

Lesson 2

Obadiah: Servant of the Lord

Introduction

Obadiah is the shortest writing of the Minor Prophets. Obadiah's name, Servant of the LORD, was very common in Israel. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia identifies thirteen different Obadiah's in the Old Testament. The Jewish Talmud holds that the prophet was the same Obadiah who was King Ahab's palace administrator, 1 Kings 18.3-16. Some suggest he is the man sent out by Jehoshaphat to teach God's law to the people in the hill country of Judah, 2 Chronicles 17.7. While some might make a case for either one of these, the fact is that we know nothing about Obadiah beyond his name that that he received a revelation from God predicting the downfall of Edom.

The occasion of Obadiah's prophecy is difficult to ascertain. Suggested dates for the book range from the ninth century to the late fourth century B.C. The book names no king or date so the exact historical event is a matter of speculation. The Old Testament records four different occasions when Jerusalem suffered serious attacks and devastation:

- 1 Kings 14.25-26; 2 Chronicles 12.1-12 – During Rehoboam's reign, Egyptian king Shishak invaded Jerusalem, seizing the treasuries in the temple and royal palace.
- 2 Chronicles 21.16-17 - The Arabians and Philistines invade Judah, carrying off all the possessions in the palace and the sons and wives of the king.
- 2 Kings 14.8-14; 2 Chronicles 25.17-24 – Jehoash's defeat of Amaziah and pillaging of the temple and the king's palace.
- 2 Chronicles 36.11-21 – The destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

Today, many scholars prefer to place the writing of Obadiah around the time around the end of Jerusalem/Judah in 597-587 B.C. Zedekiah was the last reigning king over Judah and after fleeing Jerusalem was captured near Jericho and returned to Nebuchadnezzar, 2 Kings 25.4-7. The Psalms, Ezekiel and Jeremiah all refer to Edomite involvement in the destruction of Jerusalem² which seems to fit what Obadiah mentions in v. 10-14.

Other scholars prefer a much earlier date, ascribing Obadiah to be the earliest of the Minor Prophets, writing around 845 B.C. This perspective sees Obadiah as referring to a battle where Jerusalem was assaulted by the Arabians and Philistines during the reign of Jehoram in Judah and Joram (a.k.a Jehoram) in Israel. In this case, verses 10-14 would be linked to the historical account in 2 Kings 8.16-24; 2 Chronicles 21:8-10, 16-17. Obadiah mentions foreigners entering the city gates working destruction and disaster. But there is no mention of the destruction of the temple or royal palace. Nothing is said about the people being carried into captivity in Babylon or a remnant heading for Egypt.

² Psalm 137.7; Lamentations 4.21-22; Ezekiel 25.12-14; 35.1-15; Jeremiah 49.7-22.

It would seem reasonable that if such momentous and life-altering events were occurring during Obadiah's time surely, he would have mentioned this in his prophecy.

In this study, we will consider Obadiah's prophecy from the early date perspective.

The message of Obadiah is two-fold. The book opens with a decree of doom: Edom will be destroyed because of its pride and neglect of coming to the aid of Israel who had been attacked by foreigners. The second message focuses on the exaltation of Israel and the abasement of Edom (Mt. Seir) and the surrounding nations.

Edom's history

Edom was located south of the Dead Sea. It was a small country, measuring roughly seventy miles from north to south and only around fifteen miles east to west. The word "Edom" means red. This could be referring to the red sandstone cliffs that are a characteristic of the land Esau settled or it could be referring to the skin color of Esau. Most of the Edomites could be characterized as cliff-dwellers. Their capitol city of Sela (Petra in Greek) was hewn out of rock. They settled their territory around 1300 B.C., just before the Israelites arrived in the area.

The connection between Israel and Edom goes all the way back to Genesis with Esau and Jacob. From the womb disharmony characterized the relationship between Esau and Jacob, Genesis 25:22. Jacob stole Esau's birthright and later deceitfully obtained the blessing from his father Isaac. See Genesis 25 and 27. Because of this, Jacob fled for his life from Esau. Genesis 36:8-9 tells us that Esau became the father of the Edomites.

The running feud between Israel and Edom begins in earnest in Numbers 20 when Edom refuses to allow the Hebrew nation to pass through to the Promised Land. They always seemed to be a "thorn in the flesh" to Israel until they were finally brought down by David in the years after 1000 B.C. The subjugation of Edom allowed Israel to use and operate ports on the Red Sea, thus increasing their power and ability to trade with foreign nations. During this time Edom had no king—just a deputy appointed by Israel, 2 Kings 22:47. During Jehoram's reign Edom revolted. Now free of Judah's yoke, Edom returned to its former practice of aiding and abetting the enemies of Judah.

God sent Obadiah to warn of impending doom and punishment of the Edomites for their treatment of God's people. By 300 B.C. the Edomites had been captured by the Nabateans (a desert people), and what was left of them lived south of Judah. By 100 A.D. their country, language, and customs had completely disappeared, being absorbed by the Roman Empire. During the Roman Empire the Herods played a prominent role in regional government. We read of them during the days of Jesus and the early church. The Herods were descendants of the Edomites and were no friends to the people of God.

The times of Obadiah

The years after the division of Israel and Judah were characterized by ongoing hostility. It subsided during the reign of Omri and Ahab in the north. As peace prevailed, the ruling families of each nation intermarried. Jehoshaphat (a relatively good king) chose Ahab's daughter (Athaliah) as a wife for his son

Jehoram. This had extreme spiritual and national implications as the queen of Israel, Jezebel, was intent on pushing the worship of Baal on everyone. Her evil influence affected both nations. Jezebel's husband (Ahab, 873-853 B.C.) and two sons (Ahaziah, 853-852 B.C. and Jehoram, 852-841 B.C.) ruled in the north. Jezebel's son-in-law (Jehoram, 848-841 B.C.), grandson (Ahaziah, 841-840 B.C.), and daughter (Athaliah, 840-835 B.C.) ruled Judah. Largely because of the ruling class, the two countries, although at peace and economically prosperous, turned away from God. 2 Chronicles 21 describes the character of Jehoram of Judah. One of his first acts as king was to kill all six of his brothers and some of the princes of Israel to stave off any chance of having his reign put in jeopardy, 2 Chronicles 21:4. Verses 6-11 tell us more about his character and the subsequent punishment by God for the kingdom's rebellion.

He walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done, for Ahab's daughter was his wife. He did what was evil in the LORD's sight, but for the sake of the covenant the LORD had made with David, he was unwilling to destroy the house of David since the LORD had promised to give a lamp to David and to his sons forever. During Jehoram's reign, Edom rebelled against Judah's control and appointed their own king. So Jehoram crossed into Edom with his commanders and all his chariots. Then at night he set out to attack the Edomites who had surrounded him and the chariot commanders. And now Edom is still in rebellion against Judah's control today. Libnah also rebelled at that time against his control because he had abandoned the LORD, the God of his ancestors. Jehoram also built high places in the hills of Judah, and he caused the inhabitants of Jerusalem to prostitute themselves, and he led Judah astray.

Jehoram's actions prompted the judgment of God. The prophet Elijah sent a letter to the king prophesying about a coming affliction upon him and his family. He himself would be struck with many illnesses, the worst of which was a terrible, incurable intestinal condition. He would linger for two years before dying in great pain.

Verses sixteen and seventeen in 2 Chronicles 21 describe an attack on Jerusalem where the king's house was invaded. All the king's possessions and sons and wives were carried away by the Philistines and Arabs. The only son left to Jehoram was his youngest, Jehoahaz. Jehoahaz was also known as Ahaziah as the two names were interchangeable. When Jehoram died, no one mourned his death. A sad commentary is stated in 2 Chronicles 21:20: *Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king; he reigned eight years in Jerusalem. He died to no one's regret and was buried in the city of David but not in the tombs of the kings.* It is in the background of this attack on Jerusalem that Obadiah is written. Refer to Obadiah 10-11. Jerusalem had been humbled by this attack and Obadiah comes out to proclaim that the LORD'S kingdom would ultimately triumph over those who had warred against it.

The Message of Obadiah

Judgment on Edom, v. 3-14

This book announces a report from the LORD concerning Edom. *Edom would be made insignificant among the nations*, verse 2. The reasons for this are explained in detail in Obadiah's writing. Verses 3-9 speak of Edom's intense pride and verses 10-14 describe their treacherous behavior before God.

Intense Pride, v. 3-9

Pride has been the downfall of many a nation. We need to stand up and take notice from the lessons of the past, 2 Corinthians 10:6-12. The Edomites would fall because of their false sense of security in:

Their location, v. 3-4

The mountainous area of Edom made them feel secure from any invasion. The arid mountains, intense heat, lack of water, and rough terrain would make it difficult for any large army to come in. In addition, there were several fortified cities that would not be easily destroyed. The name of the capitol city, Sela, is translated The Rock. Because of the geographic features of their nation, they said to themselves: *who can bring me down to the ground?* God declared that he would bring them down.

Their money, v. 5-6

Edom possessed tremendous ore deposits and was on a major caravan route between the Middle East and the Far East. Edom grew rich from the tariffs imposed on caravans coming through their territory. Verse six describes the upcoming desolation: *how Esau will be pillaged, his hidden treasures searched out!* Edom would be completely emptied of any material prosperity.

Their alliances, v. 7

Because of its importance in trade, Edom had many commercial allies that it thought it could depend upon in case of attack. Military agreements had been made with other nations—providing a false sense of security that they were impregnable. God said that those at peace with them would deceive and overpower them.

Their wisdom and strength, v. 8-9

Some have pointed out that the Edomites were known for their wisdom in the ancient world. God would thwart their wise men with confusion. Their armies and special fighting men would be reduced to nothing. From the north to the south (Teman was thought to be in the south) their armies would be slaughtered.

There is much to learn from the Edomites fall from power. *Your arrogant heart has deceived you, v. 3.* Worldly position, money, alliances, and personal strength provide no lasting security. The Edomites failure to recognize their dependence on God resulted in the loss of their own power and strength.

Transgressions against God, v. 10-14

Violence against Israel, v. 10-11

They had, almost from the beginning, been a continual enemy to God's people—the Israelites. While Israel was experiencing great problems from foreign invaders, Edom refused to come to their aid, *standing aloof*. They were just as guilty as the perpetrators of the crime. God says they would be destroyed forever. Within eighty years they would be conquered again by Judah during the reign of Amaziah. In the early 6th century B.C., Edom was invaded by the Chaldeans under Nebuchadnezzar, and later they were overtaken completely by the Arabic people known as the Nabateans. In fact, it was this group that drove them completely out of their homeland. In the second century B.C. the Macabees

overtook this small remnant of Edomites and proselytized them into Judaism. Their culture and language completely disappeared.

Gloating over Israel's Misfortune, v. 12

The Edomites took great pleasure in the knowledge that those in Judah had suffered at the hands of their enemies. Note the usage of *day* in verse twelve. In the New American Standard Version it is used four times, noting the devastation of destruction against God's people. Those who rejoice in the tragedy of others will have their own day of reckoning with the forces of God.

The Looting of Jerusalem, v. 13-14

These verses make it clear they had not only rejoiced in Jerusalem's peril but had joined the enemy in the looting of the city. As people fled Jerusalem, the Edomites stood at the crossroads, intercepting them to capture and sold as slaves. Edom had long been known for its slave trade and took full advantage, selling their brethren into the slave trade as conquered people.

Edom would sow what it reaped, v. 15-16

It is Paul who wrote: *Don't be deceived: God is not mocked. For whatever a person sows he will also reap, because the one who sows to his flesh will reap destruction from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit*, Galatians 6:7-8. Because of their transgressions, Edom would not escape the Day of the LORD.

The term *Day of the LORD* is used throughout Scripture to bring people to an awareness of impending judgment from God. That judgment could be local, regional, or national in its scope. It is used throughout the prophetic writings of the Old Testament (Joel 1:15; 2:1, 10-11 and Isaiah 13:9-13.) It is a day in which God makes Himself known by the righteous vengeance played out on His enemies. It is a day of terror and fear for the enemies of God, but a day of righteous redemption for those who are loyal to God. Ultimately, there is a Day of the LORD reserved for the future, in which God will call all creation together for judgment. This is the event in which all creation will give an account for the deeds done in the body, 2 Corinthians 5:9-10.

God's kingdom would ultimately triumph, v. 17-21

Verse seventeen begins the second section of Obadiah. It looks toward the future glory of Israel. God's kingdom would be established and Mt. Seir's (Edom) would be destroyed. The Mt. Zion as used in these verses refers to spiritual Jerusalem. The house of Jacob not only refers to his physical descendants but to those who would be redeemed under Christ. The house of Jacob and Joseph would be as a fire and burn Edom to stubble. Edom would be destroyed forever. Note the triumph of Mt. Zion in v. 17-18:

- Mt. Zion will be a place of deliverance or salvation, v. 17a.
- It will be set apart or holy, v. 17b.
- Those who dwell on Mt. Zion will be conferred with many possessions, v. 17c.
- Mt. Zion is characterized by unity, v. 18a. The house of Joseph and the house of Jacob are joined together.

- Mt. Zion is a place of victory, v. 18b. Edom would be reduced to stubble by the blazing fire and burning flame of God's people.

Mt. Seir was the tallest mountain in Edom, reaching almost five thousand feet in elevation. It was Edom's counterpart to Israel's Mt. Zion. Mt. Zion would conquer all her enemies including Mt. Seir. Verses 19-21 provide the details on how God's purposes would be carried out. Truly, God is in control of all the nations, their arrangements, size of territory, and even their very existence is in His control.

The message here is not so much about changing geography and worldly political power as it is that the captives of God's people would not be forgotten. The kingdom of God would continue to progress. It's inhabitants would not be on defense forever, but would, after the coming of the Christ, would be the workers who expanded it in triumph, Acts 1.8.

Obadiah 17-21 is ultimately fulfilled in Christ

The destruction of Edom and its conquest by Judah are not all that is in this prophecy. These verses also look forward to a conquest which was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Even as far back as Balaam we have glimpses of Christ subduing Edom through the power of His kingdom. In Numbers 24.15-24 Balaam prophesied: *I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; A star shall come forth from Jacob, A scepter shall rise from Israel.* The star is Jesus Christ. The scepter represents the power He would possess in His kingdom. Balaam goes on to say, *Edom shall be a possession, Seir, its enemies, also will be a possession, While Israel performs valiantly.* Obadiah speaks of Judah possessing Edom throughout verses 17-21.

Now, let's consider two more interesting passages, one in the Old Testament and the other in the New Testament.

In that day I will restore the fallen shelter of David: I will repair its gaps, restore its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old, so that they may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name— this is the declaration of the Lord; he will do this, Amos 9.11-12.

Ultimately, Edom would become the conquered, the possession of others. It would be under the reign of Christ that this nation would become a possession. Note how James declares the prophecy of Amos finds its fulfillment in Christ. The bringing in of the Gentiles by the preaching of the apostles has been fulfilled through Christ:

And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written: After these things I will return and rebuild David's fallen tent. I will rebuild its ruins and set it up again, so that the rest of humanity may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles who are called by my name— declares the Lord who makes these things known from long ago, Acts 15.15-18.

For discussion

1. Obadiah's name means: It is believed his book was written around:

2. What is the two-fold message of Obadiah?

3. Discuss Edom's relationship with Israel.

4. Discuss the importance of influence. As you answer, consider the devastating effects Jezebel had on Israel and Judah. What can we learn from this?

5. In what areas did Edom feel secure?

6. How can arrogance lead to a false sense of security?

7. Edom did nothing to come to the aid of Judah in their time of distress, verse 11. How did that make them guilty? Are there any New Testament principles we can consider? See James 4:17.

8. What is the Day of the LORD?

9. Why do you believe man has such difficulty in realizing that he will reap what he sows?

10. What does Mt. Zion refer to in Obadiah?

11. Explain how the prophecies in verses 17-21 have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ and His kingdom.