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The betrayal of Edom: Remarks on a claimed tradition

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Biblical and post-Biblical texts refer to the tradition of the betrayal of Edom. During the conquest the brother-nation of Edom would have betrayed Judah by choosing sides with the Babylonians. Historical and archaeological evidence for this 'fact' is absent or not convincing. It is argued that the occupation of Southern Judah by the Edomites in late Babylonian and/or Persian times would have been the source of this claimed tradition.

Brothers

The Hebrew Bible makes clear that Edom was seen in antiquity as the nation of a brother. Several texts construe Edom as kinship-related to Israel. Whether Israel was seen by the Edomites in a similar way cannot be detected in view of the scarcity of Edomite sources. Only a handful of Edomite inscriptions are known to us today (Beyer 2012). In the 'biblical period' the Edomites inhabited areas in the present kingdom of Jordan, east and south-east of the Dead Sea. Some biblical texts present the Edomites in a friendly way. In the Book of Genesis the descendants of Esau, Jacob's deceived brother, are equalled to the people of Edom (Gn. 36:1). In the Book of Deuteronomy some regulations are given for the interaction with the neighbouring nations. As for Edom: 'You shall not abhor the Edomite, for he is your brother' (Dt. 23:7).

Brothers, however, not always live in peaceful coexistence. The stories about Jacob and Esau are full of hitches (Gn. 25–26; see Anderson 2011:18–154; De Pury 2001). The family is in complete disorder as a result of jealousy. The Books of the Prophets regularly contain, in their sections of the oracles against the nations, prophecies of doom for Edom drenched in revengeful language; see for example Ezekiel 25.

This contribution will look at one, although important, aspect of the image of Edom. After the Babylonian exile a tradition arose in which Edom is depicted as betrayer of its brother-nation Judah. By reading the relevant texts and looking at the broader cultural historical context, the tradition will be assessed. Was it based on real-time events, or just invented?

Edom in Obadiah

The Book of Obadiah, too, contains a prophecy of doom towards Edom:

> Shall I not on that day – Oracle of the Lord
> Destroy both the sages from Edom
> And wisdom from the mountain of Esau?
> Your mighty men will be shattered, O Teman!
> With the result that all men from the mountain of Esau will be eradicated by a killing.
> Because of the violence towards your sibling Jacob
> You will be covered with defamation.
> You will be cut off forever. (Ob. 8–10)

This textual unit is not in need of clarification, since it announces the forthcoming complete and final destruction of Edom. Intriguingly, two groups within the people of Edom are mentioned: 'sages' and 'mighty men'. Both were, in their own way, pillars of the Edomite society. Wisdom as well as military power defends a nation from destruction. Teman was the name of one of the most important Edomite tribes, famous for their martial art. The prophecies of doom are motivated by the author of the Book of Obadiah. The reason for forthcoming destruction is to be found in the recent past:

> On the day that you stood aloof,
> On the day that strangers carried away its wealth
> And strangers entered its gates
> And cast the ill-fate over Jerusalem,
> Even you were like one of them.
> You should not have looked on the day of your sibling,

On the day he became a stranger.
You should not have rejoiced over the Judahites
On the day of their destruction.
You should not have raised your voice
On the day of distress.
You should not have entered into the gate of my people
On the day of their calamity.
You should not have looked in a gloating way
On the day of its calamity.
You should not have taken its wealth
On the day of its calamity.
You should not have stood at the crossroads
To finish off its refugees.
You should not have incarcerated
Its survivors on the day of distress.
For the day of the Lord is close
On all the nations.
As you have done,
It will be done to you.
Your recompense will be returned upon you. (Ob. 9–15)

This motivation refers to the 'betrayal of Edom'. That concept refers to the suspicious role Edom would have played in 587 BCE. The image arises of the Edomites conspiring with the Babylonians during the siege of Jerusalem hoping for economic advantages as a result of their collaboration.

The betrayal of Edom as a tradition

The Book of Obadiah is not unique for its view on Edom. Various Biblical and post-Biblical texts refer to the cruel and malicious role the Edomites would have played during the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (Tebes 2011). Traces of this tradition can for instance be found in the Book of Ezekiel. According to Ezekiel 25:12–14 God will take revenge on the Edomites because they had grievously offended Judah. In this passage the guilt of Edom is not portrayed in great detail, but is seems safe to construe it as a reference to the 'betrayal of Edom'. Ezekiel 35 contains a prophecy of doom against Seir, the name of a mountain in southern Edom. The use of this alternative depiction of Edom is connected to the memory of the Amalekites and their treatment of the Israelites. The prophecy is motivated as follows:

therefore, as I live, declares the Lord God,
I will prepare you for blood,
and blood shall pursue you;
because you did not hate bloodshed,
therefore blood shall pursue you.
I will make Mount Seir a waste and a desolation,
and I will cut off from it all who come and go. (Ezk. 35:6–7)

The theme is also referred to in a well-known Psalm, composed by the rivers of Babylon:

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, 'Lay it bare, lay it bare,
down to its foundations!'. (Ps. 137:7; Becking 2012)

The unique collocation 'the day of Jerusalem' refers to the final conquest of the city by the Babylonians, the destruction of the temple and the forced migration of greater parts of the population. In the Psalm, God is invited to remember 'the day of Jerusalem'. The meaning of the verb *zākar* in this verse differs from the meaning of the same verb earlier in the Psalm. In verses 5 and 6 *zākar* refers to the mournful memory of days long gone. In verse 7 the verb is connected to the language of revenge namely the principle of *ius tallionis*, 'an eye for an eye'. The Psalmist asks God to take revenge to Edom – and also Babylon – for their vicious deeds in a comparable way.

1 Esdras is an apocryphal book sometimes labelled 3 Esra (Bird 2012; Böhler 2015). This book contains a translation, and sometimes a retelling, into Greek of passages from 2 Chronicles 35–36, Ezra 1–10 and Nehemiah 7–8. The text starts in the middle of a sentence and ends halfway a clause. This twofold peculiarity is indicative for the fact that in the manuscript tradition of *1 Esdras* at the beginning as well as at the end one or more pages have gone lost. Of great importance is the inclusion of the story of the three youths who organised a contest on the question 'what is the strongest'. This story resembles Hellenistic court stories and is integrated into the text of *1 Esdras* (see next to Bird, 2012; Böhler 2015; Sandoval 2007; Zimmermann 1963–1964). The book hence dates to the Hellenistic period (Becking 2011). Zerubbabel is the winner of the contest by arguing that the truth is stronger than kings, wine or women. Darius grants him 'everything he wishes'. The pious Zerubbabel does not ask for earthly wealth but for the return of his people from the exile and the rebuilding of the ruined temple in Jerusalem. On his request Zerubbabel claims the destruction of the temple as a deed of Edomite enmity:

You also have vowed to build up the temple, which the Edomites burned when Judea was made desolate by the Chaldees. (*1 Esdras* 4:45; Bird 2012:182–187; Böhler 2015:97–107; McCarter 1976)

The Persian king does not refuse this request. He writes an order to all those in power to guarantee Zerubbabel and his people a safe travel. Those returning from exile are offered to live freely in their land and it is even stated that 'the Edomites should give over the villages of the Jews which then they held'. (*1 Esdras* 4:50; Bird 2012:182–187; Böhler 2015:97–107)

This passage implies that the Edomites would have conquered Judaean territory after 587 BCE. In the Talmud too, traces of this tradition can be found (Kunik 1999:21–24). I will only refer to a passage from the tractate *Pesachim*:

R. Hiyya taught: What is meant by the verse, God understands the way thereof, and He knows the place thereof? The Holy One, blessed be He, knows that Israel are unable to endure the cruel decrees of Edom, therefore He exiled them to Babylonia. R. Eleazar also said: The Holy One, blessed be He, exiled Israel to Babylonia only because it is as deep as She'ol, for it is said, I shall ransom them from the power of the nether-world; I shall redeem them from death. (87B)

The learned Rabbi lingers on the concept of divine providence using the betrayal of Edom as an example. This example is also chosen to comfort in the pain of persecution. To preserve the people from greater evil, knowing that it was at hand, God sent Israel into exile.

Legend or history?

Many scholars accept the betrayal of Edom as an historical fact (e.g. Anderson 2011:177–202; Beit-Arieh 1995:314; McCarter 1976; Mobley 2001:1318; Raabe 1996:52–53; Wolff 1986:18). The historical reliability of this tradition is nevertheless not easily proven. The assumed Edomite acts are not narrated in the section in 2 Kings or 2 Chronicles that deal with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. Such an absence, however, is not decisive; both Books narrate the history of Israel and Judah from a religious perspective and not from a factual one. The authors of the Book of Kings are mainly interested in the correct form of religion: the veneration of one God, without images in the temple of Jerusalem (Römer 2005). The authors of the Book of Chronicles have a main focus on the design of the cult (Beentjes 2008). Both authors (or groups of authors) have made a selection of topics from their point of view. Many features that a modern-day historian would like to have been informed on are not selected. It should be noted that the Book of Kings on several occasions refers to struggles between Judah and Edom (1 Ki. 11:14–21; 2 Ki. 8:20–22; 14:8–14; Na'aman 2015). The absence of a note on enmity within the final hour of the Kingdom of Judah hints therefore at the absence of such an enmity.

No traces of Edomite involvement in the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BCE are found in archaeological excavations. No Edomite arrowheads are found, while arrowheads of Scythian origin have been discovered that hint at the presence of trained mercenaries from this people from the steppes of Asia in the Babylonian army (Avigad 1980). It is therefore more than probable to assume that Edom and the Edomites did not play a vicious role in the conquest of Jerusalem (see, e.g., Bartlett 1982:21; 1989:155; Ben Zvi 1996:236–237; Hoffman 1971; Lipschits 2005:143–144).

What is clear, however, is that sooner or later after the conquest of Jerusalem greater parts of the southern fringe of Judah have become Edomite territory. Some scholars argue that soon after the conquest of Jerusalem the Edomites occupied Southern Judah (Beit-Arieh 1995; Lindsay 1976:25; Müller 1971:201; Oded 1977:475; Wolff 1986:53). Other scholars date this occupation later (Kloner & Stern 2007; Lipschits 2005:181–184; O'Brien 2008:164–165). The presence of Edomite earthenware in this area and the Edomite inscriptions excavated at Ḥorvat 'Uza and Ḥorvat Qitmit clearly hint into the direction of an Edomite occupation (Beit-Arieh 2007; Lipschits 2005:181–184).

Next to that, it should be noted that Neo-Babylonian inscriptions up to the time of Nabonidus (533) reflect a favourable stand of the Babylonians towards Edom (Beaulieu 1989:165–185; Crowell 2007; Lindsay 1976).

In my view, this capture of territory might have been the source of the tradition about 'the betrayal of Edom'. By occupying the Southern parts of Judah, the Edomites profited economically from the weakness of Judah during and after the Babylonian exile. This territorial expansion is clearly assumed in the passage quoted form *1 Esdras*. A passage from 2 Maccabees sheds light on this matter:

> At the same time the Idumeans, who held some strategic strongholds, were harassing the Jews; they welcomed fugitives from Jerusalem and endeavoured to continue the war. Maccabeus and his companions, after public prayers asking God to be their ally, moved quickly against the strongholds of the Idumeans. Attacking vigorously, they gained control of the places, drove back all who were fighting on the walls, and cut down those who opposed them, killing no fewer than twenty thousand. (2 Macc. 10:15–17)

This section informs about the reconquest by the Maccabees of strongholds that had been lost to the 'Idumeans'. Idumean is the Hellenistic indication of Edomite. This passage only makes sense against the background of a previous Edomite occupation of Southern Judah.

Some 30 years ago Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger introduced the concept of 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm & Ranger 2012). With this label they referred to a set of national rituals and symbols that are presented as reflecting real and formative historical events, but mostly are not historical. The legend of Wilhelm Tell in Switzerland (Bergier 1990) and the descendance of the Dutch from the Germanic tribe of the Batavi are well-known examples of invented tradition (Roymans 2004). The tradition on the betrayal of Edom could be seen as an ancient example of an invented tradition which would be the case if Bartlett were correct in assuming that the role the Edomites played at the fall of Jerusalem was only based in Obadiah's imagination (Bartlett 1982:21; 1989:155). I would, however, not go that far. In my view this tradition can be labelled as a 'claimed tradition'. Although the Edomite atrocities during the conquest of Jerusalem are most probably not-historic, the tradition arose as the result of a process of transposition. The memory on the Edomite occupation of Southern Judah functioned as the source of this process, which, I think, is a much more plausible explanation than the proposal of Elie Assis who suggested that the memory of the struggle between Jacob and Esau was the origin of the betrayal tradition (Assis 2006). The shame of losing these territories was revengefully transposed to and enveloped into the bitter memory of the ruination of Jerusalem.

Boundary as identity

In the era after the Babylonian Exile, Israel was challenged to reformulate its identity. I am following here the insights of Carly Crouch (2014) and of the authors of the essays in a volume edited by Ehud ben Zvi and Diana Edelman (2015). From these scholars I have learned that in re-creating a self-image three features play an important role. (1) Ancient traditions and memories are appropriated to the new situation. The belief of God as the liberator out of Egypt has been bended into the belief in God who with the return from exile had created a second exodus. (2) The identity is constructed from an inside perspective. After the exile, Israel construed itself as a community around the temple rebuilt. (3) The identity is

defined by boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. This process is clearly visible in the Biblical Books of Ezra and Nehemiah. By presenting the 'other' in dark colours, a boundary is drawn between 'we' and 'they'. In the period after the exile, the Edomites still were seen as related as well as inimical. The tradition on the betrayal of Edom functioned as a boundary marker of the community. 'We' were thus separated from 'they'. 'We' – Israel – were as a result of the divine grace returned from exile. 'They' – the Edomites – were excluded as badly behaving brothers. In order to construe this divide a claimed tradition was constructed.

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