

THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

Message:

The short Book of Obadiah (the shortest in the OT) is an oracle against the nation of Edom. Like a number of prophetic books, it is both a book of judgment and a book of hope. Yahweh will judge Edom both historically through the nations and eschatologically through Israel. Along with the judgment of Edom will be the eschatological restoration of a Jewish remnant. Therefore, the message of Obadiah is, “Mistreatment of God’s people will be judged by Yahweh who preserves and restores His people.”

Author:

According to 1:1, the recipient of the vision (אֲזוֹן, *āzôn*) is Obadiah (עֲבַדְיָה). Obadiah means “servant of Yahweh.” The name itself was fairly common in the Old Testament with around a dozen men bearing that designation (1 Kgs 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). Little if anything is known about the author other than his name.¹

Recipients:

The identification of the original recipients is tied somewhat to the issue of dating. While most would hold that the oracle was written to Judah, dating affects whether we are referring to pre-exilic or exilic Judah. Since an early date seems more likely, the original recipients are likely pre-exilic Israel.

Dating:

Perhaps the most contentious and difficult issue involved in the study of Obadiah is the issue of dating. Three basic suggestions have been offered: (1) during the reign of Jehoram (848–841 B.C.), (2) during the reign of Ahaz (731–715 B.C.), and (3) in 585 B.C. (soon after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586). Finley has noted that, “Three sorts of evidence have been presented for the date of Obadiah: historical allusions, its position in the canon, and literary connections with other prophets.”²

¹ Some passages may suggest that the author “seems to be associated with the kingdom of Judah (Obad. 11–12, 17, –20–21).” Charles H. Dyer and Eugene H. Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer: Discovering the Essence, Background, and Meaning of Every Book in the Old Testament*, Swindoll Leadership Library, ed. general Charles R. Swindoll and managing ed. Roy B. Zuck (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 2001), 765.

² Thomas J. Finley, *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody, 1990), 340. Finley also suggests that the historical evidence is “the most objective kind.”

Historical allusions

Utilizing the historical evidence is challenging in at least three ways. First, one needs to determine whether some passages are historical or prophetic (e.g., vv. 12–14).³ The form of the statements are in standard prohibition form. Notice how the NASB translates these passages as “do not” whereas the RSV has “you should not have.” The second challenge is the nature of historical allusions themselves. By definition allusions are indirect references. The third challenge is the poetic nature of the passages in question. These passages are not detailed historical reports but symbolic (e.g., “Jacob” in v. 10), highly selective, perhaps hyperbolic accounts. These challenges notwithstanding, one will have to wrestle with correlating these texts with what is known about Israelite history. The passages in question seem to refer to a military invasion of some kind. The question is what invasion of Israel is in view. Three invasions are commonly postulated.

First, there was an invasion of the Philistines and Arabians during Jehoram’s reign (848–841 B.C.). In this case, Judah was overrun and the city of Jerusalem was plundered (2 Chr 21:16–17; cf. Joel 3:3–6; Amos 1:6). According to 2 Kings 8:20–22, relations between Edom and Judah were contentious (cf. 2 Chr 21:8–20). A second possibility occurred during the reign of Ahaz (731–715 B.C.). According to 2 Chronicles 28:17, Edom attacked Judah taking away captives. A third and commonly held option is the Babylonian invasion in 586. According to Psalm 137:7, the Edomites encouraged the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem. The negative association of Edom to the Babylonian invasion can also be seen in Lamentations 4:21 and Ezekiel 25:12, 35:5–15.

Deciding between these invasions is not easy and most commentators seem to gravitate to the first or third options (the second option is too obscure?).⁴ In favor of the third option (586) is the comprehensive nature of the invasion which appears to be pictured in Obadiah 10–14. The first option is appealing in that it fits the standard prohibition form⁵ and the mention of the “foreigners” (Philistines, Edom) casting lots for the city (cf. 2 Kings 8:20–22; 2 Chr 21:16–17). Perhaps the slightest of preferences should go to this option.

Canonical Position

Another piece of evidence that merits at least some consideration is the placement of Obadiah within the Book of the Twelve, or what we call the Minor Prophets. For example Wood suggests that Obadiah’s inclusion amidst ninth or eighth century prophets “would be strange if

³ Ibid.

⁴ Second Chronicles 28:17 does not mention the city of Jerusalem, or its destruction, only the carrying away of some captives.

⁵ As Baker argues, “The form of the Hebrew verbs in verses 12-14 (“you should not . . .”) warned Edom against doing *again* what she had already done. Had Jerusalem already been destroyed, these commands would have had no meaning.” Walter L. Baker, “Obadiah,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1985), 1454.

Obadiah were written as late as the time of the exile.”⁶ It must be admitted that this argument’s persuasiveness depends upon the assumption that the order of the Twelve was chronological. But this is a tenuous position.⁷ That being said, neither can this piece of evidence be dismissed outright.

Literary Considerations

Commentators have long noted certain literary similarities between Obadiah and Jeremiah. These similarities are seen most readily in comparison to Jeremiah 49.⁸

Obadiah	Jeremiah 49
v. 1	49:14
v. 2	49:15
v. 3	49:16
v. 4	49:16
v. 5	49:9
v. 6	49:10
v. 8	49:7
v. 9	49:22b
v. 16	49:12

These similarities are part of the issue of dating since the date of Jeremiah is better established. Three options present themselves. Obadiah and Jeremiah could be using a common source. In this case, the similarities do not particularly help with the issue of dating. However, most scholars are not inclined to see a common source. So if literary dependence is involved then there are two options. Obadiah could be using Jeremiah or Jeremiah could be using Obadiah. Good arguments can be made for both positions. Keil has argued for the priority of Obadiah (supporting an early date).⁹ Raabe argues for the priority of Jeremiah (supporting a late date).¹⁰ In the end, the arguments tend to cancel one another out. But it should be noted that even if one were to accept that Jeremiah wrote first, this would not leave Obadiah very much time to write to fit within the time frame suggested by late daters.

⁶ Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 264.

⁷ The arrangement of the Minor Prophets is a complicated issue. For a helpful examination of some of these issues see Barry Alan Jones, *The Formation of the Book of the Twelve: A Study in Text and Canon*, SBL Dissertation Series 149, ed. Michael V. Fox (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

⁸ Raabe states, “The closest parallels are found in Obad. 1–6 and Jeremiah’s Edom oracle, 49:14–16, 9–10. Of the forty-three words in Obad. 1–4 (omitting the superscription and the opening messenger formula) twenty-nine occur in Jer. 49:14–16 (67 percent), and twelve of the twenty-four words in Obad. 5–6 appear in Jer. 49:9–10 (50 percent).” Paul R. Raabe, *Obadiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24D, The Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 22.

⁹ C. F. Keil, “Minor Prophets,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, trans. A. Harper, vol. 10. 10 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982; reprint, [25 volumes in ten]), 340-1.

¹⁰ Raabe, *Obadiah*, 31.

Conclusion

As noted earlier, the issue of dating is a debated one. While earlier conservative exegetes tended to favor an early date, many today now favor a date after 586. What one decides concerning the date affects the interpretation of some of passages, but the overall message is not greatly affected. Nonetheless, we suggest that the early date is a better option.

Historical Setting:

The specific historical setting is somewhat dependent on dating. However, the general setting of the animosity between Israel and Edom is not debated. The longstanding nature of the animosity is also not debated. The acrimony has roots in a struggle between the twins Jacob and Esau in the womb (Gen 25:21–26). The problems were exacerbated with Esau trading his birthright (Gen 25:27–34) and Jacob's deceptive theft of Esau's blessing (Gen 27:1–45). There was a brief respite in the strained relationship when Jacob returned to Canaan (Gen 33). However, this improved relationship would not last and later Edom would refuse to let the Israelites pass through their land after leaving Egypt on the way to the Promised Land (Num 20:14–21). From this point on the relationship would be hostile. Saul (1 Sam 14:47), David (2 Sam 8:13–14), and Solomon (1 Kgs 11:17–22) all had conflicts with the Edomites. Jehoshaphat of Judah and Joram of Israel joined with Edom in an attack against Moab (2 Kings 3). For our purposes, it is important to note that in the reign of Jehoram Edom revolted against Judah (2 Kgs 8:20–22; 2 Chr 21:8). Later Amaziah invaded and captured Sela and renamed it Joktheel (2 Kgs 14:7; 2 Chr 25:11–12). Edom became a vassal of Assyria around 736 B.C. The Edomites apparently participated in the downfall of Judah and Jerusalem in 586. In the late sixth or early fifth century the Nabateans drove out most of the Edomites from Edom. Those who remained in Edom were assimilated by the Nabatean Arabs. Other Edomites resettled in southern Judea (renamed Idumea). These Edomites/Idumeans, were subdued by John Hyrcanus (Josephus *The Antiquities of the Jews* 13.9.1; 14.7.9) but later the Idumean Herod the Great would become king. The Idumean/Edomites basically ceased to exist after A.D. 70, having been eliminated by the Romans.

Purpose:

The purpose of Obadiah is fairly straightforward. There are two basic purposes. First, the prophet prophesies of the judgment of Edom and those who seek to harm God's people. Second, the prophet prophesies of the eventual restoration and blessing of a remnant. Both of these purposes are to be understood in light of Yahweh's covenantal relationship with Israel.

Contributions:

The contribution of Obadiah is primarily related to the fall of Edom. Although other

prophets mention Edom,¹¹ it is the central part of Obadiah. If we are correct in our dating of Obadiah as early then it provides one of the earliest references in the writing prophets to the Day of the Lord.

Obadiah and the New Testament:

There are no quotations of Obadiah in the New Testament.

Literary Features:

The way the Hebrew text (BHS) is set up suggests that there are two forms in Obadiah. The bulk of the book (vv. 1–18) is poetic. Whereas, the final three verses (vv. 19–21) is prose.¹² In any case, Obadiah appears to have been a skilled writer. As Niehaus states, “Whoever Obadiah was, he possessed literary skills appropriate to his calling. He had a repertoire of poetic devices that earn him an honorable place among the writing prophets. Among the qualities of his work, we find not only facility with the various devices of parallelism, but also a capacity for imagery, rhetorical questions, irony, and repetition.”¹³

Structure:

Outline

- I. The Verdict: Edom Will Be Destroyed (vv. 1–9)
 - A. The Verdict Expressed (vv. 1–4)
 - B. The Verdict Explained (vv. 5–9)
- II. The Violation: Edom’s Mistreatment of “Jacob” (vv. 10–14)
 - A. The Violation Expressed (vv. 10–11)
 - B. The Violation Explained (vv. 12–14)
- III. The Victory: The Day of the Lord (vv. 15–21)
 - A. The Day of the Lord Brings Retribution (vv. 15–17)
 - B. The Day of the Lord Brings Restoration (vv. 18–21)

¹¹ See Isa 11:14; 21:11–12; Jer 25:21; 49:7–22; Lam 4:21; Ezek 25:12–14; 35:1–15; Joel 3:19; Amos 1:11–12; Mal 1:2–5.

¹² Rabbe suggests that, this distinction is supported by the use, or not, of the so-called prose particles. Raabe, *Obadiah*, 6-7.

¹³ Jeffrey Niehaus, “Obadiah,” in *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, vol. 2. 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 503.

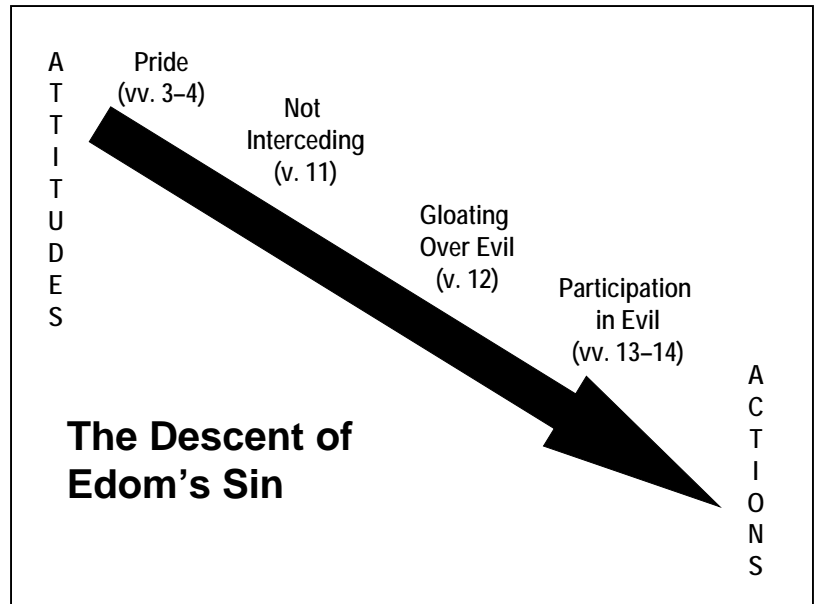
Chart

The Verdict: Edom Will Be Destroyed vv. 1-9		The Violation: Edom's Mistreatment of "Jacob" vv. 10-14		The Victory: The Day of the Lord vv. 15-21	
The Verdict Expressed	The Verdict Explained	The Violation Expressed	The Violation Explained	The Day of the Lord Brings Retribution	The Day of the Lord Brings Restoration
1-4	5-9	10-11	12-14	15-17	18-21
Focus on Edom				Focus on Israel ("Jacob")	

Expositional Outline of Obadiah:

I. THE VERDICT: EDM WILL BE DESTROYED (vv. 1-9)

A. The Verdict Expressed (vv. 1-4)



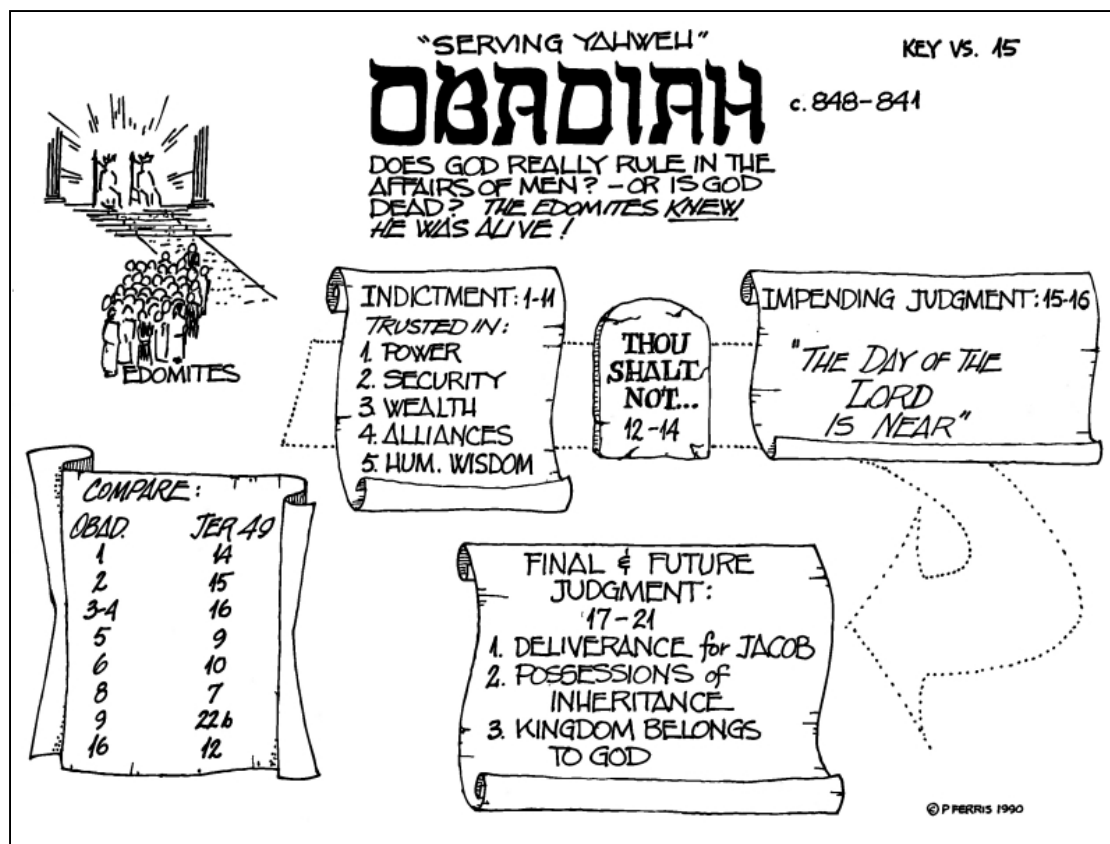
B. The Verdict Explained (vv. 5-9)

II. THE VIOLATION: EDMOM'S MISTREATMENT OF "JACOB" (vv. 10-14)

- A. The Violation Expressed (vv. 10-11)
- B. The Violation Explained (vv. 12-14)

III. THE VICTORY: THE DAY OF THE LORD (vv. 15-21)

- A. The Day of the Lord Brings Retribution (vv. 15-17)
- B. The Day of the Lord Brings Restoration (vv. 18-21)



Select Bibliography

- Baker, Walter L. "Obadiah." In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 1453-9. Wheaton: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1985.
- Finley, Thomas J. *Joel, Amos, Obadiah*. Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker. Chicago: Moody, 1990.
- Keil, C. F. "Minor Prophets." In *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 10. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1982. Reprint, [25 volumes in ten].
- Niehaus, Jeffrey. "Obadiah." In *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical and Expository Commentary*, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey, vol. 2. 3 vols., 495-541. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992.
- Raabe, Paul R. *Obadiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24D. The Anchor Bible, ed. William Foxwell Albright and David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
- Wood, Leon J. *The Prophets of Israel*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979.

APPENDIX: DAY OF THE LORD CHART¹⁴

1	near at hand (approaching)	15	1:15; 2:1	14	6, 22	1:7, 14			3, 9	(1)
2	some sort of proclamation (sometimes a warning)		1:3	9	13:2	2:1, 2, 3	34:1	14		
3	universal nature—all nations, gathering of nations	15, 16		2, 9, 11	4	2:11; 3:8, 20	34:1, 2	1, 12, 28		2, 12, 14, 16, 19
4	war situation, armies		2:4, 5, 7-9, 11	9-11	4	1:16	34:2	3-6, 8, 9, 14, 22	4, 11	2, 12-14
5	darkness		2:2-10	15	10	1:15			18	6, (7)
6	recompense: revenge, satisfaction	15, 16		2-8, 12-14, 19, 21	11; 14:2	2:8-10; 3:1-8	34:8; 35:4	10, 28	19	
7	devastation—destruction of land or buildings	(18)	1:4-7, 9-13, 16-18; 2:3	19	5, 6, 9, 16	1:2, 13, 15, 18; 2:4-6, 9, 13-15; 3:8	34:9, 11, 13-15, 17	19, 20-21, 22, 23	4, 7, 11, 12, 14	2
8	fire	18	1:19, 20; 2:3, 5		(8)	1:18; 3:8	(34:9, 10)	19	8, 14, 16	
9	harm to domestic animals		1:18-20			1:3	34:6, 7	12		15
10	personal harm to humans—depopulation and death	18		8	9, 12, 15, 16, 18, 20	1:3-6, 11, 17-18; 2:5, 12	34:2, 3	10, 12, 14, 19	4-6, 11, 17	2, 12
11	captivity			8	14:2			19, (23)	17, 18	2
12	recognition of Yahweh		1:5, 8, 11, 13, 19, 20		6	1:10, 11		12	2	
13	howling and crying		(2:17)	17		2:11; 3:9	(35:2)		8, 19	16
14	sanctuary, protection, or salvation for a remnant	17		17, 20	14:1 ^b	(2:9); 3:13	35:4	(26), 27		2
15	return of captives	(20)		1, 7	14:1, 2	2:7; 3:20	35:1-10	(26), 27		
16	material blessings for God's people—land and possessions	17, 19, 20	2:14	18	14:1	2:7, 9	(35:1-2); 35:6-9			8, 10, 11, 14
17	Presence of Yahweh (as king) among his people	21		21	(14:2)	3:15, 17	(35:2)	(18), 28		4, 9

¹⁴ Robert D. Bell, "The Day of the Lord Theme in the Old Testament Prophets," *Biblical Viewpoint* 29 (1995): 49.