

## BOOK REVIEWS

### BIBLICAL STUDIES

Elie Assis. *Identity in Conflict: The Struggle between Esau and Jacob, Edom and Israel*. Siphrut 19. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016. 214pp.  
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The special place reserved for Edom in the biblical corpus—that is, the level and intensity of the vitriol aimed at Israel’s neighbor—has long intrigued readers and interpreters. Edom’s actions as portrayed in the Bible are less than ideal, but the actions themselves are not incomparable to those of other neighboring nations. How, then, do we account for the hatred of Edom? Elie Assis’s most recent work revisits this question, offering a new approach that views the issue through the lens of identity and chosenness.

In chapter 1 Assis lays out the textual evidence that suggests that Esau and Edom have a special relationship with Jacob/Israel, including notions of kinship. The second chapter then offers a lengthy exploration of Jacob and Esau in the book of Genesis (chapters 25–35). Assis sees these narratives as intentionally ambiguous, and suggests that the question of the identity of the chosen son is not resolved as early in the cycle of stories as is often assumed. While many readers see the blessings of Genesis 27–28 as highlighting Jacob’s chosen status, Assis suggests that it is only with his eventual return to the land of promise, along with Esau’s decision to settle in Edom, that Jacob’s status as the chosen son in the line of Abraham is confirmed. Assis helpfully highlights the complexity of these chapters, including the ambiguous portrayal of the characters and the lack of clarity concerning the reasons for Jacob’s election. Indeed, he suggests that the ambivalence surrounding these issues “was to play a decisive role in how the ancients read the story” (64).

In chapter 3, Assis explores the depiction of Edom in what is referred to as the “preexilic biblical literature,” a heading that includes the books of Samuel and Kings, along with several Psalms as well as Amos 1. The overview of this material suggests that the attitude toward Edom during this period is not especially vindictive, pointing to the important role the events of 586 BCE played in shaping the sharper edges of Israel’s views on Edom. The following chapter discusses a number of different theories regarding Israel’s enmity toward Edom, after which Assis puts forward a new thesis, which is central to the volume as a whole: “Israel’s attitude toward Edom in the sixth century B.C.E. is a result of the people’s despair that God had abandoned and rejected them. Because Edom was perceived as an alternative to Israel, being identified with Esau, Jacob’s brother, the nation feared the possibility that God had now elected Edom as the chosen nation in Israel’s place” (87).

The next several chapters engage with the prophetic portrayal of Edom, exploring Jeremiah 49 (chapter 5), Ezekiel 25 and 35 (chapters 6 and 7), Isaiah 34

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and 63 (chapters 8 and 9), Obadiah (chapter 10), and Malachi 2 (chapter 11). While each text deals with Edom in unique ways, Assis highlights recurring themes in these references to Edom, including a focus on election and the status of Israel as the chosen people during and after the exile; a tendency for Edom's desolation to be spoken of specifically in relation to the restoration of Israel (apart from other nations); and the increasingly hostile portrayal of Edom as the enemy of God. The clearest indication of the author's thesis is found in the final prophetic text, Malachi, where a strong case is made that the language of "loving" Jacob and "hating" Esau should be understood in terms of election, with Malachi reiterating Israel's chosen status. Taken together, Assis argues that the prophetic message concerning Edom is meant to reassure Israel of their chosen status.

The portrayal of Edom in the genealogical lists of 1 Chronicles is the topic of chapter 12. Assis suggests that this portrayal highlights anti-Edomite rhetoric of the postexilic period, subtly denigrating Edom while exalting Israel and the Davidic dynasty and, by extension, affirming Israel's chosen status over the alternative heir.

The final chapter explores the role of Edom in rabbinic and medieval Jewish literature. Here the equation of Edom and Rome—and eventually Christianity—is unpacked. Again, Assis highlights how the issue of chosenness can be seen as a driving factor in these equations, as "throughout Jewish history, Edom has symbolized all who seek to destroy the Jews, all who compete with them for the status of the chosen nation" (187).

In sum, Assis concludes that "Israel's hostility toward Edom initially stemmed from Edom's grave offenses against them, but with time, these violations became weighted with theological significance" (189). Thus, while "many nations could have been rendered into a symbol of evil for their sins against Israel ... only Edom threatened Israel's very sense of identity, and challenged the perception that they were indeed God's chosen people" (190).

There is much to commend in this accessible and clearly written volume. It is, to begin with, particularly comprehensive, given its relative brevity. For example, the book helpfully situates the broader scholarly discussion on Edom, and the interpretive trajectories that have been taken with the texts in question. Further, Assis provides close readings across the canon that give sustained attention to the biblical text, engaging interpretations that offer much food for thought for the interested reader. Finally, Assis helpfully brings to the fore issues such as election and chosenness, and rightly points out their importance for reflection on questions surrounding Israel's understanding of its identity in the Bible.

There are a few issues with which I would have liked to have seen further engagement. To begin with, while the rest of the biblical material in the volume is situated historically, there is no discussion of the dating of the Genesis material. It is assumed in the study that the stories of the ancestors were known and thus informed (later) biblical traditions. However, it would be interesting to tease out what the implications might be for Assis's thesis if these ancestral narratives took shape (or were at least brought together) at a later date, as increasingly is being proposed. Second, while in general the thesis is plausible and a number

of examples given are convincing (Malachi, for example), it seems to me that there is little *explicit* textual evidence that suggests Israel saw Edom as a threat to its chosen status. Assis offers an innovative reading that is indeed plausible; nevertheless, there are other ways in which these texts can be construed, and thus the argument as a whole could be presented in a more heuristic manner.

These quibbles notwithstanding, Assis has provided a valuable and welcome contribution to the literature on the biblical depiction of Esau and Edom. While most likely aimed at biblical scholars, this volume offers a useful and accessible introduction to Israel's neighbor Edom, and its engagement in the closing chapter with rabbinic and medieval literature will also be of interest to those involved in these aspects of Jewish studies.

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Susan Niditch. *The Responsive Self: Personal Religion in Biblical Literature of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Periods*. The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015. 190 pp.  
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This is a wonderful book. Susan Niditch investigates the ways in which the individual expresses him/herself religiously as depicted in the biblical text and in the archaeology of ancient Israel. She focuses on the period following the Babylonian exile and asks what people did, rather than what they believed. She examines issues of personal responsibility for sin; theodicy; the meaning of incantations, prayer, autobiography, and vows; the role of material objects; prophecy and visions; and finally literary expression. Problematic for this reviewer is the author's need to date certain texts to the postexilic period, and other texts, used for comparison, to the "classical" period. I am not as confident as she in these dates, and if all the writings are postexilic, what becomes of her thesis? Nevertheless, her analysis of these texts proves its worth whatever suspension of disbelief in her dating the reader requires.

Niditch begins by examining the issue of personal responsibility that is expressed in the problematic proverb "parents eat sour grapes and the teeth of the children twinge" (17). The proverb implies that present-day suffering is not caused by our own actions, but of those perhaps already dead. The individual excuses himself from sin, but in doing so, challenges God's justice. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel claim that the proverb no longer holds, that everyone suffers for her own sin. They want to see the world/God as fair and just, but the result is that all suffering is viewed as deserved. Suffering is explored further in a study of Job and Ecclesiastes. These texts frame an argument between conventional wisdom (accepting one's lot, working hard, trusting God) and its contrast that life is