

Notes on Obadiah

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Introduction

TITLE AND WRITER

As is true of all the other prophetic books in the Old Testament, the title of this one evidently comes from the name of its writer. "Obadiah" means "servant of Yahweh" or "worshipper of Yahweh" depending on the form (vocalization) of his name in Hebrew, which is debated. There are 13 men who bear this name in the Old Testament, from Davidic to postexilic times, assuming the writer was not one of the other 12. It appears that he was not since attempts to identify him with one of the others have proved unsatisfying. A few scholars have favored the view that this "Obadiah" was not the name of an individual but a symbolic title of the writer who was an unidentified servant or worshipper of the Lord. This seems unlikely since the other prophetic books bear the proper names of their writers.¹

Exactly who Obadiah was remains a mystery.² Usually something about the writer accompanies his name at the beginning of each prophetic book, generally his father's name, some of his ancestors, and or his hometown. This descriptive information is absent in only two of the prophetic books: Obadiah and Malachi.

Whoever Obadiah was, he possessed significant literary talent. He employed the skills of imagery, rhetorical questions, irony, repetition, and various forms of parallelism in his brief prophecy.

UNITY

Some scholars have contended that this small book, the shortest one in the Old Testament but not in the Bible, is a collection of prophecies that two or more unidentified prophets uttered. There are two reasons for this view. First, since the identity of Obadiah is obscure, some students of the book have concluded that "Obadiah" is a title that describes prophets in general, as servants of the Lord, rather than the name of one specific individual. Second, the content of the book may consist of from two to five oracles. This has led some scholars to posit two or more prophecies and two or more prophets.

¹Some scholars believe that Malachi is also a title rather than a proper name.

²C. F. Keil, "Obadiah," in *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, 1:337, believed the Obadiah who served King Ahab and who encountered Elijah (1 Kings 18:3-16) was the writer.

However, since "Obadiah" was a common Hebrew name, and since the other prophetic books bear the names of their writers, it is more natural to assume that one prophet named Obadiah wrote the whole book. Furthermore, since many other writing prophets recorded several oracles, it is reasonable to assume that one prophet named Obadiah did the same in this book if, indeed, it consists of more than one oracle. The whole brief book fits together nicely as a single composition.³

DATE

Since we do not know who the writer was, other than that his name appears to have been Obadiah, it is very difficult to date this book and to determine where it came from.

"This shortest book in the Old Testament, consisting of only twenty-one verses, bears the distinction of being the most difficult of all the prophecies to date."⁴

There are three clues concerning when the prophet wrote it: references to historical events in the book, the book's place in the Hebrew canon,⁵ and possible quotations or allusions to the writings of other Old Testament prophets.

First, Obadiah referred to a time in the apparently recent past when the Edomites had gloated over a successful invasion of Jerusalem (vv. 10-14, 16). There are at least seven occasions during the ministry of the writing prophets when we know Jerusalem experienced invasion and suffered a defeat. One of these is probably the event he referred to.

1. During Rehoboam's reign (930-913 B.C.; 1 Kings 14:25-26; 2 Chron. 12:2-9)
2. During Jehoram's reign (853-841 B.C.; 2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chron. 21:8-10, 16-17; cf. Amos 1:6)
3. During Amaziah's reign (796-767; 2 Kings 14:13-14; 2 Chron. 25:23-24)
4. During Ahaz's reign (732-715 B.C.; 2 Chron. 28:16-18)
5. During Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:6-7)
6. During Jehoiachin's reign (598-597 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:10-16; 2 Chron. 36:10)
7. During Zedekiah's reign (597-586 B.C.; 2 Kings 25:3-7; 2 Chron. 36:15-20; cf. Lam. 4:21-22; Ps. 137:7)

Of these, the invasions that seem to fit Obadiah's description of the Edomites' behavior were the one in King Jehoram's reign and the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C.⁶ Most scholars believe one of these

³For further discussion of the book's unity, see especially John D. W. Watts, *Obadiah: A Critical Exegetical Commentary*, pp. 9-10; or Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, pp. 133-35.

⁴Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 299.

⁵See Greg Goswell, "The Order of the Books in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51:4 (December 2008):673-88.

⁶For arguments that Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C., see Rodger C. Young, "When Did Jerusalem Fall?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47:1 (March 2004):21-38.

instances is in view, and most believe the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is.⁷ The second most popular view is that the invasion of Jerusalem during Jehoram's reign is what Obadiah referred to.⁸ This would make Obadiah a contemporary of Elijah and Elisha (cf. 2 Chron. 21:12-15).

The second clue to the date of Obadiah's prophecy is the place of the book in the Hebrew canon. The Minor Prophets are called "minor," of course, because they are shorter than the Major Prophets. The Jews put all 12 of the Minor Prophets on one scroll for convenience sake and to keep them from getting lost. The order in which they appear in the Hebrew Bible is basically chronological, and this order continued in later translations of the Old Testament, including English translations. This would lead us to conclude that the ancient Jews regarded Obadiah as one of the earlier prophetic books.⁹

"In the arrangement of The Twelve in the Hebrew Bible the chronological principle which seems to have determined the over-all order was as follows: (1) the prophets of the Assyrian period were placed first (Hosea to Nahum); (2) then followed those of the Babylonian period (Habakkuk and Zephaniah); (3) the series closed with the three prophets of the Persian period after the exile (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi)."¹⁰

The third clue concerning the date of Obadiah is evidence that one prophet depended on another. There are similarities between Obadiah 1-6 and Jeremiah 49:9 and 14-17 and between Obadiah 10-18 and Joel 1:15; 2:1, 32; 3:3-4, 17, and 19.¹¹ There are also similarities between Obadiah 9, 10, 14, 18, and 19 and Amos 1:2, 6, 11-12, and 9:13.

⁷E.g., Watts, pp. 8-9, 19, 27, 54; Allen, pp. 129-33; Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, pp. 403-4, 416; Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, p. 340-42; Billy K. Smith, "Obadiah," in *Amos, Obadiah, Jonah*, p. 172; David W. Baker, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 23; Carl E. Armerding, "Obadiah," in *Daniel-Minor Prophets*, vol. 7 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 337; Frank E. Gaebelien, *Four Minor Prophets [Obadiah, Jonah, Habakkuk, and Haggai]: Their Message for Today*, pp. 13, 28; G. Herbert Livingston, "Obadiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 839; Roland K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 898, 902; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 356, 417; Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Theology of the Minor Prophets," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 418; idem, *Handbook on the Prophets*, p. 403; *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 939.

⁸E.g., Keil, 1:341-49; Walter L. Baker, "Obadiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, p. 1454; Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets*, p. 136; Archer, pp. 299-303; Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, pp. 262-64; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Israel: A History of Old Testament Israel*, p. 382; Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 186; Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 277; Charles H. Dyer, in *The Old Testament Explorer*, pp. 765-66; Warren W. Wiersbe, "Obadiah," in *The Bible Exposition Commentary/Prophets*, p. 371. I have found the arguments of Jeffrey Niehaus, "Obadiah," in *The Minor Prophets*, pp. 496-502, especially helpful.

⁹The order is not completely chronological. Hosea seems to have been put first because it is the longest of the pre-exilic Minor Prophets. The recurrence of similar themes and or words appears to have influenced the order too since Joel, rather than Amos, the second longest pre-exilic minor prophet, follows Hosea. Allen, p. 129, suggested that Obadiah may follow Amos because it "may have been viewed as a virtual commentary on Amos 9:12." Smith, p. 180, agreed. Stuart, p. 416, suggested that Obadiah follows Amos because Obadiah used the name Adonai Yahweh (v. 1), a rare name for God in the prophets, that Amos also used.

¹⁰Freeman, p. 135.

¹¹For defense of the priority of Obadiah to Jeremiah, see Niehaus, p. 501.

However, in all these instances it is really impossible to determine if Obadiah referred to the other prophets, if they referred to Obadiah, if they all depended on another common source, or if the Holy Spirit simply led each prophet independently to express himself in similar terms.

Unfortunately, none of these sources of information enables us to date the book certainly. All things considered, I tend to favor an early date for Obadiah, about 850 B.C. However, those who prefer a date shortly after 586 B.C. could be correct. Fortunately, discovering the correct date of this prophecy is not crucial to understanding it.

PLACE OF COMPOSITION

Since Obadiah's concern was the Edomites' rejoicing over an invasion of Jerusalem, it seems most probable that the prophet lived in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Most of the scholars do agree on this.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE

Since Obadiah's concern was Jerusalem, and since it seems likely that he lived in Judah, the original people who received his prophecy were probably the residents of Judah.

Obadiah wrote to announce coming divine judgment on Edom and to give the Israelites hope by reminding them of the future that God promised them.

"Prophetic oracles against foreign nations, though full of the language of doom, are also implicitly messages of hope for God's people. Such oracles look forward to a time when the predicted demise of the nation under attack will open the way for the restored, purified Israel to blossom once again as the flower of all God's plantings.

"Obadiah's message fits this pattern and in some ways even typifies it."¹²

"In a sense Obadiah is a miniature profile of the message of all the writing prophets."¹³

"Edom . . . was tenaciously and rather constantly hostile from beginning, i.e., after the exodus, to end, i.e., after the exile. This factor would itself be enough to cause such a small nation to receive such regular, even prominent mention in prophetic oracles against foreign nations. But Edom's prominence as an enemy was additionally noteworthy because of its historical position as a brother nation to Israel (Gen 25). There are, then, at least three factors that made Edom so prominent among Israel's enemies that it could sometimes function virtually as a paradigm for all of

¹²Stuart, p. 408. See also Kaiser, p. 187; and Finley, p. 351. Most authorities see Edom as typical of all the forces arrayed against Israel and Yahweh (e.g., Archer, p. 302). See verse 15. Some scholars also see Edom as a type of the flesh and Obadiah as a prophecy of its eventual destruction (e.g., Charles L. Feinberg, *Joel, Amos, and Obadiah*, p. 124).

¹³W. Baker, p. 1453.

them: (1) the sheer chronological length of its enmity as alluded to in Ezek 35:5; (2) the consistency and intensity of its enmity (as in Obad 10-14); (3) the 'treasonous' nature of its enmity (as in Amos 1:11). No other nation quite shared these characteristics.

". . . of the ancient non-superpowers (i.e., leaving aside Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon) Edom is the subject of more separate oracles against foreign nations (seven [i.e., Isa. 21:11-12; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35; Amos 1:11-12; Obad.; Mal. 1:2-5]) and more brief or passing hostile references (four [i.e., Isa. 11:14; Jer. 25:21; Lam. 4:21; Joel 3:19]) in the prophetic books than any other nation."¹⁴

There are more references to Edom in the Bible than to any other hostile nation except the superpowers.

"The Edomites played such a consistently adversarial role in Israel's history that the prophetic literary category of 'oracles against foreign nations' was bound to include predictions of judgments against Edom. Edom, indeed, becomes in the OT a kind of metonymy for 'hostile nations.'"¹⁵

Edom is the subject of the little Book of Obadiah as Assyria is of the larger Book of Nahum.¹⁶ The New Testament writers did not quote from or allude to the Book of Obadiah.

As with all the other prophetic books, references to God's covenants form an important background. People who lived in the ancient Near East lived aware of the covenants that nations made with one another, the blessings of covenant faithfulness, and the curses that would come because of covenant unfaithfulness. This view of life is very prominent in all the prophetic books.

OUTLINE

- I. Edom's coming judgment vv. 1-9
 - A. The introduction to the oracle v. 1
 - B. The breaching of Edom's defenses vv. 2-4
 - C. The plundering of Edom's treasures vv. 5-7
 - D. The destruction of Edom's leadership vv. 8-9

¹⁴Stuart, p. 404. This writer provided a helpful table of all the nations that the writing prophets referred to and the locations of their prophecies against these nations on pp. 405-6. For a synopsis of the relations between Edom and Israel, see Finley, pp. 345-48. Most commentaries and Bible encyclopedias contain a summary of Edom's history.

¹⁵Stuart, p. 421. Cf. Judg. 5:4; Isa. 63:1-6. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which the writer uses the name of one thing (Edom) for another that is associated with or suggested by it (all Israel's enemies).

¹⁶Assyria is also the subject of the Book of Jonah, but Jonah focuses on the capital city, Nineveh, more than on the whole nation of Assyria.

- II. Edom's crimes against Judah vv. 10-14
 - A. The statement of the charge v. 10
 - B. The explanation of the charge vv. 11-14
- III. The restoration of Israel's sovereignty vv. 15-21
 - A. The judgment of Edom and the nations vv. 15-18
 - B. The occupation of Edom by Israel vv. 19-21

Many competent commentators believe that the Book of Obadiah follows the covenant-lawsuit form of address that was common in the ancient Near East.¹⁷ In this type of message, which many of the other writing prophets also used, there are certain formulaic sections. These are, most basically, a description of the scene of judgment and then the speech by the judge. This speech includes an address to the defendant (including reproach based on an accusation and a statement that the accused has no defense), the pronouncement of guilt, and the sentence. Niehaus outlined Obadiah on this basis as follows.¹⁸

- I. Title (1a)
- II. Description of the scene of judgment (nations arise for battle, 1b)
- III. Speech by the Judge (2-21)
 - A. Three sentences (2-9)
 - 1. First sentence (2-4)
 - 2. Second sentence (5-7)
 - 3. Third sentence (8-9)
 - B. Three pronouncements of guilt (10-14)
 - 1. First pronouncement (10)
 - 2. Second pronouncement (11)
 - 3. Third pronouncement (12-14)
 - C. Sentence on the nations (15-16)
 - D. Promise of restoration (17-21)

¹⁷See, for example, Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Covenant Lawsuit in the Prophets," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 78 (1959):285-95.

¹⁸Niehaus, p. 507.

Exposition

I. EDOM'S COMING JUDGMENT VV. 1-9

A. THE INTRODUCTION TO THE ORACLE V. 1

This verse contains the title of the book, the shortest title of any Old Testament prophetic book, as well as a summary of the Lord's decree against Edom. This revelation came as a vision (Heb. *hazon*; cf. 1 Sam. 3:1; Isa. 1:1; Nah. 1:1) to the prophet.

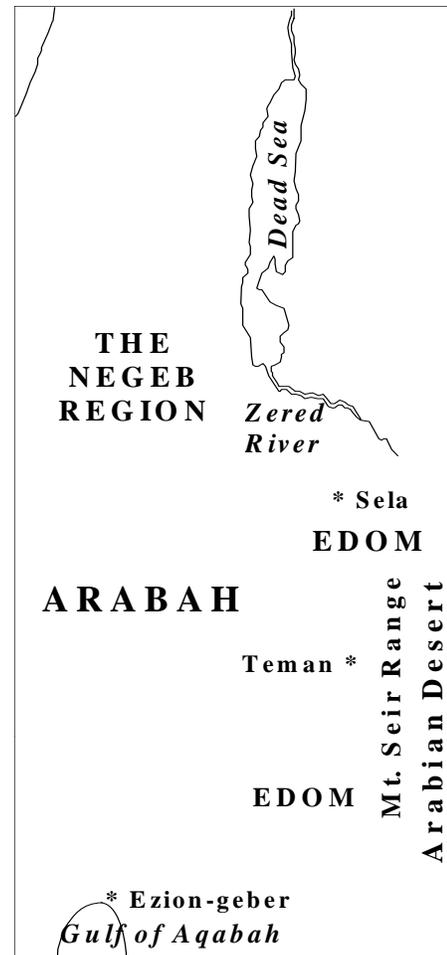
"The vision is to be sharply differentiated from common sight and things seen. It is the result of inspiration and is understood as having unique significance since it is given by God himself."¹⁹

The vision came to the prophet Obadiah ("servant of Yahweh" or "worshipper of Yahweh"). As mentioned in the introduction to this exposition, nothing is known about Obadiah other than his name. We must infer where and when he lived and ministered from clues in the book.

Adonai (i.e., sovereign) Yahweh (cf. Gen. 2:4; et al.) had made a pronouncement concerning the nation of Edom. This is an unusual titulary (a combination title and name) for the Lord. It identifies the covenant God of Israel as sovereign of the world and history.

"Yahweh was truly Lord. This entire prophecy gives one specific example of the exercise of his lordship."²⁰

Edom was the nation that had developed from the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob (cf. Gen. 36:1). The Edomites occupied the territory east of the Arabah between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqabah south of the Zered River and north of Ezion-geber (Elath). Its eastern boundary was the Arabian Desert. Edom was also known as Seir after Mount Seir, the prominent tableland that occupied the northeastern part of Edom's territory.²¹



¹⁹Watts, p. 42.

²⁰Ibid., p. 47.

²¹For maps of Edom, I recommend those in Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of the Bible*; the Hammond *Atlas of the Bible Lands*; and Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, revised ed.

Those who had heard a report (message) from the Lord were God's people. Obadiah spoke to them and used an editorial "we." God was sovereignly and supernaturally summoning other nations against Edom, probably through "natural" means (i.e., the desire to defeat her and take over her territory). The envoy sent among the nations is probably a personification of the desire God had placed in these nations to destroy Edom. That desire, from the spiritual viewpoint, was His messenger.

B. THE BREACHING OF EDMON'S DEFENSES VV. 2-4

Verses 2-9 contain three sections, which the phrase "declares the Lord" marks off (vv. 4, 8).

- v. 2 Yahweh called Obadiah's hearers to see that He would make Edom, which was already despised because of her character, small among the nations. He would humble her further.
- v. 3 The outstanding mark of Edom's national character was pride. The Hebrew word for pride (*zadon*) comes from a verb meaning to boil up (*zid*). It pictures pride as water that boils up under pressure in a cooking pot. Similarly the proud person is like a bubble that thrusts itself up but is hollow. Interestingly, the same Hebrew word occurs three times in the account of Esau, the father of the Edomites, squandering his birthright (Gen. 25:27-34).

". . . the key that unlocks the central moral lesson of the book is found in these words in the third verse: "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee."²²

"It is possible for Christians also to fall into the sin of pride. One has only to dismiss God from the reckoning, one has but to slip into the habit of neglecting his Bible, one has merely to fail to be alone with God daily in prayer, and he too may fall into the sin of making decisions and living his life on a secular basis without placing God and His will foremost."²³

The Edomites thought they were superior because they inhabited a lofty region, Mt. Seir. They thought they were secure because they occupied this militarily favorable location. In fact, they thought they were invincible.

"Edom's natural defenses were imposing. Its main centers of civilization were situated in a narrow ridge of mountainous land southeast of the Dead Sea . . . This ridge

²²Gaebelein, p. 48.

²³Ibid., p. 52. This writer's discussion of the sin of pride in the light of today (pp. 48-52) is worth reading.

exceeded a height of 4,000 feet throughout its northern sector, and it rose in places to 5,700 feet in the south. Its height was rendered more inaccessible by the gorges radiating from it toward the Arabah on the west and the desert eastwards.

"In addition to these natural fortifications, Edom was strongly defended by a series of Iron Age fortresses, particularly on the eastern frontier where the land descended more gradually to the desert."²⁴

The rock (Heb. *sela'*) in view is the granite and sandstone that made up Mt. Seir. Though Sela was also the name of an Edomite town (cf. 2 Kings 14:7), here the mountain home of the whole nation seems to be in view.²⁵

v. 4 Here the figure of an eagle that was also in view in the previous verse becomes explicit. Even if the Edomites would build their nest as high as the stars (hyperbole), God would bring them down.²⁶ They might have been humanly unassailable, but they were not divinely unassailable. They had proudly boasted, "Who will bring me down to the earth?" (v. 3), but Yahweh replied, "I will bring you down" (v. 4). He would burst their bubble. He Himself declared that He would.

Malachi, who wrote some 400 years later, mentioned that the Edomites were still in existence then (Mal. 1:3-4). By 312 B.C. the capital of Edom was in Nabatean hands, and Edom had ceased to exist as a nation, though Edomites continued to live. They became known as Idumeans. Herod the Great was an Idumean.

C. THE PLUNDERING OF EDOM'S TREASURES VV. 5-7

vv. 5-6 Thieves robbed houses and grape harvesters stripped vineyards, yet both left a little behind that they did not carry off. However, Yahweh's destruction of Edom would be so complete that nothing at all would remain of her (cf. Jer. 49:9-10). There would be no remnant of Edom left (in contrast to the remnant that Yahweh promised elsewhere to leave in Israel). The form of this assurance sounds like mourning in the presence of death. Concealed treasures of all kinds, human as well as material, would not escape Yahweh's omniscient eye.²⁷

²⁴Armerding, pp. 342-43.

²⁵The Greek translation of *sela'* is Petra, the modern name of this town.

²⁶Hyperbole is overstatement for the sake of emphasis. King Sennacherib of Assyria and King Assurnassirpal II of Assyria both used the same figure to boast of their security in their respective annals. See Daniel D. Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib*, p. 36; and Albert K. Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions*, 2:122.

²⁷Compare God's omnipotence in verse 4.

- v. 7 Edom's allies would treacherously betray their friend. Thus Edom would not only deceive herself, but her trusted allies would also deceive her. They would do what in the ancient Near East was most despicable, namely, break a covenant with a covenant partner (cf. Ps. 55:20; Amos 1:9). Edom's allies would prove to be the worst of enemies. They would fail to assist her in her hour of greatest need. Three parallel descriptions of covenant disloyalty in this verse picture the treachery as certain. Moreover this disloyalty would completely surprise the Edomites.

"Edom was a weak country militarily, its small population and its limited agricultural wealth precluding powerful armed forces. Therefore its ability to attack Judah's Negeb and help plunder Jerusalem had depended on its obsequious alliance with more powerful states, especially Babylon."²⁸

D. THE DESTRUCTION OF EDMON'S LEADERSHIP VV. 8-9

"Obadiah's discussion nicely interweaves the themes of divine intervention and human instrumentality."²⁹

- v. 8 The repetition of "declares the Lord" (cf. v. 4) reemphasizes Yahweh's initiative in this judgment. "That day" points to a specific, though undefined, day when He would surely destroy Edom.

God would destroy Edom's famous wise men (cf. 1 Kings 4:30; Job 1:1; 2:11; 4:1; Jer. 49:7; Lam. 4:21; Baruch 3:23) and their understanding by allowing them to fail to detect the unfaithfulness of their allies (v. 7). They would also overestimate their own security (v. 3).

"Because of its communication with Babylon and Egypt and because of the information gleaned through the caravans going to and from Europe and India, Edom had gained an enviable reputation for wisdom."³⁰

The "mountain of Esau" is Mt. Seir, the mountain God gave Esau and his descendants to inhabit (Deut. 2:5).

- v. 9 The "mighty men" of Edom may be a synonym for the wise men (v. 8) or the nation's warriors. Together with the wise men, the mighty men form a merism, a figure of speech in which two parts stand for the whole, in this case all the Edomites. Rather than feeling confident, the mighty men, a chief resource of the nation, would feel dismayed when they realized that their covenant partners had proved traitorous.

²⁸Stuart, pp. 417-18. This writer believed Obadiah wrote after the Babylonians defeated Jerusalem.

²⁹Finley, p. 362.

³⁰Feinberg, p. 126.

Teman was both a prominent town in central Edom (possibly modern Tuwilan)³¹ and the region around the town (cf. Gen. 36:10-11), but its name stands for the whole nation (by metonymy). The end of all this deception and destruction would be the total end of Edom.

II. EDOM'S CRIMES AGAINST JUDAH VV. 10-14

Verse 10 summarizes what verses 11-14 detail in the same way verse 1 did in relation to verses 2-9.

A. THE STATEMENT OF THE CHARGE V. 10

Pride was not the only reason God would humble Edom. The Edomites had also cursed the people whom God had purposed to bless, the Israelites (cf. Gen. 27:40-41; Exod. 15:15; Num. 20:14-21; Deut. 2:4; Judg. 11:17-18; 1 Sam. 14:47-48; 2 Sam. 8:13-14; 1 Kings 11:15-16; 1 Chron. 18:11-13; Ps. 60; et al.). In doing this they had incurred God's wrath (Gen. 12:3). "Violence" (Heb. *hamas*) includes both moral wrong and physical brutality. This violence was especially despicable since it was against Edom's brother, Jacob (i.e., the Israelites). Consequently, great shame would cover Edom (cf. v. 2), and God would cut her off forever (cf. v. 9).

B. THE EXPLANATION OF THE CHARGE VV. 11-14

v. 11 God cited one specific instance of Edom's violence against her brother, but as I explained in the introduction, which instance is unclear. Edom's treachery against Judah had taken place on a particular "day" in the past. Likewise God's judgment would come on a particular "day" yet future (v. 8).³² The Edomites' sin was that they failed to help the Israelites in their hour of need (cf. Luke 10:31-32). Instead they stood aloof and watched joyfully as Israel's invader plundered Jerusalem. Enemies passing through a city's gate signified the loss of its self-rule.³³ God considered the Edomites as guilty as Jerusalem's invaders because the Edomites failed to help their brethren.

"In the sight of God, who looks not on the outward appearance but on the heart, there is little distinction in moral accountability between overt sin and an inner bias toward that sin that permits it to go unchecked (cf. Matt 5:21-32)."³⁴

³¹Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, map 155; *Student Map Manual: Historical Geography of the Bible Lands*, map 9-2.

³²"Day" does not always refer to a period of 12 or 24 hours in the Bible. It sometimes refers to a longer period of time but one that is distinguishable as a period of time (e.g., Gen. 2:4).

³³Niehaus, p. 529.

³⁴Armerding, p. 348.

". . . the Israelites are always commanded in the law to preserve a friendly and brotherly attitude towards Edom (Deut. ii. 4, 5); and in Deut. xxiii. 7 it is enjoined upon them not to abhor the Edomite, because he is their brother."³⁵

- v. 12-13 God reinforced the seriousness of the Edomites' sin by condemning it in parallel terminology eight times (vv. 12-14).³⁶ Hostile attitudes more than physical violence were Edom's sins against the Israelites on this occasion. Blood ties should have transcended even covenant ties. Edom's allies would break covenant ties with her (v. 7), but she had betrayed blood ties.
- v. 14 Physical violence eventually came into play too. As the Judahite fugitives from Jerusalem left the city, the Edomites met them at some fork in the road and slew them rather than helping them escape from the invader. Other Edomites imprisoned fleeing Judahites instead of giving them refuge. This could be poetic hyperbole, but there is nothing in the text that indicates overstatement. All the other descriptions of Edom's actions seem to be literal.

Some English translations render verses 12-14 as referring to the future while others interpret them as referring to the past. Most commentators take the time as past; God was describing something that had already happened.³⁷ A few take it as future describing something that would take place in the future.³⁸ Since this is a judgment oracle, it seems more likely that God was announcing judgment on Edom for something she had already done rather than for something she would do in the future. As she had been proud (v. 2), she had also been violent (v. 10).³⁹

The two most likely historical occasions that are in view are, first, the invasion by a coalition of Arabs and Philistines who carried off King Jehoram's family and his property during a period of tension with Edom (2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chron. 20:1-2; 21:8-17; 22:1). The second possible event was the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 24:13-16; 25:4-17; 2 Chron. 36:18, 20; cf. Ps. 137:7; Jer. 9:26; 25:21; 27:3; 40:11; Ezek. 25:12; 32:29; 35:3-9, 11-15; 36:2-7; Lam. 1:17; 2:15-17; 4:21-22). As discussed in the introduction to this exposition, I think there is slightly better evidence for the first occasion than for the second.

³⁵Keil, 1:360.

³⁶Compare the same parallel structure in verse 7 where there is a threefold positive reiteration. There is also a pun in the Hebrew text since the word for "disaster" (*edam*) is similar to the word "Edom" (*edom*).

³⁷E.g., Finley, p. 340.

³⁸E.g., Gaebelien, pp. 5, 29.

³⁹Keil, 1:363, proposed that Obadiah referred to an event that had happened and to another that would happen again in the future, the past event being typical of future reoccurrences.

III. THE RESTORATION OF ISRAEL'S SOVEREIGNTY VV. 15-21

A. THE JUDGMENT OF EDMOM AND THE NATIONS VV. 15-18

References to the work and word of the Lord frame this section. Obadiah announced that a reversal of roles was coming for Edom and all the nations.

- v. 15 "The day of the Lord" here is a future day in which God will reverse the fortunes of Israel and the nations (cf. v. 8).⁴⁰ It will be the day when God establishes His rule in human affairs, namely, when Jesus Christ returns to rule and reign on the earth. Obadiah said that day was approaching. As Edom and the other nations had done to Israel, so God would pay them back with precisely the same judgment (*lex talionis*; cf. Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21; Gal. 6:7).

"God shows not only his sovereignty over all people by not permitting unrequited wickedness, but also his justice by not permitting punishment to exceed crime."⁴¹

Edom's punishments that resulted in her demise as a nation before the Second Coming were part of God's judgment on her, but the prophet saw all God's judgments on Edom and the nations, which will culminate in the eschaton (end times). All the prophets had difficulty seeing the proximity of the future events that they predicted to one another (cf. 1 Pet. 1:11).

"The opening line of v. 15 therefore constitutes the core of Obadiah's prophecy. It provides a theological framework for the preceding verses: the localized disasters befalling Edom and Jerusalem are not merely isolated incidents in a remote and insignificant theater of war, for they mark the footsteps of the Lord himself as he approaches to set up a 'kingdom that will never be destroyed' (Dan 2:44). And the following verses are essentially a commentary on the implications of that impending 'day.'"⁴²

"Edom is presented as the paradigm of all the nations."⁴³

- v. 16 Edom had her "day" on the Lord's holy mountain, Jerusalem, when she failed to help her brother, Israel. Likewise, all the nations would have their "day" dominating Jerusalem and the Jews, during "the times of the

⁴⁰"The day of the Lord," a common term in the Prophets, refers generally to any time when God intervenes in human affairs to accomplish His will.

⁴¹D. Baker, p. 38.

⁴²Armerding, p. 353.

⁴³D. Baker, p. 39.

Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). We live in "the times of the Gentiles."⁴⁴ Obadiah described these enemies as drinking there in celebration of their dominion over Israel (cf. Exod. 32:6; 1 Sam. 30:16). Though they would celebrate to the point of delirium, God would destroy them, and they would become as though they had never existed. They would drink the cup of His wrath (cf. Ps. 60:3; 75:8; Isa. 51:17-23; Jer. 25:18-18, 28-29; 49:12-13; Hab. 2:15-16).

"The verse apparently precludes any trace of the nations remaining . . . , yet there will be a remnant of various nations in the Millennium (Isa. 2:2-4; Amos 9:12; Mic. 4:1-3; Zech. 14:16-19). How are these two ideas to be reconciled? The answer perhaps lies in the difference between the concept of nations before and during the Millennium. Before the golden age of Messiah's rule on earth the nations consider themselves sovereign and fight to maintain their individual rights. When Christ returns, however, only those from the nations who have called on the Lord's name will enter. Also, they will be under one King and no longer a threat to Israel's existence. Therefore, the nations as we presently know them will exist no more once the Millennium begins. In any case, Obadiah dwells only on the destruction of the old order as far as the nations are concerned."⁴⁵

- v. 17 The future of Israel (restoration) contrasts with the future of Edom (judgment). In that future time of judgment (the Tribulation), there would be those who escaped from Jerusalem, namely, many Jews (cf. Zech. 13:8; Rev. 12:13-17).⁴⁶ The city would eventually become holy (at the Second Coming), and the house of Jacob, in contrast to the house of Esau, would then possess what God intended for them to have (in the Millennium).
- v. 18 The Israelites would then consume the Edomites, as a fire burns up stubble (cf. Exod. 15:7; Isa. 10:17; Joel 2:5; Zech. 12:6; Mal. 4:1; Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17).⁴⁷ There would be no Edomites left (cf. vv. 8-9; Num. 24:18; Isa. 11:13-14; Ezek. 25:13-14; Amos 9:12), though Israelites would escape from Jerusalem (v. 17).

⁴⁴This period of history began when Nebuchadnezzar removed Israel's sovereignty in 586 B.C. and will end when Jesus Christ returns to the earth and restores Israel's sovereignty. During "the times of the Gentiles" Israel is being "trodden down by the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24).

⁴⁵Finley, p. 372.

⁴⁶Some writers (e.g., Armerding, p. 354) viewed this as taking place during the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. But Jerusalem did not become holy and the house of Jacob did not possess their possessions after that event, as this verse predicts.

⁴⁷Fire is often a tool of divine judgment in Scripture (cf. Deut. 28:24; 32:22).

"Obadiah distinctly mentions the house of Joseph, *i.e.* of the ten tribes, in this passage and in this alone, for the purpose of guarding against the idea that the ten tribes are to be shut out from the future salvation."⁴⁸

This prediction will find ultimate fulfillment during the judgment of the nations after the Second Coming and before the messianic rule of Christ in the Millennium begins. Yahweh again guaranteed the accuracy of this prophecy with His own word (cf. vv. 4, 8).

"Some passages, like v. 18, speak of a military participation by Israel in the judgment of the nations just prior to the Millennium (Zech. 12:1-9; Mal. 4:3 [MT 3:21]), while others depict the Lord carrying out the judgment on behalf of His people (Joel 3:12 [MT 4:12]; Zech. 14:3-5; cf. Matt. 25:31-46). It is difficult to reconstruct the precise order of events. In any case much of the material is evidently not strictly chronological."⁴⁹

The Edomites' fortunes ebbed and flowed for centuries following Obadiah's prophecy. The Herods, including Herod the Great (Matt. 2:1-17), Herod Antipas (Luke 13:31-32; 23:7-12), and Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-11, 23) were all of Edomite descent. But in the second century B.C. the Jews and other enemies virtually consumed the Edomites. It was then that the Edomites lost their national identity and autonomy, which they never regained. So the final destruction of the nation of Edom by Israel took place long before the eschaton.

". . . one could speak of a partial fulfillment of Obadiah's oracles when the Maccabeans and Hasmoneans reclaimed these areas for Israel."⁵⁰

However, Obadiah spoke of the nations as well as Edom. He foresaw the destruction of all Gentile powers that dominated the Israelites. Had the Jews accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah, He would have begun to rule just a few years after His crucifixion and resurrection. Since they rejected Him, the final judgment of the nations that the prophets predicted is still future.

B. THE OCCUPATION OF EDOM BY ISRAEL VV. 19-21

This pericope (section of text), as the former one, also has a framing phrase: "the mountain of Esau" (vv. 19, 21). This mountain, of course, contrasts with the Lord's holy mountain, Zion (vv. 16-17).

⁴⁸Keil, 1:370. The house of Jacob refers to the Southern Kingdom.

⁴⁹Finley, p. 373.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 374. This took place in the second century B.C.

vv. 19-20 Obadiah predicted that Jews living in various parts of Israel would possess parts of the Promised Land that other nations formerly occupied (cf. Isa. 66:8; Zech. 12:10—13:1; 14:1-9). These parts included Mt. Seir (Edom), Philistia, and territories to the north of Judah, including Ephraim and Samaria (the Northern Kingdom), and Transjordan (Gilead). Formerly exiled Israelites living to the north near Zarephath (in modern Lebanon) and in Sepharad (perhaps Sardis in modern Turkey or a territory in Media or Spain⁵¹) would return and occupy the southern portions of the land, the Negev. Israel would again conquer the land, but this time she would subdue it completely and occupy all the territory God had promised Abraham (cf. Gen. 13:14-17; 26:2-5; 28:13-15; Deut. 1:7).

"Was Obadiah's prophecy fulfilled? By Malachi's time (approximately 450 B.C.), Edom had suffered a devastating defeat (see Mal. 1:1-4), though not of the magnitude envisioned by Obadiah. Obadiah's description of Edom's judgment is probably to some degree stylized and exaggerated. However, the cosmic dimension of the prophecy transcends historical developments and points to an end-time judgment of worldwide proportions. When viewed in this larger eschatological context, Edom serves as an archetype for all God's enemies, who will be crushed by his angry judgment (see also Isa. 34 and 63:1-6)."⁵²

v. 21 In summary, those who would deliver the Jews to their divinely intended destiny would ascend Mt. Zion and would judge Mt. Seir (cf. Judg. 3:9, 15). Edom would not prevail over Israel, but Yahweh would prove to be sovereign (cf. v. 1). His kingdom would extend over the whole Promised Land, even the part that Israel's enemies formerly occupied and the people who formerly opposed them. The conquest of the land that Joshua began but did not finish will be complete then. Thus Obadiah's prophecy, this tale of two mountains, ends on a climax with Yahweh's kingdom dominating all the nations and with Yahweh as King of Kings and Lord of Lords (cf. Rev. 19:16; 20:4). The verse is clearly messianic.

"None of the prophets has a more exalted close than this. . . . No man-ruled empire nor any nation of this world will endure forever. All will one day be merged into that eternal kingdom over which the Lord Jesus Christ will reign in solitary glory."⁵³

⁵¹See *The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Sepharad," by D. J. Wiseman, p. 1160; and Watts, p. 64. The location of Sepharad remains a mystery.

⁵²Chisholm, *Handbook on . . .*, p. 406.

⁵³Gaebelein, pp. 46-47.

Amillennial interpreters understand New Testament references to Israel as references to the church. They see the fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy not in the restoration of Old Testament Israel to future sovereignty in the Promised Land but in the final victory of the church over all her enemies.⁵⁴ Premillennialists reject this "replacement theology" (the church replaces Israel in God's program) because we believe when God said "Israel" He meant Israel. It is incorrect, we believe, to conclude that because Christians are the spiritual seed of Abraham the church is the spiritual seed of Israel.

As the nation of Edom opposed the Israelites, so the Edomites of Jesus' day (Herod the Great and his successors) opposed Jesus Christ and His followers. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who proved to be the fulfillment of all that the nation of Israel was to be, became the personal focus of Herod's hostility, who tried to kill Jesus in His infancy. Yet Herod was unsuccessful. Likewise all the enemies of Israel, and of Israel's Messiah, will be unsuccessful in doing away with the Savior and will experience destruction themselves for trying to do so.

⁵⁴E.g., Stuart, p. 422; Keil, 1:378; Allen, p. 172.

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