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The Ethnic Origin of the Edomites*

In arguing for the ethnic origin of the Edomites, I am only following the conclusions of the late Michael Avi-Yonah, who understood they were an Arab people¹.

Unlike the Hurrians, whom they displaced and replaced, the Edomites were a Semitic people who belonged to the waves of Semitic migrations from the Arabian peninsula to the Fertile Crescent, such as the Ammorites, the Canaanites and the Aramaeans. But more relevantly, they can be placed amongst the groups of Arab peoples to be found in Trans-Jordan during this period, such as the Ammonites and the Moabites, who erupted into in what might be called Trans-Jordania Tripartita through its two gateways, Wādī Sirḥān and the Tabukiyya in northern Ḥijāz. The Jews rejected them as Israelites, so what else could they have been but Arabs, in the sense of whatever the term meant in that period? They were as Arab as the Ammonites and the Moabites, both considered Arab peoples, perhaps even more so as they lived even farther to the south than either of these two peoples, in the deepest southern corner of the Fertile Crescent, immediately adjacent to Arabia and its two gateways.

Part I

In support of Avi-Yonah's position, attention may be drawn to the fact that the term "Edom" is close to Duma, one of the twelve sons of Ishmael in the Bible², and is also a toponym for a well-known location at the mouth of Wādī Sirḥān in northern Ara-

bia. The Table of Nations in Genesis is not always accurate but in this case it appears to be so, at least in the sense that it assigns Duma to the sons of Ishmael, who are — it is generally recognized — the Arabs. This is the extent of the value of Genesis. But the toponym, Duma, is more important than the personal name in Genesis, since if the toponym is identified with the term "Edom" then the Arab and Arabian origin of the Edomites can be inferred without the help of the Bible.

"Edom" is phonetically close to Duma and the presumption is that the Arab (again, in the sense of whatever the term meant in that period) people who inhabited the location moved through Wādī Sirḥān, one of the gateways of Bilād ash-Shām, and into southern Jordan, whence they were driven into Palestine by the Nabataeans. Identifying Edom with Duma not only relates the Edomites to the Arabs but also points to their exact provenance in Arabia, whence they came. As a result, the Edomites cease to be a people who suddenly appeared in Jordan and Palestine, whose antecedents before that time remained obscure. As is well known, Dumat was the center of an important Arab kingdom whose kings and queens are known, and whose relations with the powerful Semitic empires of Mesopotamia are also known from inscriptions³. They were in possession of a strategic site in northern Arabia, hence the campaigns against them by the rulers of Mesopotamia.

The identification of Duma with Edom, despite the phonetic closeness of the two terms, may still

*The article is essentially the same as the paper read at the 10th International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan, held in Washington DC between 23 and 28 May 2007. It therefore retains some features peculiar to oral delivery. Notes are reduced to a minimum, since the thrust of the article is to bring together some well-known facts in support of the argument for an Arab origin of the Edomites.

¹ Avi-Yonah, M., *The Holy Land: A Historical Geography* (Grand

Rapids, Michigan, 1966), pp. 25, 61-62, 65, repeated on the same pages of the most recent edition of the book (Carta, Jerusalem, 2002).

² Genesis, 25:14.

³ On Duma and the Assyrian kings, see Eph'al, I., *The Ancient Arabs* (The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1982), pp.118-142.

be doubtful as the initial plosive sound (E) or (A) is missing in Duma, although two consonants of the tri-literal root are present. This brings me to the second new item, which clinches the identification, namely, the fact that Duma was originally pronounced Aduma or Adummatu with the initial plosive sound, which is how it appears in the inscriptions of the Assyrian kings. The site or place called Aduma or Addummatu thus relieves Duma of its apocoped status and confirms the identification of Arabian Adumma with Biblical Edom, that of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Josephus, on phonetic grounds. This carries important implications for the history of Edom, initially in Arabia and later in the Fertile Crescent, where the Edomites settled first in southern Jordan but were then forced into southern Palestine by the Nabataeans. These two stages may be summarized as follows:

- 1- The identification provides Biblical Edom with an Arabian historical background in which it was not a minor entity, but a power in Arabia, the center of which was the strategic site of Duma, later called Dumat al-Jandal. The best evidence, the epigraphic, provides details of their life and history. One of the Assyrian inscriptions, that of Esarhaddon, states how his father Sennecherib conquered Duma and captured its queen, along with images of its deities⁴. Their having been a respectable force in Arabia might explain why the Edomites were able to retain their identity when they settled in the Fertile Crescent (and later produced forceful personalities during the Herodian period).
- 2- The identification could also explain why the Edomites left their ancestral home in Arabia and moved to the Fertile Crescent. Their center, Dumat al-Jandal, attracted the unwelcome attention of the powerful Mesopotamian empire of the Assyrians, who terrorized the Fertile Crescent and Arabia. As a result, all or most of them decided to move on.
- 3- The move to the Fertile Crescent might also explain their name. What they called themselves when they were domiciled in Duma is not clear, but after they left it and moved into the Fertile Crescent they were known as "Edomites".

When peoples or individuals move they are often referred to by the place they came from. The Arab world is full of families who derived their names from the towns or regions they had come from, e.g. Beiruti, Tarabulsi, Halabi.

It is noteworthy that after the Edomites moved, their name retained the initial plosive sound (A) or (E), a sure sign of their place of origin. But the laws of phonetics eventually caught up with the Arabian toponym, which after centuries appeared elided and apocoped as Duma, a common feature in the colloquial pronunciation of Arabic names.

The movement of this Arabian people from Duma in the peninsula to the Edom of Jordan and Palestine, as well as their adoption of the name Edom, is paralleled by the movement of another Arab people from roughly the same area of the peninsula to the Fertile Crescent in the 5th century AD. This reveals a recurring pattern of migration and will strengthen the conclusions about the movement of the Edomites reached in this paper. This later movement is that of the Salihids, or Zokomids, the Arab *foederati* who lived in what had become the Byzantine *Provincia Arabia*. They had emigrated from a place referred to in Ptolemy's *Geography* as Zagmais, which the indefatigable explorer Alois Musil located in Wādi Sirhān and which was correctly identified with the Arabic name of the Daja'am group⁵. This group was also named after a toponym, Daj'am, in the Arabic broken plural form of Daja'ima. The history of this group is doubly relevant to that of the Edomites in the sense that they too were subsequently displaced and replaced by the superior power of another Arab group, the Ghassanids⁶, in much the same way that the Edomites were later displaced and replaced the Nabateans. Thus, a pattern can be seen in the movement of Arab peoples during the pre-Islamic period, out of the Arabian peninsula and into the Fertile Crescent owing, at least in part, to political and military pressure.

So much for the history of Edom in its Arabian phase, which the identification of Biblical Edom with Assyrian / Arabian Duma or Adummatu has made possible. Biblical Edom will now be discussed in the context of the light shed upon it by its Arabian predecessor.

⁴ For an English version of one inscription in which the Assyrian Esarhaddon refers to his father Sennacherib's conquest of Adummatu and the capture of its queen, see Hoyland, R. *Arabia and the Arabs* (Routledge, London and New York, 2001), pp. 133-134.

⁵ For this toponym in Ptolemy, see his *Geography*, ed. C. Muller

(Paris), vol. I, part 2, p. 1016, and the present writer in *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks, (Washington DC, 1989), p. 246, n. 66.

⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 282-289.

Part II

The second stage in the history of Edom is well-known, as it became part of Roman and Jewish history for some two centuries, from the settlement of Pompey in 63BC, and is mentioned in literary rather than epigraphic sources⁷, which had been the case during the first phase of its history. The new light thrown on the history of the Edomites by the identification of Edom with Duma calls for a new approach to their history and is a challenge to the cultural analyst. The new approach consists of disentangling Edomite history from Roman and Jewish history, placing it in its pre-Islamic Arab context. This will be a truly new approach to Edomite history, which historians have typically linked to Roman and Jewish history, recorded as it was by a major Jewish historian: Josephus. This process should not be difficult, as the Jews utterly rejected the Edomites as non-Israelites who overthrew their own Hasmonean dynasty and, through Roman power, ruled oppressively. Indeed, the name Edom became the name for hated Rome itself in Jewish writings. What then is the new context within which the history of the Edomites, as an Arab people, can be understood?

The main factor which affected these Arab peoples during the period in question was the constant gravitational pull which the Fertile Crescent, with its material and cultural wealth, exerted on those who lived in the arid Arabian peninsula. This pull set in motion waves of migration from the peninsula into the Fertile Crescent, which resulted in the profound transformation of these peoples once they settled there.

Over the course of the last half century, I have discussed three waves of peninsular Arab migration into the Fertile Crescent, during the 4th, 5th and 6th centuries AD⁸, and it is within the context of these migrations that Edomite history can most fruitfully be evaluated. Within the context of these migrations, the Edomites stand out as unique, as of all these people, they were the ones who underwent the most profound cultural transformation. From their origins as an Arabian people living a primitive life in Duma, they became a vibrant community that was profoundly influenced by the three major cultural currents of the Fertile Crescent at

that time, *viz.* Judaism, Hellenism and Romanisation. Indeed, some of the results of these powerful influences have survived in the region until the present day⁹.

This is illustrated by the career of Herod the Great, a *philoktistes* or lover of building unparalleled by any of other personality in this pre-Islamic period of migration, who in so doing set the tone for his descendants.

- 1- For Judaism, he rebuilt the Second Temple on the grandest scale, even though he did so to curry popular favor.
- 2- As a Philhellene, he erected monumental buildings associated with Greeks and Greek culture, not only in Judaea, but also in other parts of the Near East.
- 3- As Philrhomaiois, he also built structures associated with the Romans and founded *poleis*, such as Caesarea and Sebasteia, in honor of Augustus. His descendants followed in his wake as *philoktistai*, who contributed much to the urbanization and pacification of the region, as well as to the eradication of paganism.

In the spiritual history of the Arabs, the Edomites represent the adoption by an Arab people of, first, Judaism, then Christianity and finally Islam. Jewish monotheism was also adopted by other Arab peoples, but the Edomites were the ones most profoundly influenced by it, since they became completely Judaized, at least formally, although their rulers may not have been the most pious of converts. It was in their adoption of Judaism that the Edomites wrote a chapter in human history, as they left their mark not only on Jewish history but also on its daughter religion, Christianity, as their culture was flourishing at the time which witnessed the birth of the latter. Thus, they have left their mark on two world religions.

After their contribution to Judaism, the Edomites became involved in the fortunes of Christianity and influenced a number of important events in the history of that religion. Herod the Great is associated with the massacre of the innocents; his son Antipas the Tetrach of Galilee and Peraea beheaded John the Baptist; Agrippa I, his grandson, treated St. Paul well, contributing to the decision to send him

⁷ For a succinct history of the Edomites in this period, see the entry "Edom" in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971) vol. 23, pp. 369-380.

⁸ See *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks (Washington DC, 1984); *Byzantium and the Arabs in*

the Fifth Century, Dumbarton Oaks (Washington DC, 1989), and *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, Dumbarton Oaks (Washington DC, vols. I, 1 and 2 [1995] and vol II.i [2002]).

⁹ Represented by the cities they founded and the structures they erected.

to Rome for trial as a Roman citizen, an important decision in the life of the Thirteenth Apostle and Apostle to the Gentiles.

This re-evaluation of the Edomites, as an Arab people, inevitably calls for discussion of the Biblical Job and his *Book*. So much has been written on him, his ethnic origin and on his *Book* as a masterpiece, not only of Biblical Hebrew literature but even of world literature. An extravagant claim has been put forward that his *Book* was merely a translation of an original Arabic text¹⁰. For a minimalist like myself, however, the following facts are relevant to this discussion:

1- There is no doubt that Job was *not* an Israelite, as demonstrated by toponymical statements in the first chapter, e.g. he belonged to the land of 'Us, Sabaeans attacked his oxen and his children¹¹, the onomastic of his three friends and their provenance¹².

2- If the hypothesis of an original Arabic text is to be rejected, it should be noted that Arabisms have been noted in the *Book* by Hebraists, which only an Arabic lexicon could explain¹³.

From these two observations it follows that Job was an Arab. Who other than an Arab would have used Arabic in the pre-Islamic era, before it became the universal language of Islam when non-Arab Muslims used it.

3- Job's Arab tribal affiliation remains unclear. However, his God is none other than Jehovah, which links him explicitly to Judaism and reveals him as an Arab convert.

From these three premises it is natural to conclude that Job was an Edomite, who belonged to the Arab people who adopted the religion whose God was Jehovah, namely, Judaism.

As my conclusions on the Arab identity of the Edomites concur with those of Avi-Yonah, so do they concur with those of Robert Pfeiffer, a distinguished Old Testament scholar who argued that Job was not an Israelite but an Edomite¹⁴. He did not say, however, that he was an Arab. But if Avi-Yonah's conclusions about the Arab identity of the Edomites are accepted, to which the identification

of Edom with Adummatu in Arabia proposed in this paper may be added, the inevitable conclusion is that Job was both Edomite and Arab.

If Herod is the greatest figure in the political and cultural history of the Edomites, Job is his counterpart in their literary history. As an Arab, he could figure — albeit in a vague and ambiguous sense — in the history of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, which is shrouded in obscurity in this distant past. However, regardless of his ethnic origin, the *Book of Job* remains, as it must, part of Hebrew rather than Arabic literature, as it is in Hebrew that the work has survived, notwithstanding the Arabisms within it.

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¹⁰ See Foster, F.H., "Is the Book of Job a Translation from an Arabic Original?" *The American Journal of Semitic Languages* 49 (1932-3), pp. 21-45.

¹¹ *Job*, I:1, 15. The 'Uz/'Us of Job is identifiable with 'Is in Northwest Arabia; see Ali, J., *al-Mufasssal fi Tarikh al-'Arab qabl al-Islam* (Beirut, 1971), vol. vii, p.356.

¹² On the three friends of Job as non-Israelites, hailing from northwest Arabia, see *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Metzger, B. and R. Murphy (Oxford University Press), p. 627, n. 29.

¹³ See Pfeiffer, R., *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Harper, New York, 1948), pp. 682-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 680-681.