

ISRAEL'S CONFRONTATION WITH EDMOM (Num 20,14-21) ACCORDING TO JOSEPHUS AND PHILO

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1. Introduction

In the presentation of the Old Testament, the relationship between the «brother peoples» Israel and Edom was both long-lasting and tension-filled.¹ One moment in their multi-century interaction comes in Num 20,14-21 as Edom denies Israel's request that it be allowed to pass through the former's territory.² In this essay, I propose to examine three, fairly extensive first century A.D. treatments of the Numbers text, i.e. those of Josephus, *Antiquitates judaicae* (hereafter Ant) 4.76-77 and Philo, *De vita Mosis* (hereafter Mos.), 1.239-249 and *Quod Deus Immutabilis sit* (hereafter Deus), 144-180, both in relation to the source passage and to each other.³

By way of background to my discussion of Josephus and Philo, however, certain comments on Num 20,14-21 itself are first in order. I begin with the

1. For a survey of the relevant Old Testament material, see J.R. BARTLETT, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOTSup 77), Sheffield, 1989; B. DICOU, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist. The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and History* (JSOTSup 169), Sheffield, 1994.

2. On this text, see in addition to the commentaries: H. SEEBASS, «Wollte Mose ursprünglich nach Edom? Zu Num 20,14-21», in K.D. SCHUNK – M. AUGUSTIN (eds.), «Lasset uns Brücke bauen...» *Collected Communications to the XV Congress of the Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Cambridge 1995* (BEATAJ 42), Frankfurt/Main, 1998, pp. 73-79; W. OSWALD, «Die Revision des Edombildes in Numeri XX 14-21», *VT* 50 (2000) 218-232.

3. My comparative study of the above material is intended as a development of the summary remarks concerning this found in G. DORIVAL, *Les Nombres* (La Bible d'Alexandrie 4), Paris, 1994, pp. 390-391. My study will also take into account the varying ancient text-forms of Num 20,14-21 where these differ from the MT (as is the case particularly with the targums) as well as the comments on the passage found in midrashic-rabbinic tradition, on which see L. GINZBERG, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1968, III, pp. 313-316; VI, pp. 109-110, nn. 620-622.

passage's context. In Numbers 20, our pericope is preceded by a summary notice on the death of Miriam (v. 1) and the story of Moses and Aaron's offense at the waters of Meribah which leads to the Lord's pronouncing the sentence of death upon them (vv. 2-13). In turn, it is followed by the account of Aaron's demise and the high priestly accession of his son Eleazar (vv. 22-29).

As for Num 20,14-21 itself, one might distinguish five component sections within this: Israel's initial message to Edom (20,14-17); Edom's opening, negative response (20,18); Israel's second message (20,19); Edom's reiteration of its refusal (20,20-21a); and the upshot: Israel's changes its march route (20,21b).

The Numbers account, for its part, is not the Bible's only reference to this particular confrontation between the two peoples. In Judg 11,17a, first of all, Jephthah, in his message to the king of the Ammonites that recalls the Israelites' Transjordanian wanderings, sums up the content of Num 20,14-21 in this way: «Israel then [i.e. from Kadesh, v. 16] sent messengers to the king of Edom, saying: "Let us pass, we pray, through your land"; but the king of Edom would not listen.» Also to be noted here is Deut 2,1-8 which offers its own distinctive version of the Edom-Israelite interaction, this formulated as a speech by Moses to the people recalling highlights of their past forty years of shared history. Deuteronomy's rendition opens with Moses quoting the Lord's directive to him to head north following the people's prolonged circuit of Mount Seir (vv. 1-3). In connection with that directive, the Lord, Moses continues, commanded him to instruct the people to pass through the territory of Edom, whose people will be «afraid of» them (v. 4), but with whom they are not to «contend» since the Lord has not allotted any of the Edomites' territory to them (v. 5). Rather, the Israelites are purchase the necessary food and water from the Edomites (v. 6), using the resources with which the Lord has blessed during their forty years in the desert (v. 7). The actual delivery of these directives by Moses to the people is not recorded. Rather, the passage concludes with Moses stating (v. 8): «So we went on, away from our brethren the sons of Esau who live in Seir...» Subsequently, in Deut 2,29 Moses, in his message to the Amorite King Sihon requesting passage through his land, cites the precedent set by Sihon's Transjordanian neighbors: «(let me pass through on foot), as the sons of Seir and the Moabites who lives in Ar did for me...».⁴

With the foregoing remarks concerning the context, components, and biblical parallels of Num 20,14-21 in mind, let us now turn to the treatments of the passage by Josephus and Philo.

4. On the question of the literary relationship between Num 20,14-21 and Deut 2,1-8 (+ 29), see the commentaries on Numbers and Deuteronomy and the articles cited in n. 2.

2. Josephus

Josephus gives his rendering of Num 20,14-21 a rather different context than the biblical one as cited above. Specifically, in the historian's presentation, the account of the Israel-Edom confrontation (Ant 4.76-77)⁵ is immediately preceded, in 4.67-75, by the Mosaic instructions concerning the means of support for priests and Levites that Josephus draws primarily from Numbers 18 though with some use of other Pentateuchal cultic-legislative passages as well. Ant 4.76-77, in its turn, finds its continuation in 4.78-84 where Josephus reproduces the following biblical items: the death of Miriam (4.78// Num 20,1), the ritual of the red heifer (4.79-81),⁶ and the death of Aaron and his succession by Eleazar (4.82-84 // Num 20,22-29). Josephus thus anticipates the events of Num 20,14-20, making these the first of the happenings of Numbers 20 he relates.

In line with his juxtaposition of the provisions for the clergy (Numbers 18) with his version of Num 20,14-21, Josephus introduces the latter passage with a transitional phrase that links this what precedes, likewise attaching a notice on Israel's arrival at the Edomite frontier. This opening sequence in Ant 4.76 accordingly reads: «*When Moses had drawn up these regulations [i.e. those of 4.67-75] after the sedition,⁷ he set out with his whole army and came to the frontiers of Idumaea (Ἰδουμῶαζ)...*»⁹

5. For the text and translation of this passage, I use R. MARCUS, *Josephus*, IV (LCL), Cambridge, MA – London, 1930, pp. 512-513. I have likewise consulted the text and translation of and notes on the passage in E. NODÉT, *Flavius Josèphe Les Antiquités juives*, II: *Livres IV et V*, Paris, 1995, pp. 19-29*, as well as the annotated translation of L.H. FELDMAN, *Judean Antiquities 1-4* (Flavius Josephus Translation and Commentary 3), Leiden, 2000, pp. 355-356. All other, occasional quotations of Josephus are likewise drawn from the LCL edition. With regard to the text-form of Numbers (and the Pentateuch as a whole) used by Josephus in *Antiquities* 1–4, it is generally agreed that for this portion of his presentation he used primarily a Hebrew text; see NODÉT, *Antiquités juives*, II, xi-xiii (who further holds that the particular Hebrew Pentateuchal text used by Josephus had noteworthy affinities with the *Vorlage* of the Codex Vaticanus).

6. In thus giving his parallels to Num 20,1 and 19,1-21 back to back as he does, Josephus both reverses their biblical sequence and omits the story of Moses and Aaron's offense (Num 20,2-13) which in the Bible comes immediately after Num 20,1.

7. The reference here is to the revolt of Korah and its sequels (Numbers 16–17), of which Josephus gives his elaborated version in Ant 4.11-66. (I italicize those components of Josephus' account like the above which lack a discernible basis in Num 20,14-21; I shall do the same in my subsequent citations of Philo's two renditions of the passage.)

8. In both MT and LXX Num 20,14-21, the reference is to «Edom». Throughout his biblical rewriting, Josephus generally (as here) substitutes the above Greek place name for the biblical one. He does so in line with his remark in Ant 2.3 where, in the context of his version of the story of Esau's sale of his birthright to Jacob (Gen 25,29-34), he first notes that the incident led to Esau's getting the Hebrew nickname «Adom», the Hebrews' word for «red», a name still used of the country of Esau's descendants by the Jews, and then adds: «the more dignified name of Idumaea (Ἰδουμῶαζ) it owes to the Greeks».

In Num 20,14a Moses dispatches messengers to the king of Edom «from Kadesh,¹⁰ the site at which the Israelites arrive and where Miriam dies in Num 20,1. Josephus, who, as noted above, relates the demise of Miriam only at a later point, i.e. 4.78 (where he situates this event «on a mountain which they call Sin»), accordingly leaves the indication aside in his rendering of Num 20,14a in Ant 4.76b: «... then, sending envoys to the king of the Idumaeans...»

Moses' message to the king of Edom opens (Num 20,14b-16) with a summary review of Israel's history that covers the period from the ancestors' descent to Egypt to the people's arrival on Edom's frontier. Perhaps because this history lesson does not seem immediately germane to the matter at hand, i.e. Israel's request for permission to pass through Edom as cited in 20,17, Josephus leaves the segment aside completely.¹¹ In so doing, he has Moses begin his message immediately with the salient point, i.e. the request for passage and the appended assurances of 20,17, formulating these seemingly under the influence of God's word to Moses in Deut 2,6 as well.¹² His version of 20,17 thus runs: «he requested him to grant him passage,¹³ *promising to give whatever guarantees he might desire to ensure himself against injury*,¹⁴ *asking*

9. With the above reference to Israel's coming to the Idumaeon frontier, compare Moses' reference to Israel's being «in Kadesh, a city on the edge of your [the Edomite king's] territory» in Num 20,16b.

10. In the targums, the name is «Rekem», the targumic equivalent for the Greek place name «Petra».

11. *Num. Rab.* 20.15 suggests the following conceptual link between the historical retrospective of 20,14b-16 and the request of 20,17: In Gen 15,13 God informs Abraham that his descendants —of whom Esau/Edom would be a part— will have to endure enslavement in a foreign land. In fact, however, it was only the progeny of Jacob/Israel among Abraham's descendants who underwent this divinely imposed affliction. Their having done so now gives them the right to make a claim on the Edomites, as that part of Abraham's lineage which has hitherto escaped the deprivations for the Abrahamites announced in Gen 15,13.

12. On the influence of Deut 2,1ff. on Josephus' rendering of Num 20,14-21, see the remark of DORIVAL, *Les Nombres*, 390: «... il commente le récit parallèle de *Dt* 2,1-7 plus que le texte des *Nb*». (Note that Josephus does not reproduce the content of Deut 2,1ff. as a distinct, later moment in his version of biblical history, likely in view of the duplication —and discordance— between this and Num 20,14-21 itself.)

13. Compare Num 20,17a: «Now let us pass through your land.» On Josephus' penchant for converting biblical direct address into indirect, see C.T. BEGG, *Josephus' Account of the Early Divided Monarchy* (AJ 8,212-420) (BETL 108), Leuven, 1993, pp. 12-13, n. 38.

14. This component of the Josephan Moses' message has no direct counterpart in the assurances attached to the Israelite's request for passage in Num 20,17. In that biblical verse Moses simply informs the king of all the potentially threatening or disruptive things «we» (the Israelites) will refrain from doing, i.e. pass through field or vineyard, drink water from a well [the targums turn this sequence into a promise not to molest the various categories of Edomite womenfolk, i.e. maidens, the betrothed, and matrons] or deviate «to the right or the left» while traversing the «King's Highway» [the targums identify the «king» here as the «King who is in the Heavens»]. Josephus rendering depicts a still more deferential Moses who begins by inviting the Edomite king to himself prescribe the conditions for his granting Israel the passage it is requesting of him.

him to open a market for his army,¹⁵ and even undertaking to pay for water should he order them to do so.»¹⁶

Num 20,18 reports Edom's (direct address) response to Moses' message: «you shall not pass through, lest I come with the sword [MT; LXX for war] against you».¹⁷ Thereafter, Moses reiterates his plea for passage (20,19) only to have the Edomite army take its stand against them, with a reiteration of the prohibition of passage (20,20-21a) Josephus (Ant 4.77a) conflates the two distinct moments of Edom's reaction, likewise passing over the second intervening appeal by Moses:¹⁸ «But the king¹⁹ was ill-pleased with this message of Moses,²⁰

15. This portion of Moses' proposal lacks a counterpart in Num 20,17. It may be inspired by the divine directive to Moses cited in Deut 2,6 («you shall purchase food from them [the Edomites] for money] that you may eat»). In its commentary on Num 20,14-21, *Num. Rab.* 20.15 elaborates on Moses' promise (20,17) that the Israelites will not drink from Edom's «well» in similar fashion. Here, Moses is represented as saying to the Edomites that whereas Israel does have its own food (the manna) and water provided for them by God, they are ready to purchase additional supplies from the Edomites on their passage so that the latter might profit from their passage. In addition, the midrash has Moses exhorting the Israelites themselves: «Loosen your purse strings that they [the Edomites] shall not say: "They were slaves! They were poor!" Show them your wealth, and let them know that you have lost nothing by the bondage.» On Josephus' characteristic concern to counteract contemporary claims about Jewish impecuniousness and mendicancy throughout his rewriting of biblical history, see L.H. FELDMAN, *Studies in Josephus' Rewritten Bible* (JSJSup 58), Leiden, 1998, p. 547.

16. Josephus' formulation concerning the «water question» differs from its handling in both Num 20,17 and Deut 2,6b. In the former text, Moses assures the Edomite king «neither will we drink water from a well», while in the latter God instructs Moses «you shall also buy water of them for money, that you may drink». In Josephus' rendering Moses, on his own —rather than God's initiative, offers to have the Israelites pay for their water, should the king so require (with this last indication, Josephus once again [see n. 14] accentuates the deferential character of Moses' message, leaving it up to the Edomite king to decide whether or not he will ask payment for the water drunk by the Israelites during their passage.)

17. *Mek. Beshallah* 3.55ff. expatiates on Edom's negative response as cited in Num 20,18. There, the Edomites first reply by alluding to Israel's pride in the word of Isaac to its ancestor Jacob («the voice is the voice of Jacob», Gen 27,22) and then goes on to declare that they themselves take pride in Isaac's word to their ancestor Esau («by the sword shalt thou live», Gen 27,40). Only thereafter do they cite the words of 20,18 with their threat to block Israel's attempted passage with the sword.

18. This second appeal by Moses (20,19) in the face of Edom's emphatic refusal in Num 20,18 might appear to reflect badly on Moses as someone who, in childish and self-degrading fashion, persists in asking when the other has made clear that he has no intention of granting the request. Perhaps then, it was reading of 20,19 in this way that prompted Josephus to pass over its content. On the Josephan portrait of Moses, see L.H. FELDMAN, *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, Berkeley, CA, 1998, pp. 374-442.

19. The subject of the response to Moses here is implicitly (ὁ) the Edomite king, the addressee of Moses' message in Num 20,14 (and Ant 4.76). By contrast in Num 20,18 Edom collectively responds to Moses.

20. Num 20,18 lacks a corresponding indication concerning the emotional reaction of the recipient(s) to Moses' message. Compare Deut 2,4b where God informs Moses that the Edomites «will be afraid of you».

refused him passage, and led forth²¹ his armed troops to encounter Moses and check these people should they essay to cross his territory by force.»²² The narrative of Num 20,14-21 concludes in v. 21b with a very brief indication concerning Israel's response to the threatening stance assumed by the Edomites according to vv. 20-21a: «so Israel turned away from him». This notice could suggest the thought that Israel's response was dictated by cowardice: it is afraid to join battle with the Edomites, and so to avoid this takes another (and presumably more circuitous) route. Josephus' rendition (Ant 4.77b), itself perhaps inspired by various targumic versions of Num 20,21b²³ and/or Deut 2,5a (where Moses is told not «to contend» with the Edomites), serves to dispel such an impression²⁴ by making Israel's move a matter of its adherence to guidance given it by God himself: «And Moses,²⁵ since upon his inquiry (χρωμένω)²⁶

21. In Num 20,20a it is the Edomites collectively who take the initiative in advancing against the Israelites. Once again (see n. 18), Josephus highlights the leadership role of the Edomite king.

22. With the above formulation Josephus spells out the rationale for the Edomites «coming out against» the Israelites, as they are said to do in Num 20,20b. In so doing he makes use both of the words —reiterating those of 20,18— «you shall not pass through» of 20,20b and the narrative notice of Num 20,21a («thus Edom refused to give Israel passage through his territory»). With the statements of Num 20,20-21a; Judg 11,17; and Ant 4.77a concerning the Edomites' denial of passage to Israel, compare Deut 2,29 where, in the context of his message to Sihon, Moses urges the king to imitate the «sons of Esau» and the Moabites, both of whom allowed Israel to pass through their territory.

23. Targum Neofiti I, e.g., renders Num 20,21b as follows: «... Israel turned aside from them, because they had been commanded by their Father who is in heaven not to set battle array against them», while Targum Pseudo-Jonathan reads: «So Israel turned away from it because it was commanded before the Memra of the Heavens that they should not engage in battle with them. For until now the time was not come for the punishment of Edom to be given into their hands.» Targum Onkelos, by contrast, lacks a corresponding elaboration of the MT. The possible influence of Deut 2,5a (where God directs Moses not «to contend» with Edom) on the first two of the above targumic renderings of Num 20,21b becomes explicit in *Num. Rab.* 20.15 where Deut 2,5 is adduced in support of the claim that Israel's turning away from Edom in Num 20,21b was preceded by God's informing Moses that Edom's refusal of the request for passage was itself in accordance with his (God's) will.

24. On Josephus' concern, throughout his retelling of biblical history in Ant 1.1–11.296, to counter contemporary assertions about his people's cowardice and lack of military distinction, see FELDMAN, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 106-109.

25. In Num 20,21b it is Israel as a whole that, acting on its own, «turns away» from the assembled Edomites. Josephus' wording highlights the leadership role of Moses in a way similar to his previous accentuation of the king of Edom's initiative in responding to Moses' message; see n. 18.

26. In Num 20,21b no such «inquiry» precedes Israel's turning away from Edom. A previous inquiry of God is not mentioned either in connection with the instructions given by God to Moses (or Israel) about not engaging Edom in Targums Neofiti I and Pseudo-Jonathan on Num 20,21b (see previous note) or Deut 2,5a. Josephus' introduction of the reference serves to accentuate the piety of Moses who does not venture to respond to the Edomite threat before first consulting God.

God did not counsel him to open battle, withdrew his forces *to pursue a circuitous route though the desert.*²⁷

Josephus' rendering of Num 20,14-21 stands out in several respects. Most obviously, the historian retells the biblical incident in highly streamlined form, drastically compressing Moses' message of Num 20,14-17 and conflating the sequence of 20,18-21a. In addition, his version seems to reflect the influence of the parallel passage Deut 2,1-8 and/or the targumic tradition in 20,21b on such points as Moses' proposal that Edom open a market for the Israelites during their passage (see n. 15) and the attribution of Israel's ultimate «disengagement» to the divine guidance given Moses (see n. 24) —rather than to cowardice on the people's part. Also noteworthy is the historian's accentuation, vis-à-vis the Bible's own presentation, of the deferential character of Moses' message to the Edomite king and of the leadership roles assumed by these two figures. A final feature of interest in Josephus' version is the fact that whereas elsewhere he tends to downplay the «divine factor» in Israel's history,²⁸ here he actually introduces a reference to God's involvement in the affair, thereby likewise counteracting the impression of Jewish reluctance to fight that the biblical account might evoke in its audience (see n. 24).

3. Philo (Mos 1.239-249)

The first of Philo's two extended treatments of Num 20,14-21 I shall examine here is that found in Mos 1.239-249, where it constitutes part of the «biography» of Moses which he gives in Book I of his *De Vita Mosi*.²⁹ The passage itself represents the immediate sequel to the Alexandrian's version of the «spy story» of Numbers 13–14 (// Mos 1.220-238) which itself ends (1.238) with the people's approaching, once again, after forty years of wandering, the borders of the land into which they had unsuccessfully attempted to penetrate so long previously. Following Mos 1.239-249, Philo diverges from the biblical sequence, in making its immediate continuation, not the death of Aaron (Num 20,22-29), but rather Israel's victory over the king of

27. In Num 20,21b Israel simply «turns away» from Edom. Josephus appends an indication concerning the purpose/consequence of this maneuver.

28. On this feature of his retelling of biblical history, see FELDMAN, *Josephus's Interpretation*, 205-217.

29. For the text and translation of Mos 1.239-249, I use F.H. COLSON, *Philo*, VI, Cambridge, MA – London, 1935, pp. 400-405. For a summary orientation to the work as a whole, see *ibid.*, 274-275 and K. SCHENCK, *A Brief Guide to Philo*, Louisville, KY, 2005, pp. 99-101. As we begin our consideration of Philo, we recall that he used the Bible in its LXX text-form; see SCHENCK, *Philo*, 10: «His citations from Scripture always come from a Greek translation.»

Arad (Num 21,1-3) of which he gives a much expanded version in Mos 1.250-254.³⁰

Philo prefaces his rendering of Israel's message to Edom (Num 20,14-17) with an extended review (Mos 1.239-242) of the previous relationship between the two parties that reaches back to their respective ancestors. Given the length of this segment, I limit myself to summarizing and paraphrasing its content. Making the transition from what precedes, Philo begins Mos 1.239 with the notice: «Near the entrances [i.e. to the «country to which they had come before» mentioned in 1.238] there dwelt, among others, some kinsfolk of their own...»³¹ Thereafter, he proceeds to mention the Israelites' expectations with regard to these «kinsfolk», i.e. that they would assist in their endeavor to conquer and establish themselves in their land or at least would stay «neutral» (1.239). Those expectations, in turn, were, as Philo points out, rooted in the common ancestry of the two peoples as descendants of full, and in fact, twin brothers,³² both of whom became ancestors of populous nations (1.240ab). Subsequently, as 1.240c points out, these two peoples separated, with one (the Edomites) remaining in the ancestral homeland, the other (the Israelites), emigrating to Egypt, whence they are now finally returning. Philo's foregoing review of the two peoples' history, leads in Mos 1.241-243 to a comparison of the divergent stances adopted by them towards each other. Of the two, the Israelites, Mos 1.241 informs us, did endeavor to maintain the bond of kinship in spite of the distance between them, this notwithstanding the fact that the Edomites had given up their ancestral shared customs, doing this on the consideration «that it was proper for humane natures to pay some tribute of goodwill to the name of kinship».

Having thus portrayed the Israelites' attitudes and behavior in the relationship in positive fashion, Philo shifts his attention in Mos 1.242a to the Edomite party, accusing them of maintaining an «implacable enmity» and keeping «alive the fire of ancestral feud». The latter charge, in turn, gives Philo the occasion to recall the origins of the «feud» in question in Mos 1.242. In so doing, the Alexandrian summarily rehearses the relevant biblical history from a clearly anti-Esau/Edomite perspective. In particular, he declares (1.242ab) that after voluntarily selling his birthright to his brother (see Gen 25,29-33),³³ Esau fraudulently demanded this back, menacing Jacob with death should he

30. As we have seen, Josephus too departs from the biblical sequence following his rendering of Num 20,14-21 (Ant 4.76-77), continuing this with his version of Num 20,1; 19,1-22; 20,22-29 (in that order) in 4.78-85a; see above. Unlike Philo, Josephus does not reproduce the incident of Num 21,1-3.

31. Strikingly, nowhere in Mos 1.239-249 does Philo identify the people in question (or its ancestor, Esau/Edom) by name.

32. The allusion here is to the story of the births of Esau and Isaac told in Gen 25,19-26. Philo makes reference to this story in Cher 47 and (at greater length) in Sacr 4.

33. Philo's other allusions to this happening are in Sacr 17-18, 81, 120; Sobr 26; Virt 208.

not restore it.³⁴ Reverting then to the present situation, in which the two long separated peoples make contact with each other once again, Philo concludes Mos 1.242 (and the whole segment 1.239-242) with the notice «and this old feud between two individual men was renewed by the nation so many generations after», thereby foreshadowing the negative outcome of the interaction he is about to relate on the basis of Num 20,14-21.

It is only at this point that Philo finally (Mos 1.243) comes to speak of Moses' embassy (// Num 20,14). Before doing so, however, he pauses to insert a remark (1.243a) as to why, given the previous history of Edom's hostility, Moses did not at once simply attack that recalcitrant people: «Now the leader of the Hebrews, Moses, though an attack might have won him an uncontested victory, did not feel justified in taking this course because of the above-mentioned kinship.»³⁵ In Mos 1.243b he then gives his version of Moses' message of Num 20,14-17, from which he leaves aside the historical retrospective of vv. 14b-16 (the content of which he has, very loosely, utilized in Mos 1.139-242; see above), while expatiating on the appeal portion of the message, likely under the influence of the parallel passage in Deut 2,6. His rendition thus reads:

Instead, he merely asked³⁶ for the right of passage through the country³⁷ *and promised to carry out all that he agreed to do*,³⁸ not to ravage any estate, not to carry off cattle or spoil of any kind,³⁹ to pay a price for water *if drink were scarce* and for anything else which their wants caused them to purchase.⁴⁰

34. Genesis' story of the interactions between the brothers does not, as such, relate an initiative of this kind by Esau. Cf., however, Gen 27,41 which states that Esau «hated» Jacob for his having contrived to secure Isaac's blessing for himself and cites his intention of killing Jacob once their father dies.

35. With the concluding words of the above remark, Philo reinforces his earlier reference (Mos 1.241) to Israel's ongoing sense of solidarity with Edom even in the face of the latter's active hostility, now attributing that national sense of solidarity to Moses personally.

36. In contrast to Num 20,14a, Philo does not specify the «king of Edom» as the addressee of Moses' message; in fact, he nowhere mentions that figure in his rendering of Num 20,14-21 in Mos 1.239-249.

37. Compare the opening words of Num 20,17: «Now let us pass through your land.» Philo recasts the direct address of the biblical message in indirect address.

38. Such an encompassing «promise» on Moses' part is not mentioned in either Num 20,17 or Deut 2,6.

38. The above assurances might be seen as Philo's embellishment of Moses' declaration in Num 20,17: «we will not pass through field or vineyard».

40. For the above two assurances, Philo seems to draw on God's directives to Moses in Deut 2,6 («You shall purchase food from them [the Edomites] for money, that you may eat; and you shall also buy water of them, that you may drink»), while also reversing their sequence and turning them into a word of Moses to the Edomites. In Num 20,17 Moses assures the Edomite king «we will not drink water from a well». Philo leaves aside Moses' concluding declaration in 20,17: «We will not go along the King' Highway, we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed through your territory.»

As noted above, Moses' message (Num 20,14-17) evokes a first, negative response by Edom (20,18), which itself calls forth a renewed plea by Israel (20,19), to which Edom responds with a reiterated refusal, now reinforced by a threatening display of force (20,20-21a). Philo, for his part, compresses this whole biblical sequence into a notice (Mos 1.243c) on a single Edomite refusal that itself incorporates elements of both Num 20,18 and 20,20-21a: «But they refused these *very peaceful* overtures with all their might, and threatened war if they found them overstepping their frontiers, *or even merely on the threshold.*»⁴¹

In Num 20,21b Israel responds to Edom's provocation by immediately and wordlessly «turning away from him». Philo, by contrast, inserts an extended segment (Mos 1.244-245) concerning what precedes Israel's withdrawal before the Edomite threat. The sequence opens (1.244) with a mention of the emotional effect of the Edomites' response upon the Israelites which makes clear that the latter were in no way intimidated by this: «The Hebrews were incensed at the answer, and were now starting to take up arms...»

Their initiative is, however, quickly checked by an intervention of Moses (1.244b-245), which evidences both his appreciation of crowd psychology and his moderating influence upon the people in favor of a policy of non-retaliation and leaving requital to God:

(Mos 1.244) ... when Moses, standing where he could be heard, said: «My men, your indignation is just and reasonable. We made friendly proposals in the kindest spirit. In the malice of their hearts they have answered us with evil. (1.245) But the fact that they deserve to be punished for their brutality does not make it right for us to proceed to take vengeance upon them. The honour of our nation forbids it, and demands that here too we should mark the contrast between our goodness and their unworthiness by inquiring not only whether some particular persons deserve to be punished, but also whether the punishment can properly be carried out by us.»

Following the above «preface», Philo finally does reproduce (Mos 1.246) the notice of Num 20,21b, even while appending to this yet another derogatory reference to the Edomites: «He then turned aside and led the multitude by another way,⁴² *since he saw that all the roads of that country were barricaded by those who had no cause to expect injury but through envy and malice refused to grant a passage along the direct road.*» To this expanded rendition

41. Philo's conflated version of Edom's double response in Num 20,18.20-21a highlights the contrast between Israel's pacific intentions and the Edomites' bellicose response to these (they even threaten the Israelites with war for merely positioning themselves on Edom's frontier), thereby reinforcing his earlier contrast between the two peoples.

42. In Num 20,21b it is the Israelites *en bloc* who take the initiative to «turn away from» Edom and Moses is not mentioned. Philo's version accentuates the leadership role assumed by Moses at this critical moment.

of the conclusion of the biblical account, Philo, in turn, attaches (1.247-249) a lengthy reflection of his own in which he offers his evaluation of the various parties involved. Here, Philo focuses in first place to the story's villains, the Edomites. Concerning them he states in Mos 1.247: «This was the clearest proof of the vexation which these persons felt at the nation's liberation, just as doubtless they rejoiced at the bitter slavery which it endured in Egypt. For those who are grieved at the welfare of their neighbors are sure to enjoy their misfortunes, though they may not confess it.» Over against the Edomites' envy and *Schadenfreude*, the Alexandrian next (1.248) highlights the Israelites' own *bona fides* and desire to reach out to their utterly unworthy interlocutors: «As it happened, the Hebrews, believing that their feelings and wishes were the same as their own, had communicated to them all their experiences, whether painful or pleasant, and did not know that they were far advanced in depravity and with their spiteful and quarrelsome natures were sure to mourn their good fortune and take pleasure in the opposite.» Having thus contrasted the two peoples in question, Philo (1.249) concludes his rendering of Num 20,14-21 by redirecting attention to the figure of Moses as Israel's humane and provident leader:

But, when their malevolence was exposed, the Hebrews were prevented from using force against them by their commander, who displayed two of the finest qualities—good sense (φρόνησιν), and at the same time, good feeling (χρηστότητα). His sense (συνέσεως)⁴³ was shown in guarding against the possibility of disaster, his humanity (φιλανθρωπίας)⁴⁴ in that on kinsmen he has not even the will to take vengeance.

Philo's rewriting of Num 20,14-21 in Mos 1.239-249 evidences several noteworthy features. On the one hand, he jettisons entirely or compresses much of the actual content of the biblical text, including the opening portion of Moses' message (20,14b-16), and the sequence comprising 20,18-21a. Conversely, however, he amplifies those portions of the source material he does take over with an elaborate «preface» (1.239-243a) and «epilogue» (1.247-249), just as he inserts a lengthy segment (1.244-245) concerning Moses' calming of the indignant people prior to his rendering of Num 20,21b (the people's «turning away» from Edom). As a result the bulk of Philo's version consists of *Sondergut*. In addition to these two most obvious rewriting techniques, the Alexandrian modifies his *Vorlage* in still other ways. The figure of the «king

43. Josephus too uses the term σύνεσις of Moses; see Ant 3.12 (at Mount Sinai the people forget all they owe to Moses' «virtue and sagacity [συνέσεως]») and Ant 4.327 (Moses «surpassed in understanding [συνέσει] all men that ever lived»).

44. On the use of this term (and its cognate adjective) in Greek literature overall, see C. SPICQ, *Notes de lexicographie néo-testamentaire*, II (OBO 22/2), Fribourg-Göttingen, 1978, pp. 922-927.

of Edom», the addressee of Moses' message according to 20,14a, disappears, as does the very name «Edom/Edomites» as Israel's interlocutor, while the name «Israel» itself, used three times in 20,14ff. (vv. 14, 21 [*bis*] is replaced by the designation «the Hebrews» (five times in 1.239-249). In his reproduction of the Mosaic appeal of Num 20,17 in Mos 1.243b, Philo appears to draw on the parallel passage of Deut 2,6 (see n. 40). Throughout he accentuates, vis-à-vis the Bible itself, the stature of Moses: he is given the titles of «leader» (ἡγέμων, 1.243) and «commander» (προεστῶτος, 1.249), and his «good sense» and «good feeling» are commended. We are further supplied (1.243a) with a (positive) motivation for Moses' sending an embassy to Edom rather than immediately attacking them, i.e. his respect for the bonds of kinship. The Philonic Moses likewise intervenes to calm the agitated people with an extended speech (1.244-245) that evidences his «crowd control» capacities and his determination to leave requital of the Edomites' offense to God—a point reiterated at the very end of 1.249 with the reference to «his humanity in that on kinsmen he had not even the will to take his revenge». It is Moses as well—rather than the people (as in 20,21b)—who takes the initiative in turning away from Edom. Moses' preeminence is also highlighted in Philo's presentation by the fact that nothing is said there of his receiving or acting on instructions from God, as one finds in Deut 2,3-6 and the targumic renderings of Num 20,21 (see n. 23). What is above distinctive, however, about Philo's rendering of Num 20,14-21, is his use of the particular biblical incident in order to draw a sharp, all-encompassing contrast between the two peoples featured therein, i.e. the Edomites with their disregard of kinship ties, envy, *Schadenfreude*, and bellicosity, on the one hand, and the Israelites with their concern to maintain kinship bonds despite a long separation, peacefulness, readiness to remunerate the Edomites for their passage, but also their fighting spirit in the face of unjustified provocation (see the opening of 1.243c-244a), on the other.

4. *Philo (Deus 144-180)*

Philo offers another, even more expansive treatment of the Numbers episode in his treatise *Quod Deus Immutabilis sit*, 145-180.⁴⁵ The occasion for his doing so is Philo's discussion of the phrase, «... all flesh destroyed his way upon the earth» of Gen 6,12 that commences in Deus 140. Focusing on the term «his» in this phrase, Philo affirms (Deus 141-143) that the reference there

45. For the text and translation of this passage I use F.A. COLSON – G.H. WHITAKER, *Philo*, III, Cambridge, MA – London, 1930, pp. 82-99. For brief discussions of the treatise as a whole, see *ibid.*, 3-9 and SCHENCK, *Philo*, 111.

is to God's way of wisdom, the high road that leads to him, but which the «flesh» constantly seeks to obstruct and cause humans to deviate from. The «way» in question is that followed by the people of Israel, while the flesh's opposition to their doing is embodied in the people of Edom, whose very name according to Deus 144, means «the earthly one».

Having thus introduced the contrasting figures of Israel and Edom in this fashion, Philo next (Deus 145) proceeds to cite the text of the dialogue between them of Num 20,17-20a according to the LXX. Thereafter, he pauses (Deus 146-147) to interject a story concerning Socrates⁴⁶ who seeing an opulent spectacle, declares to his disciples, «observe how many things there are that I do not need» —a saying that Philo elaborates upon as «a truly heaven-sent profession» of self-control and resolution. Whereas, however, that declaration was made by the single man Socrates, similar sentiments, Philo declares in Deus 148, were entertained by the whole of Moses' people, as is shown by the words of the envoys of Num 20,17 previously cited by him. In particular, their opening request to Edom there about «passing through» his land attests to their readiness to renounce all the (apparent) earthly goods that «Edom» has to offer. Following this allegorical interpretation of the envoys' initial words, Philo devotes a long segment (Deus 149-153) to commending and inculcating that disengagement from earthly benefits they express. Resuming then his elucidation of the various components of the envoys' discourse in Num 20,17, Philo points out that in contrast to their declaration about «passing through» the Edomites' land, the messengers aver that they will «not pass through» their interlocutors' «fields or vineyards». Commenting on this difference, the Alexandrian (Deus 154) asserts that the fields and vineyards spoken of by the envoys refer to spiritual growths, i.e. «worthy sayings and laudable actions» that one should not pass by but ought rather gather and enjoy.

Coming then to the envoys' next affirmation in Num 20,17, i.e. «neither will we drink from a well», Philo expatiates on this item in Deus 155-158, averring that it highlights our need to find satisfactions for our thirsts, not from exiguous earthly wells, but from the copious communications God himself makes to us.

The envoys' declarations continue in Num 20,17 with their statement «we will go along the King's Highway». Echoing his earlier allusions to the mind's «high» and «royal» road of wisdom leading to God (see Deus 143-144), Philo in Deus 159-161 identifies the «King» to whom the messengers are referring as «the Uncreated» and the road itself as the way of wisdom, on which alone God is to be reached. Moses' messengers conclude their biblical discourse with the

46. In Philo's rendering, the protagonist is called simply «one of the ancients». The figure is identified as Socrates in the versions of the story handed down by Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.91 and Diogenes Laertius, 2.25.

words «we will not turn aside to the right hand or to the left, until we have passed through your territory». This final declaration of theirs inspires Philo (Deus 162-165) to a disquisition on virtue as the «golden mean» that is to be sought and held to over against excesses and exaggerations on either side.

Philo devotes Deus 148-165 to his allegorical, phrase-by-phrase commentary upon the envoys' message of Num 20,17 and drawing out its ethical implications. Thereafter, he turns (Deus 166) to the Edomites' reply of Num 20,18, here supplying an elaborate motivation for their negative response, i.e. Edom's fear that, should he allow Israel passage, Israel would proceed to uproot «the fruits of his soul which he has sown for the destruction of wisdom».

According to the text of LXX Num 20,19 quoted by Philo in Deus 145 Israel's initial reply to Edom's rebuff of 20,18 runs «we will pass along the mountain country (τὸ ὄρος)». ⁴⁷ Embellishing on this LXX formulation, Philo (Deus 167-168) turns it into an exhortation about how one should respond to the way of life represented by «Edom». Specifically, he urges his readers to profess their attachment to «powers that are lofty and sublime», knowable by rational investigation and their rejection of everything external and corporeal as «low-lying and grovelling exceedingly» with which «Edom» hopes to ensnare them so that it can boast of having overcome «the virtue-lovers».

Israel's reply of Num 20,19 continues with its assurance «if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, then I will pay you the price (LXX τιμήν)». Playing on the polysemy of the word τιμή («price» and «honor») and attending to the conditional formulation of the Israelites' declaration («if we drink...»), Philo (Deus 169-171) turns this into an exhortation to his readers, urging them not to give the non-virtuous the honor/satisfaction of participating in their vices.

The response made by the Israelites in Num 20,19 terminates with a phrase of uncertain meaning: «(let me pass through on foot), nothing more» (RSV). ⁴⁸ Taking this phrase in its LXX wording ⁴⁹ as his starting point, Philo develops it into a lengthy reflection (Deus 172-180a) on the unsubstantiality of everything earthly—even the most powerful empires that have come and gone throughout history, ⁵⁰ the whole ending with an encomium on those who pronounced the words of Num 20,19, «the matter of creation is all of it nothing» and «we will journey along the mountain country» (LXX), as expressive of their adherence to the way of wisdom leading to «things indestructible».

47. In MT Israel's statement is: we will go up by the highway».

48. The MT phrase rendered «nothing more» by the RSV is אֵי־כֵן (literally: there is nothing); LXX reads οὐδέν ἔστιν.

49. See n. 48.

50. In his catalogue of these in Deus 173-174 Philo cites the Greeks, the Macedonians, Persians, Parthians, Egypt, the Ethiopians, Carthage, Libya, Pontus, and more generally «Europe» and «Asia». Notably, however, he makes no mention of *the* super-power of his day, i.e. Rome, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions about the eventual fate of its empire.

Philo ends his long excursus on the Edom-Israel encounter reported in Num 20,14-21, that was itself «triggered» by the reference to humanity's «corrupting his [i.e. God's according to Philo; see above] way» in Deus 180b with a summarizing contrast between the two sides: «So then the earthly Edom purposes to bar the heavenly and royal road of virtue, but the divine reason (ὁ ... θεῖος λόγος) on the other hand would bar the road of Edom and his associates.»⁵¹

Philo's treatment of Num 20,14-21 in Deus 144-180 consists essentially of an abbreviated quotation of its verses 17-21 according to the LXX, followed by an allegorical elucidation of its component phrases, the whole interspersed with a variety of more or less tangential developments (e.g., the story of Socrates and attached comments of Deus 146-147 and the survey of world history in 173-174). The entire segment is itself occasioned by Philo's remarks concerning the humanity's «corrupting his [God's] way» (Gen 6,12) in Deus 140-143, the word «way» of that text reminding the Alexandrian of the references to the «(King's) highway» of Num 20,17.19. As developed by him in this context, Philo's allegorical handling of Num 20,14-21 serves to present his readers with two contrasting «ways», that of the Edomites who cling to earthly things, and that of the Israelites, who are intent on following the higher way of wisdom that leads them to God, and to call such readers to themselves adhere to the latter path.

5. Conclusion

In what precedes, I have examined each of the three postbiblical treatments of Num 20,14-21 for itself, comparing it with its Scriptural source. In the conclusion of this essay, I wish to briefly compare the three passages among themselves in order to highlight what is distinctive about each of them as a *relecture* of their common *Vorlage*. In so doing, I shall proceed in three steps, first comparing Josephus' version with that of Philo in Mos 1.239-249, then with that of Deus 144-180, and finally the two Philonic treatments with each other.

The retellings of Num 20,14-21 found in Josephus' Ant 4.76-77 and Philo's Mos 1.239-149 do evidence a number of points in common. Both, e.g., pass over the historical *Vorbau* of Moses' message (Num 20,14b-16), just as they omit the name («Kadesh», 20,14a.16b) of the site from which the message is dispatched. The two presentations likewise agree in their compression of the

51. The above mention of earthly Edom's «associates» gives Philo the occasion to adduce (Deus 182-183) the figure of one such «associate» with whom he terminates his treatise, i.e. Balaam who, notwithstanding his encounter with an angel (see Num 22,31), persisted in his nefarious schemes and so suffered due punishment, thereby becoming a warning to others not to persist in obdurate disregard of the inner voice of «conviction/conscience (ἐλεγχος)».

source sequence Num 20,18-21a. Their respective renderings of the assurances concerning Israel's intentions given in 20,17 seem jointly to reflect the influence of the biblical «parallel» text, Deut 2,6. In addition, the two authors both enhance the stature of Moses by having him —rather than Israel as a whole (thus Num 20,21b)— take the initiative in disengaging from recalcitrant Edom and seem to share a concern that the Israelites' forbearing response to Edom's obduracy not be understood as evidence of their (and Moses') cowardice.

At the same time, the Josephan and Philonic accounts also manifest a range of differences. For one thing, the two authors situate their retellings in different contexts of their respective works: Josephus situates his version (Ant 4.76-77) between his parallels to Numbers 18 (4.67-75) and his utilization of Num 20,1; 19,1-22; 20,22-29 in Ant 4.78-85a, while Philo situates his after his narrative of the incident of the spies and its sequels (Number 13-14) in Ant 1.220-238 and prior to his equivalent to Num 21,1-3 (the overthrow of the king of Arad) in Ant 1.250-254. The figure of the king of Edom whom Josephus takes over (and amplifies) from the Numbers story disappears in Philo's rendering, which, moreover, lacks an equivalent to the reference to Moses' «inquiry» of God and the Deity's counsel to him as that which prompts Moses to withdraw in the face of Edom's intransigence that Josephus introduces into his version of Num 20,21b in Ant 4.77b. Philo, for his part, consistently avoids naming Israel's interlocutor, i.e. Edom/the Edomites, which Josephus takes over from the Bible. Such differences of detail aside, it is clear that Philo «makes more» of the *einmalig* Numbers incident than Josephus (who basically limits himself to reproducing this in shortened form), turning it into an illustration of the fundamental differences between two peoples that characterize their entire history and relationship, while likewise going far beyond Josephus (and the Bible itself) in his exaltation of Moses as efficacious public speaker, provident general, and model of forbearance who does not even think of taking vengeance in response to outrageous provocation (see Mos 1.249).

Overall, Josephus' retelling of Num 20,14-21 in his own words even as he adheres closely to the biblical story line has little in common with Philo's second treatment of the source text whose (LXX) language it (partially) reproduces verbatim⁵² and then submits to a *peshet*-like, meandering allegorical commentary that far exceeds the «plain meaning» of the Numbers narrative. More specific differences between the two versions may also be noted, however. Thus, e.g., their respective contexts differ, with Josephus situating his within his rearranged rendition of the material of Numbers 18-20 (see above), while Philo appends his to a discussion of the corrupted «way» of Gen 6,12 and follows it

52. One (minor) communality between the two presentations is the fact that Philo's citation of the words of Num 20,14-20 in Deus 145 omits the messengers' historical retrospective of 20,14b-16, just as Josephus leaves aside this component of their discourse in Ant 4.76.

with an allusion to the figure of Balaam as portrayed in Numbers 22–24,31. In further contrast to Josephus' rendition, Deus 144-180 leaves aside the individual interlocutors of Num 20,14-21, i.e. Moses and the king of Edom in order to focus attention on the two peoples, Edom and Israel, the opposing ways of life they represent, and the ethical implications of these. Here again, Philo is not content—as Josephus appears to be—to simply reproduce the literal content of the Numbers story (more or less) as he found it. Rather, he exerts himself to invest the biblical data with a far-reaching allegorical and moral significance.

As for Philo's two handlings of Num 20,14-21 themselves, these do share a few communalities, both of detail (e.g., neither rendering mentions the king of Edom, while each passes over the historical component of Israel's opening message) and of general character (i.e. their concern to endue the Numbers incident of a one-time confrontation between two peoples with a wider, fuller import, of whom, moreover, one, the Edomites, comes off altogether negatively, the other, the Israelites, positively without qualification in both versions). Otherwise, however, they go their own ways in many and varied respects: The contexts of the given Philonic passage in which the two treatments occurs differs (see above). Deus names the people that is Israel's interlocutor, as Moses does not; the former cites the actual wording of Num 20,17-20 rather than paraphrasing this as does the latter, and the accentuation of the figure of Moses that characterizes the rendering in Moses is absent in Deus. More generally, while Philo's pair of renderings both aim to accentuate the significance of the confrontation between the two peoples as told in Numbers, the specifics of their doing this diverge; in Moses the contrast is between the character of two historical peoples over the course of their relationship, while in Deus the contrast takes on a trans-historical status, becoming an opposition between two ways of life that are to be found in all times and places.

Within the whole sweep of the Torah's account of Israel's origins the Edomite-Israelite confrontation told in Num 20,14-21 is a quite minor incident, without long-term consequences for the wider course of history.⁵³ As this essay has sought to show, however, even so minor a biblical passage had a literary «fecundity» of its own, calling forth, as it did, three extended—and quite distinctive—renderings of its content in the course of the first century A.D. alone.

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53. Pseudo-Philo, in fact, makes no mention of the incident in his retelling of biblical history.

Summary

Num 20,14-21 briefly relates a confrontation between Israel and Edom that results in the former's taking another route in the face of the latter's adamant refusal to allow Israel passage through its territory. This essay focusses on three first-century A.D. handlings of the episode, one by Josephus, and two by Philo. Josephus, in Ant 4.76-77 reproduces the basic content of the story in shortened form, while likewise introducing reference to an inquiry of God by Moses and the Deity's response that prompts the leader to initiate Israel's withdrawal before the Edomites. Of Philo's two versions, the relecture in Mos 1.239-249, e.g., sets the Numbers incident within the wider historical context of the long-lived relationship between two very different peoples and accentuates the role of Moses in the proceedings. In his Deus 144-180, by contrast, Philo cites the words of (LXX) Num 20,17-20 verbatim and then proceeds to an allegorical, *peshet*-like commentary upon them, wherein «Edom» becomes the representative of all those who cling to earthly things and (attempt to impede others from taking a different course), while «Israel» symbolizes those intent on following the «highway» of wisdom that leads to God.

Resum

Nm 20,14-21 relata breument l'enfrontament entre Israel i Edom que es resol prenent un altre camí per part dels primers davant la negativa adamant dels darrers a permetre Israel de passar pel seu territori. Aquest estudi es basa en tres versions de l'episodi del segle I de la nostra era: una de Flavi Josep i dues de Filó. Flavi Josep, a Ant 4,76-77, reproduïx el contingut bàsic de la història en la seva forma més breu i així mateix esmenta una consulta a Déu per part de Moisès i la resposta divina que induïx el líder perquè fessin un tomb per darrere dels edomites. De les dues versions de Filó, la relectura de Mos 1.239-249, per exemple, situa l'incident de Nombres dins un context històric més ampli en la llarga relació entre tots dos pobles tan diferents i posa l'accent sobre el paper de Moisès en els fets. Tanmateix al seu Deus 144-180 Filó cita literalment les paraules de (LXX) Nm 20,17-20 i després continua amb un comentari al·legòric de tipus *peshet* on «Edom» és la representació de tots aquells qui s'aferren a les coses terrenes —i intenten d'impedir els altres que prenguin un altre camí—, mentre «Israel» simbolitza els qui intenten de seguir el «camí principal» de la saviesa que condueix a Déu.