

c. Edom's refusal to allow passage through its land (xx.14-21)

The Edomites were descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob. Moses expected that they would be friendly. He did not ask for unrequited assistance, but merely that the Israelites be allowed to pass through Edomite territory on the highway, promising to abstain from injuring any Edomite property or using anything, even water, without paying for it (19). However, the king of Edom was distrustful, and sent an army to guard his borders (20). This unbrotherly attitude cast a dark shadow over future relations between the two nations, and the prophetic books of the Old Testament contain many severe denunciations of the Edomites (e.g. Is.xxxiv.1-17, note verses 5,6; Je.xlix.7-22; Ezk.xv.12-14; xxxv.1-15; in some of these passages the AV uses Idumaea to translate the same Hebrew word which is elsewhere rendered as Edom).

We learn from Jdg.xi.17 that a similar request was sent from Kadesh to the king of Moab and that the same unfavourable answer was received from him as from the king of Edom. In his farewell address Moses does not mention either of these two requests but tells of God's command that, on account of the ancestral relationship, the Israelites should not injure the Edomites or the Moabites (Dt. ii.5,9), but that they should buy food and water from them for money. Later Moses tells of a similar request being sent to Sihon, king of Heshbon, and his words seem to imply that the Edomites and the Moabites had granted his request (Dt.ii.29). At first sight this would appear to contradict Nu.xx.14-21 and Jdg. xi.17-18. However, Deuteronomy, like Numbers, describes a long march through the desert around the territory of both Edom and Moab. Moreover, Deuteronomy does not say that the Israelites passed through the actual territory of either nation, but merely along its 'coasts' (see note at xx.23 below). The truth would seem to be that, though both Edom and Moab refused passage, and Edom sent a large army to prevent such passage, in both instances there were probably settlers on the edge