

Lessons from Obadiah

There is no indication in the one chapter that makes up this book as to who Obadiah was. His name is a common one among the Hebrews, being mentioned thirteen times in the Bible. However, Bible scholars have not been able to establish a clear-cut identification of this Obadiah with any other individual of this name mentioned elsewhere.

Various opinions have been expressed as to the chronological setting of Obadiah. The position of the book among the minor prophets suggests an early date. That this is the correct position is indicated on page 108 in *Prophets and Kings*: "During the years that were to follow the rending of the kingdom, Elijah and Elisha were to live and labor, and the tender appeals of Hosea and Amos and Obadiah were to be heard in the land. Never was the kingdom of Israel to be left without noble witnesses to the mighty power of God to save from sin."

Chronological Placement

The above reference suggests that his ministry was mainly directed to the Northern Kingdom. This would, of necessity, place Obadiah chronologically before the fall of Samaria in 723/22 B.C. In this case, then, the destruction of Jerusalem, which is placed in the past tense in verse 11, is actually being foretold, just as the final judgment of Edom is clearly predicted.

Obadiah promotes the golden rule in reverse. "As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head" (verse 15). The writings of this minor prophet center on the predictability of judgment as suggested in this verse.

The book of Obadiah is not only short but it is simple in meaning although profound in thought and concept. Though some have raised the question as to why it is included in the sacred canon, it is undoubtedly for purposes that reach far beyond the demonstration that Edom is being punished for unbrotherly viciousness and cruelty toward their blood relatives in Israel. "All scripture is ... profitable" Timothy tells us, and even the book of Obadiah contains much of value for God's people today.

The terms "that day" and "day of the Lord" reflect the writings of Joel and point to the eschatological implications of the final day of judgment. This being true, Obadiah 8-15 evidently describes the day of final judgment, as well as the judgment to come upon Edom. These verses call it a "day of destruction," a "day of distress," and a "day of calamity."

Support for such eschatological application is found in the use of the phrase from verse 16, "They shall be as though they had not been" in such references as *The Desire of Ages*, page 763, and *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 541.

Impact of Faulty Character

The book of Obadiah completes the story of the result of Esau's faulty character. The hostility evident at this point in history between Edom and Israel can be traced back to the birthright conflict between Jacob and Esau. Esau is recognized as the father of the Edomites (Genesis 36).

At the time of the Exodus, the Edomites refused to allow the Israelites to pass through their land on the way to Canaan (Num. 20: 14-21). Saul, David, and Solomon waged war

on Edom, and the Edomites united in a triple alliance with neighboring countries in attacking Judah in the days of Jehoshaphat (see 2 Chronicles 20).

There was continuous trouble and strife between the descendants of the children of Isaac through the period of the kings until, when Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, the Edomites joined in the attack and plunder of the city (see Ezekiel 35; 36:5).

About the fourth century B.C. the Nabataeans drove the Edomites from the rocky fortress of Petra into the Negeb. They established their capital at Hebron, but were overthrown by the Maccabees in the second century B.C. and compelled to become Jews, even submitting to circumcision. But still they lived on to plague the Jews. Herod the Great was an Idomean (an Edomite). After the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 they at last disappeared from history.

Judgment Pronounced

The judgment pronounced on Edom is severe, since the crime of callous indifference toward a brother in trouble is especially heinous and hateful and is compounded by Edom's gloating over Israel's misfortune. The prophecies of doom upon Edom, however, do not reach their ultimate fulfillment in the disappearance of this nation from the pages of history. Final destruction was predicted at the time of Israel's ultimate restoration. Thus Edom becomes a symbol of the annihilation of the wicked at the end of time when spiritual Israel is restored to the everlasting kingdom God promises.

Pusey, in his classic work on the minor prophets, goes to some length to demonstrate that the forty-ninth chapter of Jeremiah actually quotes from the first five verses of Obadiah. This is logical since Jeremiah also incorporates portions of Isaiah in his prophecies against Moab and Babylon and selections from Amos in his prophecies against Damascus and Ammon.

The verses common to Obadiah and Jeremiah form an integrated whole in Obadiah, but are scattered amid other verses of his own in Jeremiah. Apparently, then, Jeremiah enlarged an existing prophecy, rearranging it to suit his context. Here is another indication that Obadiah should be included among the earlier prophets.

Hatred for Sin

Obadiah clearly points to Edom's self-sufficiency and pride as the root of his sin. Even then, Edom was not to be rejected and eventually punished because of sin. All men are sinners and just as deserving of punishment. Edom's failure to accept the plan God provides for the disposition of sin, and his stubborn, willful persistence in evil in spite of God's pleadings could only culminate in final destruction. The application to the individual too proud to accept the work of grace is apparent.

Just as Israel was never really able to permanently overthrow the Edomites, our personal Edomites the sins that plague and beset us not only continually annoy us but cannot be conquered in our own strength. Christ has already come, however. He alone is the Saviour who "shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau" (verse 21). He alone can make it possible for us to gain the victory (see verse 19).

Obadiah seems almost merciless in his hatred for the Edomites. Here is a graphic portrayal of how we should regard our sin. We should abhor it as much as the people of God in Obadiah's day hated the Edomites. We should separate ourselves from our

personal Edomites, recognizing that there can be no possible reconciliation between the world and those dedicated to God and His righteousness.

Outline of Book

The four introductory words "The vision of Obadiah" actually constitute the title of the book. The rest of this brief prophecy deals with the specific message given the prophet to share with his nation.

Verses 1-9 announce Edom's doom and detail the extent of its complete destruction. No matter how impregnable they felt themselves to be amid their rocky fortresses, their annihilation is inevitable. Nothing will be spared.

Verses 10-16 outline the causes of Edom's doom. They have brought it upon themselves by cruelty, treachery, and unbrotherly conduct. Verse 12 introduces an ascending climax in Edom's malicious satisfaction over the misfortune of Israel. First there is the satisfied look. It is followed by malicious joy, and finally by boastfulness and insulting derision.

Verses 17-21 reveal final restoration of God's people to Mount Zion. These prophecies were conditional and never fully accomplished as far as ancient Israel is concerned. But at the end of time, still future in our day although fast approaching, Mount Zion will gain eternal pre-eminence over Mount Esau, the mountain of human pride. The kingdoms of this world will become the eternal kingdom of Christ and this people who were as sinful as the Edomites but accepted Him as Saviour and Lord of their lives.