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Polite Israel and Impolite Edom: Israel's Request to Travel through Edom in Numbers 20.14-21*

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Abstract

In Num. 20.14-21, Israel requests passage to pass through Edom but is denied. Of interest are the elements that add to Israel's request (e.g. historical preamble, and self-imposed conditions to encourage Edom to accept their request). Using politeness theory, this article finds these elements to be strategies of politeness, and also show that Israel has a strategy of increasing politeness during the communication with Edom. In contrast, Edom is impolite, which indicates it wishes to be superior to Israel. This is consistent with the Bible's portrayal of Edom as a 'bad brother' to Israel. The ability of politeness theory to bring out subtleties in communication in the Bible shows that it is a useful heuristic device to assist with the interpretation of biblical texts.

Keywords: Politeness, communication, request, Israel, Edom, Numbers, brother.

Introduction

Numbers 20.14-21 recounts an incident in wilderness journeys where Israel requests passage through the territory of Edom, but is refused. In the flow of the wider narrative, the pericope is placed early in the journey

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from the Wilderness of Paran to the plains of Moab. Thematically, the pericope is placed in a narrative that continues the theme of Israel's continued complaining against YHWH (20.2-13; 21.4-9) and includes Moses and Aaron's not being allowed to enter Canaan (20.9-12). The pericope does not add to the theme of complaining; rather, it provides relief yet prepares for the incident in 21.4-9,¹ and breaks up the accounts of both Miriam and Aaron's deaths (20.1, 22-29).

The passage is an exercise in diplomacy. Israel has to make the awkward request to travel through the territory of Edom. The diplomacy is achieved by the sending of messengers (20.14) to the king of Edom. The negotiations proceed in two stages: an initial request which is refused (20.14-18); and a subsequent briefer request which is also refused, but now with a show of force by Edom which had been threatened in the first refusal (20.19-20). The shortening of both the second request and subsequent refusal may have the effect of increasing dramatic impact, making Edom's refusal very blunt, which is further heightened by the show of force.² The narrator concludes with a summary statement (20.21), which anticipates 21.4-9, which in turn narrates the people's frustration at the delay in the journey because they could not travel through Edom.

It is the language of the diplomacy that is the focus of my study. Israel's request shows formal characteristics that reflect diplomatic practice in the ancient Near East: annunciation formula (כֹּה אָמַר); identification of the sender along with status (אֶחָד מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל); preamble, which summarizes the circumstances prompting the communication (20.14-16); and the request proper (20.17).³ Commentators have long noted the plural 'we' in Israel's initial request, the juxtaposition of plural and singular in the subsequent request (hidden by the NRSV), and Edom's use of the singular for both themselves and Israel in the refusals (also hidden by

1. The focus of P.J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC, 5; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1984), p. 225.

2. In contrast to M. Noth (*Numbers: A Commentary* [OTL; trans. G.D. Martin; London: SCM Press, 1968], p. 149) and N.H. Snaith (*Leviticus and Numbers* [Century Bible; London: Thomas Nelson, 1967], pp. 276-77), recent commentators view Num. 20.14-21 as a unit. See, e.g., Budd, *Numbers*, p. 223; E.W. Davies, *Numbers* (NCBC; London: Marshall Pickering; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 20.

3. G.J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1981), p. 152; R.K. Harrison, *Numbers* (Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), p. 270 (reprinted as R.K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992]), using letters from Mari, Babylon, Alalakh and Amarna as models. The introductory formula כֹּה אָמַר commonly introduces direct discourse in the Hebrew Bible, but Davies (*Numbers*, p. 209) thinks this is a coincidence in this text.

the NRSV).⁴ Overall, the language used for Israel can be regarded as ‘polite, friendly, yet deferential’.⁵

But there is more to politeness and deference than just the use of formal elements in a communication. Politeness can be expressed in how language is used in relation to the topic at hand. This can be shown by the application of politeness theory to the communication, in our case the text of Num. 20.14-21. Such an application will give a theoretical basis for the observation that Israel’s request is politely given. As a corollary, Edom will be shown to be unreasonably rude, which matches the usual portrayal of Edom in the Hebrew Bible. The study will also affirm the usefulness of politeness theory as a tool to assist biblical interpretation.

Politeness Theory

The study of politeness received a major impetus with the publication in 1987 of Brown and Levinson’s *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*.⁶ The theory developed in this work, which combines theories on ritual, human interaction and communication,⁷ attempts to explain why social harmony occurs in the context of actions that may disrupt relations, and then how this is achieved. Brown and Levinson’s argument is that all people have ‘face’, which can be defined as a public perception of

4. Noted, for example, by G.B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903), pp. 265-66, who argues that whole peoples and large groups can be referred to in the singular. Other examples of the phenomenon occur in Num. 14.25; 21.1-3, 22; Josh. 9.7; 17.14; Judg. 1.2-3; 19.44; and Lam. 1.15-22, noted by B.A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993), p. 491. The few commentators that comment on the phenomenon do not treat it as significant (the exception being Noth *Numbers*, p. 149), so it is best to understand the swapping of plural and singular as a stylistic device that has no import to the meaning of the text, accepted even by Noth.

5. Harrison, *Numbers*, p. 269.

6. P. Brown and S.C. Levinson, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage* (Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics, 4; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). This is an expansion on a chapter Brown and Levinson contributed on an earlier work: P. Brown, S.C. Levinson, ‘Universals in Language Usage: Politeness Phenomena’, in E. Goody (ed.), *Questions and Politeness: Strategies in Social Interaction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 56-289.

7. Brown and Levinson build upon the theories presented in E. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1915); E. Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967); and H.P. Grice, ‘Logic and Conversation’, in P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics. III. Speech Acts* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 41-58.

oneself,⁸ and all people, except on occasions, desire to honour face when they interact with others, both their own and that of the other. There is a positive and negative aspect to face: 'positive face' represents a desire for approval, and 'negative face' represents the desire to be autonomous and/or not be impinged upon. Furthermore, all human interaction presents a threat to face, either the speaker's or the addressee/hearer's, and therefore spoken communication is done in such a way to lessen the threat. An important part of the argument is the claim that threats to face vary in degree, which can be measured using a combination of the social distance between interactants, the relative power difference between interactants, and the cultural weighting of the face-threatening action in question. Consequently, face-redress strategies can be graded as to the amount of redress given. The higher the face-redress, the more 'polite' the strategy is. But there is a risk: increasing politeness gives the increased chance that the hearer will misinterpret the speaker's intention. The most polite strategies are when the speaker is ambiguous in intention and the hearer has to work it out (called *off-record*). An example is when someone comments, 'the window is open', but intends the hearer to shut it. The least polite strategies are various direct, unambiguous communications that permit no chance of miscommunication (called *bald on-record*) and therefore attempt no face-redress; for example, 'Shut the window!' In between are strategies that redress positive face (*positive politeness*; e.g. 'People will think you are thoughtful if you shut the window') and strategies that redress negative face (*negative politeness*; e.g. 'Sorry to bother you, please can you shut the window'), of which Brown and Levinson consider the latter to give more face-redress than the former and so therefore to be more polite. Brown and Levinson focus on verbal communication, though they are aware that politeness can be expressed non-verbally, to say that the addressing of face concerns results in specific spoken (linguistic) strategies, which they claim are universal across cultures.⁹ Consequently, politeness theory is concerned mostly with language production and patterns of language use.¹⁰

8. Derived from Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, p. 5, cited in D.J. Goldsmith, 'Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory', in B.B. Whaley and W. Samter (eds.), *Explaining Communication: Contemporary Theories and Exemplars* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), pp. 219-36 (220). Brown and Levinson unfortunately do not give a succinct definition of 'face'.

9. The theory is described in Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, pp. 59-91, with the rest of the work giving detail and proofs. Brown and Levinson make their claim for

This focus on linguistic strategies is a major point of criticism, particularly Brown and Levinson's minimal attention to body language and non-verbal communication,¹¹ and the use of communication to create identity.¹² Brown and Levinson's focus on requests ('impositions'),¹³ the speaker-addressee relationship,¹⁴ and on a single turn of conversation between interactants¹⁵ is also criticized, but it needs to be noted that some of these criticisms have in fact become an impetus for applying the theory to situations not covered by Brown and Levinson. Despite the criticisms, politeness theory has proved valuable in explaining patterns of communication in a number of cultures, and has been used to study how communication can be used to create identity.¹⁶

A text such as Num. 20.14-21 is amenable to the application of politeness theory. It is a written text, therefore non-verbal language is not an issue; it deals with a request; and the communication between Israel and Edom has only two turns in it. That politeness theory can be applied to our text is affirmed by some studies that apply the theory to other literary works from the past. Brown and Gilman apply the theory to four of

universality by giving examples from English, Tamil and a tribal language from Mexico. For convenient summaries, see T. Holtgraves, 'The Linguistic Realization of Face Management: Implications for Language Production and Comprehension, Person Perception, and Cross-Cultural Communication', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 55 (1992), pp. 141-44; and the recent summary in Goldsmith, 'Politeness Theory', pp. 219-36.

10. The study of politeness comes under the discipline of linguistics known as *pragmatics*, and in a sub-category of study called *honorifics*, noted by Brown and Levinson themselves (*Politeness*, pp. 179, 276) and affirmed in A. Agha, *Language and Social Relations* (Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language, 24; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 301-332 (301-303, 315-23); and in S. Okamoto, 'Politeness and the Perception of Irony: Honorifics in Japanese', *Metaphor and Symbol* 17 (2002), pp. 119-201.

11. Agha, *Language*, p. 316, also pp. 308, 311; and K. Tracy, 'Discourse and Identity: Language or Talk?', in Whaley and Samter (eds.), *Explaining Communication*, pp. 15-37 (22-23).

12. J. Hendry, 'To Wrap or Not to Wrap: Politeness and Penetration in Ethnographic Inquiry', *Man* 24 (1989), pp. 629-31; Goldsmith, 'Politeness', pp. 232-33; L. Josephides, 'Disengagement and Desire: The Tactics of Everyday Life', *American Ethnologist* 26 (1999), pp. 139-59 (142). Politeness theory is essentially a functionalist theory; that is, it shows expected behaviour and norms in a society.

13. M.J. Cody and D. Dunn, 'Accounts', in Whaley and Samter (eds.), *Explaining Communication*, pp. 237-56 (244); Holtgraves, 'Linguistic Realization', pp. 145-46.

14. Agha, *Language*, p. 316.

15. Holtgraves, 'Linguistic Realization', p. 151; Tracy, 'Discourse', pp. 23-24.

16. See especially Hendry, 'To Wrap'; and Josephides, 'Disengagement'.

Shakespeare's tragedies to indicate when the politeness strategies proposed by Brown and Levinson occur, and offer explanations when they unexpectedly do not occur (e.g. anger).¹⁷ Lloyd discusses a selection of texts from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to determine the *off-record* strategies in those texts.¹⁸ The importance of these two studies is not just that politeness theory is found useful to help interpret literary texts from the past, but that the theory can be applied to literary works, in which language is 'designed to serve literary purposes, not necessarily to reflect the patterns of everyday speech in any straightforward way'.¹⁹

Politeness theory has yet to become familiar to both historians of antiquity and biblical scholars. I have so far found only one study that applies politeness theory to biblical texts. This is Revell's application of the theory in his discussion of deferential speech by the characters in the books of Judges–2 Kings.²⁰ The theory assists him to determine two situations in which characters do not use deferential language where it is normally expected: when characters express strong emotion; and when a character has a formal relationship with the addressee (even if the addressee is a social superior). In conjunction with other linguistic theory, Revell understands the former situation to be a 'marking' in the text: that is, the narrator creates a stress or emphasis that the reader or hearer is to note as important.²¹

17. R. Brown and A. Gilman, 'Politeness Theory and Shakespeare's Four Major Tragedies', *Language in Society* 18 (1989), pp. 159–212. They critique the theory on the matter of Brown and Levinson's grading of the strategies.

18. M. Lloyd, 'The Politeness of Achilles: Off-Record Conversation Strategies in Homer and the Meaning of "Kertomia"', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 124 (2004), pp. 75–89. The article highlights some of the subtleties of language in the texts studied.

19. Lloyd, 'Achilles', p. 75. Lloyd is enthusiastic about this, but Brown and Gilman, p. 208, are more cautious. See also A. Paternoster, 'Decorum and Indecorum in the Seconda Redazione of Baldassare Castiglione's *Libro Del Cortegiano*', *The Modern Language Review* 99 (2004), pp. 622–34 (626), who does not use an explicit theory to discuss politeness in a sixteenth-century Italian literary work, but recognizes the concepts with which Brown and Levinson deal. Paternoster focuses on the unexpected use of *bald on-record* speech in one part of the text by characters who are socially inferior to their hearers.

20. E.J. Revell, *The Designation of the Individual: Expressive Usage in Biblical Narrative* (CBET, 14; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), pp. 267–74. See also A.L. Warren-Rothlin, 'Politeness Strategies in Biblical Hebrew and West African Languages', *Journal of Translation* (2007), pp. 55–71.

21. Revell, *Designation*, pp. 272–74. Cf., Tracy, 'Discourse', p. 25: 'Marking...is a way speakers convey that the taken for granted identities expected for a specific interactional one...do not apply.'

Politeness Strategies in Numbers 20.14-20

As has already been noted, the request by Israel in Num. 20.14-21 incorporates formal conventions that indicate its inherent politeness to Edom. But some of these formal elements are also strategies of politeness in their own right, along with the language used in the request proper. Israel's request is, in effect, a huge face-threatening action with the potential of a significant loss to Edom's face as a nation if something was to go wrong (i.e. Israel invades or raids Edom).

The formal convention, identification of the sender along with status (אֲנִי יִשְׂרָאֵל), uses kinship terminology (20.14b). In politeness theory, this terminology indicates the *positive politeness* strategy, 'use in-group identity markers'. This reflects the speaker's claim that they and the hearer have common ground and want similar things.²² In biblical texts, the key in-group identity markers are familial terms (e.g. *son*, *brother*), which reflects an ancient Near Eastern custom that goes back at least to the Amarna period.²³ In the case of Edom, other biblical texts continue to claim the 'common ground',²⁴ in the form of an ethnic tie between Edom and Israel (e.g. Gen. 25-33; Deut. 2.8; 23.8; Amos 1.11; Obad. 10, 12; Mal 1.2).

The formal convention of a preamble (20.14c-16), like the identification of the sender, is also a strategy of *positive politeness*. Here, it is the strategy of 'give (or ask for) reasons', and works on the principle that the speaker claims reflexivity with the hearer, a form of desire to cooperate with the hearer.²⁵ In Brown and Levinson's scheme, this strategy is more

22. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 102.

23. W.L. Moran (ed. and trans.), *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. xxiv-xxv, 1-115, 275, 298. In the Amarna letters, the use of 'brother' is normally restricted to between kings of equal status (see EA 1-42). In a similar fashion, in 1 Kgs. 20.31-34 אֲחִי appears prominently as the term that indicates to Ben-hadad that his enemy, the king of Israel, who has defeated him, will spare his life. Here, the use of a 'common ground/in-group' term results in just that: an 'in-group' relationship has been established. אֲחִי appears prominently in David's request to Nabal in 1 Sam. 25.8 for supplies.

24. Noted by most commentators: e.g. J. Sturdy, *Numbers* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 142; Davies, *Numbers*, p. 209; Gray, *Numbers*, p. 265. Recent commentators refer to J.R. Bartlett, 'The Land of Seir and the Brotherhood of Edom', *Journal of Theological Studies* 20 (1969), pp. 1-20; and 'The Brotherhood of Edom', *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 4 (1977), pp. 2-27.

25. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 102.

polite than the strategy of using in-group identity markers. Thus, just by the use of formal conventions alone, Israel is portrayed as polite, indeed increasingly polite, and desiring to meet Edom's desire for approval.

Israel's request, 'now let us pass through your land' (20.17) is unambiguous, and therefore clearly *on-record*. As has already been discussed, the request is a significant face-threatening act, which accounts for the use of the two politeness strategies that form the conventional opening to the message. But Israel's request contains yet more politeness strategies. Immediately following the request is a statement of what Israel will and will not do (stay on the *King's Highway*, and not drink Edom's water). In Brown and Levinson's scheme, Israel's statement could be a *positive politeness* strategy, 'offer, promise', or a negative strategy, 'minimise the imposition'.²⁶ The former, however, implies some prior attempt by Israel to cooperate with Edom, something which is not present in the text. Therefore it is best to understand Israel's statement as the latter strategy. According to Brown and Levinson, this strategy is more polite than the two strategies in the opening to the message. This suits: the most polite strategy used so far is reserved for the request proper. The thought behind this strategy is that Israel honours Edom's desire to be autonomous, or not to be impinged upon, by restricting the effects of the request.

After the refusal by Edom, Israel repeats the request (20.19) with increased politeness. A repeated use of the strategy 'minimise the imposition' heads the message ('we will stay on the highway'), designed to defuse the impact of the request itself, which is left to last. But before Israel restates the request, there is a promise to pay for any water used ('if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, I will then pay for it'²⁷). This is a *negative politeness* strategy, 'go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting the hearer'.²⁸ According to Brown and Levinson this is the most polite strategy possible without going *off-record* (using ambiguous language). This promise to pay for water, like the insistence that Israel will stay on the *King's Highway*, could also be considered as an example of the *positive politeness* strategy 'offer, promise', but the mention of paying a price shows that the comment is actually an 'incur a debt' strategy. The aim of the 'incur a debt' strategy is to redress any concerns by Edom that will arise from Israel's passage through their territory. The text portrays

26. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, pp. 102, 131.

27. The NRSV translates all these clauses in the plural.

28. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 131.

Israel as interpreting Edom's refusal as a concern they will use up precious water resources as they travel through Edom's territory.²⁹

The effect of the 'incur a debt' strategy is heightened by Israel making yet another statement that minimizes the request: the matter of paying for water *is only a small matter* (רק אי־דבר). The problem of using water in an environment such as Edom's is understandably a major concern, and Israel's statement may seem like a downgrading of the situation. Despite this apparent downgrading, the comment is designed to put Edom at ease: Israel implies they can pay for any water used; therefore this should be a small matter to Edom. It is an attempt to soothe Edom that they will not lose out if water is consumed.

In contrast to Israel, Edom is blunt in both refusals (20.18, 20).³⁰ The language is clear on both occasions: 'you (sing.) shall not pass through', which is a *bald on-record* statement. There is no chance Israel will miss the meaning. Politeness theory indicates that *bald on-record* language is mostly used in three situations: when the speaker is socially superior to (has power over) the hearer, when the danger to the hearer's face is very small, or the speaker considers the matter important enough to override the need to redress face.³¹ Revell finds that this is the case for situations in Judges–2 Kings in which the first and third scenarios appear. But Revell also finds that *bald on-record* language is used by a socially inferior person to a socially superior person when they are in a formal relationship with each other.³² In Num. 20.14–20, Edom's bluntness can be explained by three of the four scenarios: Edom has power over Israel; Edom is a 'brother' to Israel; or Edom thinks the matter of Israel's request too offensive to be polite about it. Of these scenarios, the first or the third suits the portrayal of Edom, with the first being the best. Edom, in the first refusal, threatened to fight against Israel if they were to pass through their territory, and in 20.20, the narrative has Edom carry out the threat.³³ In effect,

29. Cf. Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, p. 493. Most commentators note the contrast between Num. 20.19 and Deut. 2.6 on the matter of payment for resources used. Deut. 2.6 has the offer of payment as part of the request, and includes food; whereas here in Num. 20.19, the offer of payment is stated after Edom's initial refusal.

30. Cf. Harrison, *Numbers*, p. 271.

31. Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, p. 69.

32. See above, n. 21.

33. An actual conflict is not narrated, so most commentators assume what is implied in 20.21: Edom offered a show of force to force Israel not to travel through their territory. See, e.g., Davies, *Numbers*, p. 210; Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 152; Budd, *Numbers*, p. 225.

Edom wants to be the superior party in contrast to Israel's focus on redressing potential problems that may occur as a result of their travel through Edom's territory.

To summarize, Israel's strategy of politeness in its request for passage through Edom is to use politeness strategies before stating the request proper. Not only this, the strategies used represent increasing politeness. This happens in both turns of their communication with Edom, and across both turns. To list Israel's strategy, it is:

- Use 'in-group identity markers' (אֶחָד יִשְׂרָאֵל), which introduces Israel's communication (20.14b).
- Use the more polite *positive politeness* strategy, 'give (or ask for) reasons' (preamble [20.14c-16]) to introduce the request proper.
- State the request ('let us pass through your land', 20.17a).
- Back up the request with the yet more polite again, but now the *negative politeness* strategy, 'minimise the imposition', as an attempt to restrict the effects of the request (stay on the 'King's Highway', and not drink Edom's water, 20.17b-d).

In the second turn of the communication, the strategy is:

- Repeat the 'minimise the imposition' strategy, which, as in the first turn of the interaction, precedes the restated request ('we will stay on the highway', 20.19b).
- Use the most polite strategy available, short of going *off-record*, which is the *negative politeness* strategy, 'go on record as incurring a debt, or as not indebting the hearer', which also precedes the restated request ('if we drink of your water, I and my cattle, I will then pay for it', 20.19c-d). This last strategy is heightened by combining it with the strategy, 'minimise the imposition' ('it is only a small matter', רַק אֵין דָּבָר, 20.19e).
- Restate the request (20.19f).

In contrast, Edom is blunt, therefore impolite, in both of their turns in the communication.

Conclusion

Numbers 20.14-21 portrays Israel as very polite to Edom, and increasing in politeness over the two turns of the communication. In contrast, Edom is portrayed as refusing to be a 'brother' to Israel by wanting to take the role of superior. This accords with the Hebrew Bible's motif of Edom as a

'bad brother' to Israel/Judah, starting in Genesis 25 and culminating in the prophetic writings in which Edom receives the most prophecies of condemnation and judgment of any nation outside of Israel/Judah in the region.³⁴ But politeness theory also shows a further reason why Edom is such a 'bad brother': the nation is portrayed as only concerned with its desire to be superior to Israel, just as its ancestor is portrayed in Gen. 25.29-34 and 27.34-41,³⁵ and similarly in Obadiah 10-14. Therefore, God is right to reject Edom in favour of Israel/Judah.

Obviously, the use of politeness theory to assist interpreting biblical texts needs to be used with caution. Despite its amenability to written texts, some of the criticisms as noted above need to be kept in mind. The issue of culture is particularly important. There is insufficient data in the Bible from which to describe a 'biblical culture' or 'biblical cultures'.³⁶ Despite grading the strategies of politeness in accordance with Brown and Levinson's system, it might be that biblical authors/compliers had a different system of grading politeness. It might also be that Israel's request was not a face-threatening action,³⁷ which, if so, would indicate that Edom's refusal is unreasonable. This issue of culture is also not helped by the problem of discerning what in a biblical text reflects the period of time that the text portrays as against the time at which it was

34. G. McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament*. IV. *The Prophets* (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 182; J.J. Niehaus, 'Obadiah', in T.E. McComiskey (ed.), *The Minor Prophets*. II. *An Exegetical and Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 495-541 (496); D. Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah* (WBC, 31; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), p. 404. These scholars also comment that the Hebrew Bible makes Edom representative of God's judgment of all nations. The accord of Num. 20.14-21 with prophets' oracles against Edom permits the possibility that this narrative was written/compiled during the same period these oracles were delivered. See n. 38.

35. Cf. Heb. 12.16-17, which continues the same thought.

36. As noted for literary texts in general by Brown and Gilman, 'Politeness Theory', p. 208.

37. Implied in Harrison, *Numbers*, p. 271: 'In antiquity it was usual for some conditions to be imposed upon those who travelled through another's territory, whether it was a toll in goods or money or some other kind of stipulation'. Since Harrison does not cite any texts, it not possible to discern whether groups of travellers were treated differently from individual travellers. It is unlikely that large groups of people from one nation or ethnic group would come under the normal arrangements for travellers, thus giving rise to biblical texts such as Num. 20.14-21 and 21.21-22 (paralleled in Deut. 2.26-29 and Judg. 11.17-19), in which passage is negotiated. In support is the Egyptian text, 'The Report of a Frontier Official' (*ANET*, p. 259). This text indicates permission was given to people from the region of Edom to come into Egypt during a time of drought, though the conditions for their entry are not stated.

written down or compiled.³⁸ Politeness theory can only work when there is adequate information to work with, so it is important to use as much information from ancient Near Eastern archaeological and epigraphic studies as possible. Furthermore, since ‘conversation in literary works will of course be designed to serve literary purposes, not necessarily to reflect the patterns of everyday speech in any straightforward way’,³⁹ and because in dramatic works ‘the speech is not elicited from informants but was invented by authors for purposes of their own’,⁴⁰ it should be recognised that there will be instances where polite language will not be used when it is expected and be used when it is expected not to be used. It also means that authors could use expected politeness to bring out other themes that show up characters to be something other than what they appear. However, despite these issues, politeness theory remains a good heuristic device to explore the intentionality of literary texts. In the case of Num. 20.14-21, the portrayal of Israel as the polite social inferior to the powerful and impolite Edom serves to continue the motif in the Hebrew Bible that Edom is rejected by God for being a ‘bad brother’ and concerned with his own wants. Edom in Num. 20.14-21 may be portrayed correctly using *bald on-record* language, but the text adds to the Bible’s portrayal of Edom as always being unreasonable to Israel.

38. E.g. Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, pp. 93-94, 485, 491-92, who argues Num. 20.14-21 reflects increasing Edomite power and hostility against Israel in the eighth century BCE. Budd, *Numbers*, p. 225, understands Num. 20.14-21 to reflect the time of Josiah. Sturdy, *Numbers*, p. 141, argues that Num. 20.14-21 was created to fill in a gap in earlier sources, possibly at 500–400 BCE (p. 2), which suits a time when it was known that Edom’s hostility had resulted in the gaining of territory at Israel’s expense as a result of the exile (p. 142).

39. Lloyd, ‘Achilles’, p. 75.

40. Brown and Gilman, ‘Politeness Theory’, p. 208.