CHAPTER FOUR

“BROTHER ESAU?” ESAU IN RABBINIC MIDRASH

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Introduction

In some articles to date, I have attempted to demonstrate that Esau fulfils the function of demarcation.\(^1\) My thesis postulates that the degree of belonging to Judaism is measured on the adherence to or divergence from the Torah, rabbinic ethics and religious fundamentals, and only to a limited extent on ethnic criteria. This confirms the thesis of Christine Hayes, who states:\(^2\)

...the identity of Jews...is a fundamentally religious, rather than genealogical, identity, and thus Gentiles who renounce idolatry and immorality...may enter the community as converts.

The Bible depicts Esau as the brother of Jacob (Gen 25–35) and as the progenitor of the line of Edom. This results in both positive and negative attributions. The positive evaluation of Edom is found with the specific reference to Esau’s “brotherhood” in Deut 2–3 and 23:7–8 (“You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother”). In contrast, the prophets\(^3\) Amos (1:11–12), Obadiah (1–14), Malachi (1:2–4) und Joel (4:19) have extreme rejections of Esau / Edom. Obadiah 1:10 justifies this as follows: “Because of the violence done to your brother

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Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them.” The denouncement given expression here refers to Esau’s alleged assistance during the siege of Judah by Babylonians. In another instance, Num 20:14–21, Edom’s refusal to allow Israel to pass through Egypt is commented upon in a negative fashion. An (apparently) historical meeting of Edom and Israel is reflected upon in 1 Sam 14:47; 2 Sam 8:14; 2 Kgs 8:20; 14:7 (2 Chr 25:11–12); 16:6 or 2 Chr 28:17; Isa 34:5–6; 49:7–22 and Ezek 25:12–14; 32:29; 35:3–15; 36:5 also mention Edom’s negative fate and the condemnation of his power and malicious joy: “As you rejoiced over the inheritance of the house of Israel, because it was desolate, so I will deal with you; you shall be desolate, Mount Seir, and all Edom, all of it” (Ezek 35:15). Jer 9:25 and 25:21ff. portray Edom as part of the corrupted world, “uncircumcised” by evil behaviour. Edom’s guilt is avenged (Lam 4:21–22).

It has frequently been attempted to correlate current political events with the fluctuating relationship between Edom and Israel.4 This may be justifiable to some extent, but is an injustice to the text when taken as a whole. Therein, resultant consequences of the behaviour of insiders and outsiders are depicted that are evaluated in terms correct or incorrect behaviour. The brotherhood of Esau is a critical issue in this regards. These elements are treated again in the rabbinic discussion of Esau. Here I will provide a systematic and synchronic analysis (with an emphasis on Genesis Rabbah) that respects the integrity of the individual textual sources. In my opinion, it is worth investigating the hypothesis that although Esau is depicted in diverse ways, in sum total these various depictions result in a holistic portrait of his person.

Esau as Brother and Insider

The view of Esau as a brother is often depicted negatively in the rabbinic sources. This leads to a consideration of the passages that emphasize this and wherein this is clearly referenced.

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