

EDM 11 – Do Not Despise an Edomite for He is Your Brother 2

In our previous message, we looked at Israel’s encounter with Edom in the wilderness. To get to the promised land, Israel had to walk through Edomite territory. As we looked at those passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy, we learned something truly wonderful. Esau was not cursed as many imagine him to be. Esau and his descendants were blessed by God. God gave them a land. God fought for them. Their land was blessed. It was not the land flowing with milk and honey like the promised land, but it was a place to live and Edom prospered!

We turn, now, to one of the most amazing passages in the Law regarding how Israel was to look upon the Edomites, Deuteronomy 23:7-8.

“You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother; you shall not detest an Egyptian, because you were an alien in his land. The sons of the third generation who are born to them may enter the assembly of the LORD.”

The word, detest/abhor refers to “persons, things, or practices that offend one’s ritual or moral order,” and the verb “delineates the loathing of that offensive person, thing, or practice.”¹ It is the opposite of lovingkindness, the positive way of expressing God’s covenant faithfulness. Israel was not to act contrary to this covenant kindness toward his Edomite relatives. They were not to treat Edomites as religiously unclean.²

Deuteronomy 23 defines who could be part of the assembly of the Lord. The phrase, *entering the assembly*, refers to Israel as a worshiping community that gathers in God’s presence. “Thus to enter the assembly of the Lord would indicate a person who became a true Israelite and who therefore shared in the worship of the Lord.”³ This was God’s provision to the descendants of Esau.⁴ Thus, God recognized Edom as a separate state with a God-given land. Their territory was off-limits for Israel. They were brothers to Israel. They could enter the assembly of the Lord and become part of the worshiping community.

So, the Edomites were at first considered Israel’s brother! Though Edom came to be hated, that hatred was not eternal nor was it decreed before the foundation of the world by God. It was hatred that arose from centuries of animosity and warfare, but it was a hatred that could be overcome with the love and grace of God. We have seen these seeds of hope and grace in the writings of the prophets, and we see them in this initial encounter between the young nations. But they were also present in some of the earliest records of the Edomites that are included in our

¹ Ibid., 173-174.

² Gerhard Von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966, 146.

³ Craigie, 296.

⁴ We can move one step further in this history. After Israel entered the land and dispossessed Canaanite nations, Joshua delineated the boundaries of each tribe. He also delineated the boundaries between Israel and Edom. He listed cities of Israel in Judah “at the extremity of the tribe of the sons of Judah toward the border of Edom...,” (Joshua 15:21-32).

Bible. I am referring to the genealogies of the Edomites that are placed twice in the canon of Scripture.

I now want to point you to some of the most challenging reading in the Bible – a list of the names of people who no longer exist. And we find it twice! – in Genesis 36 and 1 Chronicles 1:43-54. It often tries our patience, and we feel like Israel in the wilderness as we wander through the names, some of which we have difficulty pronouncing. Why would the writers of Scripture allocate such space to the descendants of Esau? Its names and places are obscure to modern readers and no doubt to many in antiquity.

We have already noted that one of the overlooked promises to Abraham is that kings would come from him (Genesis 17:6, 16, 20). Abraham’s and Hagar’s grandchildren through Ishmael became twelve princes of a great nation. Now, Abraham’s and Sarah’s descendants (17:16) through their grandson, Esau, would become Edomite kings, and they are listed in 36:25ff.⁵

The inclusion of Esau’s descendants is a story that the writers in Genesis and 1 Chronicles are crafting for the reader. Throughout Genesis, we see an internal structure called *toledots* – genealogies and/or stories about the person producing a genealogical line. “Within the book of Genesis, the phrase (“these are the generations of”) or (“this is the account of the generations of”) is used ten times, each of which seems to signify the direction of the storyline (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, [9]; 37:2).”⁶ Five of these are major headings and five are subheadings.

The heading not only indicates the flow of the story but determines its direction. . . . Through the series of toledot headings, the narrative does not wander aimlessly, but according to a certain pattern. On the macro scale, this pattern takes the reader from the heavens and earth (creation) at the beginning of Genesis to Jacob (Israel) at the end of Genesis. Thus, within 36 chapters (2-37) the readers’ focus has been drawn from the entire universe to a small tribe wandering around the Levant and Egypt.⁷

Significantly, the *toledots* for Ishmael (Genesis 25:12-18) and for Esau (36:1-43) are included in the biblical account with the covenant bearers. They are part of the story the writer is telling, and several important truths emerge from their inclusion in the story. In these *toledots*, God reminds

⁵ In addition to the listing of the kings, 36:43 speaks of the Edomite “habitations” and “the land of their possession.” Anderson notes that the Hebrew word in verse 43 is the same word used in 17:8 which is God’s promise of a land. Some negate this association because the word is often used for land and burial plots, but the Genesis narratives show that even burial plots had theological significance. The patriarchs wanted to be buried in the land of promise and nowhere else (Genesis 23; 50:4-14, 25; Exodus 13:19), Anderson, 139. Anderson also shows how the word is used in Joshua 22:19; Genesis 48:14; and Leviticus 25:34 in this theological way. He quotes William T. Keepmans, NIDOTTE 1:359, “The first reference to a possession of this sort comes in the context of God’s covenantal promise of land, described in terms reminiscent of other ancient NE land grants given by a king to his vassals. Subsequent texts repeatedly seek to show how God’s provision is being received by his people.”

⁶ Jared M. August, “The Toledot Structure of Genesis: Hope of Promise,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174 (July-September 2017), 267.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 270.

his people that they are part of a larger story that is not complete without other nations, including Edom. God’s work is not limited to Israel; his blessings flow over the borders of Israel.⁸ Spina presents a balanced view when he says, “To be sure, nothing could compensate Esau for missing being the bearer of the ancestral promise. Due to the inscrutable will of Yahweh, that role was reserved for Jacob. Nevertheless, Esau was blessed with an excellent future consisting of progeny, prosperity, land, statehood, and kings.”⁹

The names in the genealogy, though meaningless to us, must have been valuable enough for ancient readers to preserve. “The story of Genesis clearly has room for Esau’s legacy. It remembers his wives and children and the land on which he settled, demonstrating that Esau is more than a supporting character in the story. He is a son to be remembered. His people are worthy of commemoration. Esau has a legacy as a father of a great household.”¹⁰ Thus, the compiler who has these records in front of him sees the importance of including the *toledot* of Esau.

Among the many names in the list are ones that praise God for his blessing and grace.¹¹ Westermann concludes this about the Jacob/Esau saga, “The family bond across the generations is stronger here than political enmity.... The Jacob-Esau story deals realistically with conflicts between brothers, but the conflicts cannot alter the fact that they are and remain brothers. The author lays greater weight on the family relationship than on the political.”¹²

The message has been remarkably consistent through the ages. Although there was bad blood between Jacob and Esau and even worse between Israel/Judah and Edom, we also find family relations, original hope, and prophetic promise for restoration. And in the stories when the Edomites and Israelites first met we find more enigmatic puzzle pieces.

⁸ Anderson, 142-147.

⁹ Spina, 21.

¹⁰ Tyler D. Mayfield, *Father Abraham’s Many Children: The Bible in a World of Religious Difference*, Eerdmans, GR MI, 2022, 117-118.

¹¹ “...There are surprising elements in the theophoric personal names. Some also occur in Israel; others could be Israelite. The names expressing praise of God express that praise in the same way as do names and the Psalms in Israel. The name of the Edomite king, Shaul, expresses the experience that prayer for a child has been answered, as does the same name of the Israelite king. And even though this is but a tiny excerpt from the religion of the Edomites, it shows nevertheless something common to both,” Westermann, 569.

Eliphaz – My God conquers, or, is gold

Reuel – God is my companion

Magdiel – God is my gift

Mehetabel – God confers benefits

Zerah – God shines forth

“All these names express or suggest the praise of God. Each could also have been uttered in Israel (e.g., El-hanan) without any trace of another religion,” 567.

¹² *Ibid.*, 568.

- Esau was abundantly blessed, so much, that he had to relocate his flocks and herds to another part of the region in what became his homeland, Edom.
- God fought for Edom so that he would conquer the land.
- Israel had no right over Edom’s land.
- God provided a way for Edomites to enter the assembly of the Lord. Israel was not to abhor them. As we saw in the previous messages, Jeremiah said they and other peoples would be built up in the midst of Israel’s assembly (Jeremiah 12:14-17).
- Esau’s family line was important enough to include twice in the canon of Scripture, and many descendants had names that honored God.

All this presents another Edomite enigma. It is an enigma for the Calvinist position of eternal hatred for Esau/Edom by God’s foreordained decree. It is an enigma because we cannot find in the narrative a divinely predetermined hatred toward Esau/Edom, let alone a decree for eternal damnation. Though we read in Scripture about challenges, difficulties, injustices, atrocities, and abundant sin, we also see that God’s plan did not foreordain those evils. God’s plan was to overcome them by his grace and include Edom in his family. Edom may have been “hated” in the sense that it was not the “loved” covenant nation, but that was ancient covenant talk to encourage the covenant people to persevere in a challenging time. God would be faithful to his promises. He would bless his people, and in blessing them, he would bless all the peoples of the earth – including the Edomites. The end of the story would then match the beginning of the story and God’s gracious designs would be perfectly experienced.

The misunderstanding of the words in Romans 9:10-13 is almost gone. The historical record makes things clearer, and we realize that though we are chronologically far from Paul’s words in Romans 9, we are even further, theologically, from the Calvinist interpretation of his words.

We have almost completed our historical journey. Although we have come a great distance, we must travel a bit further into the past and find the stories that started it all. We have had a glimpse of that story as we examined Edom’s land and Esau’s *toledot*. We will now examine the lives of Jacob and Esau in greater detail and see what they teach us. As we will see in the family archives, members who were torn apart by sin came together by the grace of God.