

EDM 10 – Do Not Despise an Edomite for He is Your Brother 1

We have gone a great deal in our journey in this teaching series. We started by talking about how all of us wear glasses when we read Scripture. By this, I mean that we interpret Scripture according to the way we have been taught. The way we have been taught largely determines how we see Scripture. Sometimes other people teach us well and we see things clearly. Sometimes teachers do not teach well and we do not see Scripture clearly. Such is the case with the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9:10-13 and especially the words “Jacob I loved and Esau I hated.” Our Calvinist brothers have said this means that God does not wish to save everyone. In fact, they teach that God foreordained some to eternal damnation while he chose only some to be saved. This is the wrong interpretation of Paul’s words. And I have shared with you that if we want to understand Paul’s words in this great passage, we must understand the background to what he said. And so we have looked at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 and we discovered that far from condemning Esau/Edom to eternal perdition, God used a prophecy about them for salvation! We have looked at the OT prophets that talked about Edom’s sins and there we discovered that though God judged Edom for its sins (just as he did with Israel), this was not eternal judgment. It was historical judgment and the hope was laid out for Edom and all the nations that they could be saved. In one of the greatest passages in the NT we saw that Edomites sought for Christ when he walked this earth.

Today, we are going to go back further into time to learn more about Edom. We are going to look at Israel’s encounter with Edom when it was walking through the wilderness on its way to the promised land. To get to the promised land, Israel had to walk through Edom’s territory. How would the descendants of Esau, respond to Israel as it walked through the wilderness toward its border? We read about this in Numbers 20:14-21.

¹⁴From Kadesh Moses then sent messengers to the king of Edom: “Thus your brother Israel has said, ‘You know all the hardship that has befallen us; ¹⁵that our fathers went down to Egypt, and we stayed in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our fathers badly. ¹⁶But when we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt; now behold, we are at Kadesh, a town on the edge of your territory. ¹⁷Please let us pass through your land. We will not pass through field or through vineyard; we will not even drink water from a well. We will go along the king’s highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through your territory.’” (Numbers 20:14-21)

Israel approached Edom from Kadesh to the west of its border. How they approached is significant. Israel did not come with weapons or demands, only a polite request to pass through the land peacefully. Let’s make four observations from this passage. First, we notice that Edom has already formed itself into a nation ruled by a king. It is far more advanced, politically, than Israel. Kings would not arise in Israel for a few more centuries, but Edom was already there, and

its national status is a partial fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham that kings would come from him. Here are the promises to Abraham in Genesis 17.

17:6 “I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations of you, and kings will come forth from you.”

17:16 “I will bless her (Sarah), and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.”

Lest anyone doubt that this applies to the Edomites, we observe that in 17:6 God spoke of *nations*, not just Israel, and in 17:16, he spoke of Sarah being a mother of *nations* and that *kings of peoples* would come from her. Israel is not the only nation in view and the rise of nations and kings is a sign of God’s blessing. Thus, Edom is walking in the blessing of God.

Second, we note Moses’ familial and civil speech in his request.¹ He said, “Please, let us pass through the land.” He also identifies Israel as Edom’s *brother* (20:14).²

Third, we note Moses conceding that the land and all that is in it belongs to Edom. “We will not pass through field or through vineyard; we will not even drink water from a well. We will go along the king’s highway, not turning to the right or left, until we pass through *your territory*.”

Fourth, in an ironic turn of events, we discover that “Jacob” is the brother in the wilderness and is in need. His brother “Esau” has the supplies to help. Here are Moses’ words about their need.

“You know all the hardship that has befallen us; ¹⁵ that our fathers went down to Egypt, and we stayed in Egypt a long time, and the Egyptians treated us and our fathers badly. ¹⁶ But when we cried out to the LORD, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt; now behold, we are at Kadesh....”

Centuries before it was Esau in the wilderness, ready to die, and asking Jacob for help. Brothers are meeting again. Now, “Jacob” is asking “Esau” for help.

The appeal made no impression on the king of Edom. His people came out with military force. The text does not explain why Edom showed hostility. One could surmise that it was Esau’s bitter descendants taking revenge upon the children of Jacob for what had happened centuries before – the way Jacob cheated Esau twice! Descendants, especially in that part of the world and at that time had a long memory.

It could have also been the natural desire to defend their land against what they saw as a military threat. Edom lived in constant preparation for such a threat. Glueck says, “Strong fortresses

¹ Edward Bridge speaks of Israel using the civil social conventions of their day, “Polite Israel and Impolite Edom: Israel’s Request to Travel through Edom in Numbers 20:14-21,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol 35.1 (2010): 88.

² Anderson notes that Moses began his request to pass through the land using the word, “brother,” a word that could be used for a neighbor or the larger international community but used almost exclusively for Israelites, Bradford Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance: A Canonical Reading of the Esau and Edom Traditions*, T&T Clark, New York, 2011, 162.

barred the way on all the frontiers of Edom and of Moab north of it.”³ It is natural to assume that Edom would act defensively against an encroaching people. Yet, the Israelites did not respond in kind but turned aside rather than engage in battle. Why? The answer comes from Deuteronomy 2:1-8 which reviews Israel attempting to pass through Edomite territory years later.

¹ “Then we turned and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea, as the LORD spoke to me, and circled Mount Seir for many days. ² And the LORD spoke to me, saying, ³ ‘You have circled this mountain long enough. Now turn north, ⁴ and command the people, saying, “You will pass through the territory of your brothers the sons of Esau who live in Seir; and they will be afraid of you. So be very careful; ⁵ do not provoke them, for I will not give you any of their land, even as little as a footstep because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession. ⁶ You shall buy food from them with money so that you may eat, and you shall also purchase water from them with money so that you may drink. ⁷ For the LORD your God has blessed you in all that you have done; He has known your wanderings through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you; you have not lacked a thing.”’ ⁸ “So we passed beyond our brothers the sons of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road, away from Elath and from Ezion-geber. And we turned and passed through by the way of the wilderness of Moab.

So Israel turned around. They wandered many more years in the wilderness. Finally, God commanded them to go through Edom again. On this second attempt to pass through Edom,⁴ Israel approached from the south. In this second approach, there is no record of an appeal to the king and no record of an Edomite military blockade. Yet, we notice that Israel was told to be careful as it passed through the land and not to provoke the Edomites. They were to travel on the King’s Highway that stretched from the Gulf of Aqaba through Edom to the east of the Jordan River all the way north to Damascus.⁵

What is noteworthy in the biblical text is the reason God told Israel not to provoke Edom, “I will not give you any of their land, even as little as a footstep because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession,” (Deuteronomy 2:5). Readers of the Bible are usually aware that God gave the Promised Land to Jacob and his descendants, Israel. But many do not know that God also

³ Nelson Glueck, “The Civilization of the Edomites,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 1947, 4, Volume X, 78.

⁴ Glatt-Gilad seeks to harmonize the two approaches to Edom. See, David A. Glatt-Gilad, “The Re-interpretation of the Edomite-Israelite Encounter in Deuteronomy II,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 47 No 4, Oct 1997, 443.

⁵ “Since passage through their country had been refused, the Israelites had to go around it; this could only be possible on the eastern side along the border between cultivated land and desert. In order to reach the territory north of the Arnon, the Israelites would also, then, have to pass in some way or another the land of the Moabites which was situated between Edom and the Arnon.” Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 150. He says this is the highway they wanted to get to and use in their earlier encounter (Numbers 20:17) when Edom refused.

gave a land grant to Esau and his descendants. All this is based upon Isaac’s blessing in Genesis 27:39.

The land was no fertile crescent. It was formidable in many ways.⁶ Edom was situated between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. It was a mountainous region, and those mountains blocked rain from falling in the eastern part of its territory, but the western slopes had adequate rainfall in winter making it fit for cultivation. There were also forests on the western slopes which is why some believe it was called Seir (hairy).⁷ Along the King’s Highway which was in the eastern part of Edom, population centers thrived.⁸ In a secure, stable environment learning increased and Edom became known for its wisdom.⁹

Its mineral wealth attracted the attention of Egypt, particularly the copper mines.¹⁰ It also attracted the attention of other kings, namely those of Israel, which is why David, Solomon, and others wanted to conquer the land. They wanted its minerals, and they wanted to control the trade on the King’s Highway. This prosperity went back to the earliest days of the nation when Esau moved to the territory that God gave him. We read in Genesis 36:6-8:

⁶Then Esau took his wives and his sons and his daughters and all his household, and his livestock and all his cattle and all his goods which he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land away from his brother Jacob. ⁷For their property had become too great for them to live together, and the land where they sojourned could not sustain them because of their livestock. ⁸So Esau lived in the hill country of Seir; Esau is Edom.

This does not sound like a description of someone who has been cursed. Instead, it sounds like Esau – the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham – was prospering. Although Esau would not have a land flowing with the dew of heaven and the fatness of the earth (27:28, 39), we have seen that he still prospered. The land had to sustain the abundance of his flocks, and Esau conquered the land with God’s help and generated a people of his own.

⁶ “The geography of Edom encouraged in Edomites a frontier-like independence, brimming with overconfidence. In an era when soldiers did without mechanized travel and gunpower, the high ground was a powerful Edomite ally that hampered invasion by enemy soldiers forced to fight while climbing rock walls.” John A. Beck, “Geography of Edom,” *Discovery House Bible Atlas*, Discovery House, GR MI, 2017, 197-198.

⁷ Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1979, 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁹ Rabbi Ouri Cherki in commenting upon Obadiah 1:8 says, “The verse which describes the destruction of the wisdom of Edom implies that in fact they do have wisdom. There would seem to be a direct link between the characteristic wisdom of Edom and the fact that it was lost,” Ouri Cherki, [The Wisdom of Edom – The Noahide World Center](#), November 26, 2015.

¹⁰ “There is a geological connection between the copper mines of the Arabah and those of Sinai worked by the Egyptians....” Glueck, “The Boundaries of Edom,” 145.

This leads us to our next point. We learn that God was also actively involved in Esau’s conquest of the land. “He destroyed the Horites from before them; they dispossessed them and settled in their place even to this day,” (Deuteronomy 2:22b).¹¹

Thus, we see that Edom had a God-given right to its land just as Israel did.¹² This was behind the warning, “Do not provoke them, for I will not give you any of their land, even as little as a footstep because I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession.”

We are going to end today’s lesson right here. I think you can see that Esau and his descendants experienced the blessing of God. This does not sound like someone, or a nation, that has been foreordained to eternal judgment. But there is more! In our next lesson we will discover an even more amazing blessing of God that he offered the Edomites. I hope you will join us!

¹¹ Some have noted that this type of language in granting land derives from ancient suzerainty treaties. Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, 22-23.

¹² W.A. Sumner, “Israel's Encounters With Edom, Moab, Ammon, Sihon, and Og According To The Deuteronomist,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 18, No 2, Apr 1968, 220.