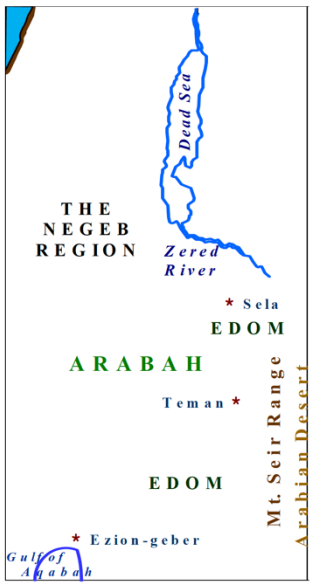
The Book of Obadiah

Introduction

Obadiah is the shortest Old Testament book. This little book is little known, as its message is one of doom and judgment, and it is not quoted from in the New Testament. Yet it contains a powerful message about the justice of God. His righteousness demanded vengeance on Edom, the enemy of Israel. Judgment against Edom is mentioned in more Old Testament books than it is against any other foreign nation (cf. Isa. 11:14; 34:5-17; 63:1-6; Jer. 9:25-26; 25:17-26; 49:7-22; Lam. 4:21-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11-12; 9:11-12; Obad.; Mal. 1:4).

At least 12 Old Testament men were named Obadiah. But nothing is known of the author of this small prophetic book except that his name means "worshipper of Yahweh."

Since the Bible gives no facts about the life or background of the man who wrote the book of Obadiah, the date is unknown.



The conflict began with a struggle between Jacob and Esau in the womb of their mother Rebekah (Gen 25:21-26). Years later, when Esau was hungry, he readily traded his birthright to Jacob for some red stew. For that reason Esau was also called Edom (Gen 25:30), which means "red." Also, when Esau was born, his skin appeared red (Gen 25:25). Later Esau moved to the land of Seir (the ancestor of the Horites) (Gen 36:8-9), the red sandstone area south and east of the Dead Sea. There his descendants, the Edomites, displaced the Horites (Deut 2:12, 22).

Edom refused to let the Israelites pass through their land when Israel was on the way to the Promised Land from Egypt (Num 20:14-21). But God told Israel not to hate Edom since they were related (Deut 23:7). However, hostility developed and continued for centuries (Ezek 35:5). For example, Saul (1 Sam 14:47), David (2 Sam 8:13-14), Joab (1 Kings 11:16), and Solomon (1 Kings 11:17-22) all had problems with the sons of Edom. Edom seemed to vanish or be absorbed into the Nabatean Arabs by the fifth century B.C. (The Nabateans were the renowned stone-carvers of Petra.) About 120 B.C., they settled in Idumea (southern Judea), and were then called Idumeans. Herod the Great, king of Judea from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C., was an Idumean (Edomite), who tried to have the baby Jesus killed. The Idumeans joined the Jews in rebellion against Rome in A.D. 70, but were almost obliterated by the Roman Emperor Titus. The Edomites then faded from history.

An Outline

I. The Message from the Lord (v. 1)
II. The Degradation of Edom (vv. 2-9)
  A. Edom's Character (vv. 2-4)
    1. Edom's future smallness (v. 2)
    2. Edom's present pride (vv. 3-4)

B. Edom's Calamity (vv. 5-9)
   1. Edom's ransacking (vv. 5-6)
   2. Edom's entrapment (v. 7)
   3. God's initiative (vv. 8-9)

III. The Charge Against Edom (vv. 10-14)
   A. The Reason for the Charge (v. 10)
   B. The Explanation of the Charge (vv. 11-14)
      1. The charge defined (v. 11)
      2. The charge repeated and amplified (vv. 12-14)

IV. The Day of the Lord (vv. 15-21)
   A. The Judgment of Esau (vv. 15-18)
   B. The Occupation of Edom (vv. 19-21)

Commentary

I. The Message from the Lord (v. 1)

Verse 1—*The vision of Obadiah*—The word "vision" is also used in Isaiah 1:1, Micah 1:1, and Nahum 1:1 to introduce those prophetic books. It suggests that the prophet "saw" (mentally and spiritually) as well as heard what God communicated to him.

- *Thus says the Lord—Yahweh*, His covenant relationship name with Israel
- *— GOD* [Heb. "sovereign"]
- *concerning Edom*—the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob [Israel], the son of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 25:25), the grandson of Abraham.
- *We have heard a report from the LORD*—revelation from God to Obadiah to the people
- *And an envoy has been sent among the nations saying, "Arise and let us go against her* [Edom] *for battle"* —Even the nations, who have evil motives, are serving the purposes of God. They serve Him unconsciously (Isa 45:4-7), but it is the responsibility of Israel to walk in the knowledge of the messages it receives from the prophets of God. This call to battle and to annihilate Edom anticipates verse 18.

II. The Degradation of Edom (vv. 2-9)

A. Edom's Character (vv. 2-4)

1. Edom's future smallness (v. 2)

Verse 2—*"Behold, I will make you small* [insignificant] *among the nations*—Edom had prided herself in her great wealth, by iron and copper mining in the region, and in her almost impregnable position geographically. Yet, God would cause her to be made insignificant.

- *You are greatly despised*—to be despicable, worthless

2. Edom's present pride (vv. 3-4)

Verse 3—*"The arrogance of your heart has deceived you*—Edom thought it was impregnable because of its geographical stronghold. But they were deceived by their stronghold.

- *You who live in the clefts of the rock, In the loftiness of your dwelling place*—Edom's main centers of civilization were situated in a narrow ridge of mountainous land southeast of the Dead Sea. This ridge exceeded 4,000 feet in its northern sector and rose to 5,700 feet in the south. It was inaccessible because of the gorges radiating from it towards the west (and

Israel) and the desert on the east. There is a route, called the ancient King's Highway, along the ridge, which at times approaches the rim, and the traveler peers dizzily down into a bizarre world of dark, gigantic cliffs and deep, terrifying gorges. Later in its history was the Nabataean capital "Petra," meaning "rock," the well-known rock-carved city.

- *Who say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to earth?'*—Edom had a pride, a disproportional self-estimation, a false sense of security, because of their geographical location. What nations can bring them down? Notice the word "bring" as God uses the same word in verse 4: *"I will bring you down."*

Verse 4—*"Though you build high like the eagle, Though you set your nest among the stars*—Some took refuge very high in the rocks, among the caves, confident in their protection.

- *From there I will bring you down," declares the LORD*—From the very place of what they thought was their protection, God would cause calamity.

B. Edom's Calamity (vv. 5-9)

1. Edom's ransacking (vv. 5-6)

Verse 5—*"If thieves came to you, If robbers by night — O how you will be ruined! — Would they not steal only until they had enough?*—Or probably steal what they came for, leaving the rest. For example, they may steal money and jewels, but leave food and clothing.

- *If grape gatherers came to you, Would they not leave some gleanings?*—According to the Mosaic Law, harvesters were required to leave some grain behind in the fields for the poor (Lev 19:1; 23:22; Ruth 2), also practiced with grapes and olives (Lev 19:10; Deut 24:21). The implied answer is "Yes." They would leave some of these crops. It is repeated with the robber example as a double emphasis.

Verse 6—*"O how Esau will be ransacked*—totally stripped, plundered, pillaged

- *And his hidden treasures searched out!*—Whereas a thief might not see something to steal because it is hidden, in Edom even the hidden treasures will be searched out and plundered.

2. Edom's entrapment (v. 7)

Verse 7—*"All the men allied with you Will send you forth to the border*—Edom's trusted allies will break their covenant with them. Perhaps they sought help within a covenant country, but was sent out of the border of that country.

- *And the men at peace with you Will deceive you and overpower you*—their deception is claiming to be Edom's friends and at peace with Edom, but instead they overpower Edom.
- *They who eat your bread Will set an ambush for you*—in another parallel statement, those who are "friends" of Edom, who eat their bread together, will set a trap, such as a net, for Edom. In the late sixth or early fifth century B.C., the Nabateans went to the Edomites who took them in for a banquet. Once welcomed inside Edomite territory, the Nabateans turned against their ally and killed the guards (BKC).
- *(There is no understanding in him)*—Edom was known for her wise men (v. 8), yet they are totally ignorant of her allies' deceptive scheming.

3. God's initiative (vv. 8-9)

Verse 8—*"Will I not on that day," declares the LORD*—Although Edom's entrapment will come from her perceived allies and friends, we are reminded once again that it came from God. "On that day," a common phrase in prophetic literature, looks forward to a specific time appointed by God in His sovereignty, when He will intervene in human history in judgment and salvation (EBC).

- *Destroy wise men from Edom And understanding from the mountain of Esau?*—God already said he would destroy Edom (v. 2), now He says He would destroy her wise leaders. Their "wisdom" would not rescue them. As mentioned in verse 7, no understanding will deliver Edom because God has destroyed their wisdom and understanding.

Verse 9—*"Then your mighty men will be dismayed, O Teman*—Edom's capital, named for the grandson of Esau (Gen 36:10-11), representing the entire nation (Amos 1:12).

- *So that everyone may be cut off from the mountain of Esau by slaughter*—Edom's pride led to her humiliation. Her security and wealth would be gone, her wise leaders, soldiers, and other would fall. Nothing would keep her safe—not her geography, her military power, or wisdom.

III. The Charge Against Edom (vv. 10-14)

A. The Reason for the Charge (v. 10)

Verse 10—*"Because of violence to your brother Jacob* [the Israelites]—This has characterized Edom's relations with Israel from the very origins of the two nations. It began with Esau's hatred for his brother Jacob (Gen 27:40-41). Then there was the hostility of Edom to Israel after the Exodus (Exo 15:15; Num 20:14-21; Deut 2:4; Judg 11:17-18). Edom is numbered among Israel's *enemies…who had plundered them* before they were defeated by Saul (1 Sam 14:47-48).

- *You will be covered with shame*—contrasted to Edom's arrogance
- *And you will be cut off forever*—destroyed as a nation, as a people (v. 18).

B. The Explanation of the Charge (vv. 11-14)

1. The charge defined (v. 11)

Verse 11—*"On the day*—this phrase repeated 8 times (10 times in Hebrew) in verses 11-14

- *that you stood aloof*—rather than helping their *brother Jacob*, Edom was indifferent to the attacks against Israel
- *On the day that strangers carried off* his [Jacob's] *wealth And foreigners entered his gate And cast lots for Jerusalem — You too were <u>as</u> one of them*—From God's perspective, because of Edom's indifference *(stood aloof)*, Edom was no different than the strangers who went against Edom's own relatives. Indifference was just the beginning, it's a downward spiral from there in the next verses.

2. The charge repeated and amplified (vv. 12-14)

Verse 12— *"Do not* gloat [to look down on, malignant pleasure] *over your brother's day, The day of his misfortune*—Edom's allies would break covenant ties with her (v. 7), but she betrayed blood ties.

- *And do not rejoice* [to feel or show great delight] *over the sons of Judah In the day of their destruction*—[see Ps 137:7; Lam 4:21-22; Ezek 25:12; 35:5, 15; 36:5; Joel 3:19].
- *Yes, do not boast* [talk with excessive pride and self-satisfaction]
- *In the day of their distress*—"misfortune," "destruction," and "distress", "disaster" (v. 12), "calamity" (v. 13)—All these words heighten the effect of the disaster Judah experienced and "gloat," "rejoice," and "boast" heighten the pride, wrong attitudes, and sinfulness of Edom's response.

Verse 13— "*Do not enter the gate of My people In the day of their disaster. Yes, you, do not gloat over their calamity In the day of their disaster. And do not loot their wealth In the day of their disaster*—Edom goes from being spectators who rejoiced over Judah's misfortune, to actually participating by entering the gates of Jerusalem, looting the wealth of the city (v. 11).

Verse 14—*"Do not stand at the fork of the road To cut down their fugitives*—This describes Edom's treatment of Judah's survivors. They cut down Judah's fugitives, and God will cut them down (v. 9-10).

- *And do not imprison their survivors In the day of their distress*—Specific correlations are in Jeremiah 49:7-22 and in Ezekiel 35–36. This suggests that Obadiah was looking back at the Fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586, in which Edom was implicated. But this is not certain. There are other battles that may be suggested, but this seems to best match Judah's political and religious history.

IV. The Day of the Lord (vv. 15-21)

A. The Judgment of Esau (vv. 15-18)

Verse 15—*"For the day of the LORD draws near on all the nations—the day of the Lord,* when God intervenes in human affairs to bring all things under His rule. This is the core of Obadiah's prophecy. The falling of Jerusalem and Edom are not isolated incidents, they mark the footsteps of the Lord Himself as He approaches to set up a *kingdom that will never be destroyed* (Dan 2:44). The kingdom begins with the judgment of all the nations (Matt 25:32).

- *As you have <u>done</u>, it will be <u>done</u> to you*—the repeating of the verb <u>done</u> indicates that the actions that will be done to the nation of Edom will correspond precisely to the actions they have already done.
- *Your dealings will return on your own head*—the consequences of their own free-will actions, the certainty of it.

Verse 16— *"Because <u>just as</u> you drank on My holy mountain*—Edom had been involved in a drunken celebration in Jerusalem (v. 13).

- *All the nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow And become as if they had never existed*—All the nations will experience the judgment of God. They will be a memory. They will no longer exist. This is the difference between the nations and Israel. Edom and the nations will be *as if they had never existed*, whereas Judah will be restored, *there will be those* [Jews] *who escape* (v. 17).
- Verse 16 parallels verse 15:
  —As you have done…just as you drank on My holy mountain
  —The day of the Lord draws near on all the nations…all nations will drink continually…as if they never existed.

Verse 17—*"But on Mount Zion* [Jerusalem] *there will be those who escape*—there will be Jewish people
—*And it will be holy*—Israel/Judah will be holy and God's temple will be there
—*And the house of Jacob will possess their possessions*—they will possess all the blessings of the covenants God made with them

Verse 18—*"Then the house of Jacob* [Judah, the Southern Kingdom] *will be a fire And the house of Joseph* [Israel, the Northern Kingdom] *a flame*—the two nations will once again be united and will be a flame of fire against Edom
—*But the house of Esau will be as stubble* [easily burned]. *And they will set them on fire and consume them*—the fire of the united kingdom of Israel will destroy the Edomites
—*So that there will be no survivor of the house of Esau,"*—they will be completely wiped out, destroyed
—*For the LORD has spoken*—God said it, so it will be.

B. The Occupation of Edom (vv. 19-21)

Verse 19—*Then those of the Negev* [southern wilderness] *will possess the mountain of Esau* [east of the Dead Sea]
—*And those of the Shephelah* [hills near the Mediterranean Sea] *the Philistine plain* [Mediterranean coast]*;*
—*Also, possess the territory of Ephraim and the territory of Samaria* [the Northern Kingdom of Israel]*, And Benjamin will possess Gilead* [trans-Jordan].

Verse 20—*And the exiles of this host of the sons of Israel*—the Jews will return to the land of Israel
—*Who are among the Canaanites as far as Zarephath* [in northern Lebanon]
—*And the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad* [unknown place]
—*Will possess the cities of the Negev* [southern Judah wilderness]
—In the future millennial kingdom, Israel will occupy all the land God promised them (Gen 15:18).

Verse 21—*The deliverers* [Heb. "those who have been delivered"] *will ascend Mount Zion* [Jerusalem] *To judge* [Heb. "rule over"] *the mountain of Esau,*
—*And the kingdom will be the LORD'S*—All will one day be merged into that eternal kingdom over which the Lord Jesus Christ alone will reign in glory (1 Cor 15:24-28; Rev 11:15; 12:10; 22:1-5)..