

Who were the Edomites?

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the firstborn son of Isaac and the twin brother of Jacob. In the womb, Esau and Jacob struggled together, and God told their mother, Rebekah, that they would become two nations, with the older one serving the younger (Genesis 25:23). As an adult, Esau rashly sold his inheritance to Jacob for a bowl of red soup (Genesis 25:30-34), and he hated his brother afterward. Esau became the father of the Edomites and Jacob became the father of the Israelites, and the two nations continued to struggle through most of their history. In the Bible, “Seir” (Joshua 24:4), “Bozrah” (Isaiah 63:1) and “Sela” (2 Kings 14:7) are references to Edom’s land and capital. Sela is better known today as Petra.

The name “Edom” comes from a Semitic word meaning “red,” and the land south of the Dead Sea was given that name because of the red sandstone so prominent in the topography. Esau, because of the soup for which he traded his birthright, became known as Edom, and later moved his family into the hill country of the same name. Genesis 36 recounts the early history of the Edomites, stating that they had kings reigning over them long before Israel had a king (Genesis 36:31). The religion of the Edomites was similar to that of other pagan societies who worshiped fertility gods. Esau’s descendants eventually dominated the southern lands and made their living by agriculture and trade. One of the ancient trade routes, the King’s Highway (Numbers 20:17) passed through Edom, and when the Israelites requested permission to use the route on their exodus from Egypt, they were rejected by force.

Because they were close relatives, the Israelites were forbidden to hate the Edomites (Deuteronomy 23:7). However, the Edomites regularly attacked Israel, and many wars were fought as a result. King Saul fought against the Edomites, and King David subjugated

them, establishing military garrisons in Edom. With control over Edomite territory, Israel had access to the port of Ezion-Geber on the Red Sea, from which King Solomon sent out many expeditions. After the reign of Solomon, the Edomites revolted and had some freedom until they were subdued by the Assyrians under Tiglath-pileser.

During the Maccabean wars, the Edomites were subjugated by the Jews and forced to convert to Judaism. Through it all, the Edomites maintained much of their old hatred for the Jews. When Greek became the common language, the Edomites were called Idumaeans. With the rise of the Roman Empire, an Idumaeen whose father had converted to Judaism was named king of Judea. That Idumaeen is known in history as King Herod the Great, the tyrant who ordered a massacre in Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the Christ child (Matthew 2:16-18).

After Herod's death, the Idumaeen people slowly disappeared from history. God had foretold the destruction of the Edomites in Ezekiel 35, saying, "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, PTMount Seir, and all Edom, all of it. Then they will know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 35:15). Despite Edom's constant efforts to rule over the Jews, God's prophecy to Rebekah was fulfilled: the older child served the younger, and Israel proved stronger than Edom.