

BY GEORGE H. SHADDIX



# EDOM

## *Its Land and People*

**E**DOM, WHAT DO WE know about the people called Edomites and about the land called Edom? Through Obadiah's prophecy, God stated He would make them a small nation and others would despise them (see Obad. 2).

This nation originates with Esau, the older son of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:21-24). Esau and Jacob were twins, but Esau was the firstborn. These two brothers grew into men with different interests. Jacob enjoyed staying around the house. Esau, who

had a ruddy and rough appearance, enjoyed the outdoors. Genesis 25:25 describes Esau at his birth: "The first came out red, all his body like a hairy cloak, so they called his name Esau."<sup>1</sup> As these twin boys grew up, Esau became a skilled hunter (v. 27).

These two, Esau and Jacob, struggled with each other even before



their births (v. 22). This struggle extended beyond the two individuals to the two nations that would be their descendants.

Two major events marked Esau's life. First, he sold his birthright to Jacob for some red stew (vv. 29-34). The end of verse 30 says, "Therefore his name was called Edom." Second, Jacob, with the help of his mother, Rebekah, got the blessing of his father, Isaac. This blessing usually went to the firstborn. Once Isaac had given Jacob Esau's birthright, though, he could not take it back and give it to Esau.

These events, plus the struggling before birth, set the stage for the hostility that developed between these twins' descendants. Jacob's descendants became the nation of Israel and the descendants of Esau became the Edomites.

In marrying two Hittite women (26:35), Esau disregarded God's covenant with his father, Isaac, and his

**Below: Panoramic view from Petra in Jordan, including Jebel Harun, meaning "Mountain of Aaron." Tradition holds that Aaron's tomb is on the peak of the mountain to the left.**

**Upper left: Found in a Jericho tomb, a carinated bowl dated to the Middle Bronze Age (2200-1550 B.C.), which includes the time of the patriarchs.**

grandfather, Abraham. Later he married Ishmael's daughter. Ishmael was Abraham's son by Sarah's handmaid. Again, these factors built tension between Esau and his parents, Esau and his brother, and ultimately the nations of Israel and Edom.

### The Land

"Esau settled in a region of mostly rugged mountains south of the Dead Sea (Gen. 33:16; 36:8,9; Deut. 2:4,5)."<sup>2</sup> This area south of the Dead Sea extended south to Elath and Eziongeber (Deut. 2:8).<sup>3</sup> Moab's southern border was the northern border of Edom. Sometimes Edom was called "Seir" (see Gen. 32:3).

This mountainous area is 40 miles wide and 100 miles long.<sup>4</sup> The sides of this mountainous area "rise steeply from the valley."<sup>5</sup> The northern part of the plateau forms a spacious grazing ground. Mountains in the north rise 1,500-2,000 feet; some in the south reach 2,600 feet. Many areas are inaccessible peaks and gorges.<sup>6</sup> These features help us understand why the Bible says, "Esau...lived in the mountains of Seir" (Gen. 36:8, HCSB, emphasis added). In the days of Obadiah, the capital of Edom was Sela, a city "cut into rock cliffs and set in a canyon that could be entered

only through a narrow gap."<sup>7</sup> We know Sela today by its Greek name, Petra.

"The famed King's Highway, an essential caravan route linking North Africa with Europe and Asia, passes along the eastern plateau (Num. 20:17)."<sup>8</sup> The King's Highway was "the main trade route from Damascus to Arabia, passing through the Edomite heartlands on the high hills southeast of the Dead Sea."<sup>9</sup> "[T]his highway has been in continuous use for over 3,000 years."<sup>10</sup>

Red limestone gave the territory a "ruddy" appearance. While much of the land was rocky cliffs and deep gorges, in some areas, "fertile land [yielded] wheat, grapes, figs, pomegranates and olives."<sup>11</sup>

### Its People

In this land the descendants of Esau settled. They conquered the Horites who lived in this area before them (compare Gen. 14:6 and Deut. 2:22).

After leaving Egypt, the Israelites approached Edom. Moses sent messengers to ask the king of Edom for permission to go through their land (Num. 20:14-21). Moses sent the messengers from Kadesh telling them to refer to the Israelites as "your brother Israel" (v. 14). No doubt this was





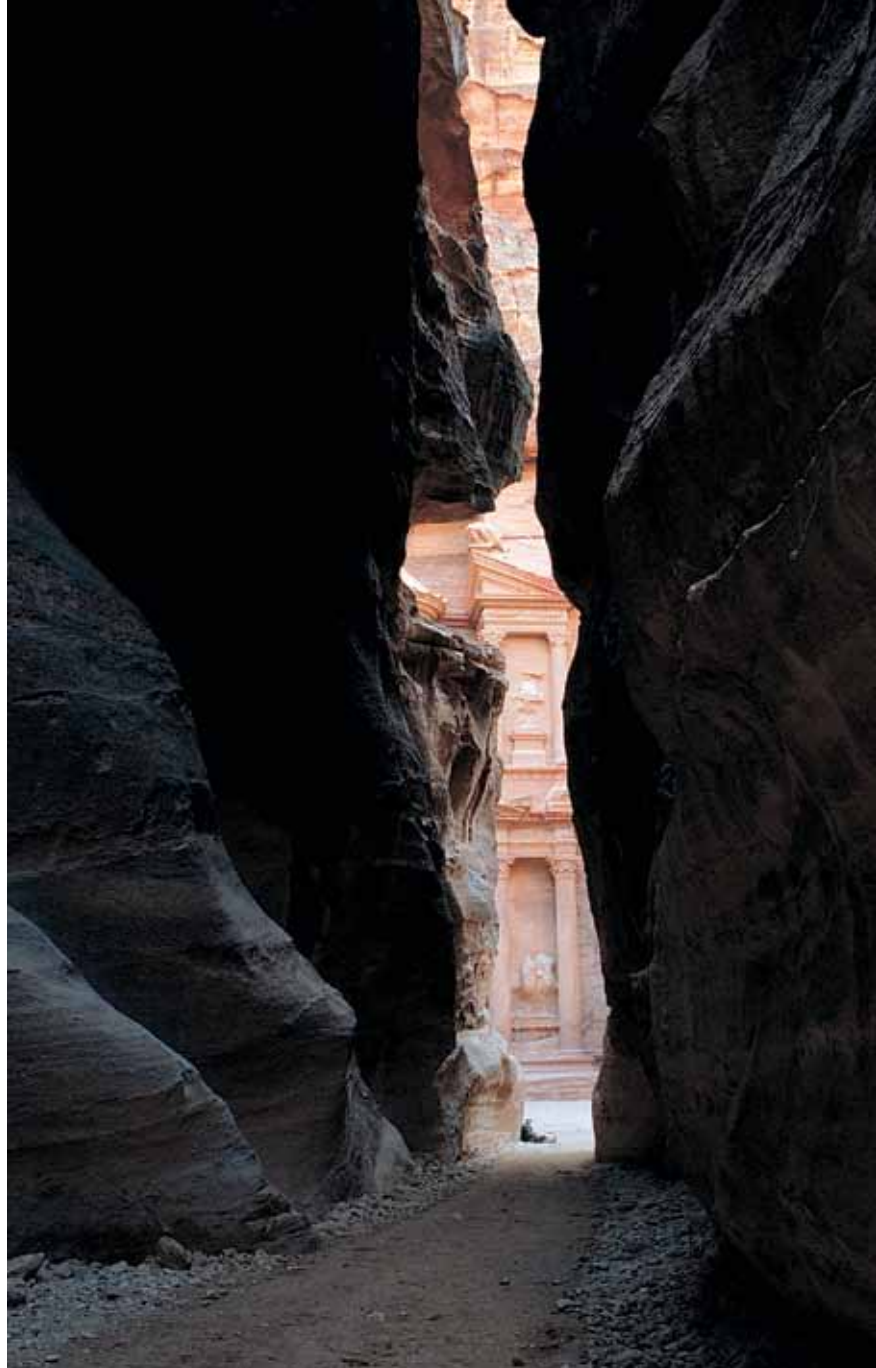
ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/9897)

**Above: One of the panels that decorated the walls of the North Palace in Nineveh, which was capital of Assyria. The panel, which dates about 645-635 B.C., shows a herd of deer being run into a net. The Bible says Esau was a skilled hunter.**

an effort to encourage the Edomites to be generous and allow them to go through the land. The animosity between Jacob and Esau evidently continued; the Edomites would not allow the Israelites to go through their land.

This refusal was in spite of Moses' promises that they would go along the King's Highway and not through the fields or vineyards, nor would they drink water from a well in the land. The king's response was, "You shall not pass through, lest I come out with the sword against you" (v. 18). To be sure that Israel did not come through their land, the Edomites came against them with a large army. The Israelites turned away and did not attempt to go through the land of Edom. Two brothers' differences and struggling against each other now resulted in an international incident.

While the Israelites were still in the region and on the border of Edom at Mount Hor, Aaron's position as high priest was passed to his son Eleazar. God instructed Moses to take Aaron and Aaron's son Eleazar up on the mountain. There



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (6/1417)

**Above: View of the siq (meaning "the shaft") leading into Petra. The Nabatean capital, Petra was located along a major trade route.**

**Excavations indicate the area has been inhabited since the patriarchal age. Early documents refer to the site as Sela or Seir, which**

**would have been in Edom.**

**Right: Base of a stele dated to the 13th cent. B.C. (the Hittite imperial period). The**

**image depicts a woman in front of an altar. Showing total disregard for the Lord's instructions, Esau married two Hittite women.**

Moses took the priestly garments from Aaron and placed them on Eleazar. Aaron died on top of Mount Hor. The people wept for Aaron for 30 days (vv. 22-29).

### **Dispossessed and Destroyed**

Balaam, in his final oracle (see Num. 23-24), declared "Edom shall be dispossessed; Seir also, his enemies,

shall be dispossessed. Israel is doing valiantly" (Num. 24:18).

As God described the land He was giving Israel, He told Moses, "your south side shall be from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom, and your southern border shall run from the end of the Salt [Dead] Sea on the east" (34:3). Joshua 15:1 says that this area along the border





EZION-GEBER: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (18/11/17)  
ILLUSTRATOR MAP/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON

**Above: Island of Pharaoh's Daughter, which is located in the Gulf of Aqabah,**

**also known as Ezion-geber. This was one of the port cities for the Edomites.**

put garrisons of soldiers throughout Edom. The Edomites became subjects of David (2 Sam. 8:13-14).

Solomon assembled a fleet of ships at Ezion-geber on the Red Sea in the land of Edom—an indicator Edom was under Solomon's rule. These ships sailed to Ophir and brought back to Solomon 420 talents of gold (16 tons, see 1 Kings 9:26-28, HCSB).

Through these years Edom, a nation that refused to allow Israel to pass through their land, was under the rule of Israel's (and later Judah's) kings. During the reign of Judah's King Jehoram (850-843 B.C.), Edom revolted and appointed their own king (2 Kings 8:20).

Many Old Testament prophets foretold of Edom's destruction. Isaiah, describing the judgment on the nations said, "For the LORD has a day of vengeance, a year of recompense for the cause of Zion. And the streams of Edom shall be turned into pitch, and her soil into sulfur; her land shall become burning pitch" (Isa. 34:8-9). Jeremiah 49:17 says, "Edom shall become a horror. Everyone who passes by it will be horrified and will hiss because of all its disasters." Joel 3:19 says, "Egypt shall become a desolation and Edom a desolate wilderness, for the violence done to the people of Judah, because they have shed innocent blood in their land." Many other prophets made similar pronouncements concerning Edom.

Obadiah's prophecy focuses on Edom. Because of their location in the rugged mountains, the Edomites thought they were secure. Obadiah prophesied that Edom would be made small among the nations and would be utterly despised (Obad. 2). Obadiah further prophesied, "Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever" (v. 10). In the latter part of verse 18, he prophesied, "there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau [Edom], for the LORD has spoken." According to this verse, the "house of Jacob" would destroy Edom. Early readers would certainly catch the message and tie it back to the twins born to Isaac and Rebekah: the house of Jacob would destroy the house of Esau. The twin brothers' struggle indeed continued for centuries, long after their deaths. **B**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ MUSEUM OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT/ ISTANBUL (200/9A)

of Edom would be given to the descendants of Judah.

Some years later, when Saul was king of Israel, "he fought against all his enemies on every side, against Moab, against the Ammonites, against Edom, against the kings of Zobah, and against the Philistines. Wherever he turned he routed them" (1 Sam. 14:47).

Then when David became king, he struck down 18,000 Edomites and

1. Unless identified otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

2. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1001.

3. W. Ewing, "Edom; Edomites" in *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 899.

4. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1001-1002.

5. Ewing, "Edom; Edomites," 899.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Note on Obadiah 1:3 in *Life Application Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1991), 1556.

8. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 1002.

9. Study note for Numbers 20:17-21 in *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 297.

10. "King's Highway" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 848.

11. Ewing, "Edom; Edomites," 899.

George H. Shaddix is the retired pastor of the Northwood Hills Baptist Church, Northport, Alabama.