The striking oddity, if not outright eccentricity, of the delineation of Esau’s character and activity in Targum Neofiti becomes increasingly apparent the more that Targum is studied. Most evident, even at first sight, is this Targum’s restrained and sparing use of post-biblical material hostile to Esau. Indeed, close examination of the Targum suggests that even such fragments of hostile material as are presently incorporated in the text may, in some cases, have formed no part of the original rendering. Also noticeable is the poor state of the manuscript in many verses which speak of Esau: this is the case, even leaving aside passages which censors have erased or otherwise modified. Finally, we may point to aspects of Neofiti’s interpretation which seem vague and even ambiguous; and the rationale behind some of its divergences from the translations of the other Targums is not always immediately apparent.

Each of these peculiarities may, however, help to shed light on Neofiti’s character. For Esau was a figure of central importance in Jewish thought from late Second Temple times until the redaction of the Babylonian Talmud and after; and it would not be unreasonable to suppose that the Targum’s presentation of him was determined by its reaction in favour of, or against, other currents of Jewish thinking about him.1 Hence it will be important to show briefly something of the depth of the antagonism towards him displayed in postbiblical literature, and to set this alongside the Targum.

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Already in the second century BCE, the book of *Jubilees* offers a highly developed re-writing of biblical data about Esau, in which he is described as fierce, illiterate, and dangerous. His mother Rebecca, rather than Isaac his father, knows his true character: he is uncompromisingly depraved, unrighteous, and violent. She catalogues his wickedness, which culminates in the idolatry of his descendants. Although Esau admits to his father that he freely sold his birthright to Jacob, and agrees on a proper division of the inheritance with his brother, he is compelled by his sons to go to war with Jacob once their father is dead. In the course of this war, Jacob kills Esau, and brings his people into servitude.²

Philo, although less concerned about the details of Esau’s history, is as convinced as the author of *Jubilees* that Esau is wicked: he is, in short, the very representation of evil, and his descendants were deadly enemies of Jacob’s children.³ But Josephus seems to moderate this unrelievedly black portrait of Esau, while managing nonetheless in a diplomatic manner to point to Esau’s shortcomings and defects of character. Louis H. Feldman has recently argued that Josephus has deliberately moulded his presentation of Esau to suit his Roman patrons, since the equation of Esau with Rome and the Romans had already been established in his day.⁴ Whether or not he is correct on this matter, it is well known that Jewish texts, including the Talmuds and Midrashim, eventually came to use Esau as a code-name for the hated Rome, the tyrannical destroyer of the Temple and the Jewish state.⁵

As for the Targums, the Fragment Targums, marginal glosses of Neofiti (= Ngl), and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan view Esau as utterly wicked, and are aware of the identification of Esau with Rome. It is

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² See *Jub.* 19.13–14 for Esau’s illiteracy, which Feldman, ‘Josephus’ Portrait’, p. 119 properly notes as intended to contrast with Abraham’s learning, *Jub.* 11.16; 12.27; and *Jub.* 35.8–38.10. ¹ *En.* 89.12 also describes Esau in uncomplimentary language.
³ See, for example, Philo, *Sacr.* 4 (ii); *Congr.* 129 (xxiii); *Vit. Mos.* 1.239–49 (xliii–xliv).