



THE MINOR PROPHET CHALLENGE

The Prophecy of Obadiah

INTRODUCTION TO OBADIAH

All introductory material has been excerpted from *The Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* published by Zondervan Publishing. We highly recommend it for your personal study library.

Author

We know nothing of the prophet Obadiah other than his name, which means “the servant [worshiper] of the Lord.”

Time and Place of Writing

Date: c. 586 B.C.

Interpreters have long debated the date of composition of this book. The prophet had in view a violent ransacking of Jerusalem in which the Edomites had gleefully participated (vv. 11-14). But Obadiah did not provide clearly datable information in describing the catastrophe.

Some date the book in relation to an invasion of Judah by Philistines and Arabs during King Jehoram’s reign (848-841 B.C.)- an invasion in which the Edomites presumably took part (cf. 2 Ki. 8:20-22; 2 Ch. 21:8-10, 16-17). Others date the prophecy in connection with Babylonian assaults on Judah that eventually resulted in her collapse in 586 B.C. Both Scripture (Ps. 137; Eze. 35:1-15) and Jewish tradition (1 Esdras 4:45 [a noncanonical book]) explicitly connect Edomites with this final catastrophe. The text of the prophecy itself seems to refer more naturally to this event. Whatever the precise historical setting, the situation was one in which Edom prospered while Judah lay defeated, and the moral order of the world appeared to God’s people to have been overthrown by chaos.

Purpose

To encourage Judahites facing trouble from Edom to hope in divine justice and for eventual victory over all enemies.

Finding Christ in Obadiah

The book of Obadiah does not contain Messianic predictions that point directly to Christ, but the theme of divine judgment against those who persecute God’s people finds its final fulfillment in Christ. Jesus himself suffered at the hands of God’s enemies (Ac. 2:36), and he predicted that his followers would experience the same affliction (Ac. 14:21-22). Yet Christ promised to keep his people in his love during these difficult times (Ro. 8:28-39). When he returns in glory he will judge all those who have stood against himself and his people (Mt. 25; Rev. 19:1-2).

Obadiah’s vision of a new order in which God’s people are restored in victory over the nations also finds fulfillment in Christ. Christ began to rule over all in his resurrection and ascension (1Co. 15:25), the church now spreads his kingdom throughout the earth (Mt. 28:19-20; Ac. 2:37-41) and he will expand it to the ends of the earth when he returns (Rev. 11:15).

IMPORTANT THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT OBADIAH

Obadiah, the “minorest” of the minor prophets, announces God’s judgment on the nation of Edom. This is not the first mention of Edom in the prophets, (see Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35:15; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11-12; 9:12; also Lam. 4:21-22). At the time of Obadiah’s prophecy, Israel/Judah and Edom have had a long history of antagonism.

The hostility began with their progenitors, Jacob and Esau. Even before their birth, the boys “struggled together” within Rebekah’s womb. Esau was born first and came out red and hairy; therefore, he was named Esau. When they grew up, Esau was a man of the “field,” but Jacob was a “home” boy. Isaac loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Jacob acquired Esau’s birthright in exchange for a bowl of stew. . Later, Jacob tricked their father out of Esau’s blessing. As a result, Esau held a grudge against Jacob and told himself that he would kill him. To escape his brother’s wrath, Jacob fled to Haran. When Jacob returned to Canaan, he and Esau reconciled. Even so, tensions seemed to have remained, because Jacob rejects Esau’s offer to travel together. Also, Genesis 36 says that Esau and his household went to live in the land of Seir, because Canaan was not big enough for the two of them. It also identifies Esau with Edom, “Esau is Edom” (Gen. 36:8).

The animosity between the brothers continued between the nations. After the Exodus, Israel asked Edom for permission to travel through their territory, but the request was rejected (Num. 20:14-21. Soon thereafter, Balak predicted the eventual downfall of Edom (Num. 24:18). During the monarchy, Saul did battle with the Edomites (1 Sam.14:47), and David eventually conquered them (2 Sam. 8:13-14). Hostilities continued back and forth throughout the Divided Kingdom and culminated in the events surrounding the fall of Judah to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. It was Edom’s actions at this time that is the likely occasion of Obadiah.

Edom occupied the region southeast of Israel. It extended from the Wadi Zered, at the south end of the Dead Sea, to the Gulf of Aqabah. It included land on both sides of the Arabah, “the great depression connecting the Dead Sea to the Red Sea.” The land was rugged and mountainous. Key cities included: Ezion-geber/Elath, Petra, Sela, Teman, and Bozrah

I. Introduction – v.1

The source of the message is Yahweh. The prophet may be the vessel (or servant -- Obadiah means servant of Yahweh), but it is God who has revealed his word through the prophet. “Vision” refers to the divine origin of the message, to that which is revealed. Moreover, the message is from Adonay Yahweh, “the Lord God” (ESV), or “Sovereign Lord” (NIV). Yahweh, who is not only the covenant God of Israel, but also the Master and Sovereign over all nations, speaks to announce his judgment upon Edom and to summon the nations as his instruments in bringing about the judgment. While the prophet speaks against Edom, he addresses the message to Judah.

II. Judgment on Edom – Part 1: Edom’s Pride – vv.2-9

These verses describe the underlying problem of Edom and the nature of God’s judgment. God says to Edom, “You think you are a big deal? I will make you small. You will be held in contempt by the nations.” Why? The reason is the arrogance of Edom. Edom presumed that they were secure because of the inaccessibility of their land. Edom occupied the region southeast of Israel. It extended from the Wadi Zered, at the south end of the Dead Sea, to the Gulf of Aqabah. It included land on both sides of the Arabah, “the great depression connecting the Dead Sea to the Red Sea.” The land was rugged and mountainous; it provided a natural defense against outside attack. As a result, Edom thought no harm would come to them.

However, God announces the complete destruction of Edom and of everything in which they might place confidence:

1. their natural defenses.
2. their treasures.
3. their allies/friends
4. their wise men/leadership.
5. their mighty men/military strength.
6. their entire population.

III. Judgment on Edom – Part 2: Edom’s Mistreatment of God’s people, Judah – vv. 10-14.

These verses describe the specific actions of Edom toward Judah that led to the judgment, namely, Edom’s violence against his brother. “Violence” is a strong word and is used almost exclusively in the Old Testament to refer to sinful actions. The violence need not be physical, but can refer to moral violence. In any case, it refers to “extreme wickedness” and it encompasses all of Edom’s actions toward Judah. Edom’s actions were as follows:

1. Edom stood aloof.
2. Edom gloated.
3. Edom looted.
4. Edom killed and captured fugitives from Judah.

As a result God will utterly destroy Edom.

IV. Judgment on all nations and the establishment of God’s Kingdom – vv.15-21

The context of God’s judgment on Edom is his judgment on all nations. All nations, all peoples are accountable to him. As elsewhere in Scripture, the day of the Lord is both a time of judgment and a time of blessing. It will be judgment on all those who, like Edom,

have exalted themselves in pride and acted wickedly. However, it will also be a time in which God establishes his Kingdom and his people are gathered to Zion.

Message of Obadiah

God is sovereign over the nations.

God is just.

All nations/peoples will be judged by Yahweh; all are accountable to Him.

In particular, God brings judgment on the proud, on all who are self-“sufficient”, who think that they are invincible.

God also brings judgment on those who mistreat others.

There is hope for God’s people that they will enjoy the blessings of his Kingdom.

WHY IT MATTERS

For personal reflection:

1. In what ways does pride manifest itself in your life? How does it show up in your relationships?

For discussion:

2. What does Obadiah say to God’s people today, a time in which there is much uncertainty around the world?

3. How do we balance a desire for justice with a desire for mercy?

4. How should we respond to the mistreatment of others?