

The “Wisdom” of Edom*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Among the most perplexing prophetic references to the biblical Edomites are the mention of the “wisdom” and “understanding” of Edom. These appear in two short quotations, one in Jer 49,7 that refers to the city / area of Teman and the other in Obad 7b-8 making reference to Edom and the mount of Esau:

Jer 49,7:

le'edôm kôh 'amar YHWH šeb 'āôt ha'ên 'ôd ḥokmâ bêtēmân
'ābēdâ 'ēšâ mibbānîm nistrēḥâ ḥokmātām

Concerning Edom. Thus says the LORD of hosts: Is there no longer wisdom in Teman? Has counsel perished from the prudent? Has their wisdom vanished?¹ (NRSV)

Obad 7b-8:

'ên tēbûnâ bô
hālô' bayôm hahû' nē'ûm YHWH
vēha 'ābadî ḥākāmîm mē'ēdôm ûtēbûnâ mēhar 'ēšāw

There is no understanding of it.²

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¹ The LXX omits “of hosts” and the interrogative *ha*, and therefore is a simple statement (“there is no longer...”): Carroll, Jeremiah, 801; Holladay, Jeremiah, 370; McKane, Commentary, 1214; Lundbom, Jeremiah, Appendix VI. The Tg. and the Vg. present “children” instead of “prudent” (see discussion below).

² Raabe translates this sentence as “in which there is no understanding”, taking *bô* as a reference to either Esau or the term *māzôr* (traditionally “snare, trap, net”, but also “stead”) in the preceding clause: Raabe, Obadiah, 155-156; followed by Barton, Joel, 140. See also McCarter, Obadiah, 87-88. Early readings such as the LXX and the Tgs. interpret this verse as a reference to Edom; see Ben Zvi, Study, 90-96. Some

On that day, says the LORD, I will destroy the wise out of Edom, and understanding out of Mount Esau (NRSV)

1.2. These are texts that reward careful reading; ones that provide a unique glimpse into the biblical discourse concerning ancient Edom. Several questions arise when dealing with these passages: What do these biblical verses mean by referring to “wisdom” and “understanding”? Why do these references appear related to Edom? Scholars have struggled to capture the historical and ideological framework behind the composition of these verses. While these efforts are commendable, they have tried to understand the meaning of these allusions by references to the Hebrew Bible itself, thus leaving little room for analyses in the broader framework of the ancient Near East and beyond. In order to provide an adequate context for these passages, this paper will study the occurrence of similar references in the Hebrew Bible but also in contemporary ancient Near Eastern sources. Additionally, I will make reference to recent archaeological excavations in southern Jordan (the ancient land of Edom) that might shed new light on one of the possible meanings of Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8.

1.3. This paper is divided into four main parts. First, I will devote attention to the context in which Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8 are present in their respective books. The second part will compare Jer 49,7 / Obad 7b-8 with similar references in other biblical passages, as well as discuss analogous allusions to the presence of wisdom in other biblical peoples. Also I will review the meaning of the references to the wisdom, as well as the larger frameworks in which these terms occur, in non-Israelite sources, particularly Mesopotamian texts. Third, I will study previous explanations developed by biblical scholars concerning Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8, particularly focusing attention on how they were understood in the broader context of the oracles of Jeremiah, Obadiah and other prophets. Although a preliminary review of the evidence suggests that a definitive conclusion is not possible, I expect to provide some points that may give a glimpse into the ideological background of Jeremiah / Obadiah’s verses. As a result of the dearth of relevant epigraphic finds in the land of Edom, the survey that follows depend to a large extent on biblical parallels and also on the relevant conclusions that can be derived from ethnographic studies. In the fourth and last part I will elaborate a hypothesis in the line of those scholars that equate the “wisdom” of Edom with the skill of metalworking. For this purpose, I will make a survey of anthropological and ethnographic studies on ancient metallurgy’s ideological / magical background, literature that may give a broader framework for the references to the Edomite wisdom.

modern scholars follow Wellhausen in the idea that *'ên tēbûnâ bô* is a gloss; e.g. Pfeiffer, *Edomitic Wisdom*, 13 note 4; see also Allen, *Books*, 150 note 30.

2. The “Wisdom” of Edom in the oracles’ general context

2.1. Our starting point, from an analytical perspective, are the texts of Jeremiah and Obadiah themselves. The general background of the oracles against Edom as they appear in Jer (49,7-22) and Obad is generally believed to have taken place in the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C.E. or slightly later, when Edom allegedly assisted the Neo-Babylonian army against the Judaean kingdom or at least profited from Judah’s defeat.³ It is in these references that the accusation that the Edomites took part in the fall of the city appears for the first time, either as direct agents of the on-going destruction or as mere passive, though joyfully, spectators. These passages are very theatrical presentations in which the Edomites always play the “bad guys” character roles.

2.2. The prophecy against Edom in the Book of Jeremiah (49,7-22) is part of a larger composition traditionally known as the “prophecies against the nations” (Jer 46-51), and in itself stands between the oracles delivered to Moab and Ammon and those delivered to some Syrian cities and Arabian tribes. As is typical for the accusations against the Edomites, few specific, historically-grounded details (and in this case, not one) are mentioned pertaining to what Edom did in the past, whereas on the contrary a terrible fate is prophesized against this nation, such as the ruin of Esau (49,8), the destruction of his race (49,10) and of the Edomite capital Bozrah (49,13), and the sacking of their pastures (49,20). In this context, the references to the lack of “wisdom” and “counsel” in Edom serve as an introduction to the Edomites’ ignorance of their dreadful future. The judgment on the Edomites, both in Jeremiah and Obadiah, carries some irony, for these people are supposed to be wise but they do not see what is coming to them. In fact, this could be interpreted as an ironic reversal of the theme of Edom’s arrogance (“pride of your heart”: Jer 49,16; Obad 3).

2.3. The Book of Obadiah seems to have been composed at the same time or slightly later than Jeremiah’s and is almost entirely devoted to the Edomite “question”. The text under study here falls into what scholars generally believe are two different parts: the second (Obad 5-7) and third (Obad 8-11) oracles against Edom.⁴ Overall, references to the Edomites’ behavior in 586 B.C.E. are particularly graphic: Edom is accused of violence against his brother (v.10), of staying aloof (v.11), feasting and gloating on the day of his brother’s misfortune (v.12-13a), looting his possessions (v.13b) and assassinating the fugitives (v.14a). The annihilation of the “wise men” and the “understanding” from Edom is but the logical divine punishment for this shameful behavior.

³ For example, see Watts, Obadiah, 8-9; Raabe, Obadiah, 51-56. Against the idea of the Edomite participation in the fall of Jerusalem is Bartlett, Edom, 151-157.

⁴ Bez Zvi, Study, 72-98.115-138; Barton, Joel, 139-147.

2.4. Similar diffuse memories are scattered through some prophecies and literary works accusing the Edomites of improper conduct toward their “brothers”, though any precise historical detail is again missing, such as in Ps 137,7; Amos 1,11; Joel 4,19; Ezek 25,12; 35,5 and 1 Esdras 4,45.

2.5. Now let us study in more detail the verses under consideration. In Jer 49,7 Yahweh addresses the Edomites with three rhetorical questions, with only one interrogative *h* assuming the function for the three colons.⁵ Repetition of words in these three colons – wisdom (*ḥokmā*) + counsel (*’ēṣā*) + (their) wisdom (*ḥokmātām*) – is key for achieving an internal balance in the verse’s structure.⁶ The term *bānīm* is most likely a *qal* participle from *bīn*, a reading that was already recognized by the LXX’s translation (*ek sunetōn*, “from the intelligent ones”) and the Peshitta.⁷ The name Teman (*tēmān*, “south”), to which Jer 49,7 refers as not having “wisdom”, is a place-name located in the area of Edom. There has been some debate as to whether this name should be identified with a precise place – Glueck identified Teman with the Late Iron II site of Tawilan, in the Petra area⁸ – or a region – de Vaux identified it with the area of southern Edom,⁹ whereas others locate it in the northern Edomite plateau¹⁰ –, the consensus leaning towards the latter view.

2.6. Obad 8 is an excellent example of parallelism, with a construction verb + object + prepositional phrase with *min*. The “wise” (*ḥākāmīm*) and “understanding” (*tēbūnā*) form a lexical word pair, the former in a masculine plural (concrete) form, the latter in a feminine singular (abstract) form.¹¹

2.7. As already noted by some commentators, if we look closely at the texts under discussion we see that both passages share a very similar vocabulary and grammatical structure:

- 1) Beginning with an interrogative *h*;
- 2) Formula *’ēn* + noun + *b*;
- 3) Verb *’bd* + *min*;

⁵ The LXX even does not show the first interrogative: Lundbom, Jeremiah, 328. In this regard, Holladay thinks that *ha* is a dittography after *YHWH*; Holladay, Jeremiah, 370.

⁶ Lundbom, Jeremiah, 326-328.

⁷ The Tg. and the Vg. translate the less likely rendition “from the children”; see Holladay, Jeremiah, 374-375; McKane, Commentary, 1214; Lundbom, Jeremiah, 328-329; Hayward, Targum.

⁸ Glueck, Explorations, 82-83.

⁹ de Vaux, Téman.

¹⁰ Edelman, Edom, 10-11.

¹¹ Raabe, Obadiah, 8; Ben Zvi, Study, 120.

4) Root *ḥkm*;

5) ABA noun pattern: wisdom – counsel – wisdom (Jer); understanding – wise – understanding (Obad).¹²

2.8. The resemblance in both vocabulary and structure seems to indicate that one of the texts depends on the other. There is some agreement that one of the authors of these passages, most likely Obadiah’s, made use and adapted the other text for his own purpose.¹³ Although the terminology and structure of both passages are very much similar, there is one element in Obadiah that is key for recontextualizing the whole composition. For whereas the verbs in Jeremiah appear in *qal* perf. 3rd sing (*’bd*) and *niphal* perf. 3rd sing (*srḥ*), Obadiah makes use of only *’bd* in *hiphil* waw consec. perf. 1st sing., thereby transforming three rhetorical questions into a proclamation about the divine punishment on Edom.¹⁴ The result is a declaration with a stronger anti-Edomite meaning, which may parallel the growing anti-Edomite feelings among the Judaeen population in the post-exilic period.

3. “Wisdom” in the Hebrew Bible and the Literature of the Ancient Near East

3.1. Returning to the issue of the Edomite wisdom, one main question arises: Are the books of Jeremiah and Obadiah making use, or sharing the same meaning, of similar occurrences of the words “wisdom” and “understanding” that appear in other biblical passages and extra-biblical sources? In order to answer this question, I will reexamine the use of similar phraseology in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East.

3.2. As already mentioned, the passages under discussion make use of a very similar vocabulary, in Jeremiah represented by the roots *ḥokmâ* (two times) and *bîn*; in Obadiah by the roots *ḥokmâ* (two times) and *tēbûnâ* (two times). In these and in other biblical passages the meaning of these roots is often analogous and more often than not they are used interchangeably as synonyms.

3.3. An important feature that precludes us from reaching the exact meaning of the occurrence of this vocabulary in Jer 8 / Obad 7b-8 is that in the Bible as well as in non-Israelite sources these words are used with a wide range of senses. It would be impossible to list here all occurrences of these words in the

¹² Dicou, Edom, 68-69; Raabe, Obadiah, 30-31.

¹³ Dicou, Edom, 68-69; Raabe, Obadiah, 30-31; McKane, Commentary, 1214; see also Brueggemann, Theology, 154-156.

¹⁴ As correctly pointed out by Ben Zvi, in the Hebrew Bible there are no occurrences of *’bd* in *hiphil* with direct objects *ḥākāmîm* or *tēbûnâ*, but we do have *ḥokmâ* with *’bd* in *qal* (Isa 29,14): Ben Zvi, Study, 121.

Hebrew Bible, but most of them can be grouped according to the context in which they appear. Several semantic fields can be identified for the use of these words in the Hebrew Bible: 1) nonspecific usage; 2) court wisdom, e.g. Solomon's wisdom as an author and as a judge (1Kgs 3,28; 5,9-12); 3) mantic wisdom, e.g. the (false) Babylonian divination tradition (Isa 44,25; 47,10); 4) magical wisdom, e.g. the Egyptian sorcerers confronting Aaron (Ex 7,11); and 5) artisans (see part 5).¹⁵

3.4. Some biblical peoples seem to have been famous because of the possession of wisdom. Most of the references allude to the regions to the east of Palestine, encompassing from southern Jordan to Northwestern Arabia. The passages under study fall, of course, in this category, but they are not the only ones. 1Kgs 5,11, for example, compares the wisdom (root *ḥokmā*) of King Solomon with that of the "sons of the East" and Egypt, this monarch being even wiser than Ethan the Ezrahite and the sons of Mahol, Heman, Calcol and Darda (identified by some scholars as Edomites¹⁶). The Greek Book of Baruch presents a long chapter dealing with the wisdom in Israel, remarking in passing the lack of wisdom in Teman, the children of Hagar and the merchants of Midian and Teman (Bar 3,22-23). There is agreement in that this text was written long after the books of Jeremiah and Obadiah, but nevertheless it may very well be grounded in a long-lasting tradition going back to the Iron Age, being therefore of help for unraveling the specific meaning of Jer 47,9 / Obad 7b-8.

3.5. My focus on the Edomite wisdom does not mean that the authors of the Hebrew Bible attributed this feature only to Edom. In particular, there are sparse references to the wisdom of the Phoenicians and Babylonians. Contrary to Jeremiah's and Obadiah's passages, biblical allusions to the wisdom of other peoples are very explicit about which kind of wisdom they are referring to. Yet all these references occur not because the biblical writers were avid of compiling ethnographic data about other peoples' cultural experience, but because they were used to make the point that foreign peoples' wisdom was annulled or made to seem foolish by divine action. In Ezek 27,8-9 the people of the cities of Sidon, Arvad, Tyre and Byblos and their "wise men" (root *ḥokmā*) are mentioned in connection with sailing activities; whereas Ezek 28,3-5 refers to the "wisdom" (root *ḥokmā*) and "understanding" (root *tēbūnā*) within the context of trading enterprises (cf. also the similar meaning in Zech 9,2). Isa 44,25 and 47,10 make allusion to Babylon, its "wise men" and "wisdom" (root *ḥokmā*) and "knowledge" (root *da'at*), which are direct references to the

¹⁵ Müller, Chāqam, 373-379.

¹⁶ Pfeiffer for example equates Ezrah with Edomite Zerah (Gen 36,13.17.33) and Ethan and Heman with modern topographic names in southern Jordan; Pfeiffer, Edomitic Wisdom, 13.

Babylonian divination tradition. Similar allusions for the Babylonian “wise men” (root *ḥokmā*) appear in Jer 50,35 and 51,57. Even though these peoples seemed to be “very wise” this did not prevent them from being condemned by God or from looking foolish after committing foreign policy blunders.

3.6. To complete this brief account of the wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible it is necessary to note that, interestingly enough, allusions to the wisdom of Ammon or Moab are entirely absent. This absence may go unnoticed if not for the recurrent allusions about the “wisdom” of Edom and the peoples of the East. This divergence between Ammon / Moab and Edom may have to do with two facts. The first point to note is that Ammon and Moab were not included among the peoples of the East – as Edom was. Furthermore, Edom possessed a yet undiscovered attribute – which Ammon and Moab did not – that made the Edomites famous for their “wisdom”.

3.7. A survey of non-Israelite sources looking for the use of similar vocabulary and phraseology in the ancient Near East may help to better understand the passages of Jeremiah and Obadiah under discussion. The word for “wisdom” (*ḥokmā*) in Hebrew has cognates in other Semitic languages, although less widely used than their Hebrew counterpart: Ugaritic *ḥkm*, Neo-Assyrian Akkadian *ḥakāmu*, Imperial Aramaic *ḥkym*.¹⁷ Sumerian *nam-kù-zu* and Akkadian *nēmequ* appear to have had a somewhat similar meaning, but again, nothing compared with the biblical use of the root *ḥokmā*.¹⁸

3.8. Mesopotamia did not possess a tradition of wisdom literature. This does not mean, however, that the concept of wisdom was absent in the Mesopotamian texts; however, it was present as a theme(s) rather than as a genre in itself. Wisdom thus was present in several literary genres, such as in unexpected texts like omen compositions or the Epic of Gilgamesh.¹⁹ Consequently, Mesopotamian sources show a broad range of connotations for the use of the wisdom vocabulary that does not accommodate into the schemes that biblical scholars have traditionally constructed. Denning-Bolle has stressed a most important feature in the Mesopotamian literature: the boundary demarcation between a “practical” wisdom and an “abstract” wisdom does not appear to be suitable for classifying the Mesopotamian literary traditions. Many of the words in Akkadian that stand for technical skills, such as *mūdū*, “one who knows”, “expert in a craft”; *emqu*, “skilled, experienced, educated”; *apkallu*, an ante-diluvian sage; and *nēmequ*, “wise”, were meant to refer to wisdom in general sense but also to practical expertise.²⁰

¹⁷ Müller, Chāqam, 364-368.

¹⁸ Beaulieu, Babylonian Wisdom Literature, 3-4.

¹⁹ Bucellati, Wisdom; Beaulieu, Setting, 18.

²⁰ Denning-Bolle, Wisdom and Dialogue, 217.220.

3.9. The absence of a clear boundary between “practical” and “abstract” wisdom in the Mesopotamian literature has important ramifications for our study of Jer 49,7 / Obad 7b-8, for it considerably expands the range of possible meanings of the wisdom of Edom.

4. The Wisdom of Edom in the scholarly literature

4.1. Using the issues discussed thus far, we can now return to the problem of the Edomite wisdom in a more specific manner. As with almost everything related to the Edomites, modern scholars are divided over the meaning and function of the references to the wisdom of Edom. A survey and reexamination of previous hypotheses developed by biblical scholars show at least three main lines of reasoning for explaining the allusions to Edom’s wisdom: the existence of some (not yet discovered) Edomite sapiential writings; Edom’s political alliances in the face of the Neo-Babylonian invasion; and the Edomite mining and metalwork in the copper mines of Faynan. These points of views will now be examined in more detail to show how they have become thematic influences on the history of Edom in general.

4.2. Scholarly interest in the wisdom of Edom has been largely limited to the issue of the sapiential writings. In this literature, there is the common assumption that Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8 are allusions to Edomite sapiential writings, based mostly on references in the Book of Job but also in other biblical passages.²¹ A pioneering textual overview of the Edomite influence on the Hebrew Bible was provided by R.F. Pfeiffer, who in the 1920s and 1930s wrote a series of articles in which he supported the idea that the Edomite tradition of wisdom had an enormous impact on the biblical authors, if not Edomite writers themselves were responsible for entire parts of the Hebrew Bible, such as Psalms, Proverbs, Job²² and even parts of Genesis.²³

4.3. An important point in Pfeiffer’s reasoning is that in the Edomite writings (particularly the Book of Job and Pfeiffer’s so-called Genesis Source S) God appears with very specific features that differed from those composed by

²¹ The Book of Job is full of geographical allusions that indicate an Edomite or North-western Arabian background of the story. Job himself is said to have dwelled in the land of Uz (Job 1,1), and Uz in other biblical passages appears closely linked to Edom (Gen 36,28; Lam 4,21). Job’s friends also share the same geographical background. Eliphaz came from Teman (Job 2,11); in Gen 36 Eliphaz is portrayed as Esau’s son (v.4) who also bore his son Teman (v.11.15). Job’s second friend Bildad dwelled in Shuah (Job 2,11), also a name of a Midianite clan (Gen 25,2); whereas Elihu came from Buz (Job 32,2), probably in Arabia (Jer 25,23). See Day, Job, 392-395.

²² Pfeiffer, *Edomitic Wisdom*; Pfeiffer, *Wisdom*, 95.

²³ Pfeiffer, *Source*.

the Judaeen authors. God, from the Edomite perspective, is a distant entity, who does not betray interest in the future of Israel, nor of any other nation; he is jealous and ready to punish, and he indeed inspires feelings of fear and pessimism; moreover, the Edomite writers made use of polytheistic sources.²⁴ One could even add that these features can be related to the names with which God is called in the Book of Job. As is well known, in the poetic dialogue section (Job 3-31), Job and his friends use general, universal names for the deity (*Elohim*, *Eloah*, *Shaddai*) when speaking to each other rather than the specific name of the God of Israel, *YHWH*. Yet the latter name is employed by the Judaeen writer/editor in the prose prologue (1-2) and epilogue sections (42,7-17) as well as in the narrative introductions in 3rd. person to the divine speeches.²⁵

4.4. Although Pfeiffer largely overstated the case of the Edomite influence in the biblical tradition of wisdom, his works are so far the sole thorough analysis of the context of Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8, being repeatedly cited in more recent studies of the books of Jeremiah,²⁶ Obadiah, Job,²⁷ and wisdom in general.²⁸

4.5. New epigraphic findings have given new life to the hypothesis of the "Edomite" sapiential books. Sasson has recently suggested that an inscription written on a bowl unearthed at Horvat 'Uza, in the Northern Negev, largely thought to be a Judaeen literary work, is in fact a piece of Edomite wisdom literature. This inscription, Sasson defends, is a parallel version of Job 27,10-17 written in the Edomite language, and would point to the existence of *YHWH* worship in Edom.²⁹ Archaeological excavations in the Hellenistic site of Maresha might have provided further evidence of Edomite sapiential literature. Two ostraca found in this site, used for scribal exercises, contained small parts of wisdom literary texts written in Aramaic (with no direct parallels in any known text). Given that Maresha during Hellenistic times was included in Idumaeen territory, the editors of the inscriptions suggest that these are part of the lost

²⁴ Pfeiffer, *Wisdom*, 96-101; Pfeiffer, *Source*, 71-72.

²⁵ Although the topic of wisdom embraces the whole Book of Job, the most direct allusion to the existence of a wisdom tradition in Edom appears in Eliphaz the Temanite's words: "I will show you; listen to me; what I have seen I will declare – what sages have told, and their ancestors have not hidden, to whom alone the land was given, and no stranger passed among them" (Job 15,17-19 NRSV).

²⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 328.

²⁷ Day, *Job*, 392.

²⁸ Müller, *Chāqam*, 379. In the same vein stands Zeron's study of the 1st century B.C.E. book "Biblical Antiquities of Pseudo-Philo" (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*), arguing that this is the product of an Edomite writer; see Zeron, *Swansong*.

²⁹ Sasson, *Text*.

Edomite wisdom tradition.³⁰ These three inscriptions, even if found outside the Edomite “heartland” and – in the case of the Maresha ostraca – very late in date, are likely indicators of the existence of a scribal school learned in the wisdom literature within the area of Edomite demographic and cultural influence.

4.6. According to a second line of reasoning, Jeremiah’s and Obadiah’s allusions to the Edomite wisdom are no more than references to Edom’s political and diplomatic acumen, thereby implying that the Edomites did not anticipate the day of their own downfall.³¹ Thus, Ben Zvi points out that by referring to the wisdom of Edom, the author of the book of Obadiah is signaling the lack of astute political advising on the part of the Edomites, which betrays their lack of theological wisdom.³² In other words, the political talent of the Edomites is no match for Judah having God’s strength on his side. Allen supports the related idea that Obadiah in this context alludes to the “wisdom” in military skill, even though this proves to be completely ineffective in the face of the action of God.³³

4.7. The hypothesis of the “political” understanding may seem more straightforward, since it may have some support from the fact that Obadiah’s “wisdom” allusion appears just before the verses that – it is traditionally argued – describe the shameful behavior of the Edomites during the fall of Jerusalem in 587/586 B.C.E.:

On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them (Obad 11 NRSV)

Based on these passages, one could argue that the highest point of the political insight of the Edomites was the aggression against the Judaeans in the face of Nebuchadnezzar’s attack. The Edomite attack on Jerusalem – even if a literary construction – and the possible territorial gains of the Edomites following Judah’s downfall (particularly in the Negev area)³⁴ may have been seen as an Edomite “stab-in-the-back” of Judah not only because of the folklore linking the brothers Jacob – eponymous ancestor of Israel – and Esau – forefather of the Edomites –,³⁵ but also given that Edom seems to have been Judah’s political ally just before the Neo-Babylonian invasion (Jer 27,3) and even provided asylum to

³⁰ Eshel / Puech / Kloner, Exercises.

³¹ Ben Zvi, Study, 121-122; Raabe, Obadiah, 163-164; Barton, Joel and Obadiah, 144; McKane, Jeremiah, 1215.

³² Ben Zvi, Historical-Critical Study, 122; see also Raabe, Obadiah, 164.

³³ Allen, Books, 153.

³⁴ See Beit-Arieh, Rivalry.

³⁵ See Tebes, Edomite.

Judaean refugees after the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 40,11). In other words, the constant *renversement des alliances* of Edom may have led to the Judaean belief of an acute Edomite political wisdom, if nothing else because Judah was the most affected by Edom’s foreign policy.

4.8. The argument has been presented by some scholars that Edom’s “wisdom” is a reference to the knowledge of the skill of metalworking.³⁶ During the last years more attention has been paid to archaeological excavations in the Edomite lowland area of Faynan (the largest source of copper in the southern Levant) that have uncovered evidence of mining and metalwork from the Pre-Pottery Neolithic to the Early Islamic period. Impressive architectural remains – particularly a square fortress with four-room chamber at the site of Khirbet en-Nahas – and large piles of slag attest the magnitude of the copper mining activities during the Iron Age. These findings have led to some scholars to conclude that the “wisdom” of Edom is no more than knowledge of the craft of metalwork. In Knauf-Belleri’s words, “There is no need to invent another set of ‘lost books’ or to look for remnants of Edomite sapiential writings in the Hebrew Bible”.³⁷

4.9. The three hypotheses have much to commend themselves and are not necessarily in opposition. There is evidence to suggest that when referring to the Edomite wisdom the biblical writers had many things in mind, maybe even beyond the boundary of the meanings we have studied so far. Yet of the three lines of reasoning presented above, the “metallurgy” hypothesis, though attractive, has never been fully explored. So in the last part of this article I would like to discuss this issue, developing further the idea by placing it in its historical and ideological context.

5. Copper Metalwork and the “Wisdom” of Edom

5.1. Suddenly the body of archaeological material available from the Faynan lowlands which is relevant to the understanding and analysis of metallurgy has assumed formidable proportions. However, it is surprising and disappointing that very little research has so far been devoted to elucidating the relationship between these discoveries and the wisdom of Edom.

5.2. The Wadi Faynan area, located 60 km. south of the Dead Sea at the eastern foothills of the Arabah valley (Jordan), has the distinction of being the largest source of copper ore in the southern Levant. It contains nodules of copper ore consisting mainly of malachite, chalcocite and chrysocolla, and in this respect is geologically very similar to the copper region of Timna valley,

³⁶ Knauf / Lenzen, *Copper Industry*, 87; Knauf-Belleri, *Edom*, 113 n. 77; followed by Raabe, *Obadiah*, 164.

³⁷ Knauf-Belleri, *Edom*, 113 n. 77.

located in the southern Arabah (Israel). Research made in Faynan has discovered evidence of exploitation since the Pre-Pottery Neolithic, which continued during the Chalcolithic Period, Early Bronze Age, Iron Age, and the Roman and Early Islamic Periods.³⁸ The mining of local copper ores during the Iron Age resumed after a hiatus in activity during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Archaeological research has demonstrated the existence, during the Iron Age, of a string of settlements extending along the major wadis of the area. The most important sites are Barqa el-Hetiye 2, the Wadi Fidan 40 cemetery, Khirbet en-Nahas and Khirbet al-Jariya. Despite the extensive wave of occupation during the Iron Age, only two of these settlements – Khirbet en-Nahas and Barqa el-Hetiye – have been excavated.³⁹

5.3. The largest settlement dug so far in the area is Khirbet en-Nahas, measuring c. 10 ha. The site consists of over one-hundred building complexes and over thirty-four massive slag mounds. The most prominent feature is a large square fortress with a one four-chamber gate. Since 2002 part of the gate complex of this fortress was excavated (Area A), and a sequence of four main strata was established associated with evidence of copper production. Radiocarbon dates place its construction at the beginning of the 10th century and its end at the 9th century B.C.E. Excavation and radiocarbon dates from a nearby metalwork building (Area S) revealed a longer period of settlement, between the 12th and 9th centuries B.C.E.⁴⁰

5.4. If, as some scholars suggest, the authors of Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8 are referring to the craft of metalwork, then the question arises as to what was the knowledge the biblical writers had with respect to the mines of Faynan. The biblical corpus covering this region is ambiguous. A perusal of the Hebrew Bible shows no explicit reference to the mining area of Faynan nor to Edomite smiths in general, although there are some probable indirect allusions. One of the stations in the Exodus is Punon (*pûnôn*), between Zalmonah and Oboth (Num 33,42-43), traditionally identified as modern Faynan. A parallel account of this list appears in Num 21,4-9, where the station between Zalmonah and Oboth is replaced by the incident of the bronze serpent, which therefore seems to have occurred at Punon – thus linking this site with a mining region.⁴¹ More challenging are Aharoni's identification of "Calebite" Ir-Nahash (1Chr 4,12; *'îr nāḥāš*, lit. "city of serpent", notice the similarity with *nēḥōšet*, "copper /

³⁸ Hauptmann, Metallurgie.

³⁹ Tebes, Land, 74-77.

⁴⁰ Levy et al., Reassessing; Levy / Najjar / Higham, Iron Age.

⁴¹ See also the name Pinon (*pînôn*) in the lists of Edomite "chiefs": Gen 36,41; 1Chr 1,52.

bronze”⁴²) with Khirbet en-Nahas and Glueck’s identification of Kenizite Ge-Harashim (1Chr 4,14; *gê’ ħārāšīm*, “valley of craftsmen”) with the Arabah valley.⁴³

5.5. The paucity of references concerning the Edomite copper metalwork extends also to contemporary Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian sources. Although Edomite kings are known to have paid tribute several times to the Assyrian empire, there are no textual references to consignments of copper.⁴⁴ Neo-Babylonian documents provide even less information, most of which concerns King Nabonidus’ campaign to Transjordan and the Hejaz, an event that most probably brought the downfall of the Edomite ruling dynasty, ca. 551 B.C.E.⁴⁵

5.6. A significant point never explored in dealing with the Edomite metallurgical hypothesis is that in ancient societies the skill of metalwork was regarded as being intimately connected with magic knowledge, supernatural powers and cultic activities. We know that in ancient societies metal-making did not possess the scientific connotations that it does have in the industrial world, the various activities related to it being necessarily ritualized and symbolic. Ethnographic researches on metalwork activities, particularly in contemporaneous African societies, have shown that ritual contexts are usual in every stage of the production process. Given that smelting involves process of creation and transformation of raw materials, it is often metaphorically related to human reproduction and childbirth, cooking and fecundity; even the act of firing has ritual significance.⁴⁶ The activities of the artisans involve rites of purification, fasting, meditation, prayers, songs and sacrifices. The magical aspect embeds also the worker’s tools, which are thought to possess divine attributes and magical powers.⁴⁷

5.7. More specifically, early metallurgy was often associated with politic-religious power and charisma. As Budd and Taylor put it, in the early metallurgy we can see the “copper smith, political leader and magician coinciding in one single person”.⁴⁸ Ancient mythology and contemporary African beliefs frequently portrays the metalworker as a central character in creation accounts and epics: the roles of Ptah in ancient Egypt, Ea (Enki in Sumerian) in Mesopota-

⁴² Mitchell, *Evidence*, 272-273.

⁴³ See Bartlett, *Edom*, 50; Bartlett, *Wadi*, 152-154.

⁴⁴ Tebes, *Land*, 87-88.

⁴⁵ Crowell, *Nabonidus*.

⁴⁶ Collett, *Metaphors*; Schmidt, *Iron Technology*, 207-230; Schmidt / Mapunda, *Ideology*.

⁴⁷ McNutt, *Forging*, 45-46.

⁴⁸ Budd / Taylor, *Faerie Smith*, 139.

mia, Indra in ancient India, and Hephaestus in Greece, to name just some few examples, involve in some way or the other their link with the manufacture of metals.⁴⁹

5.8. More reliable inferences may be drawn from the archaeological evidence. Although these findings are by no means easy to interpret, there is some archaeological evidence in Iron Age sites in Transjordan, the Negev and Sinai that may point to metallurgical activities associated with ritual contexts.⁵⁰ The presence of cultic places at Timna, in the southern Arabah valley, may have permeated some kind of cultic significance to the Egyptian copper metalworking at the site: in Site 2, next to a *bamah* (high place) remains of metallurgical operations were found; whereas in the Temple of Hathor's courtyard another workshop was discovered. It is quite probable that the copper processing activities were an integral part of the ritual.⁵¹ Similarly, in Tel Masos (Beer-sheba valley), archaeologists unearthed a workshop for casting metals (House 314: Stratum II), which contained molded stones similar to the votive offerings found at Timna's Mining Temple, which would suggest a ritual context.⁵² All of these data are also reinforced by the evidence from the turquoise mining operations at Serabit el-Kadim, in west-central Sinai. At Serabit, the Egyptians and the local workers built a large temple dedicated to the goddess Hathor, who among other epithets was known as the "Lady of the Turquoise".⁵³ To these examples we probably should add the case of Tell Deir 'Alla (Phase B) in central Jordan, where metal workers carried out their craft among and on the ruins of a Late Bronze shrine, which they rapidly restored.⁵⁴ Lastly, we should mention the recent discovery of cemetery Wadi Fidan 40, located at the heart of the region of Faynan. Here, archaeologists unearthed four graves that contained metal objects (copper and iron rings, anklets, bracelets and earrings), which may have had attached some sort of symbolic value.⁵⁵

5.9. Much can also be learned from a reexamination of some relevant biblical passages. The Hebrew Bible provides examples of the relationship between the skill of metallurgy, "wisdom", supernatural powers and cultic activities. Among the diverse biblical allusions to wisdom one stands out as clearly being linked with mining activities. This is Job 28,1-12, a part of the speech of Job's friend Zophar in which he compares the search for wisdom with

⁴⁹ McNutt, *Forging*, 45-95; Beaulieu, *Setting*, 4.

⁵⁰ Tebes, *Land*, 72.

⁵¹ Rothenberg, *Researches*, 158.171-172.

⁵² Fritz / Wittstock, *Areal*, 40-41.

⁵³ Beit-Arieh, *Years*.

⁵⁴ van der Kooij / Ibrahim, *Threads*, 80-81; McNutt, *Forging*, 207-208.

⁵⁵ Levy / Adams / Shafiq, *Project*, 302.

the search for silver, gold, iron, and copper in mines dug in the earth.⁵⁶ After going into more details about these mining activities, the writer asks to himself

“But where shall wisdom (*Hokmā*) be found? And where is the place of understanding (*binā*)?” (Job 28,12 NRSV).

5.10. An interesting clue to the conception of craftsman current in the biblical world is offered by Exod 31,1-5. Here, Bezalel, son of Uri, son of Hur – a name strongly reminiscent of the Hurite lineage – of the tribe of Judah, the artisan that manufactured the ark, the tent of the meeting and other items, is mentioned as having been filled

with divine spirit, with ability (*hokmā*), intelligence (*tēbūnā*), and knowledge (*da’at*) in every kind of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, in every kind of craft (Exod 31,1-5 NRSV)

This passage is striking in more than one aspect. Particularly, it explicitly intertwines two attributes that appear in Jer 49,7 / Obad 7b-8 (wisdom, understanding) with the craftsmanship and the spirit of God.

5.11. Another significant case is that of Hiram of Tyre, a bronze smith that assisted in building the temple of Jerusalem. 1Kgs 7,14 alludes to this person with a similar language to that of Bezalel:

he was full of skill (*hokmā*), intelligence (*tēbūnā*), and knowledge (*da’at*) in working bronze (1Kgs 7,14 NRSV)

The parallel account of this episode in 2Chr 2,13-14 names this artisan as Hiram-abi, and expands his abilities to other types of craft:

“I have dispatched Hiram-abi, a skilled artisan (*’iš hākām*), endowed with understanding (*yôdē’a binā*), the son of one of the Danite women, his father a Tyrian. He is trained to work in gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone, and wood, and in purple, blue, and crimson fabrics and fine linen, and to do all sorts of engraving and execute any design that may be assigned him, with your artisans, the artisans of my lord, your father David” (2Chr 2,13-14 NRSV)

The above cases of Bezalel and the Tyrian artisan illustrate the notion that the craft of metallurgy was associated, in the Hebrew Bible ideology, with the possession of wisdom and understanding, features that at least in the case of

⁵⁶ Knauf and Lenzen have suggested that the description of mining work in Job 28,1-12 matches the mining activities at Faynan; Knauf / Lenzen, *Industry*, 87.

Bezalel are said to have been given by God.⁵⁷ As correctly pointed out by Van Leeuwen, these passages should be related to the Mesopotamian genre of building inscriptions, in which the king is portrayed as building the palace or temple with the wisdom granted by the gods.⁵⁸

5.12. The leitmotiv of the knowledge of metalwork given by God is also present in Num, 21,9. Here, Moses at the request of Yahweh made a bronze serpent (*nēḥāš nēḥōšet*) with magical powers: anyone who was bitten by a serpent and looked at the bronze serpent survived. Irrespective of its historical reliability, this passage does reflect a feature that I have already mentioned with regard to ancient metallurgy: Moses is not only acting as a craftsman of a bronze object, but also as a craftsman with supernatural powers. The magical nature of the making of this object is further reinforced by reference to 2Kgs 18,4, in which we are told that the Judaeans offered sacrifices to this bronze serpent – here called Nehushtan (*nēḥuštān*) – until King Hezekiah's reign.⁵⁹

5.13. However, the character that best reflects the unique position of metalworkers in the Hebrew Bible is Cain (*qayin*, “smith”⁶⁰). He is the ancestor of Tubal-Cain (*tūbal qayin*), “an instructor of every artificer in brass and iron” (Gen 4,22). As McNutt has pointed out, “Cain is a marginal and ambivalent figure in Israelite mythology”: he is the first murderer, yet Yahweh marks him so that none should kill him. McNutt makes the case that in this sense Cain shares many features with the smiths in African myths, in that they are seen as both human and divine, as people who live apart of conventional morality, who

⁵⁷ The relationship between metallurgy and cultic activities was also present in Mesopotamia. Cuneiform records show that the Neo-Assyrian foundry-workers of copper and bronze were under the divine patronage of Nergal, the god of mines and foundries. Yet it was Ea, under the epithet Nudimmud, who created the metal products; see Dalley, *Evidence*, 97-101. For the industry of the metalwork of copper / bronze in Mesopotamia, see Moorey, *Materials*, 250-278.

⁵⁸ For instance, among the several Mesopotamian parallels that Van Leeuwen cites there is an inscription of Tiglath-pileser III in which this king boasts to have constructed a cedar palace “with artistic wisdom and extensive skill, which the prince Nudimmud [i.e., Enki/Ea], the sage of the gods, had given me...”; see Van Leeuwen, *Cosmos*, 87-88.

⁵⁹ In relation to Num, 21,9, mention should be made to the discovery of a snake made of copper alloy with gold fold inlay in the Temple of Hathor in Timna (Rothenberg, *Timna*, 159, pls. 19.20), which may provide an adequate ideological context to the biblical passage.

⁶⁰ Hess, *Cain*, 806.

sacrifice something of themselves for the good of humankind, and act as creators / destroyers.⁶¹

5.14. In sum, there is strong evidence to argue that the references in Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8 to the “wisdom” and “understanding” of Edom are bound up in the ancient ideological framework that linked wisdom with the skill of metallurgy. Several points support this view. We begin with the central fact that the biblical authors had some knowledge of the Edomite mines of Faynan, and even if they did not possess precise data about the location of the mines, they nonetheless were loosely aware of the geographical setting of the Edomite copper mining. Second, archaeological and ethnographic data supports the assumption that in the Iron Age the metallurgy of copper was deeply embedded with ritual and supernatural connotations. Third, a reexamination of pertinent cases in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that metalworkers (Bezalel, Hiram / Hiram-abi) or characters manufacturing metal objects (Moses, Cain / Tubal-Cain) were believed to have some unique “wisdom” and “understanding” conferred by God, and in some cases supernatural powers.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Only in the past few decades has it been possible to answer questions about the history of Edom. This is a result no so much of new textual sources supplementing the biblical account, but rather the growth of archaeology. Therefore there is much room for new knowledge about this people’s history, and this explains the wide array of views concerning Jeremiah’s and Obadiah’s allusions to the Edomite wisdom, not to say about the history of Edom in general.

6.2. In this paper I have reviewed the data and discussion about the possible meaning of the references of Jer 47,9 and Obad 7b-8 to the “wisdom” and “understanding” of Edom. After reexamining the available evidence, I have made a case of the identification of the craft of metalwork as a likely meaning of these allusions. The picture I have presented is not general and does not pretend by any means to close the discussion about the wisdom of Edom. As I have

⁶¹ McNutt, *Forging*, 240-241; see also McNutt, *Shadow*. Not casually, Cain’s descendants have strong links with Edom. Lamech, father of Tubal-Cain, had two wives: Adah – also the name of Esau’s first wife – and Naamah – reminiscent of Naamath, the name of the home of Job’s friend Zophar (Job 2,11). In addition, Sawyer has suggested that the name Zillah – daughter of Lamech – is related to “Hurite” Hazzel-poni of 1Chr 4,3 (Sawyer, *Cain*, 159) thus making all these names somewhat related to the Edom area. Cain is the eponymous ancestors of the Kenites (*haqqèni*), who inhabited the southern part of Palestine, and who also are related to the Rechabites (1Chr 2,55) and Midianites (Judg 1,16; 4,11); see Tebes, *Edomite*, 15.

shown, the use of the term “wisdom” both in the Hebrew Bible and in non-Israelite sources encompasses a wide array of senses, and the puzzling aspect of Jer 47,9 / Obad 7b-8 resides in the fact that the references to Edom’s wisdom are so general that they may stand for whatever meaning one is able to find. Consequently, in dealing with these passages I have tried to stand as close as possible to the historical reality of Edom as we know from the textual and archaeological sources.

6.3. All this means that, even if my reconstruction of the historical and ideological background behind Jeremiah’s and Obadiah’s oracles is correct, this does not imply that it represents the whole picture. In fact, the non-specific evocations of the Edomite wisdom introduce an intended combination of general sense and definitional vagueness that works against an exact meaning. It can be postulated, for example, that the Edomites were primarily known because of their knowledge (“wisdom”) of the skill of metallurgy – the other significant feature being their residing in inaccessible mountains and caves –, and that this main meaning spread to other cultural traits such as the “wisdom” in political understanding and sapiential literature. I would suggest that the general statements in the books of Jeremiah and Obadiah reflect this (later) development while retaining some elements of the original metallurgical connotation. Admittedly, this development is seemingly hypothetical, but it should be stressed that the “metallurgy” hypothesis, as the only one supported by biblical examples, archaeological data and ethnographic parallels, is the sole scenario that can adequately elucidate by itself the meaning of the “wisdom” of Edom.

6.4. While it can be argued that much of the tradition of Edom’s wisdom is a construct attributed to the Edomites by outsiders, purportedly Edomite wisdom texts such as the Book of Job, and the Horvat ‘Uza and Maresha ostraca demonstrate that the wisdom folklore was an important component of Edom’s cultural experience. To be sure, the magic facet of the indigenous metallurgy industry was part of this wisdom experience, one of which the Edomites themselves, as well as their Judaeen archenemies, were well aware.

Summary

This paper studies the possible meaning of the references of Jer 49,7 and Obad 7b-8 to the “wisdom” and “understanding” of Edom. A survey and reexamination of previous hypotheses developed by biblical scholars show at least three main lines of reasoning for explaining the allusions to Edom’s wisdom: the existence of some Edomite sapiential writings; Edom’s political alliances in the face of the Neo-Babylonian invasion; and the Edomite mining and metalwork in the copper mines of Faynan. After reexamining the biblical account, related ancient Near Eastern texts and the local archaeological evidence, a case is made of the identification of the craft of metalwork as a likely meaning of these allusions.

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Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel untersucht „Weisheit“ und „Verständnis“ von Edom in Jer 49,7 und Obad 7b-8. Die neuerliche Überprüfung der bisherigen Hypothesen zeigen mindestens drei Deutungsrichtungen von Edoms Weisheit: Es handelt sich um das Vorhandensein einiger edomitischer Weisheitsschriften, oder um politische Bündnisse Edoms angesichts der neubabylonischen Invasion, oder um Fertigkeiten im edomitischen Bergbau bzw. der Metallverarbeitung in den Kupferminen von Faynan. Nach nochmaliger Prüfung der biblischen Darstellung verwandter Texte aus dem Alten Orient und der archäologischen Befunde handelt es sich bei diesen Formulierungen wahrscheinlich um die Bezeichnung des Handwerks der Metallarbeit.

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