The Prophetic Role of Esau: Hijacking the Name ‘Jew’ and the Judgment of God

Introduction

In both the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and the historical unfolding of events in the intertestamental and New Testament periods, we find an intriguing and often overlooked theme: the infiltration of the covenant land of Israel by the descendants of Esau (Edom), their adoption of Jewish identity, and the profound theological implications that follow.

What begins as a territorial betrayal in the days of Obadiah and Ezekiel becomes, by the first century A.D., a spiritual deception of such magnitude that it contributes to the rejection of the Messiah and culminates in God’s decisive judgment upon Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

This essay traces the biblical prophecies, historical records, and theological significance of Edom’s role in supplanting the identity of true Israel, ultimately connecting it to Christ’s words and the judgment He foretold.

Main Topic

Throughout the pages of Scripture, the descendants of Esau—known as Edom—are presented in a turbulent relationship with the descendants of Jacob, their brother nation Israel. The prophetic texts, particularly Obadiah and Ezekiel, shed light on a historical and spiritual betrayal: that Edom would

exploit the downfall of Israel and Judah to claim their land and legacy. This act was more than territorial; it was a calculated appropriation of identity that would have long-term spiritual consequences, potentially tied to the very deception Christ warned about in His own day.

Obadiah 1:10–14 makes this clear. The prophet rebukes Edom for standing on the sidelines—or worse, participating—when Jerusalem was overrun by foreign invaders. Rather than mourning Judah's downfall, Edom capitalized on it. Verse 13 explicitly says, *"Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity."* The implication is that Edom seized the opportunity to loot and perhaps even occupy Judah's vacated land.

Ezekiel 35:10–12 confirms this territorial ambition: *"Because thou hast said, These two nations and these two countries shall be mine, and we will possess it; whereas the Lord was there."* Edom is condemned for laying claim to both Israel and Judah's inheritance. This confirms Edom sought not just land, but to take the very identity of God's covenant people.

Historically, this was fulfilled in the second century B.C. when **John Hyrcanus**, the Hasmonean ruler, conquered Idumea (Edom) and forced its people to convert to Judaism. **Josephus** records this in *Antiquities* 13.257–258, writing that the Idumeans *"submitted to the use of circumcision, and of the rest of the Jewish ways of living… they were hereafter no other than Jews."* This moment marks a profound turning point: the physical descendants of Esau were now called "Jews," not by lineage, but by religion and political convenience.

This set the stage for further confusion by the time of Christ. **Herod the Great**, an Edomite by descent, ruled as "King of the Jews." Many of the ruling elites in Jerusalem may have been Edomites or descended from proselytes, rather than Israelites. Jesus confronts them in **John 8:39–44**, saying, *"If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham…*

Ye are of your father the devil.” These were individuals who claimed Abrahamic identity, but did not possess the spiritual—or possibly even the genealogical—heritage of Jacob.

This deception aligns perfectly with **Satan’s agenda**: to replace true Israel with a counterfeit. **Revelation 2:9 and 3:9** warn of those *“which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan.”* The groundwork for this deception was laid centuries earlier when Edom took advantage of Judah’s exile to move into their land and eventually assume their identity. By the first century, this confusion had become so complete that Jesus’ harshest words were not for Gentiles or pagans, but for those who claimed to be God’s people while opposing God’s Son.

Malachi 1:2–4 further confirms God’s enduring displeasure with Edom: *“They shall build, but I will throw down; and they shall call them, The border of wickedness, and, The people against whom the LORD hath indignation for ever.”* Though Edom may rebuild physically, spiritually they remain under divine judgment.

In conclusion, the prophetic warnings about Edom were not simply historical critiques. They foretold a deeper agenda—one that Satan could exploit to obscure the identity of God’s people. Through historical seizure of land, forced conversions, and eventual control of Jewish religious and political life, Edom’s descendants may have succeeded in hijacking the name “Jew.” But Scripture, when examined closely, unmasks this deception and points us back to the true Israel: those born not of the flesh, but of the Spirit (Romans 2:28–29; Galatians 3:29).

Connecting the Prophecies to A.D. 70 and Christ's Judgment

Connecting Edom's judgment with the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. reveals how God fulfilled layered prophetic justice. The prophets declared God's wrath against Edom for their betrayal and territorial ambitions. That judgment unfolded over time, culminating when Christ—rejected by His own people and opposed by corrupt religious leaders—prophesied the temple's destruction. The fact that many religious elites may have been Edomites or other proselytes (not true descendants of Jacob) reinforces the gravity of their sin and the appropriateness of the judgment.

Thus, God used the overlapping realities of Edomite infiltration and Jewish unbelief to bring about judgment. The destruction of Jerusalem was both a reckoning upon those who had usurped the identity of Israel and a final warning that the kingdom of God would now rest upon those in Christ—whether Jew or Gentile—who walk in faith. This convergence of prophecy and history declares a timeless truth: God is not deceived by outward claims, and His covenant people are known by faith, not by flesh.

Commentary on Obadiah and Ezekiel

Obadiah 1:10–14 – Commentary by Albert Barnes

> *"The hatred of Edom toward his brother Jacob was not the mere temporary ebullition of anger, but a perpetual enmity, which*

broke out at every opportunity. They gave vent to this hatred when Jerusalem fell before the Chaldeans. They stood at the parting of the ways to cut off fugitives, and they entered into the gates of Jerusalem to take spoil. Their cruelty and joy in the destruction of Judah increased their guilt.”

 Barnes sees Edom’s action not merely as passive indifference but as **active hostility and betrayal**. He confirms that Edom sought advantage **during Judah’s greatest suffering**, compounding their sin.

✦ Obadiah 1:10–14 — Commentary by Matthew Henry

“The Edomites are charged with violence against their brother Jacob, and a most unbrotherly behaviour it was. Though they did not themselves smite with the sword, yet they looked on with pleasure when strangers carried away the wealth of Jerusalem… God took notice of all the injuries done to His people, and would reckon with the perpetrators.”

 Henry emphasizes the **moral and covenantal treachery** of Edom. Their betrayal of kin was more than war — it was a **spiritual offense** against God’s chosen family.

✦ Ezekiel 35:10–12 — Commentary by Albert Barnes

“The Idumeans had grasped at the land of Israel and Judah during the captivity and boasted they would possess it. But God reminds them: He was still there — ‘The Lord was there.’ Their claim was a denial of the covenant and of God’s sovereignty.”

 Barnes focuses on the **arrogance of Edom's claim**, which disregarded the sacredness of the land and the presence of God. To possess it was to **usurp what God had given to Jacob**, thus provoking divine judgment.

✦ Ezekiel 35:10–12 – Commentary by Matthew Henry

> *"They laid claim to God's people's land, not remembering that God was there; that land was Immanuel's land… Those that hope to thrive by the losses and ruins of others must reckon with God."*

 Henry underscores the **blasphemous nature** of Edom's ambition. To take the land was not just theft – it was an affront to **Immanuel's authority**, pointing to a **spiritual war** over inheritance and identity.

What's The Profound and Deeply Theological Question

It is – **the intersection of prophecy, history, judgment, and identity**.

There appears to be a **direct connection** between:

1. **God's judgment upon Edom** as foretold by the prophets,
2. The **occupancy of Judea** by Edomites (and others) during the Second Temple period,
3. The **rejection of the Messiah** by the ruling Jewish authorities (many possibly of Edomite descent),
4. And the ultimate **judgment on Jerusalem in 70 A.D.**, as

prophesied by Christ.

Let’s unpack how all these threads connect in Scripture and history.

I. Prophets Foretold Edom’s Judgment — for Occupying, Betraying, and Uprooting Israel

As covered earlier:

- **Obadiah** condemned Edom for **gloating over Judah’s fall**, and **occupying their land** after the exile.
- **Ezekiel 35** said Edom said, *“These two nations shall be mine”* — a clear claim to Israel and Judah’s inheritance.
- **Malachi 1:4** said even if Edom rebuilds, **God will throw them down**, calling them *“the people against whom the LORD hath indignation forever.”*

 Point: God was not finished dealing with Edom — and that judgment would manifest **beyond the Old Testament**.

II. Edomites Rose to Power in Judea by the Time of Christ

Historical fulfillment confirms, as covered earlier:

- After the Babylonian and Assyrian exiles, **Edomites moved into southern Judea**.

- **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 13, Chapter 9, Section 1 (13.257):** *"Hyrcanus took also Dora and Marissa, cities of Idumea, and subdued all the Idumeans; and permitted them to stay in that country, if they would circumcise their genitals, and make use of the laws of the Jews; and they were so desirous of living in the country of their forefathers, that they submitted to the use of circumcision, and of the rest of the Jewish ways of living; at which time therefore this befell them, that they were hereafter no other than Jews."*
- **Jewish Encyclopedia (1906), Entry: "Edom"** *"They were gradually pushed out of their territory by the Nabataeans and settled in southern Judea, where they were known as Idumeans."*
- This resettlement occurred after the Babylonian exile, as the weakened state of Judah allowed Edomites to occupy parts of the Negev and southern Judea.

- Under **John Hyrcanus**, Edomites were **forcibly converted** (~129 B.C.) and absorbed into Judean society.
  - **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 13, Chapter 9, Section 1 (13.257):**
    "He [Hyrcanus] compelled them either to become circumcised and live according to Jewish laws or leave the country. From that time on, they were considered Jews."
  - **Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, Vol. 1, p. 222-225:** Schürer confirms that John Hyrcanus forcibly converted the Idumeans to Judaism, marking the first time a foreign population was integrated into the Jewish nation by compulsion.

- By the time of Christ, **Herod the Great** – an **Idumean (Edomite)** – was **king of Judea**, installed by Rome.
    - **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 14, Chapter 8, Section 1 (14.403):**
      "Herod, the son of Antipater, was made king by the Romans… and he was by birth an Idumean, although he was a Jew in religion."
    - **Jewish Encyclopedia (1906), Entry: "Herod"**
      "Herod was of Idumean descent… Though nominally a Jew, his lineage was Edomite, and his appointment as king by the Romans was part of their strategy to control Judea."

Many **temple elites** and **political-religious authorities** (especially Sadducees) were either **descendants of these proselytes**, or had adopted a **form of Judaism stripped of covenantal heart** – fulfilling the warning in **Romans 2:28-29**.

- **Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 20, Chapter 9, Section 1:**
  Josephus describes how the high priesthood became a political office under Roman influence, often given to those aligned with the Sadducees and aristocratic elites, many of whom were not of pure priestly lineage.
- **Jewish Encyclopedia (1906), Entry: "Sadducees"**
  "The Sadducees were the wealthy, aristocratic class, often connected to the high priestly families, who held political power under Roman rule and were known for their secularization of religious life."
- **Romans 2:28-29 (KJV):**
  "For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh:
  But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God."

This perfectly illustrates Paul's point that physical lineage and external rituals do not make one a true covenantal Jew – a charge clearly applicable to many of the religious authorities during Christ's ministry.

III. Jesus Confronted False Claimants to the Abrahamic Line

In **John 8:39-44**, Jesus said to those confronting Him:

> *"If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham… Ye are of your father the devil."*

- This is **not just spiritual**: it likely had **ethnic overtones**, especially when paired with **Revelation 2:9 / 3:9**:

> *"them which say they are Jews, and are not, but are the synagogue of Satan."*

Jesus was pointing to the **presence of impostors** in the religious power structure – those who **claimed Abraham's name** but did **Satan's work** (plotting to kill the Son of God).

IV. The Rejection of the Messiah and God's Final Judgment

The **Old Testament prophets foretold** that the Messiah would be:

- **Rejected** by His own people (Isaiah 53:3),

- **Despised by the builders** (Psalm 118:22),
- **Cut off** (Daniel 9:26).

But this was **no surprise to God**. The rejection was foretold — but so was **judgment**:

> ***Matthew 21:43*** *— "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."*
> ***Luke 19:44*** *— "…because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation."*
> ***Matthew 24*** *— Foretells the* ***destruction of the temple****.*

In 70 A.D., this was **fulfilled**:

- The Romans (with help from **Idumeans**, ironically) **destroyed Jerusalem** and **the temple**.
- The **Old Covenant system ended**.
- The **false priesthood**, perhaps many of Edomite descent, was swept away.

God **used this as a final judgment** — not just on **those who rejected Christ**, but also on the **false claimants** to Israel's covenant identity.

V. God's Sovereign Use of History: Two-Fold Judgment

God **used both realities**:

✔ **The infiltration of Edomites into Judea,**

✔ **The rebellion of ethnic Israelites who rejected**

their own Messiah,

…to bring about **a divine judgment** that fulfilled both **Old Testament prophecies** against Edom and **New Covenant consequences** for unbelief.

This judgment:

- Exposed the **counterfeit leadership**,
- Cut off the **dead branches** (Romans 11),
- Cleared the way for the **true Israel of God** — those in Christ, both Jew and Gentile, to become the **one new man** (Ephesians 2:15).

VI. Edom's Judgment Not Just Ancient

A continued judgment upon Edom progressed into the **Second Temple era** through their **infiltration and usurpation** of Judah's land and name. God, in His sovereign wisdom, used their presence and the rejection of the Messiah by **both Edomite impostors and faithless Israelites** to bring about **a cleansing judgment** in A.D. 70.

This fulfilled multiple layers of prophecy:

- Against **Edom** for their betrayal and ambition,
- Against **Judah** for rejecting the Son of God,
- And for the **revealing of the true Israel**, born of faith, not of flesh.

Concluding Remarks

The saga of Esau and Jacob is not merely a tale of two brothers—it is a prophetic picture of two competing identities: one born of the flesh, the other born of the promise. The Scriptures consistently affirm that God's covenant people are not determined by bloodline alone, but by faith, obedience, and spiritual rebirth. Edom, though a relative of Israel, despised the birthright and later sought to seize what he had lost—not through repentance, but through force, deception, and religious assimilation.

The prophetic warnings against Edom stand as a witness to this false inheritance. Edom's ambition to possess the land and name of Israel culminated in their presence within Judea during the Second Temple era, where they played a role in the rejection and crucifixion of Christ. This fulfilled not only ancient prophecies of judgment but exposed a counterfeit version of God's people who had the outward form of religion but denied its power.

Jesus' rebuke of those who claimed Abraham as their father, and the visions in Revelation of those "who say they are Jews and are not," point to a deeper spiritual reality: not all who bear the name represent the covenant. God sees beyond titles and traditions to the truth of the heart. The destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. was not simply a political or military event—it was a divine act of judgment on a system corrupted by those who had usurped the name and place of God's true people.

In our own time, this message remains urgent. Just as in the first century, the world is full of religious labels and institutions that claim to represent God, yet deny the cornerstone—Christ Himself. As followers of the Messiah, we must discern the difference between outward appearance and inward truth. The true Israel of God is not a nation defined by geography or genealogy, but a people defined by faith in

the Son of God. Let us therefore walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit, and contend earnestly for the truth that has been entrusted to us.
