One Covenant or Two? An Interview with Dr. Edward Schroeder and Dr. Theodore Ludwig

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The Lighter asked Pat Keifert to interview Dr. Theodore Ludwig and Dr. Edward Schroeder about their understanding of Delbert Hillers' *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (John Hopkins Press, 1969). The hope was that in bringing together a specialist in Old Testament and one in Systematics, there would be some interesting criticisms of Hillers and of each other's understanding of the covenantal notions. That happened, and I thank all concerned. **Steve Hitchcock**

Keifert: Hiller says on the bottom of page six: "This book will be written from the point of view that there were various ways of conceiving of the covenant of God in ancient Israel, centered about two opposite, almost contradictory notions." Dr. Ludwig, could you state for us what you consider to be the characteristics of those two notions?

Ludwig: He is talking on the one hand about the suzerainty treaty which forms the basis of the Sinai covenant: the form of the treaty when an overlord or great king comes to conclusive covenant with a vassal in which the vassal is bound to be loyal to the great king and serve him to the exclusion of any others. The important point being the great king is left free, so to

speak; he does not bind himself legally, although there is somewhat of a moral binding implied. While the other type of covenant, as Hillers and the Old Testament state, actually is more like a royal grant arrangement in which a superior grants something to the inferior party and in effect binds himself to the inferior party while placing no particular responsibility upon the inferior. This is the type of covenant Hillers finds illustrated in the Davidic covenant.

Keifert: There is then a covenant that binds the second party and another that doesn't bind the second party. Dr. Ludwig, would you say that these two notions contradict each other?

Ludwig: No, I don't think they essentially contradict each other. I think of them as two poles of Israel's conception of her relationship to God. They certainly are different yet both of them can be used as describing Israel's conception of her relationship to God.

Keifert: Dr. Schroeder, would you then agree that they are not essentially contradictory, that they are simply two different notions of one relationship, one ideal relationship, taking place in two different forms?

Schroeder: You have used two "rubber band words" in that statement. Ted started by saying "essentially" and then you said "ideal" notions. I am under the impression from reading Hillers that the word "essentially" means what is at the "ticking heart" of it all. That he, when he says "almost two contradictory notions", moves very close to saying that indeed the essence of these two notions is contradictory. He means that one notion goes and says this and the other one goes and says the opposite, that is, it says the antithesis. What I have perceived of his book and the data that he himself pulls out, I can see the sense of his statement, and I feel that sure enough one goes in one

direction and the other goes in what appears to be the opposite direction.

Keifert: Perhaps we are at the point where we can ask of you, Dr. Schroeder, what about the two covenant notions contradicts each other? Let's say, what about the Davidic covenant contradicts the Sinaitic covenant?

Schroeder: The question of contradiction comes, in my lingo, when you say, "Sinai- Shechem is bad news for any sinner and the David-Noah-Abraham covenant ain't. And that seems to me to be a contradiction; one of them says one thing and the other seems to say another.

Keifert: Dr. Ludwig, what is the "essence" of these two notions?

Ludwig: My conception of these two covenants is somewhat different from "notions." The covenants have to be set within the cultus life within Israel, and when you look at it that way, it is no longer a notion but it becomes a living reality in which these poles, I think, are somewhat present in both covenants. In other words, while in formal terms the Sinai covenant is one that binds Israel—is bad news for the sinner—in the cultus these people were worshipping a God who has, in effect, granted their existence; they experience the grace of God, so to speak. So it is not just a covenant of demand, but, in effect, their response to the grace they have received from God. The other covenant, the Davidic covenant, is not just a covenant where the God is bound and the king is left free; but within the whole setting of the covenant, the king represents the people before Yahweh, representing them also in their sinfulness—even in some of the liturgical rituals confessing the sins of the people to Yahweh. In a real sense the king is very obligated in this covenant. He is not just given this without any demands demanded of him, but he is very much bound within

the context which the concept is set. While formally these two covenants appear to be rather opposite, I think in actual living situation, both elements— people being bound and God binding himself to the people—are found.

Keifert: What you are saying is that they cannot be taken out of their historical setting and cultic placement, but that in actuality they somewhat "sloshed over" into each other in the process of worship?

Ludwig: No, I don't think they were sloshed over into each other. I think a formal distinction is important. But the formal distinction is made to conform to the particular cultural setting or situation. In other words, the time of the suzerainty treaty corresponded to the time and situation in which the people were living, and the covenant with David corresponds to that situation about which I was just speaking.

Keifert: They didn't exist, then, at the same time in the history of Israel? In other words, when there was a different situation for Israel, there was a different concept of the covenant?

Ludwig: Well, certainly the covenant with David grew up out of the particular cultural context in which Israel became a kingdom and a center of the power of civilization in the area. The Israelites, then, in effect had to reinterpret the whole theology to make sense out of this new situation. And so in doing this they tended to emphasize this particular pole which finds its expression in the covenant with David.

Schroeder: Ted, just a few moments ago you made the statement that formally so and so but as a matter of act in the actual living experience so and so. I thought I heard you trying to make the statement that formally—the way that you use that word—the two covenants got to be close. I see Hillers saying

that the formal difference—the difference in form—to be different from what you were just saying. I see him saying that there is a certain sense of bilateral litigation in the suzerainty treaty—although the suzerain seems to come out easier on this than the vassal, but at least he has some obligations and the principle of the treaty is bilateral obligations. Thus the distinction of form which Hillers is making is not unilateral; that is, the vassal in the Sinai-Shechem covenant has all the obligations, and in the Davidic covenant the royal grantor has all the obligations. Sinai- Shechem, then, is basically bilateral and the Davidic is unilateral in terms of where the obligations are, and that I would see as the formal distinction. Even then for me one would have to push t the next point which is involved when you talk about an ideal. Finally, you have not only to deal with the form, but you have to ask what on earth is the stuff inside that form. And I don't think we have got to that precisely, as yet. Your last major speech, Ted, was in my judgment still mostly formal at that level.

Ludwig: To come back to what you just said, as I recall, Hillers concedes that there is an implied feeling in the treaty that the suzerain will continue to protect and have some certain obligations. But I think he stressed strongly that in essence the suzerain is left free. I mean he seems to say that to me, but you say that wasn't your understanding.

Schroeder: He is left free and yet he isn't. What, indeed, is the shaper—what will shape the suzerain's future action? He is bound to have his future actions shaped by a faithful or unfaithful vassal. He commits himself to that, so in that sense he is, indeed, in a moral bond now.

Ludwig: I will go along with that; in that sense, it is bilateral. Yet all the stipulations in the actual form of the treaty are placed upon the vassal. But, yes, I don't think

that's the heart of the difference either. But to say that the suzerainty treaty is bilateral and Hillers tries to point out that the other covenant isn't—I think we can make that statement in general terms.

Schroeder: What I see is Hillers going one step further and saying, "If you agree on that, it is at another point that I, Del Hillers, see the real difference." It is not at this step that I see contradiction, but it is at the next step. The sovereign or suzerain's relation to the vassal and his future relation and continuing actions depend on the action of the vassal. And I hear Hillers saying in David-Noah-Abraham that the sovereign's continued action toward the vassal does **not** depend on the quality of that vassal's response. Even though David transgresses, I shall still be *heseth*. It seems to me that this is what you want to talk about—the substance of the covenant. And it is at that point that it registers with me that sure enough those are two contradicting notions.

Ludwig: That word "contradictory" keeps coming out. I guess that is where I pause. I think what needs to be done is to investigate this covenant with David more than Hillers does and to put it in the setting in which it found its place. Its setting is part of Israel's changeover from tribal league to kingdom in which they became a center of the cosmos. And as you study the hymns growing out of the royal cultus of Jerusalem, you find a very strong awareness that now somehow or another the total cosmos turns and depends upon the king of Israel and the people of Israel are centered on their king. So some of the formal words are used in some of the psalms that Hillers quotes as examples—in typical court language—talk about Yahweh making this everlasting covenant with David. And so, for instance, the psalms' talk about the blessings of Yahweh coming as a result of a king. When the king dies or is sick or anything like that, well, then the whole order breaks down. To me that is a new

cultural situation and some of the old elements are being given expression in a new idiom.

Keifert: So there is still this binding—or maybe not binding—but there are actions that the Israelites can carry out now that will affect the relationship with Yahweh in the future? So there is a sense of bilateralism in the Davidic covenant?

Ludwig: Bilateral, but in a different sense. I don't want to underestimate the difference between them, but I still think that there is this element in the Davidic covenant that the response of the people through the king still affects their relationship with Yahweh—but more in cosmic terms at this point.

Schroeder: For me what is of more weight than the point you make, Ted, "in the new cultural situation," is where the novelty comes to the fore. I'll admit that it is a new cultural situation that is being shaped by the new culture. But for me what is important is that the quality of response in the picture: "Okay, to what extent are they bound, what is it now that they have got a duty to do?" That is not answered by saying that they have got duties just like over in Sinai-Shechem. For me it would be to say, "Whatever their duties are, they will be determined by what on earth that initial unilateral action of Yahweh's to them is." If the initial word of Yahweh is his crazy *heseth*, love and mercy for you despite your response, then that initial word of Yahweh to them is what shapes whatever response is appropriate. And there it seems to me that the appropriate response to that kind of input is analogous to the kind of response that happens when any one human being says to another human being, "Hey, I love you." Initially the first response anticipated from that kind of thing is not, "Okay, I will obey you," or "I will obligate myself to you." But the first response that kind of input seems to elicit is either "Yes or No, I am going to let you love me." "Yes, or No, I am going to receive

your love." "Yes, or No, that suddenly hits me that is what the connecting link between us is." And for me that becomes the unique thing about the binding response. Israel is obligated to do that. If they break that covenant, they break solely because they don't make that kind of response.

Ludwig: Talking about this covenant love that comes from God to which the response is, "I will let you love me," are you relating that to the Davidic covenant? Don't you see that in the other covenant?

Schroeder: I don't see the unconditional quality of it in the other one because that one seems to have a condition to it. Yahweh's continuing that way with Israel according to the Sinai-Shechem covenant has this hooker in it that says if you don't keep covenant under these rubrics, I will visit the iniquities unto the third and fourth generation, etc. There is that kind of hooker, and I say that I don't see that in the David-Noah-Abraham covenant.

Ludwig: Well, I guess at this point I would like to go back to the idea that the first covenant did come about as a result of God's love and certainly it has a "hooker" in it. But I think the Davidic covenant has a hooker in it too. I don't think—

Schroeder: What is the hooker in the David-Noah-Abraham covenant?

Ludwig: I don't know if we could work too much with the Abraham covenant unless we go back to the old traditions where certainly a response was expected of Abraham: for example, the command to go to the new country and so forth. But in the covenant with David certainly the king was expected to be mediator of blessing to the people from Yahweh; and if he didn't rule justly and when he used this to embellish his own power instead of administering the blessings of Yahweh, well, then the prophets step in and

say, “You are breaking the covenant.” Take Amos or Hosea, for example: breaking of the covenant amounts to the fact that the rulers are stepping on the poor. In other words, they are not ruling according to the love that God is showing to the people.

Schroeder: That may be all right to put both Amos and Hosea together and say the grounds of their critique are the same. I see Hosea, at least, making the grounds of the critique to be the breaking of the Davidic covenant. It is more easy for me to say that Amos’s ground of critique to be the breaking of the Sinai-Shechem covenant. Especially since Hosea has got the curious image of Yahweh the jilted husband, who doesn’t destroy the unfaithful wife because she has jilted him, which is Sinai-Shechem, that is, if you are unfaithful I will visit your iniquities and this visitation is painful unto the third and fourth generation. Obviously I keep seeing New Testament parallels to this kind of critique of the Israel of the first century. The Pharisees in the Gospels were in my judgment working hard to fulfill their obligations framed in terms of Sinai-Shechem. The upsetting thing about Jesus’ coming in there is that he apparently, as I read him, was alerting them to the Hosea kind of faith, which in some cases Jesus seems to think is really central. At least in two cases in Matthew’s Gospel he says, “Go back and learn what Hosea meant when he said, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice.’” Even that phrase can be interpreted Sinai-Shechem-wise; that is, what God wants you guys to do is get out there and be merciful. In other words, it is still a further specification of what ethical life with the neighbor ought to be. **Or**—and here is my hunch— Jesus may well have been saying, “What you guys have lost sight of is the very heart of Yahweh’s own desire in his covenantal relationship with you; he wants mercy to be the jist of that relationship, he wants to be merciful to you as Hosea in his marriage illustrated. The thing where you guys are missing the boat is

that you are not apparently aware of that and therefore you are not in a position of even receiving the mercy. And Jesus would like to get the scales off your eyes in order that you might see that." Not that Jesus had something brand new, but that here is an entire part of the Old Testament—yea! the most important center of the whole Old Testament—which at the moment is somehow drowned or out of the picture.

Ludwig: I certainly agree that in Hosea you find this kind of a breakthrough to this understanding. But I hesitate to relate it to the Davidic covenant. It seems to me what Hosea is doing is reinterpreting the Sinai-Shechem covenant. The terminology and everything is correct for that covenant. As far as the northern kingdom at this time is concerned, the covenant with David down in Judah is not really a part of their cultic traditions anyway. Now I will grant you that perhaps in Jerusalem the kind of reinterpretation that Hosea did up north was taking place within in the context of this covenant with David.

Schroeder: The point of my argument, though, is based on my reading of Hillers. He says the substance of the Davidic covenant is this *heseth* election even in the face of unfaith on behalf of us, or even in the face of expectant future; Yahweh commits himself to stay with David and his descendants. This is the closest that the Old Testament comes to saying this is the forgiveness of sins by Yahweh, or forgiveness of sins of transgressions. I don't see any forgiveness in Sinai-Shechem.

Ludwig: Maybe not stated in the actual formulation of the covenant, but in the Exodus and certainly in the proclamation of the name of Yahweh and in the fact that he promises to send his presence and acceptance of the people. I mean, the whole tradition is where there is forgiveness forthcoming.

Schroeder: That word tradition is a very mixed bag, or at least

in terms of what we are talking about.

Ludwig: So is the Sinai covenant.

Schroeder: No, I mean in terms of if one were to say, “Look how Yahweh was to us in the wilderness, doesn’t that encourage you to at least say that Yahweh will forgive our iniquities?” My gosh, 6000 fell on that day, etc.” All of them died in the wilderness, and never got beyond where that place is.

Ludwig: There are two pictures of this wilderness tradition. Hosea says this was the time of the honeymoon, the honeymoon between Yahweh and Israel. Some of the other traditions look upon this as the time of testing for Israel in which they failed the test. But the very fact that Hosea would pick up wilderness traditions and make them the basis of pointing again and again to God’s graciousness, I think, indicates that at least in the tradition that came to Hosea, the interpretation of this Sinai covenant involved also a picture of graciousness and forgiveness of God. And, therefore, I think we are justified in saying that Israel’s basic conception of her relationship to Yahweh as far back as you can trace that (supposedly back to the Sinai covenant) also included the gracious and forgiving nature of Yahweh. But that is not to say there isn’t the tension between the two. It bursts forth in the Davidic covenant where the tension is overcome more, and again in Hosea. I suppose I would tend to de-emphasize the idea of the Davidic covenant as a different covenant.

Keifert: Dr. Ludwig, how did the Israelite compromise the two contradictory notions; that is, how did he resolve this tension you have been speaking of?

Ludwig: For me, from earliest times on, their conception always had these two polarities in tension and I don’t think they ever compromised them or they didn’t merge them.

That was the heart of their religion. Certainly it becomes more clarified in Hosea and perhaps in the Davidic covenant, although perhaps Isaiah and Ezekiel point out this also involves new dangers, new problems that have to be worked out. To put it crassly, I see "Law" and "Gospel" in both covenants—perhaps in a different type of tension than at present.

Schroeder: Ted, you just said that Hosea pulls these two covenants together in a unique and novel way, although in your sense you say they have always been together in almost every age of Israel's history…I would like to hear you out, then, on what you see as the unique Hosean way of pulling the two together.

Ludwig: The main thing about Hosea is the way he makes bold the fertility imagery of his time and makes this a mode for interpreting what the covenant is all about. Yahweh is the husband of all the people and disciplines the people. Finally, in chapter eleven you get this struggle in God himself between the wrath and the judgment and the decree coming out that "I won't punish you again, I will gather all your sins back."

Schroeder: What happens to the wrath and judgment?

Ludwig: I suppose that it is not really overcome except from the sight of God. It issues in what I would like to call redemptive love.

Schroeder: That is still not clear to me. I get the feeling from what you are saying that in chapter eleven of Hosea where he finally gets through wrestling with himself, finally just says, "I am going to turn off the wrath and judgment. I am not going to carry through on it." It is as though there were a radio blaring loud and he just turns the switch off.

Ludwig: No.

Schroeder: What happens to it, where does it go? Why does it stop?

Ludwig: I would see this as a preview of what happens on the cross. God's wrath is taken up into himself in a redemptive way.

Schroeder: That sounds like weasel words to me. How so is God's wrath taken up into himself in a redemptive way?

Ludwig: Ultimately, he is saying, "I forgive you." I don't see it as in a sequence of chronological events, that is, what Hosea is perceiving finally, what is the real nature of the covenant. This doesn't take away the wrath of God, for the next day God's wrath is still there after Hosea has this vision. But what he perceives is something in the nature of the covenant with God, and, now we can read back and see this before. Finally it comes to full expression: God's demands aren't lessened and yet God's forgiveness comes out. And that's finally the nature of the covenantal problems.

Schroeder: I haven't heard you say what I understand is Hosea's unique way of putting the two covenants together. So I will tell you, and then you tell me if a) that is what you were saying or b) that is **not** what you were saying because what I said is **wrong**. I too think that in Hosea we have a unique way by which these two covenantal notions are put together. The real pain and judgment-suffering that is caused by Gomer's marriage-covenantal break is a David-Noah-Abraham covenantal break, as I read it, refusing the steadfast love of the husband. The way that judgment gets overcome is that Hosea takes all the pain and suffering into himself. Therefore by analogy with Yahweh what Hosea is telling us is: Yahweh's David-Noah-Abraham covenantal relationship with you doesn't suddenly throw out Sinai-Shechem; but he is going to make Sinai-Shechem judgment stop, and the way he is going to do that will be to take the ouch into himself.

And to the extent, in a sense, Sinai-Shechem is satisfied and Sinai-Shechem is not violated and neither by any means is the *heseth* Davidic covenant. Yahweh is so intense about the Davidic covenant that he will take the ouch of the Sinai-Shechem covenant into himself and in that way that really does prefigure Good Friday.

Ludwig: That is precisely the way I would say it if I could phrase it in your words.

Schroeder: Quick, shut off the tape recorder before we disagree!

Ludwig: But then Hosea's understanding would be that this is really the way God has been all along, not that historically it has finally come to this conclusion. I think also that certainly Jeremiah picks up this same thing, and Deuteronomy with Moses in a sense becoming the symbol of the one who takes everything upon himself. The suffering servant follows in that tradition.

Schroeder: Yes, but it would seem to me that you have to be a little more precise in your rhetoric than you were five minutes ago when you said, "I see these themes of judgment and mercy—or Law and Gospel—sort of always going on." It is almost as though you were saying that these two constants and relatively equal components are sort of always there. For me, what Hosea shows is that the one triumphs over the other: the triumph of *heseth* over wrath and via this curious way Yahweh takes the judgment into himself. His mercy is so great that he even trumps his own judgment with love.

Ludwig: But then something new enters in there. I think this comes to expression in Hosea, but that is not to say that Israel didn't live by that reality previous to this. But it is not just his *heseth* overcoming his judgment. Isn't it something new that comes out of the struggle between the two?

Schroeder: You apparently think there is. So you tell me what that novelty, that *novum* is now that these two have struggled.

Ludwig: In Hosea's terms that *novum* is God's pain. It is not just his love but his pain that overcomes his wrath. In other words, God's love…It is not simply God's covenant love versus covenant wrath with love winning out. But it seems to me that the tension remains; the tension between the love and the wrath is always there. What happens is that God's own pain results in his forgiveness, or forgiving love. The new thing is his forgiving love—not the new thing, but the forgiving love grows out of the clash between love and wrath.

Schroeder: You have brought a new term into the conversation. You have two covenantal terms, love and wrath.

Ludwig: Perhaps the word should be God's grace toward his people.

Schroeder: Then forgiving love is then in some sense a third component which…

Ludwig: Which is not identical with either of these, but which is in the mind of Hosea the greater unity which he sees in God himself.

Schroeder: I would see forgiving love as already operational in whatever that word grace—as we were using it—now designates. And the only new thing I would see in Hosea is the *modus operandi*, the way in which that forgiving *heseth* operates: Yahweh takes the pain of judgment into himself and thereby, if you will, releases and redeems the prostitute Gomer and unfaithful Israel of its alienation, judgment, and all the negative words.

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