neighbor." Wait a minute. Isn't that as old as Moses? If that's it, then nothing new came in Jesus. Then follows this sentence. "Since the love of God (i.e., human love FOR God) in the Bible means both loyalty/obedience and intimacy/communion, we may use the word 'faithfulness' to connote these senses in one word."

Question: if the NT term "faith" is to be understood as my faithfulness, as Gorman renders it throughout his book, as my fulfilling the first commandment, namely, my faithfulness/loyalty/obedience to God, then how does one avoid this conclusion: in Romans 3, the second lesson for Reformation Day, justification by faith means justification by my faithfulness. If that's not Pelagianism, which Gorman abjures explicitly, then what is it? Semi-Pelagianism? John Wesley abjured that just as Luther did—and even more, as Jesus did.

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Gorman's primary agenda in this book is another topic, signaled in the sub-title: "A (not so) New Model of the

Atonement.” It is folks scrapping about atonement theories whom he wants to engage. His proposal is: nobody pays much attention these days—nor in the past—to the term “covenant” as an atonement model in all the literature. Strange, for it’s all over the place. Let me show you (he says). And this is the best one, an umbrella term that can include many of the other proposed ones floating around these days. It’s comprehensive, as the others are not. And it’s even better than that, not simply focusing on the “mechanics” of what happened on Good Friday/Easter, but on the “results” of Good Friday/Easter, what “Christ’s death effected.” To wit—

“the new covenant, meaning specifically the creation of a covenant community of forgiven and reconciled disciples, inhabited and empowered by the Spirit to embody a new-covenant spirituality of cruciform loyalty to God and love for others, thereby peaceably participating in the life of God and in God’s forgiving, reconciling, and covenanting mission to the world.

“I am proposing that this kind of holistic, communal, participatory, missional model of the atonement—incorporating various metaphors for its ‘mechanics’—reflects the heart and soul of the New Testament and is precisely what the church needs to appropriate, articulate, and actualize today. At the same time, it is imperative that we be clear that participation in Christ (or in his death) is not a vague, purely ‘spiritual’ term. New-covenantal, participatory love for God and neighbor manifests itself in concrete practices . . . practices of new-covenant faithfulness, love, and peace found in the teaching and example of Jesus and Paul, as well as other New Testament witnesses. That is, we explore more fully the meaning of the Messiah’s death and his people’s participation in it.”

Concerning atonement models, the author’s own main agenda, I think he has a point. New Covenant is a NT metaphor, largely unused in the history of theology, for the atonement. But there

are many such metaphors. From my reading over the years I've found at least two dozen different images/metaphors/pictures for what happened on GoodFriday/Easter, and regarding not only the mechanics, but the consequences. That means a couple dozen atonement "models," atonement "theories." The list available on request. (Note this: "theoria" is the Greek word for a picture, something seen. It's not an idea. It's a visual.)

I have no complaint about working out the parameters of "new covenant" as atonement model. What vexes me is the "nothing really new" in Gorman's new covenant, and his drumbeat that new covenant is (just) the renewal of the old. This emaciates the deep substance of both covenants, emaciating the grim reality of a sinner's contract with God, if Moses is the only way that God ever covenanted with humankind. Here iniquities are visited. "The soul that sinneth it shall die."

Which thereby emaciates the new one too. There is no substantive need for something radically new, a brand new contract, replacing (yes, contradicting) the old one. As in "Young man, you'll be glad to hear this: Your sins are forgiven."

I had a first un-fun within 30 seconds after the book came to my hands. I looked at the back of the book, the index of names, the bibliography. Was Delbert Hillers there? No. Why Hillers? He and I were fellow seminarians ages ago. But his Covenant-expertise lies elsewhere, in graduate school at John Hopkins under W.F. Albright. He was eventually Albright's' successor. And he wrote THE BOOK on covenant.

Here are words from his obit published in the Baltimore Sun:

"Delbert Roy Hillers, 66, Professor Johns Hopkins University, scholar of Near East, Old Testament studies. Died September 27, 1999.

One of his most important books, published in 1969 and still used in college classrooms, was 'Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea.'

'It is a key source that people still turn to,' noted Barry Gittlin, professor of biblical and archaeological studies at Baltimore Hebrew University.

Baltimore Hebrew U, Johns Hopkins U, Gorman's St. Mary's University—all three of them are in Baltimore, Maryland. Hmmm.

OK, so Gorman didn't use it. Possibly he never heard of it. After all, no one can read every book, even if it's all linked to Baltimore. Maybe, I hoped, he'd discovered on his own what Hillers unfolds there. That there are two very different covenant-types already in the OT itself—long before Jesus shows up. Already there God is reported to have offered two sorts of contracts, very different from each other. One is "Sinai and Shechem" as Hillers labels it. The other is "David, Noah, Abraham." The big difference is in the actual particulars, the "specs", as we'd say today, of these two covenant types. The very nature of the agreement in one is very different from the agreement in the other, different at the very core.

The covenant cut at Sinai and Shechem, Hillers says, is a classic Hittite suzerainty-treaty-format contract. The overlord spells out what he will do; the overlord prescribes what the underling will do. Here's the grammar of the connection between the two parties: "If you keep your part of the contract, underling, then I'll keep mine." It's "If YOU . . . then I" "Keep fulfilling the condition required, and I'll keep fulfilling my obligation. Fail to fulfill the required condition, I'll visit you. You will wish I hadn't."

The "David, Noah, Abraham" covenant is fundamentally different. One humongous difference is that there are NO conditions

specified for the underling. Yahweh takes the initiative—I will do this and this— and lays down NO conditions, obligations, requirements for the underling. (Sadly, Gorman constantly uses “requirements” and obligations” as specs for the new covenant in Christ, which is “David, Noah, Abraham” fulfilled!) Even more mind-blowing, Hillers—following his teacher Danker’s TWTS mantra—shows us that it is Yahweh, the suzerain—not the underling—who takes on the obligations [*Editor: thus the import of that ritual enactment in Gen. 15*]. So what’s the word for the underling, his part of the contract? “Just trust me.” Not a requirement, a condition, to keep Yahweh from “visiting,” but a consequence. “I’m offering (key verb: offer) you goodies. Free! For the goodies to get to you, trust me and the goodies DO get to you.” The grammar is not “If you . . . then I” Rather it’s “Since/Because I . . . therefore you” “SINCE I’m offering you this *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”) contract, THEREFORE trust me to make it your own.”

And the forgiveness of sins angle is made explicit in the specs when God offers that contract to David. See [2 Samuel 7:8-16](#) for details. The text says specifically: “yes, you David and your descendants will be commandment-breakers in terms of the Moses contract, but I will NEVER take my steadfast love away from you” (vv. 14-15). There will be NO “visiting the iniquities.”

I’ll conclude here using Gorman’s own axiom for vetting his statements. “Atonement models [are admissible] only if they can be clearly found in New Testament texts” (226). Why didn’t he use that axiom for all his covenant talk? That sentence comes right after this one: “The death of Christ should not be seen as the expression of divine anger or even wrath.” Yet that very wrath is clearly found in NT texts: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk. 15:34). TWTS.

Over and over again we read that the substance of the covenant—new or old—is the double imperative: Love God; love your neighbor. The terms “vertical and horizontal”—to God, to neighbor—pepper every chapter. This double-love commandment is only about our part of the contract; what we are “required, obligated” to do to make the covenant work. But we hear little discussion of what God is doing in that “vertical,” possibly because of the implicit Barth-premise that goes un-evaluated, namely, that if God speaks to us at all, it’s always grace. But is that clearly found in NT texts? Is God never the critic, never pays out sin’s wages?

Hard to find in Gorman’s detailed scanning of Scripture is that God ever speaks serious criticism, definitely nothing as serious as the lethal “visiting” in the Sinai contract. Yet TWTTS.

Clearly found in Paul’s opening chapter of Romans is “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ungodliness and wickedness.” TWTTS.

And, that there is a big shift in the “vertical dimension” coming from God’s side when Christ appears on the scene, that never surfaces in these pages. We never hear, as in the Reformation Day text from Romans, that the “righteousness of God through faith is ‘apart’ from the law’s sort of righteousness” (Rom. 3:21-22). Yet TWTTS.

But if you see no conflict in the covenant’s “vertical” dimension, no clash between God’s visiting sinners and forgiving them, then the vertical presents little to wrestle with. But isn’t this tug-of-war within these two covenants, with their opposite fates for sinners, precisely the stage on which the death of the Messiah occurs?

The death of the Messiah is the *mirabile duellum* hyped in the ancient Easter antiphon. “It was a *strange and*

dreadful fight, when Life and Death contended. The victory remained with Life. The reign of death was ended.” That is the “brand new” of the new covenant. It had never happened before. It most definitely is *not* renewing something that had been present earlier.

Calvary is a “vertical, God and people, ” event. So said Jesus: “Father, forgive them.” “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” “My God, my God, why?” “It is finished.”

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I’ll cease and desist in reporting my Un-fun with a final reference to what Gorman offers us in his treatment of covenant in the epistle to the Galatians. Right off the bat, it’s discouraging. Only two pages to cover the covenant theology in the entire epistle! And he never touches chapter 4 in those two pages. Why chapter 4?

Galatians 4 is Paul’s Ur-ur-theology of covenant. How so? Because the Galatian congregation—Paul’s own planting, patently Jewish folks who now call Jesus their Lord—has gone to work to merge Moses and Jesus into one covenant. TWTTS. Paul’s language gets harsh. “Foolish, bewitched Galatians.” “You are deserting THE gospel, turning to a different gospel, an OTHER Gospel . . . other than the one that we proclaimed. Anathema for such other-gospel proclaimers!”

The Galatians other-gospelers are going for the jugular. “If their Moses-and-Jesus merger is true, then Christ died in vain.” TWTTS, Gal. 2:21.

How does Paul ground such a radical claim? It’s all about covenants. Two of them. Galatians 4 spells out the details, says that God has been operating with two covenants from way back when, already in the OT. Long before Christ ever appeared there have been two very different covenants on the scene.

"Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants." TWTS, says Paul (4:24ff.). Two covenants with Abraham's two sons from two different mothers, Hagar and Sarah. One covenant is slavery, the other is freedom. Hagar is the Sinai-law covenant. There humans wind up in slavery. Sarah is a promise covenant. Its last word is freedom. One is flesh, one is Spirit. Each one labeled "covenant." Both are already on the scene among God's ancient people. They are polar opposites. To merge slavery and freedom into one entity is nonsense. Even worse, says Paul, it's anathema, a damnable thing. TWTS, cf.1:9.

Gorman's only mention of Gal. 4:24 appears as a footnote on page 62. "See Gal.3:17, 4:24 and their contexts." And that is a footnote to this sentence above: "Paul seems quite occupied with the covenant made with Abraham." Occupied indeed! The two contrasting covenants of 4:24 are the linchpin of the entire epistle.

If the Galatians haven't caught that point yet, Paul puts it into nickel words as he concludes the chapter with this: "Freedom is Christ's agenda with us, our liberation from the law covenant. So stand firm, therefore, in that freedom. Don't go back under the law's yoke of slavery." TWTS, 4:28-31.

Gorman surely knows this "clearly found" text in Galatians. He's written several books on the epistles of Paul. Does he ignore it here simply because it contradicts his own mono-covenant theology, where the law's "Love God, love neighbor" is the end of the line? This is hard to comprehend.

One more thing: Christ's "new commandment."

Gorman presents the "new commandment" as the same old, same old. Love God; love neighbor. Newness is in the new way to make it (finally) work, to wit, the Death of the Messiah. It sounds crass to say this, but Christ dies so that we can (finally)

fulfill our part of the Moses covenant. Christ does not replace, abrogate, Moses. Rather he makes it possible for Moses to have the last word.

Our sortie into Galatians shows Paul saying No.

For the NEW commandment is really new. Really different. Already signaled in the Greek adjective that accompanies the commandment. "Kainee" (of new quality) is the adjective used, not "nea" (new, as in "most recent"). Brand New. TWTTTS.

These items are novel in what new-commandment texts say:

1. Grammatically the new commandment is always an imperative in the second person plural whenever it shows up. Never "you" singular, as in the decalogue. Always "All y'all." It is mutual back and forth. It is not unidirectional as Sinai's grammar is: "You (singular) love God, love neighbor." Instead, it's "Y'all, play ping-pong agape."

2. It's always "in-house," addressed to the brothers and sisters, not to the outsiders.

3. "As Christ loved us" is the new criterion for love, not "as yourself."

4. This "ping-pong agape" commandment is always derivative. First, Christ loved us (manifold goodies offered)—an indicative sentence. Therefore, you recipients, practice ping-pong agape. This is an imperative sentence of consequence, formulated in the grammar of a grace-imperative: "Since Christ . . . , therefore you" This is brand new grammar when compared to Moses' grammar with its "if you . . . , then God"

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I ask myself: Why do I get so riled up about this? Is it octogenarian grumpiness? Dementia onset? A continuing life-long

curmudgeon complex? Probably all the above.

But it's also this: One-covenant theology is so regnant among Christians these days. Even though I'm out of most of the theologians' loops where I was once at home, I hear/read it everywhere. Messengers are re-making the message, contra the axiom, one of Bob Bertram's favorites: "The message makes the messenger."

The framework of today's widespread "re-made" message, the message I hear so often, comes off like this:

1. Moses and Jesus sing the same song. It's all about God's grace. That God speaks to us at all is already good news. Critic? Shmitic! When Jesus arrives to sing that song, he tops the charts. His singing makes it possible for us sinners to sing it too.

2. The song's final verse is "Be faithful to God's one and only Mosaic covenant: love God, love people. That will turn the messed-up world into the Kingdom of God."

3. How to make that actually happen? Latch onto Jesus. He's the way for you too to fulfill the law of loving God, loving neighbor. Replicate his life, work, words in your life, work, words—even all the way to your cross—and it will come to pass. Yes, it entails obligation, requirement, but you can do it.

Isn't that what Paul tells the Galatians is an "other" gospel, a gospel that is finally law-covenant-renewed? There is nothing new at all with its drumbeat-repeated verb "require." Whereas the Gospel's own cardinal verb is "offer." Yes, it's already on the scene among God's ancient chosen people, e.g., in Jeremiah 31 (and David, Noah, Abraham) with God's promise to offer forgiveness of sins, a brand new deal for sinners. What then came "new" with Jesus was that this new covenant gets fulfilled.

It's signed, sealed, delivered in "the death of the Messiah." Or in his own words, ala Luke, "the cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood." Or in John's report of Jesus' own words from the cross: "It is finished." The new covenant is a done deal.

Jesus' verb-of-choice was "offer." He offers sinners a new contract with God. God's resurrecting him at Easter is God's stamp of approval on the offer. Isn't That What The Text Says—all the way from Matthew to Revelation? I think so.

Edward H. Schroeder

The Octave of Reformation Day 2015.