

Obadiah - Introduction & Background

Title

The book of Obadiah is named after its principle character (1:1). In this sense the book's title is similar to the title given to other OT books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Esther, and Nehemiah. The Hebrew title of the book is *Obadyah*, which means "servant of Yahweh" and "worshipper of Yahweh." The Greek title as reflected in the LXX is *Abidou*. The Latin title found in the Vulgate is *Abdias*. The title adopted in the English Bible is Obadiah.

Author

"A few scholars have favored the view that this 'Obadiah' was not the name of an individual but a symbolic title of the writer who was an unidentified servant or worshipper of the Lord. This seems unlikely since all the other prophetic books bear the proper names of their writers." Obadiah was likely the book's author since he was the prophet who received the divine oracle that the book records (1:1). Twelve other men in the OT bear the name Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3-16; 1 Chr 3:21; 7:3; 8:38; 9:16; 12:9; 27:19; 2 Chr 17:7; 34:12; Ezra 8:9; Neh 10:5; 12:25).

Among the more likely candidates for authorship of the book are "the officer in Ahab's palace who hid God's prophets in a cave (1 Kings 18:3)," one of Jehoshaphat's officials who was sent "to teach the Law to Judah (2 Chr 17:7)," one of the officers "involved in the repairing of the temple under Josiah (2 Chr 34:12)," and a priest in Nehemiah's time (Neh 10:5). Curiously, the *Babylonian Talmud* recognized Obadiah as the steward who served King Ahab. Furthermore, Pseudo-Epiphanius in his *Lives of the Prophets* identifies Obadiah as a high military official in the forces of King Ahaziah (2 Kings 1:12ff). However, there is not enough information to determine with certainty if any of these men is the same Obadiah mentioned in the Book of Obadiah.

Internal evidence indicates that Obadiah prophesied to the southern kingdom of Judah (11-12, 17, 20-21). Because his father is not mentioned in the book's opening verse, it is doubtful that Obadiah came from regal or priestly lineage. His hometown and family remain a mystery. Other than this scant information found in his book, virtually nothing is known of this prophet.

Date

Because no kings are given in Obadiah, the book is difficult to date. The Book of Obadiah is quite different from the opening verse of the Book of Isaiah where Isaiah's place, times, and father's name are clearly delineated. Thus, a determination of a date for the book involves a consideration of at least four factors. *First*, v10-14 must be considered since they

represent the only historical reference in the entire book. There are five interpretations regarding what historical referent is in view in these verses. These referents will be presented in chronological order and the weakness of each option will be identified. Some place these events during the reign of Rehoboam (1 Kings 14:25-26) when Shishak of Egypt plundered the temple and palace in 926 BC. However, this date seems unlikely since Edom was subject to Judah during that time and verses 11-14 seem to communicate Edom's independence. Besides, most scholars have concluded that a 10th century date is too unrealistic. Others place these events in 848-841 BC during the reign of Jehoram (853-841 BC) "when the Philistines and Arabians invaded Judah and looted the palace (2 Chr 21:16-17)." Edom had already revolted against Judah, had established her own king (2 Chr 21:8-10), and had become an antagonist to the nation (2 Kings 8:16-24; 2 Chr 21:18-20). After this attack Jehoram experienced a two-year illness leading to his death. An impressive array of scholars hold to this view including Ryrie, Dyer, Constable, Baker, Young, Kaiser, Freeman, Archer, and Keil and Delitzsch. One problem with the view is that the depiction of the plundering (2 Chr 21:16-17) omits any mention of Edom. Others date these events in 790 BC during the reign of Amaziah when Israel's king Jehoash invaded Judah (2 Kings 14:34-35; 2 Chr 25). However, this interpretation seems unlikely since verse 11 refers to the invaders as "strangers" which would be an inappropriate designation for the northern kingdom. Still others date these events in 731-715 BC during the reign of Ahaz. Some hold to this view on the basis of a reference to the Edomites carrying off prisoners after attacking Jerusalem in 2 Chr 28:17. It is also argued that the Edomites moved to Elath when the Judahites were driven out by Rezin in the time of Ahaz. However, there is no necessary correlation between the Edomites move to Elath and the details found in the Book of Obadiah.

A final view involves dating these events shortly before or after 586 BC when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed the temple and Jerusalem (2 Kings 24-25). Scholars holding to this view include Allen, Chisholm, Stuart, Rudolph, Smith, Niehaus, and Harrison. Proponents of this view maintain that only the permanent destruction of Jerusalem can serve as an appropriate foundation for the strong indictment against Edom, that the grammar of the passage is best understood as conveying the idea that the prophet was actually transported backwards in time to witness Jerusalem's destruction at the hands of the Babylonians, that Ps 137:7 refers to the Edomites applauding the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC, that v12 describes a total destruction, and that verse 20 also makes mention of the exiles that were taken to Babylon after the 586 BC destruction.

However, this theory suffers since Obadiah fails to mention Nebuchadnezzar, the Chaldeans, the Babylonian exile, and the destruction of the temple. Interestingly, 1 Esdras 4:45 indicates that the Edomites burned the temple in 586 BC and yet Obadiah fails to

mention this. While all of the other prophets speaking of the impending events of 586 BC have no problem mentioning Nebuchadnezzar as the principal actor, Obadiah is completely silent on this issue. Also, v11 indicates that Nebuchadnezzar would have cast lots for Jerusalem indicating that there was more than one aggressor. However, Nebuchadnezzar was the sole actor in 586 BC.

Moreover, v10–14 do not seem to indicate the kind of total destruction that the nation experienced in 586 BC. There is no need for v12 to refer to total destruction. Also, it is possible for the exiles in v20 to refer to a smaller group of exiles. In fact, v14 refers to fugitives but this description does not fit 586 BC since no Israelites escaped during that siege with the exception of only a few that were soon captured. All things considered, a date of 848–841 BC for the transpiring of v11–14 seems most feasible.

Second, in order to properly date the book, the canonical placement of the book must be considered. The fact that Obadiah is placed between the two other eighth century prophets Jonah and Amos may indicate that all of these prophets were copied on the same scroll. However, this argument should not be pushed too far since Obadiah should be placed before Hosea, Joel, and Amos if canonical order was an ironclad determination of an early chronology. *Third*, if a ninth century date is taken, then the final judgment upon the Edomites does not transpire until the 5th century. However, a sixth century date allows for the fulfillment of the prophecy within a century. Thus, the earlier date may cause the book to lose some imminence. However, this argument is really not decisive since the book also contains numerous other prophecies that will be fulfilled in the distant future (21).

Fourth, the interdependency of Obadiah and other biblical material must also be considered. Some early-date advocates note the similarities between Obadiah and the 9th century prophet Joel and the eighth century prophet Amos. However, these arguments are not definitive since Obadiah could have been relying upon these latter two prophets rather than the other way around. Moreover, since the date of Joel is in dispute, arguments favoring the early date based upon Joel's dependency upon Obadiah are unpersuasive. Late-date advocates rely upon similarities between Obadiah and Jer 49. Because Jer 49 represents a more comprehensive and coherent text, it is believed that Obadiah borrowed from Jeremiah. Because Jeremiah wrote just prior to the exile, Obadiah must have been written after the exile. Also, because Obadiah's use of the term the "Day of Yahweh" (15) represents a development of the phrase found in Joel and Zephaniah, Obadiah must have been written later than these two prophets.

However, because these arguments are built upon presuppositions, they are unconvincing. Regarding the similarities between Obadiah and Jeremiah, it is possible that Jeremiah borrowed from Obadiah since Jeremiah frequently cites earlier prophets. It is also possible that both prophets were drawing from an undiscovered source or that the Spirit revealed the same material to both individuals. Regarding the development of the Day of Yahweh

concept, not only is this idea found early on in Scripture (Ex 32:34) but also the notion that things proceed from simple to complex represents an evolutionary presupposition. Although the arguments seem evenly divided, it would appear that the ninth century date has the upper hand. However, this position should be held tentatively rather than dogmatically. All things considered, a date of 845 BC for the composition of the Book of Obadiah would not be far from wrong. This date makes Obadiah the earliest writing prophet. However, whichever date one holds to, it is doubtful that the message of the book is significantly impacted one way or the other.

Historical Circumstances

Assuming that the book can be dated in the ninth century, the following excerpt summarizes the historical circumstances of Obadiah's day.

Jehoram reigned over Judah from 853 to 841 BC. The attack that prompted Obadiah's prophecy was the Philistine/Arab sack of Jerusalem, which occurred shortly after Edom revolted against Judah (2 Chr 21:8-10,16-17). Second Chronicles also states that *after* this attack Jehoram was inflicted with a two-year illness, which ultimately led to his death (21:18-19). Thus the Philistine/Arab attack occurred sometime between 848 and 843 BC. Jehoram 'walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, as the house of Ahab had done.... He did evil in the eyes of the LORD' (2 Kings 8:18). He promoted idolatry in Judah and tried to import Baal worship into the Southern Kingdom (2 Chr 18:11-13). Elijah and Elisha were ministering in Israel during his reign, and Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram, denouncing his sin (21:12-15).

Historical Background

The Book of Obadiah represents an important chapter in the following long struggle between Jacob and Esau.

1. Jacob and Esau conflicted in the womb of Rebekah (Gen 25:21-26).
2. Esau was born with red skin (Gen 25:25).
3. Esau was called Edom ("red") when he traded his birthright to Jacob for some red stew (Gen 25:30).
4. Jacob received the blessing and Esau did not (Gen 27:28-29,39-40).
5. Esau threatened to kill Jacob (Gen 27:41).
6. A second reconciliatory meeting between Jacob and Esau occurred after Jacob fled from Esau and Laban (Gen 32:1—33:16).
7. Esau moved to Seir (Gen 36:8-9). The color red is also evident in the hues of the sand stone cliffs.
8. Esau's descendants moved to Seir and displaced the Horites (Deut 2:12,22).
9. Edom refused to let Israel pass as she was en route to Canaan (Num 20:14-21).
10. God commanded Israel not to hate Edom since Israel and Edom were related (Deut 23:7).

11. Saul conflicted with Edom (1 Sam 14:47).
12. David conflicted with Edom (2 Sam 8:13-14).
13. David captured Edom and stationed a defense force there and made it a vassal state (1 Chr 18:12-13).
14. Joab conflicted with Edom (1 Kings 11:16).
15. Solomon developed the port of Elath (1 Kings 9:26-28).
16. The Edomite Hadad (a royal family) opposed Solomon and established a "government" in Egypt while exiled there (1 Kings 11:14-17).
17. Solomon conflicted with Edom (1 Kings 11:17-22).
18. Judah continued to control the territory during Jehoshaphat's reign and posted a governor in Edom (1 Kings 22:47-48).
19. Edom joined Jehoshaphat (Judah) and Joram (Israel) in an attack against Moab (2 Kings 3).
20. In the reign of Jehoshaphat, Edom joined the Ammonites and the Moabites in an attack against Judah (2 Chr 20:1-2,10-11,22-26).
21. It was while Jehoram reigned about 845 BC that Edom rebelled and liberated themselves (Cf. 2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chr 21:8-10,16-17).
22. During 790 to 770 BC Amaziah of Judah partially captured Edom (2 Kings 14:7).
23. Elath's port was recaptured by King Uzziah (Azariah; Cf. 2 Kings 14:21-22).
24. However, Aram (Syria) later retook the city of Elath from Judah (2 Kings 16:5-6).
25. The Edomites rebelled during Ahaz's reign (732-715 BC) and attacked Judah a second time (2 Chr 28:17).
26. Babylon was helped by the Edomites when they attacked Judah (see Ps 137:7; Jer 49:7-22; Ezek 25:12-14; 35:1-15).
27. Nabateans drove out most of the Edomites from Edom in the late sixth and early 5th century BC. The Nabateans did the rock carving at Petra.
28. The expelled Edomites settled in Idumea or Judea.
29. In 120 BC, the Edomites were subdued by a Maccabean named John Hyrcanus. He circumcised them and compelled them to follow Judaism.
30. Judean king Herod the Great (37-4 BC) was an Idumean (Edomite). Herod sought to kill Christ (Matt 2:16-18).
31. Herod's son Antipas murdered John the Baptist (Matt 14:1-12).
32. Idumea was attacked and devastated by Jewish military leader Simon ben Gioras.
33. The Idumeans joined Israel in her rebellion against Rome in 70 AD yet were decimated by Titus. Although a few escaped, the Edomites faded from history.

This age old conflict is brought to the reader's attention through the use of the word Esau as a synonym for Edom throughout the Book of Obadiah. Also, Abraham begat Isaac and Isaac begat Jacob and Esau. Because Israel descended from Jacob and Edom descended

from Esau (Gen 25:23), Edom and Israel were brothers. This relationship made Edom's sins against Israel all the more egregious.

Geographical Background

The Edomites were arrogant because of their secure position on Mount Seir. This area was a mountainous region located "50 miles south of the southern end of the Dead Sea." Its capital city was *Sela* (OT name) and *Petra* (NT name). Both of these names mean "rock." A narrow canyon offering protection against an invading army insulated this city.

The land of Edom was strategic for three reasons. First, "Edom controlled the southern end" of the king's highway or the Transjordan highway. Second, Edom controlled "the eastern end of the east/west trade route with Egypt." Third, Edom controlled "the outlet to the Red Sea at Ezion-geber (Elath)."

Recipients and Place of Writing

Although the subject matter of the book is Edom, it remains unclear as to whether Edom was the book's recipient. Geisler observes, "It was a prophecy *about* Edom's doom but it was a comfort *to* Judah, which had just suffered bitter defeat at the evil hands of Edom." Although the book condemns Edom, it was most likely addressed to Judah and written from Jerusalem (11,21).

Christ in Obadiah

"Christ is seen in Obadiah as the Judge of the nations (15-16), the Savior of Israel (17-20), and the Possessor of the kingdom (21)."

Message

In the Book of Obadiah, God comforts Judah by reminding her of two important aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant. First, God will judge Edom (and all nations) not only for her failure to be her brother's keeper, but also because of her mistreatment of the chosen people since God promises to curse those who curse Israel (Gen 12:3; Obadiah 15). Second, God will show Himself to be faithful to the patriarchal land promises, overthrow the pride of Edom, reverse the fortunes of Jacob and Edom and thereby show that the invulnerable city is located on Mount Zion rather than Mount Seir.

Purposes

Obadiah had several purposes in mind when he composed his book. *First*, he wanted to predict and announce Edom's demise as a result of her mistreatment of Israel. *Second*, he wanted to predict and announce Israel's ultimate restoration. *Third*, he wanted to comfort Judah by predicting that Jacob would ultimately triumph over Esau. *Fourth*, he wanted to explain that God will judge all who injure Israel.

Theological Themes

Several theological themes recur throughout the Book of Obadiah. *First*, God is sovereignly in control rather than the enemies of God's people. *Second*, God's kingdom program through Israel will ultimately be established (21). *Third*, the book details the outworking of

the Abrahamic Covenant. Not only will God keep His promises to His chosen people but He also will judge those who mistreat Israel.

Fourth, the book explains the reality of God's judgment. While God's judgment is sometimes delayed it is never denied. *Fifth*, the book unfolds the concept of the Day of the Lord. Not only is a near Day of the Lord featured regarding Edom's imminent destruction, but also a distant Day of the Lord is highlighted regarding the future judgment of the nations and Israel's restoration. *Sixth*, the book shows God's strong opposition against those who exhibit human pride. *Seventh*, the book reiterates how a vision of future glory can alleviate the pain of Israel's present circumstances.

Unique Characteristics

The Book of Obadiah boasts several outstanding characteristics. *First*, the book is difficult to date. *Second*, it is the briefest OT book. *Third*, if the early date scheme is accurate, Obadiah was the earliest writing prophet. *Fourth*, the book contains one of the clearest examples of pride preceding a fall (Prov 16:18). *Fifth*, assuming Obadiah was written early, then Joel, Amos, and Jeremiah extensively quoted from Obadiah.

Sixth, the book permanently seals Edom's fate with no hope of future repentance or restoration. *Seventh*, the book represents one of those rare OT books, like Jonah and Nahum, whose subject matter primarily concerns non-Jews. *Eighth*, while other OT prophets speak against a plethora of Gentile nations, Obadiah speaks against a singular Gentile nation. *Ninth*, a large number of Obadiah's verses have been corrupted and are therefore in need of emendation. *Tenth*, almost nothing is known of the book's author. *Eleventh*, the book is not quoted in the NT.

Genre and Structure

The *genre* of the book represents poetic literature. *Structurally*, the book contains two major parts. The first part consists of an announcement of Edom's destruction (1-14). The second part consists of Israel's restoration in the future Day of the Lord (15-21). Other possible ways to structure the book include condemnation (1-16) and consolation (17-21); judgment upon Edom (1-18) and restoration of Israel (19-21); and prediction of Edom's destruction (1-14), prediction of the nation's destruction (15-16), and prediction of Israel's deliverance (17-21).

Outline

I. Imminent destruction upon Edom (Obadiah 1-14)

(1) Edom's destruction is unavoidable (v1-9)

(A) Nations are called to destroy Edom (v1)

(B) Source of Edom's destruction (v2-4)

(a) Theocentric viewpoint: divine power (v2)

(b) Anthropocentric viewpoint: Edom's pride (v3)

(c) Conclusion: God will destroy Edom on account of her pride (v4)

- (C) The extent of the devastation (v5-6)
 - (a) Illustrations (v5)
 - (i) More extensive than a robber (v5a)
 - (ii) More extensive than a grape gatherer (v5b)
 - (b) Concluding statement announcing Edom's destruction (v6)
 - (D) God uses Edom's allies to destroy her (v7)
 - (E) Groups within Edom that will be destroyed (v8-9)
 - (a) Wise men (v8)
 - (b) Warriors (v9)
 - (2) Edom's destruction is deserved (v10-14)
 - (A) General: violence against Jacob (v10)
 - (B) Specific sins (v11-14)
 - (a) Apathy to Jacob's adversities (v11)
 - (b) Gloating over Jacob's misfortune (v12)
 - (c) Looting Jacob's wealth (v13)
 - (d) Imprisoning Jacob's fugitives (v14)
- II. Future day of the Lord (v15-21)
- (1) Judgment upon the nations (v15-16)
 - (A) Imminent judgment upon the nations (v15a)
 - (B) Genesis 12:3 articulated (v15b)
 - (C) Universal scope of the judgment (v16)
 - (2) Preservation of Israel (v17-21)
 - (A) Remnant preserved on Mount Zion (v17a)
 - (B) Israel's possession of the land (v17b-20)
 - (a) Generally (v17b)
 - (b) Specifically (v18-20)
 - (i) Edom (v18-19a)
 - (ii) Philistia (v19b)
 - (iii) Samaria (v19c)
 - (iv) Gilead (v19d)
 - (v) Zarephath (v20a)
 - (vi) Negev (v20b)
 - (C) Israel to triumph over Edom (v21a)
 - (D) Kingdom to be established (v21b)