

SESSION TWENTY

THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

I. INTRODUCTION

The name Obadiah means "servant [or worshipper] of YHWH." The book of Obadiah is the shortest of the OT books, and is certainly one of the most overlooked. Most of the contents involve a rebuke of Israel's neighbor, Edom, situated at the southeast of the Dead Sea. Some have slighted the book on the basis of its narrow nationalism and its propagation of hate. Although the book makes allusions to definite historical situations, these are difficult to pinpoint and date. Hence the historical background to the book is vague.

II. DATE AND AUTHORSHIP

Discussion of higher critical matters is complex, since the author does not reference the book with the reign of any certain king. Little, if anything, is known about Obadiah himself. The Babylonian Talmud identified him with a steward of King Ahab who reigned from 874-853 BC (*Sanhed.* 39b), but few scholars attach much importance to this comment.

The dating of the book has a wide divergence even among conservative scholars. Archer, Freeman, and Delitzsch have settled on a date about 854 BC during the reign of King Jehoram on the basis of 2 Kings 8:20 (cf. 2 Chr 21:16-17).¹ Another possibility is during the reign of King Ahaz (732-715) on the basis of 2 Chronicles 28:17-18. Others who feel that verses 10-14 refer to the Babylonian invasion would date the book after 587 BC.² R. K. Harrison (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, 902) as well as A.K. Helmbold in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* hold to the late date. Harrison dates the book about 450 BC. Feinberg sees the book as a reference to the Babylonian invasion in which Edom participated, but holds to a pre-exilic date for the book: "Obadiah in pre-exilic days sees by the Spirit of God the culmination of Edom's hatred for Israel in his vicious conduct toward the distraught people in the day of their exile by Nebuchadnezzar."³

Arguments can be advanced for and against each position, but I would make a couple of personal observations and remarks. A plundering of Jerusalem is mentioned (vv 10-14), but there is no clear statement about the Jerusalem destruction and no mention about the Chaldeans or Nebuchadnezzar. Especially important is the absence of any reference to the temple. Granted, this is not hard evidence, but certainly a case could be made for an historic event prior to 587 BC. Furthermore, if Joel 2:32 is drawn from Obadiah 17, then the dating of

¹Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., however, argues against an early date in Jehoram's reign. He notes, "At least two objections may be raised against this position. First, while an Edomite revolt did occur during Jehoram's reign (2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chron 21:8-10), the Edomites are not mentioned as participating in the invasion of Judah at this time (cf. 2 Chron. 21:16). Second, while the royal palace was looted (2 Chron. 21:17), there is no indication that Jerusalem suffered to the degree reflected by Obadiah 10-14" (*Interpreting the Minor Prophets* [Zondervan, 1990], 109).

²Chisholm argues for a late date after 587 BC. He points out, "The language of the text, with its repeated emphasis on the extremely disastrous nature of the event and its reference to lots being cast over the city, strongly supports this interpretation. Psalms 137:7, Lamentations 4:21-22, and Ezekiel 25:12-14; 35:5, 12-15 specifically refer to Edomite involvement in this calamity" (*Ibid.*, 110).

³Charles L. Feinberg, *The Minor Prophets* (Chicago: The Moody Press, n.d.), 130.

Obadiah may have to await a verdict for the dating of Joel (which is still disputed). In any case, the Spirit of God did not see fit to provide the information, and the main teaching of the book is not hindered by the lack of dating.

Certainly, Edom evidenced this attitude on numerous occasions prior to 587, as well as on that monumental day of destruction. There may well be a future re-play of the hostilities.

III. HISTORICAL COMMENTS ABOUT EDMOM

For a good historical sketch about Edom, one should read John D. W. Watts's small commentary.⁴ The reference in vs 10 about Edom being Jacob's brother alludes to the fact that the Edomites descended from Esau, who was indeed the twin brother of Jacob. The tension that existed between the historical brothers proved to be a foreshadowing of the relations that would continue through the centuries between their descendants. Consequently the OT Scriptures contain several indictments against Israel's hostile neighbor. For similar denunciations against Edom, one should consult Amos 1:11f; Isa 34; 63:1-6; Jer 49:7ff; Lam 4:21f; Ps 137:7; Ezek 25:12ff; 35:13ff; and Mal 1:2-5. Israelite tension with Edom surfaced on numerous occasions. The historical tensions between the brothers (Gen 25:23; 27:39f) gave way to Edom's refusal to cooperate with Israel on her way from Egypt to the promised land (Num 20:14-21; Deut 2:3-8). In spite of this, God cautioned His people in the Torah, "You shall not detest an Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deut 23:7). Other clashes took place and are recorded in 2 Sam 8:13f; 1 Kg 11:14-17; 2 Kg 8:20 (cf. 2 Chr 21:16-17) 2 Kg 14:11; 16:5f; 2 Chr 28:17-18; Lam 4:21; and Ezek 25:12; 35:10.

The descendants of Esau became known as the Edomites, and eventually settled in the mountainous rugged terrain of the wilderness area southeast of the Dead Sea. Besides the names Edom or Esau, they are also referred to as Seir and Hor. Their northern boundary was usually considered to be the river Zered (modern-day *Wadi al-Hesa*).

The Edomites were subjected by David and Solomon, but achieved freedom during the reign of Jehoram about 845 BC. They were defeated in the days of Amaziah but revolted again in the time of Ahaz. The Nabatean Arabs eventually uprooted them. Archer comments,

. . . it may be fairly inferred from Malachi 1:3-5 that by Malachi's time (435 BC) the Edomites had already been driven from Sela and Mount Seir by the overwhelming forces of the Nabatean Arabs. Secular sources inform us that as early as the reign of Darius I (521-485), the Nabateans had pushed the Edomites out of their ancestral territory and driven them into the deserted regions of southern Judea.⁵



⁴John D. W. Watts, *Obadiah* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1981). See pp 11-19.

⁵Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 303.

They settled in southern Judea, which came to be called Idumea, and this transplanted people were called Idumeans. Herod the Great arose from them. For the most part, they were cut off by the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.

The references to the clefts of the rock and lofty dwelling places (vv 3-4) is quite appropriate in light of the fact that the Edomites actually built their habitations in the sides of sheer cliff walls, often carving them out of solid rock. Freeman comments, "The rugged inaccessibility of their mountain fortress encouraged a false sense of security on the part of the Edomites and they considered themselves impregnable."⁶ The principle cities were Sela, Teman, and Bozrah.



IV. LITERARY AFFINITIES

The book of Obadiah has several interesting literary affinities with other OT books. The relationship of Joel 2:32 and Obadiah 17 has already been mentioned. The most remarkable parallel is certainly with Jeremiah 49:7-22, in which there is clearly a "borrowing" of one from the other (although it may be debated as to who borrowed from whom). My inclination is that Jeremiah borrowed from Obadiah, possibly wishing to evidence that Edom's hostile attitudes did surface in the Babylonian invasion of 587 BC and thus making a denouncement of Edom all the more fitting. Affinities with Amos include Obadiah 14 with Amos 1:6, v 4 with 5: 2, and v 19 with 9:12. Affinities with Joel also abound:

Obadiah	Joel
10	3:19
11	3:3
15	1:15; 2:1; 3:4,7,14
17	2:32
18	3:8

V. STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND COMMENTS

A. *Condemnation of Edom's pride and announcement of the Lord's intention to humble Edom (vv 1-9)*

B. *Cause of Edom's judgment: her malice against Israel (vv 10-14)*

Edom's arrogance against Israel carried over into violent and hostile conduct. Edom took delight in seizing the opportune moment when Israel was under siege by enemy forces to plunder her and "gloat" over her misfortune.

⁶Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968), 139.

If the book was written prior to 587 BC and the Babylonian invasion, it does seem to anticipate that historic occasion. However, it may include past events, anticipate the desolation of 587, and even be somewhat of a principle for other future occasions when Israel would experience a "day of distress." In some sense, the calamity of 587 BC would foreshadow an even greater day of calamity for Israel in her eschatological future (i.e., during the Great Tribulation). Whatever the occasion, the main point is this: God brings discipline on His covenant people, and Edom should not take advantage of these situations to further her own selfish interests. This is where Old Testament theology comes into play. The principles laid out in passages like Deuteronomy 28–30 clarify that misfortune does not come upon Israel without reason. For Israel, to be stormed by enemy forces and plundered is an indication of God's discipline upon them for covenant unfaithfulness. To undergo a "day of distress" is in keeping with Deuteronomy 28–30 (notice the repetition of thought in vv 10-14). It attests that God is holding them accountable to Him and the covenant between them.

Nevertheless, though God disciplines His people, He does not tolerate other nations taking undo advantage of them or going beyond the measure of harm He intended. That is precisely the point of this passage! Israel is not simply being abused by more powerful forces. They are experiencing God's discipline upon them, and Edom makes the mistake of trying to "cash in" on the opportunity. From God's viewpoint, He will discipline His covenant people and look out for them at the same time.

Furthermore, God established a principle in Genesis 12:1-3 as to how He would either grant favor or afflict the nations of the world: "The one who curses you, I will curse." Thus, God is bound by His own promises to deal with Edom in judgment. Those who accuse this little book of fostering a narrow nationalism and hate need to evaluate the book in light of the abiding principles of Genesis 12:1-3.

C. Judgment will be settled with "The Day of the Lord" (vv 15-21)

Although Israel awaits her "day of disaster" from the Lord, so do those nations who oppose God and cause undo harm to His covenant people. The "day of the Lord" will bring about a turn of events!

1. Reaffirmation of Edom's doom along with other nations (vv 15-16)

Edom is representative of many nations who have done similar acts of unjustified hostility against the covenant people of God. Nevertheless, God will bring full revenge upon all of them. What revenge is not meted out in history will certainly be finalized in the "day of the Lord."⁷

Notice the imagery of Obadiah 16. The nations that plundered Jerusalem and staggered about in drunken delight and amusement in her conquest will one day stagger from drinking of God's judgment.

⁷The "day of the Lord" is a very common expression with the prophets (see especially Isa 13 and Joel 2–3). In essence, it is a specific time in history when God will bring judgment upon the world for its evil, culminate His discipline upon Israel, and establish Messiah's Kingdom upon earth. The apostle Paul emphatically insisted that "the day of the Lord" had not come in his day (2 Thess 2:2). The "day of the Lord" will include the events of the Great Tribulation, many details of which are reflected in the book of Revelation (note Rev 6:17).

2. The glorious outcome for the Remnant of Israel (vv 17-21)

a. *The Abrahamic promises to be fulfilled with the Remnant of Israel (v 17)*

The expression "those who escape" is a reference to godly Israelites who make up the "remnant" of Israel. The doctrine of the "remnant" is dealt with extensively in the prophecies of Isaiah (note Isa 6:13; 10:20-23; 11:11-12:6; Joel 2:32; Rom 9:27). God must fulfill His Abrahamic promises with Israel. However, He does not have to fulfill the promises of blessing with every individual Israelite or with every generation. When we come to the book of Isaiah, we learn that Israel is brought into the courtroom and charged with covenant unfaithfulness. Rather than bringing complete judgment upon them at that time, God decides to postpone the final judgment. However, He does bring temporary judgment upon them by "hardening" the nation in unbelief. Isaiah's ministry is largely one of hardening the people, and this hardening will continue through the centuries—even through Messiah's earthly ministry—and even up until the moment of His return. That explains why Israel as a nation did not accept Jesus when He came the first time. But to ensure the fulfillment of His promises, God elected a "remnant" from within physical Israel with whom He would remove the hardening of unbelief. Those Jews who believed in Jesus while He was on earth were part of God's elect remnant, for whom the "hardening" had been removed (note Jn 6:44). When Messiah Jesus returns the second time, He will gather the believing remnant to participate in His kingdom on earth (cf. Rom 11:25-29). Unbelieving Israelites will await the Great White Throne judgment to be cast into hell.

The remark in verse 17 about possessing "their possessions" is a reference to the Abrahamic promises of blessing, particularly the land (comp. vv 19-20 which emphasize the possessing of land and cities). John Watts comments, "It is clear that 'their' refers to Israel and that the 'possession' is defined in terms of the broad promises to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7; 21; 17:8), Israel (Exod 3:8; Deut 1:8; Josh, etc.), and David (II Sam 7:10)."⁸ What Edom coveted for herself rightly belonged to Israel, and God will make sure she gets it. Watts remarks, ". . . Jahweh's sovereignty was also at stake in the fulfillment of his choice of David and Zion, and even further in his election of Israel and his gift to them in perpetuity of the land of Canaan. Justice would be empty if it did not lead to the accomplishment of God's positive purposes in history."⁹

b. *Complete destruction of Edom (v 18)*

There will be a "remnant" among Israel, but in contrast there will be "no survivor" for the house of Esau.

c. *Territory coveted by Edomites to be possessed by the Remnant of Israel (vv 19-20)*

This is an expansion of the last line of verse 17.

d. *The Remnant of Israel to govern with the Lord in the Millennial Kingdom (v 21)*

The "deliverers" is a reference to those godly Israelites who put their faith in Messiah Jesus and were delivered from the wrath of the Great Tribulation, were spared of Messiah's judgment, and were allowed

⁸Watts, 62.

⁹Ibid., 59.

to enter the millennial kingdom (comp Joel 2:32). They will participate as "judges" in the kingdom, i.e., they will rule and govern with Messiah. Watts comments,

Hebrew judges were saviors for the people (cf. Judg 3:9, 15; 2 Kings 13:5; Isa 19:20; Neh 9:27), the orphan, the widow, and the oppressed. Those who are called to save Israel do so by exercising judgment, i.e., by creating justice. Such men judged injustice within Israel and led the people as military men against oppressors from without.¹⁰

The book closes with the note that "the kingdom will be the LORD's" (21). In light of the preceding context with its emphasis upon the deliverance at Jerusalem and those who take possession of the land, this promise of the kingdom probably finds its fulfillment at the time of the Second Coming. The kingdom of the Lord is the millennial kingdom that follows the Great Tribulation. The inauguration of the Lord's kingdom will certainly settle the violence done by Edom to brother Jacob!

¹⁰Ibid., 65.