

# STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class  
Anchorage Grace Church  
2015

by Nathan R. Schneider, Th.M.

## OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

### Obadiah

#### I. Introduction

With only 21 verses, the book of Obadiah holds the title of being the shortest book in the Hebrew canon. In addition, its inclusion in the twelve "Minor" prophets and even its placement between two of the more substantial books in that section (Amos and Jonah) make it one of the least understood books in the OT.

Yet even its contents and message seem to alienate the book into obscurity. It concentrates on one single nation—Edom—a nation long forgotten in the annals of world history. Its tone is one of sustained vengeance and judgment, making it difficult for modern readers to relate to and accept its message. Twentieth century Christians are left wondering how a judgment oracle against a long-extinct nation can offer any kind of spiritual profit today. Such sentiments are captured quite well by one OT theologian, who asserts that the book of Obadiah is "of little theological interest."<sup>1</sup>

To this Finley remarks that "if one focuses on the apparently narrow perspective of a people's outrage against an ally that betrayed them and of their longing for vengeance, one might possibly concur."<sup>2</sup> He then goes on to write, "However, the themes of the book have a much broader theological interest." Indeed, the promise of 2 Timothy 3:16 is that *all* Scripture—OT and NT—is inspired by God and therefore *profitable*, even if some books require more studious exertion to extract their theological gold.

#### A. *Date & Authorship*

Barely anything is known about the author of this book. The superscription offers only a name—"Obadiah"—a conflation of the Hebrew term *ebed* ("servant") and the divine name *Yahweh* meaning, "Yahweh's servant." It was a rather common name in the OT, used 20x in reference to as many as 12 different individuals. Hebrew tradition identified him as the Obadiah mentioned in 1 Kings 18:3-16, a steward in the royal court of Ahab,

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament: From Its Origins to the Closing the Alexandrian Canon*, 3rd ed., trans. John Bowden, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989), 399.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah: An Exegetical Commentary* (Biblical Studies Press, 2003), 309.

king of Israel.<sup>3</sup> Such an association seems promising. This individual stood out as a man who revered Yahweh (1 Kgs 18:3, 12), protected the prophets threatened by Jezebel's murderous rampage (1 Kgs 18:4, 13), and demonstrating respect for Elijah (1 Kgs 18:7). If this is the case, then the book's date falls sometime in the mid-9th century B.C.

But it's difficult to be so conclusive. The book provides no other historical information to confirm this tradition, and other factors have led to a hefty debate over when the book was written. In fact, Smith writes that the prophet "has been tossed out of one century into another by successive critics, till there exists in their estimates of its date a difference of nearly six hundred years."<sup>4</sup> Three categories of evidence play into dating the book.

### 1. *Placement in the Twelve*

Dating Obadiah based on its position among the Twelve is inherently problematic. This section of the Hebrew canon is not clearly arranged chronologically, yet at the same time it's apparent that chronology played at least a partial role: Hosea, Amos, Jonah, and Micah easily date to the 9th and 8th centuries B.C., while Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah fall in the 7th century B.C. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are clearly post-exilic. Thus, Obadiah's placement among the pre-exilic authors underscores the confidence with which the canonical arrangers had concerning the dating of Obadiah.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, it is clear that certain thematic considerations were made in how the books were arranged. Joel's statement at the close of his prophecy—"Yahweh roars from Zion" (3:16)—undoubtedly influenced its placement before Amos, which opens with the same statement (1:2). And Obadiah's focus on the fate of Edom and Israel's future victory over her corresponds clearly with Amos' assertion at the conclusion of his oracles that at the reuniting of Israel under David, they will "possess the remnant of Edom" (9:12). Since neither Joel nor Obadiah contain any chronological markers grounding them historically, it may be postulated that the arrangers placed them before and after Amos for thematic rather than chronological purposes.

Ultimately, however, canonical position is an inconclusive guide for dating Obadiah.

### 2. *Historical Allusions*

The main category of evidence involves any historical conclusions that may be reached from the text of Obadiah. The author offers nothing concerning a reigning king or a specific historical event that clearly aligns with a known date. However, the prophet does describe Edom as collaborating with Israel's enemies in the invasion of Jerusalem (vv. 10-14).

---

<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, San. 39b.

<sup>4</sup> G. A. Smith, *Book of the Twelve Prophets* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1928), 2:164.

<sup>5</sup> Irvin A. Busenitz, *Joel & Obadiah: A Mentor Commentary*, Mentor (Geanies House, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 223.

While some commentators suggest that Obadiah's words are prophetically describing an event that had not yet happened, it seems better to see his words as memoirs of a man who was present at the event and personally observed it.<sup>6</sup> The OT records five invasions of Jerusalem throughout Israelite history:

Approx. Date	Invader	King of Judah	OT References
925 B.C.	Shishack, king of Egypt	Rehoboam	1 Kgs 14:25-26; 2 Chron 12
848-841 B.C.	Philistines and Arabians	Jehoram	2 Chron 21:8-20
790 B.C.	Jehoash, king of Israel	Amaziah	2 Kgs 14; 2 Chron 25
735-715 B.C.	Edom and Philistia	Ahaz	2 Chron 28:16-18
586 B.C.	Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon	Zedekiah	2 Kgs 25

Of these five invasions, only two are viable options. Those who date Obadiah to the pre-exilic era connect the events of the book with the Philistine/Arabian attack between 848-841 B.C. during the reign of Jehoram, king of Judah. Edom had unsuccessfully rebelled against Jehoram's control over their nation (2 Kgs 8:20-21; 2 Chron 21:8-9). Judah's victory left them vulnerable to other foreign maneuvers, when shortly afterward the Philistines and Arabians captured Jerusalem and looted it and kidnapped Jehoram's family (2 Chron 21:17). Yet opponents of this view argue that this event doesn't seem to capture the magnitude of the devastation described by Obadiah. The prophet uses words like "misfortune," "destruction," "distress," "disaster," and "calamity," terms which don't seem to correspond to this particular event. Additionally it is noted that the chronicler remains silent about Edom's role in the event, and the author of Kings doesn't even mention the event. "It hardly seems like the kind of national catastrophe depicted by Obadiah."<sup>7</sup>

Those who hold to an exilic date for Obadiah suggest that the events described in the book most closely match the devastating destruction caused by Nebuchadnezzar's razing of the city in 586 B.C. By this point in history, Judah and Edom were allies (Jer 27:1-11), making their treachery all the greater as they encouraged the Babylonians in their exploits (Ps 137:7; Ezek 25:12; 35:7). However, this view is not without its problems as well. Obadiah does not once mention the Babylonians—an amazing oversight given their role in the event and the fact that every other prophet who describes the event mentions them. There is no mention of the temple's destruction, nor the royal palace. However, Obadiah does reference Samaria and Ephraim, two epithets for Northern Israel who by this time had been in Assyrian captivity for 136 years. Additionally, it is difficult to reconcile Obadiah's stern warning to Edom in vv. 12-14 not to repeat their previous evils against Judah considering that Judah would not have been around after 586 B.C. to once again be plundered.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 225; Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, 300.

<sup>7</sup> Finley, 301.

<sup>8</sup> Busenitz, 226-27.

### 3. *Similarities to Jeremiah*

A third category involves the similarities between Obadiah 1-9 and Jeremiah 49:7-22. It is apparently that one prophet borrowed from the other, though it is unclear by itself who originated the material. If Obadiah adapted his words from Jeremiah, then the former must fit into an exilic or post-exilic timeline. However, strong arguments have been raised supporting the notion that Jeremiah borrowed his material from Obadiah. It is widely acknowledged that Jeremiah, more so than other prophets, frequently borrowed phrases and ideas from previous biblical writers. Meanwhile, it appears that Obadiah's material fits better as original because it is part of "a unified oracle with a sequence and an inner connection, while in Jeremiah they are scattered among other matters."<sup>9</sup> Archer concurs:

Obadiah could hardly have borrowed from Jeremiah, for he expresses his sentiments more briefly and rapidly than does Jeremiah and in part also more heavily and abruptly. By smoothing down the rugged places in Obadiah's style of expression, Jeremiah shows himself to have been the adapter rather than the original source, and as adapter he has made the whole oracle more lucid and perspicuous."<sup>10</sup>

If this analysis is correct, then it argues strongly in favor of an early date for Obadiah.

### 4. *Conclusion*

When taken in the aggregate, dating Obadiah remains an elusive exercise. The historical allusions are inconclusive, with good arguments for both an exilic or pre-exilic date. When the book's canonical position and relationship to Jeremiah is considered, a pre-exilic date is more promising, but certainly not conclusive. While understanding the historical background would certainly aid in understanding Obadiah's text, the broader thrust of his message remains equally profitable.

## B. *Historical Background*

It might seem futile to speculate about the historical setting of Obadiah, considering the relative uncertainty of its date and the events it depicts. But this conclusion is far from true. This is because the history of Obadiah's message dates back far beyond the time of Babylon's siege against Jerusalem, or the Philistine/Arabian attack during Jehoram's reign. It goes all the way back to before the founding of the Mosaic Covenant—back to the time of the patriarchs and the birth of two boys.

Genesis 25:22-23 records that Rebekah's pregnancy was endowed with prophetic significance. Even within her womb, the twins struggled together, and Yahweh revealed that both babies represented two struggling nations that would defy cultural norms:

Yahweh said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger" (Gen 25:23).

---

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "Obadiah," in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 500.

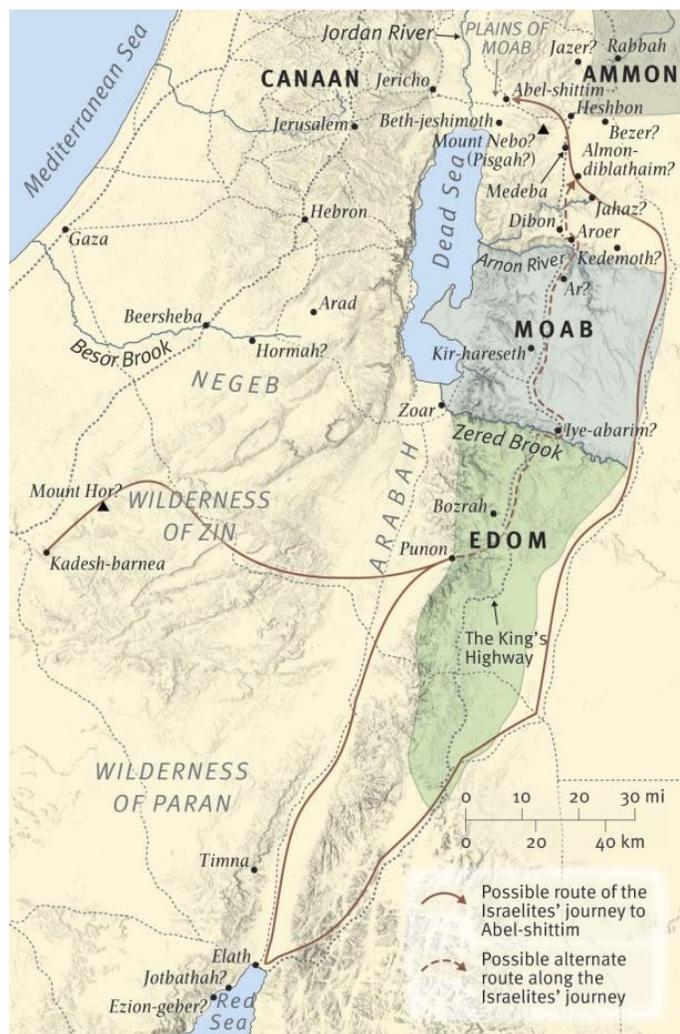
<sup>10</sup> Gleason Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 335.

This prophecy was realized in full within the lives of these two individuals. Their personalities and temperaments could not have been more different. Esau became a hunter and outdoorsman, while Jacob was not as adventurous, preferring the indoors (Gen 25:27). Their interaction around the selling of Esau's birthright became the launching point for their future struggles, for it was at this point that Esau became known as "Edom," (meaning "red") because he sold his birthright for "red" lentil stew (Gen 25:30, 34).

The real conflict, however, came at the actions of Jacob who, true to his name, deceived his father into pronouncing on him the blessing of the firstborn (Gen 27:35). Central to this covenant blessing was fertility and abundance, divine favor, national dominance, and mastery over his brother (Gen 27:29). With nothing favorable to receive, Esau was left to face the "blessing" of an infertile land, a life of violence and bloodshed, and service to his brother, with the only hope being that he would one day break off his brother's yoke from his neck (Gen 27:39-40).

Yet that small ray of hope turned out to be more general than specific, and often it was realized in ways that unveiled the depravity of Esau's heart. His contempt for his father and Yahweh's covenant led him to take Canaanite wives (Gen 28:8-9). Even his eventual "peace" with Jacob turned out to be rather superficial and fleeting (Gen 33:3-4). He eventually settled in the hill country of Seir, and his descendants multiplied into what would become the nation of Edom (Gen 36).

The land of Edom was located south of the Dead Sea in an area roughly 40 x 100 miles (Gen 33:16; 36:8-9; Deut 2:4-5). It was a land "dominated by vast wilderness, narrow valleys and rugged mountains."<sup>11</sup> Its geography afforded its cities a naturally impregnable defense (cf. Jer 49:16). Its copper mining and smelting industry provided sources of great wealth, as did its control of roughly 70 miles of the famed



<sup>11</sup> Busenitz, *Joel & Obadiah*, 230.

King's Highway, a major trade route between North Africa and Europe. Edom exacted tolls from those passing along this route. It was along this highway that Israel wished to travel on their trek north to Canaan, yet Edom refused them passage through their land (Num 20:17-21).

That incident blossomed into centuries of hostile animosity between the two nations. They opposed Saul earlier in his reign (1 Sam 14:47), but later became informants against David (1 Sam 21:7; 22:9, 18; cf. Ps 52). By the time of David's reign, Edom would be subjugated under Israel (2 Sam 8:14), even to the point that during the height of his kingdom, Solomon was able to build ships in the Edomite city of Ezion-geber along the Red Sea (1 Kgs 9:26).

As Solomon's kingdom began to crumble, Edom was able to rise up once again as Israel's adversary under the leadership of Hadad, who returned to his homeland after exile in Egypt during the Davidic conquests (1 Kgs 11:14-22). Judah was able to reassert control under Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:47; 2 Chron 20), and Edom even aided Judah and Israel in their battle against Moab (2 Kgs 3:9). But cooperation between Israel and Edom was always fleeting, and Edom soon revolted against Jehoshaphat's son Jehoram, defeating his army and establishing their own monarchy (2 Kgs 8:20-22). Years later, Amaziah king of Judah would slaughter 10,000 Edomites in the Valley of Salt, capturing Sela and renaming it Joktheel (2 Kgs 14:7).

By the time of Babylon's rise to power in the north, Edom was willing to align with Judah and other nations to face the superpower (Jer 27:1-11), but when Nebuchadnezzar arrived in Palestine, Edom and its allies deserted Judah. For this, they came under harsh condemnation. Psalm 137 records Edom's chants, encouraging the Babylonians to raze Jerusalem "to its very foundation" (Ps 137:71; cf. Lam 4:21; Ezek 25:12; 35:5).

The exile of Judah afforded Edom an opportunity to occupy lower Palestine, and they lived in the region until the late 6th or early 5th century B.C., when Arab groups displaced Edom from their homeland (cf. Mal 1:2-4). Those Edomites who remained following the displacement mingled with the population, producing a mixed ethnic class who became known as Idumeans, the most notable of whom was Herod the Great, who ruled as king over Judea under Roman authority beginning in 37 B.C. His hostility toward the Christ-child embodied the enduring hostility of Israel-Edom relations. After the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in 70 A.D., Edom also disappeared from world history never to be heard from again.

## II. Major Themes

### A. *Covenant Retribution*

Genesis and the Abrahamic Covenant form the backdrop of Obadiah's entire message. In fact, Busenitz remarks that "the book is a case study of Genesis 12:1-3. Edom's vaunted spirit of pride and her uninhibited hatred of her twin made her the object of God's wrath. She had failed to comprehend the intensity of God's love for Israel—that 'he who touches you touches the apple of His eye.'"<sup>12</sup> The Abrahamic Covenant promised blessing for

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 232.

those who blessed Abraham's descendants, while it assured that if anyone might choose to curse them, they in turn would suffer cursing (Gen 12:3). This same promise was reaffirmed by Yahweh to Israel as they made their way toward Canaan when, through the mouth of a false prophet hired by Israel's enemy to curse the nation, Yahweh compelled Balaam to instead bless them and cursed all of her enemies (Num 24:9).

Whether Obadiah was referencing Philistia's and the Arabian's invasion of Jerusalem during the days of Jehoram, or Nebuchadnezzar's sacking of the city in 586 B.C., Edom was complicit in the evil done to Israel. Obadiah describes Edom as committing "violence to your brother Jacob" (10). When the nation was being ransacked by foreigners, Edom "stood aloof" and even "were as one of them," as the nations "carried off his wealth...and cast lots for Jerusalem" (11). Edom's actions were despicable. Allied with Judah, and related to them by blood, they turned their back on the nation in the time of their greatest need.

It is for this that Obadiah informs Edom of the judgment that will come to them: "As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head" (15). Edom's actions had sowed the seeds of their own destruction, a natural consequence of evil that Paul cites in Galatians 6:7-8: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap."

Thus, two judgments would befall Edom for their treachery. First, Edom would suffer an historically immediate attack by her own allies (1-9). And second, they would suffer an eschatological attack by Israel in the Day of Yahweh (15-21).

Ironically, just as Edom's hostile action was joyfully directed against her ally and very own brother Israel, so too Edom herself will suffer desolation without compassion from an ally-led attack (v. 7) in the course of history, and again eschatologically at the hands of her own brother Jacob (v. 18).<sup>13</sup>

## B. *Kingdom of God*

The historical circumstances surrounding Obadiah's message are much broader than what they appear to be. At the heart of his message concerns the Kingdom of God as it stands opposed to the kingdoms of the world. Thus, Obadiah can initiate a sustained attack against one specific nation—Edom—yet shift his focus to the judgment of all the nations in the Day of Yahweh (16). This is because Edom, in their pride and arrogance, represents all the nations who oppose the purposes of God. They consoled themselves in the safety of their citadels and the natural fortresses afforded by the geology of their land (3). But the prophet assured them that nothing would protect them because, in the end, it was Yahweh himself who stood against them.

The book's message asserts that God ultimately rules all the nations. Thus, he can summon all the nations against Edom (7), challenge their security in the mountains (2-4), threaten to cut off their hope of rescue (8-9), and promise that the wrongs done to Israel will one day be righted (15-21). And in the end, it will not be the "mountains of Esau" that will stand in prominence (8-9), but Mount Zion (21). In the midst of the nations'

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 233.

doom, the mountain will arise as a place of refuge for Israel, who will repossess the land of Edom (17-20), and Yahweh will reign over his kingdom (21; cf. Zech 14:9).

### III. Purpose

*The judgment of Yahweh would fall upon Edom because of her lack of brotherly kindness, but Israel would be restored.*

### IV. Literary Structure

With minor variations, the structure of Obadiah is easy to identify. It describes two judgments on Edom. The first is a future conquest of Edom by other nations, historically realized in displacement of the Edomites by the Arabians in the late 6th or early 5th century B.C. The second is an eschatological judgment on Edom and the nations as part of the Day of Yahweh, when Israel will repossess her lands and experience the covenanted blessings.

In between these two judgments is an explanation of the crimes committed by Edom that warrants her downfall—treachery against her own kin. The evils to befall Edom in the near and far future mirror those she committed against her own ally and bother Israel.

#### OBADIAH<sup>14</sup>

The Judgment Enunciated					The Crimes Explained				The Judgment Expanded			
Superscription (1a)	The Battle Summons (1b-c)	The Nation Subjugated (2-4)	The Treasures Stolen (5-7)	The Leadership Slain (8-9)	They Ignored Judah's Need (10-11)	They Rejoiced in Judah's Demise (12)	They Plundered Judah's Wealth (13)	They Prevented Judah's Escape (14)	The Extent of the Judgment (15-16)	The Escapees of the Judgment (17)	The Execution of the Judgment (18)	The Effects of the Judgment (19-21)
1-9					10-14				15-21			
HISTORICAL									ESCHATOLOGICAL			

<sup>14</sup> Adapted from Busenitz, *Joel & Obadiah*, 220.