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Archeologist Unearths Biblical Controversy

by Michael Valpy

"Artifacts from Iron Age fortress confirm Old Testament dates of Edomite kingdom"

Canadian archeologist Russell Adams's interest is in Bronze Age and Iron Age copper production. He never intended to walk into archeology's vicious debate over the historical accuracy of the Old Testament -- a conflict likened by one historian to a pack of feral canines at each other's throats.

Yet by coincidence, Prof. Adams of Hamilton's McMaster University says, he and an international team of colleagues fit into place a significant piece of the puzzle of human history in the Middle East -- unearthing information that points to the existence of the Bible's vilified Kingdom of Edom at precisely the time the Bible says it existed, and contradicting widespread academic belief that it did not come into being until 200 years later.

Their findings mean that those scholars convinced that the Hebrew Old Testament is at best a compendium of revisionist, fragmented history, mixed with folklore and theology, and at worst a piece of outright propaganda, likely will have to apply the brakes to their thinking.

Because, if the little bit of the Old Testament's narrative that Prof. Adams and his colleagues have looked at is true, other bits could be true as well.

References to the Kingdom of Edom -- almost none of them complimentary -- are woven through the Old Testament. It existed in what is today southern Jordan, next door to Israel, and the

relationship between the biblical Edomites and Israelites was one of unrelenting hostility and warfare.

The team led by Prof. Adams, Thomas Levy of the University of California at San Diego and Mohammad Najjar of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities was investigating copper mining and smelting at a site called Khirbat en-Nahas, by far the largest copper-production site in the region.

They applied high-precision radiocarbon-dating methods to some of their finds, and as they say in the British journal *Antiquities*, "The results were spectacular."

They firmly established that occupation of the site began in the 11th century BC and a monumental fortress was built in the 10th century BC, supporting the argument for existence of an Edomite state at least 200 years earlier than had been assumed.

What is particularly exciting about their find is that it implies the existence of an Edomite state at the time the Bible says King David and his son Solomon ruled over a powerful united kingdom of Israel and Judah.

It is the historical accuracy - the very existence of this united kingdom and the might and splendour of David and Solomon, as well as the existence of surrounding kingdoms - that lies at the heart of the archeological dispute.

Those scholars known as minimalists argue that what is known as "state formation" -- the emergence of regional governments and kings -- did not take place in the area until the imperialistic expansion of the Assyrian empire in the 8th century BC, so David and Solomon, rather than being mighty monarchs, were mere petty chieftains.

And because everything that takes place in the Middle East inevitably is political, the minimalist argument is seen as weakening modern Israel's claim to Palestine.

In the biblical narrative, the Edomites are the descendents of Esau, whose blessing from his father, Isaac, was stolen by his younger brother, Jacob, ancestor of the Israelites. (Fans of the British satirical-comedy group Beyond the Fringe will recall how Jacob pulled off the theft by presenting himself as the hirsute Esau to their blind father, saying in an aside: "My brother Esau is an hairy man, but I am a smooth man.")

The Edomites are lambasted in the Bible for refusing to let the Israelites rest on their land as they flee Egypt. God declares obscurely: "Over Edom will I cast out my shoe." The Israelites grumble enviously that there were kings of Edom before there were kings of Israel -- a highly significant passage because it implies that state formation occurred in Edom before it happened in Israel.

Finally, there is the biblical account of David's war against the Edomites, in which David and his general, Joab, kill 18,000 Edomites and establish military control over them by "putting garrisons throughout all Edom."

Irish scholar John Bartlett, one of the world's great experts on the Edomites, dates the battle at 990 to 980 BC, precisely when Prof. Adams and his colleagues date the fortress.

Says Prof. Adams: "This battle between the Israelites and the Edomites, although not possible to document, is typical of the sort of border conflicts between Iron Age states. And the evidence of our new dates at least proves that it may, in fact, be possible to place the Edomites in the 10th century [BC] or earlier, which now supports the chronology of the biblical accounts.

"It is intriguing that at Khirbat en-Nahas, our large Iron Age fort is dated to just this period, suggesting conflict as a central concern even at a remote copper-production site."

He concludes: "We're not out to prove the Bible right or wrong. We're not trying to be controversial. We're just trying to be good anthropologists and scientists, and tell the story of our archeological site accurately."