

EDOM AND THE EDMITES

(The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary)

“Edom” denotes Esau (Gen. 25:30; 36:1, 8, 19), or the Edomites collectively (Num. 20:18, 20–21; Amos 1:6, 11; 9:12; Mal. 1:4), or the land occupied by Esau’s descendants, formerly the land of Seir (Gen. 32:3; 36:20–21, 30; Num. 24:18). Edom was renowned in Israel for its wisdom (Jer. 49:7; Obad. 8), and the book of Job seems to reflect an Edomite setting.

THE LAND OF EDOM

The region stretched from the Zered Valley to the Gulf of Aqabah (about one hundred miles) and extended to both sides of the Arabah, the great depression connecting the Dead Sea to the Red Sea (Gen. 14:6; Deut. 2:1, 12; Josh. 15:1; Judg. 11:17–18; 1 Kings 9:26). It is a dry, mountainous area with peaks rising to 3,500 feet. Though not a fertile land, it has cultivable areas (Num. 20:14–18). The name is derived from the Semitic root meaning “red, ruddy,” perhaps because of the reddish color of the sandstone in that region.

The earliest reference to Edom comes from Egypt, where Papyrus Anastasi VI preserves the report of an official from the reign of Merneptah (c. 1220 BC). He noted that the Bedouin tribes of Edom were trying to pass an Egyptian fortress to “the pools of Per-Atum” to keep themselves and their cattle alive.

It is possible that the Semitic place name was in use as early as the fifteenth century BC, if Edom is identified with one of the place names (‘i-d-má) from the list of Thutmose III (1490–1436 BC).

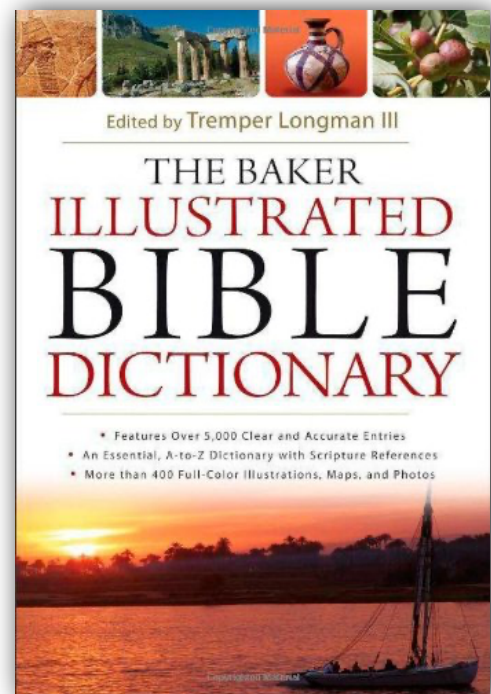
The land(s) of Seir (a term often used in the OT to refer to Edom; cf. “the hill country of Seir” in Gen. 36:8–9) appears already in a letter from Amarna written by a king of Jerusalem to Amenhotep III in the first half of the fourteenth century. About a century later, Ramesses II (1290–1224 BC) claimed to have devastated the land of Shosu and plundered Mount Seir. In the next century Ramesses III (1193–1162 BC) made a similar claim.

Thus, there is considerable evidence outside the OT from the fourteenth to the twelfth centuries BC that mentions both Edom and Seir (the latter is more frequent and seems to be better known). The sources do not identify the two places, but they refer to their inhabitants as (Bedouin) shosu.

THE EDMITES

Following the OT, it seems that Esau’s descendants migrated to the land of Seir and in time became the dominant group, incorporating the original Horites (Gen. 14:6) and others into their number. Esau had already occupied Edom when Jacob returned from Harran (Gen. 32:3; 36:6–8; Deut. 2:4–5; Josh. 24:4). Tribal chiefs emerged here quite early (Gen. 36:15–19, 40, 43; 1 Chron. 1:51, 54), and the Edomites had kings “before any Israelite king reigned” (Gen. 36:31; 1 Chron. 1:43–51).

We know from the OT that after the exodus Israel was denied permission to travel by the King’s Highway (Num.



20:14–21; 21:4; Judg. 11:17–18). Still, Israelites were forbidden to abhor their Edomite brothers (Deut. 23:7–8). Joshua allotted the territory of Judah up to the borders of Edom (Josh. 15:1, 21), but the Israelites were not allowed to encroach on their lands.

Despite the brotherly relationship between Edom and Israel, the biblical evidence shows that the relationship between Edom and Israel was one of continuous hostility from the time of the Israelite kings. King Saul fought the Edomites (1 Sam. 14:47), and David conquered Edom and put garrisons throughout the land (2 Sam. 8:13–14). Edom was subjugated by Israel during the time of David but seems to have regained independence in the eighth century BC.

The prophets of Judah were very bitter against later Edom because of its stance in the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon (587/586 BC), and they predicted Edom's destruction (e.g., Obadiah). The oracle of Mal. 1:2–4 indicates that by the time of its writing, Edom was in ruin. The archaeological evidence supports the fall of Edom by the end of the sixth century BC, and there is evidence that the Nabateans (an Arabian tribe) forced their way into Edom and replaced the Edomites, many of whom went westward to southern Judea (later Idumea [cf. 1 Macc. 5:3, 65]), while others may have been absorbed by the newcomers. By 312 BC the area around Petra was inhabited by Nabateans.

