

Michael J. Gorman, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014)

Review by David M. Moffitt

Michael Gorman's recent book *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant: A (Not So) New Model of the Atonement* makes a welcome contribution to the ongoing task of theological reflection on Jesus' death and atonement. Gorman is keen to bracket the question of *how* Jesus' death effects atonement for humanity (i.e., the mechanics of the atonement) in order to focus instead on *what* Jesus' death does for humanity (pp. 1–5). Gorman contends that, with respect to the atonement, the *how* questions are always penultimate to the *what* questions. The *what* of Jesus' death is, he argues, the inauguration of the new covenant (where "new" means renewal, not replacement, cf. p. 23) and the creation of the corresponding people with whom that covenant is established. This emphasis on the *what* allows him to focus more attention on how one is to live as the community of the redeemed. Thus, he advocates for "the new-covenant model" of atonement (p. 4), a model that takes seriously the way one ought to live as a member of the covenant effected at Jesus' death ("atonement in action" as he says on p. 55). Such a model "overcomes the inherent rift in many interpretations of the atonement between the *benefits* of Jesus' death and the *practices of discipleship* that his death both enables and demands" (p. 204, emphasis original).

As the book's subtitle suggests, Gorman argues that his new-covenant model recovers biblical emphases that have been eclipsed by later attempts to elucidate the mechanics of the atonement. The volume begins by noting the general lack of attention on the new covenant in atonement theories, problems with common models (especially their reductive and penultimate tendencies), and a brief study of the promise of covenant renewal in the Old Testament prophets (chapter 1). All of this suggests that the new covenant ought to be taken more seriously in theological reflection on the atonement. An exploration of Jesus' death and various covenantal motifs across the New Testament follows (chapters 2–3). These chapters lay particular stress 1) on ways the texts say or imply that Jesus' death inaugurates the new covenant, and 2) on how Jesus' death provides a cruciform pattern for living within that covenant. Gorman identifies a broadly consistent appeal to covenantal concepts in the Gospels, several of the epistles, and Revelation in which Jesus' death is closely correlated with the formation of a people who have been liberated/redeemed; and, who are called to live together in obedience to God. The bulk of the book (chapters 4–7) consists of explorations of concrete ethical implications and practices detailed in the New Testament that fill in the contours of the proposed cruciform model of new-covenant living. The three main Christian virtues serve to organize and unify these cruciform practices: faithfulness, love, and peace/hope. In the conclusion (chapter 8), Gorman offers a helpful overview of the shape of his argument and useful summaries of the main ideas of each chapter.

Gorman rightly highlights the variety of ways that the New Testament texts connect Jesus' death with the liberation of his people, the inauguration of the new covenant, and the formation of a community. He is right, in my view, that the importance of the new covenant has not been taken seriously enough. For the balance of this review, I offer a suggestion for further conversation. Gorman's book helpfully highlights a lacuna in much contemporary reflection on atonement, but

by focusing so much of his attention on the cross, even he has not gone far enough in exploring the relationship between atonement and the new covenant. While Gorman does mention the importance of the resurrection for atonement at a few points, this aspect of early Christian confession remains, I think, underdeveloped. Even less developed in the book, however, are the ascension and exaltation of Jesus. Yet, I suspect that these latter elements are essential to Jesus' atoning work, and they are best seen when we consider the covenantal logic of the new covenant. There is a *how/mechanics* of atonement in the new covenant even after Jesus' death, and this is linked with his ongoing high-priestly intercession at the Father's right hand.

If the new covenant works with a covenant logic analogous to the Mosaic covenant (implied in the idea that the new covenant is the renewal of the covenant), then some initial points of comparison between Levitical sacrifice in the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant seem warranted. I want specifically to focus on one of these points – within the logic of the Mosaic covenant, effecting atonement is the job of certain sacrifices. What then is atonement in this sacrificial sense? It is at least the state of being forgiven (dealing with moral failure) and/or being purified (dealing with issues of mortality or ritual impurity) by means of the priestly performance of presenting an offering to God on behalf of an offerer.

But why is atonement necessary? What, in other words is the purpose of the atoning sacrifices? To speak generally, atonement needs to be made if the offerer is to continue in the covenant relationship. Atonement, from this sacrificial point of view, is about maintaining the covenant relationship when something needs to be put right. To make atonement is to heal a breach, as it were, in the covenant relationship. When one lives rightly within the terms of the covenant and does not fall afoul of moral infraction and/or has not become ritually impure, one has no need to make an atoning offering. Gorman's emphasis on right living within the covenant context is related to atonement—to be in a right state within the covenant is to be at one or at peace with God. But what does one do when one sins against God or other members of the covenant community? From the perspective of the Mosaic covenant, the answer to this question is the sacrificial system. Sacrifice fixes a problem or set of problems in order to maintain covenant relationship between God and humanity. Sacrifice is an essential mechanism in covenant maintenance.

All of this, however, presupposes the existence of such a covenant and its community. That is to say, from a Mosaic perspective, sacrificial atonement makes sense *within* the covenant. To push the logic out a bit further—sacrificial atonement requires that a covenant first be inaugurated. Exodus suggests this pattern. The Mosaic covenant was first inaugurated, then the tabernacle and its appurtenances were made, the priests were ordained. Only then did the maintenance work of the sacrifices begin.

Much modern theology has not given proper attention to the ascension and its role in the new covenant, for it is precisely where the maintenance work of the new covenant is being done. It is, in other words, at the right hand that Jesus is interceding as the high priest for his people. Hebrews is obviously the text that expresses this idea most plainly, but it resonates with other passages as well (e.g., Rom 8:34–39; 1 John 1:7–2:2). In Mosaic terms, Jesus' intercession in God's presence is the perpetual presentation of the sacrifice (i.e., himself) that maintains the new

covenant. The analogy here between the role of Levitical sacrifice (and especially Yom Kippur) is striking.

If this line of covenantal logic is correct, then one weakness with Gorman's analysis is that, although he helpfully stresses the way Jesus' death inaugurates the new covenant, he does not pay enough attention to *how* Jesus' resurrection and ascension continue to make atonement possible for those who are members of the new covenant. Gorman, and he is hardly alone here, has collapsed covenant inauguration and covenant maintenance into Jesus' death. But the ascension, insofar as this is an essential prerequisite for Jesus' intercessory work in the heavens, is about the mechanics of maintaining the new covenant precisely because, as on Yom Kippur, this is where the new covenant's high priest is ministering on behalf of his people. If this is right, then the *how* of atonement is not only penultimate to the *what*. Rather, there continues to be a *how* that makes the *what* possible. Gorman's account, in other words, may not take a covenant logic seriously enough, at least, not if the Old Testament has a prescriptive contribution to make on these issues of Christian theology. He has nevertheless done us all a service by calling our attention to the importance of Jesus' death for inaugurating the new covenant.