

OBADIAH



Jim West

Obadiah is seldom read in many corners of Christendom and that is probably because it has some of the harshest language against enemies outside of Psalm 137. Yet it is precisely the honesty of its language that is so appealing and so refreshing, and it is the honesty of its language that invites modern readers to the same sort of honest engagement with their God. We may, at the end of the day, find ourselves uncomfortable with Obadiah's apparent hatred; and I say "apparent" because making our way to the conclusion of the book we discover quite a different tone altogether. Hatred is replaced ultimately by the victory of God's provision for God's people. Even in a book on the surface thoroughly about punishment and vindication, in the end it is really God's grace that is vindicated and proven in the right.

Obadiah in History and Tradition

What we know of the prophet himself is quite sparse. We know his name means “Servant of Yahweh” and that Obadiah is mentioned in a list of leaders of Israel in *4 Ezra* 1:40, although the order of the listing is not in canonical sequence. The same is true of his inclusion in the *Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* 4:22. In both of these he is merely mentioned and no further information is provided.

In *The Lives of the Twelve Prophets* (an ancient book written to “fill in the gaps” concerning the prophets and their backgrounds and a volume that cannot be taken at face value historically) his biography is written thusly: “Obadiah was from the district of Shechem, of the countryside of Bethacharam. This man was a disciple of Elijah, and endured much because of him, and escaped with his life. This was the third captain of fifty whom Elijah spared and (with

whom) he went down to Ahaziah [2 Kings 1:13-15]. After these events he left the service of the king and prophesied. And he died and was buried with his fathers.”

Other Jewish writers, similarly conceiving of Obadiah as Elijah’s contemporary, have a bit more to say about this enigmatic man. The *Babylonian Talmud* makes extensive reference to Obadiah in *Tractate Sanhedrin* 39: “A Heavenly voice issued and proclaimed, ‘And Obadiah feared the Lord greatly [1 Kings 18:3], but the house of Ahab is not fit for a blessing.’ R. Abba said: Greater [praise] was expressed of Obadiah than Abraham, since of Abraham the word ‘greatly’ is not used [Genesis 22:12], while of Obadiah it is. R. Isaac said: Why did Obadiah attain the gift of prophecy?—Because he hid a hundred prophets in caves, as it is written, For it was so when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them, fifty

in a cave [1 Kings 18:4]. Why just fifty?—R. Eleazar said: He learnt this lesson from Jacob, as it is written, 'Then the camp which is left shall escape' [Genesis 32:8; i.e., if one group of those under protection be discovered, at least a separate one will survive]. R. Abbahu said: It was because the one cave could not hold more than fifty. 'The vision of Obadiah. Thus said the Lord God concerning Edom' [Obadiah v. 1]. Why particularly Obadiah against Edom?—R. Isaac said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let Obadiah, Who has lived with two wicked persons and yet has not taken example by their deeds, come and prophesy against the wicked Esau, who lived with two righteous persons and yet did not learn from their good deeds. Ephraim Maksha'ah, the disciple of R. Meir, said on the authority of R. Meir: Obadiah was an Edomite proselyte: and thus people say, From the very forest itself comes the [handle of the] axe [that fells it]. And he [David, descendent of Ruth,

the Moabite] smote Moab, and measured them with a line, casting them down to the ground [2 Samuel 8:2]. R. Johanan said on the authority of R. Simeon b. Yohai: Thus the proverb runs, From the very forest itself comes the [handle of the] axe [that fells it]. When R. Dimi came [from Palestine] he said [similarly]: The joint putrefies from within.”

The rabbis, it seemed, combined various mentions of figures named “Obadiah” and believed they referenced the same person. (Scholars today would not identify 1 Kings 18:3’s Obadiah with the Obadiah we meet in the book bearing his name.) What is interesting about the Obadiah portrayed in the Talmud is that he was himself an Edomite! Hence, so far as the rabbis were concerned, Obadiah, the Edomite, preached judgment to his own people and blessing on the people of God, Israel. The “parables” they use to illustrate this point—“From the forest comes the handle of the ax that fells it”

and “The joint putrefies from within”—show that people are oftentimes the source of their own punishment. In our own terminology we might put it this way: “We have met the enemy, and they are us.”

Among Christian audiences, though, Obadiah is virtually ignored. No verse from Obadiah occurs in the Revised Common Lectionary, in the Episcopal Lectionary (in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*), or in the Roman Catholic Lectionary cycle, either presently or prior to Vatican II. Thomas Aquinas does not quote or cite Obadiah in the entirety of the *Summa*. The book seems to have played no part in the theological traditions of the church either in the Reformation or the Counter-Reformation.

The Book's Shape, Date, and Thrust

The book itself is nothing other than an “oracle” or sermon aimed at Edom, the southeastern neighbor of Judah. The intriguing thing here, though, is that Obadiah sees judgment as both a present reality and a future expectation. Judgment comes on Edom now for its transgressions and judgment comes on one and all in that great eschatological judgment at the end of days. In Old Testament language this latter judgment is called the “Day of the Lord.” This eschatological Day of the Lord theme is taken up even into the New Testament, where Jesus describes it in Matthew 25 and the book of Revelation discusses it in chapters 19 and following.

Given the tone and tenor of the text, it seems probable that it was written shortly after the Babylonians—under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar—attacked Judah and destroyed Jerusalem. That is, it was probably writ-

ten sometime around 585–575 B.C.E. Naturally, that date is disputed, with some scholars suggesting that it was written as late as 450 B.C.E. But in my estimation, this makes little to no historical sense. After all, in 553 B.C.E. Nabonidus, the Babylonian King, subjugated Edom and “fulfilled” what Obadiah only saw as an upcoming event. Hence, the book must have obtained its present form no later than 555 or so.

Obadiah is somewhat unusual among the prophets in the sense that he preaches against one foe alone. Amos, by contrast, preaches against Israel and Judah and nearly all their neighbors. Jeremiah has rather a lot to say about a number of nations as well as Judah. And Isaiah too has oracles against homeland and foreigners. Yet, it must be noted, that Isaiah (in 34:5 and 63:1) uses “Edom” as something of a representative term for all of Israel’s enemies (who are therefore God’s enemies as well). It may well then be

the case that Obadiah too uses “Edom” as a symbolic term for all Israel’s foes. This cannot be proven, of course, but it is certainly a real possibility.

The book, being so brief, is extremely easy to outline:

- ❖ Verse 1a, Heading
- ❖ Verses 1b–9a, God’s Plans for Edom
- ❖ Verses 9b–14, Edom’s Sins Against Judah
- ❖ Verses 15–21, God’s Plans for Judah

Interestingly this structure can be seen as a chiasm (a structure that begins and ends in the same way and in the middle is found the central focus or point of interest). So, we begin with God’s plans for Edom—plans for destruction; and we end with God’s plans for Judah, plans for blessing. And in between these two we find sandwiched the main thrust of Obadiah’s interest: the sins that Edom has committed against Judah. These sins constitute both that which

will bring on Edom's punishment and that which God shall overcome in order to bring about Judah's future blessing.

In other words, Obadiah preached judgment and destruction against Edom because the nation treated its sibling nation Judah badly, and he understood that God will undo that Edomite cruelty with spectacular blessing.

Obadiah's Message

The message of Obadiah has been hinted at briefly above. Now it is time to look in more detail at its contents.

As already indicated, Obadiah preaches against Edom in fiery, forceful, unforgettable language. And then he preaches to Judah (Israel) a promise of future restoration. In between, at the heart of the book and the center of Obadiah's attention, are the sins of Edom. So we will start there, in the center, in an attempt to

understand what it is that Obadiah is so angry about.

In vv. 9b–14 (in scholarly works on biblical texts, “9b” indicates the second half of the verse and “9a” indicates the first half), Obadiah (whose name, you will recall, means “Servant of Yahweh”) lets fly a barrage of denunciation aimed at Edom’s wicked behavior vis-à-vis Judah. Edom has done “violence” against Judah (v. 10). Edom also “stood aloof” and “gloated” and “rejoiced” at the misfortune of Judah, and “boasted” that it had not experienced what Judah had (vv. 11–12). Worse still, they “looted” the city while the Judeans were being carted off to exile in Babylon, and those who escaped the Babylonian sword they captured and turned over (vv. 13–14)!

All of this portrays a situation in which, at Judah’s lowest moment, Edom rejoiced and took advantage. Edom, in other words, had a bit of *Schadenfreude* at the expense of Judah. *Schadenfreude* is a German word that

means, essentially, to have joy at the suffering or hardship of another. It is the sort of thing that is going on when someone laughs when another slips on a banana peel. For this disposition, Obadiah lunges at Edom in anger.

And yet, the prophet is not speaking in his own name, but in the name of God. It is, so far as Obadiah and his readers are concerned, God who is furious that Edom has acted so reprehensibly. It is because God is enraged at this sorry behavior that Obadiah preaches divine wrath on the heads of the Edomites in vv. 1b–9a. God has a plan for the Edomites, just as the Edomites had a plan for their defeated neighbors.

What are those plans? Obadiah characterizes them as plans to make Edom “small” and “despised” (v. 2). Their neighbors will rob them and leave them without any sustenance, and God himself will rip them from their arrogant perch and hurl them to the

ground, defeated, destroyed, and ultimately utterly forgotten (vv. 3–5).

In short, what Edom did to Judah is what God will do to Edom; as God too operates on the assumption that “You reap what you sow” (see v. 15 below). Edom has sown the wind and will reap the whirlwind of God’s righteous judgment.

Does any of this, though, mean anything to 21st century Christians? Is the God we know in Jesus Christ the God of vengeance and punishment as portrayed here in Obadiah? If you knock a neighbor down, does God knock you down? These are the questions raised by even a cursory reading of this incredibly honest book. The God portrayed herein almost walks among us as a stranger—and yet, this is the God of the biblical revelation and rather than accommodating him to our view we must reconsider our view in conformity to God’s self disclosure.

For instance, when one drinks to the point of inebriation, one awakens with quite a headache. When one sins, one experiences the consequences of that sin (v. 16). Returning to the metaphor of “drinking,” it then becomes quite telling that God makes Jesus drink the “cup of wrath” to the full (Matthew 26:39). Jesus becomes satiated with the results, not of his sin, but of ours. He suffers the consequences, in their horrible fullness, of our headache inducing, head swimming, room spinning, sinful drunkenness, not because he deserves to but because he wishes we not. His mercy and grace are the remedy for our spiritual hangover; because he hung on the cross.

Hence, returning to the book at hand, Obadiah is not simply about judgment and destruction and punishment. It also has a message of comfort to offer to the people of God who are not only down and out, but exiled and dying.

Obadiah and the Promises of God

The little book closes with an “oracle” concerning Judah and God’s plans for her (vv. 15-21). Verse 15, interestingly, summarizes both what comes before and what comes after and is the hinge upon which the entire book swings. Verse 16 makes this explicit as a promise for Judah as well as a threat against Edom: what others have done to you, God will do to them. The punishment you have been forced to drink will be the punishment they drink.

So then, what precisely are the promises God makes to God’s dispossessed, suffering people? These are spelled out quite specifically as follows:

(17) But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape, ... (18) The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; ... (19) Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau, and

those of the Shephelah shall possess the land of the Philistines; ... (20) The exiles of this host of the people of Israel shall possess the land of the Canaanites as far as Zarephath... (21) Saviors shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau, and the kingdom shall be the LORD's." (ESV)

God promises that:

1. There will indeed be a remnant of survivors and they will return to their land.
2. Vengeance on Edom will be complete, utter, and devastating.
3. Edom's territory will be taken over by the returnees.
4. "Saviors" will proceed from Zion (Jerusalem's Temple Mount) to Edom and God will rule over all.

Naturally Christians read this latter point as a promise of Christ and his universal kingdom. In an extended sense that may well be true. But in all likelihood "saviors" are simply

“judges” who—as in ancient times—have the responsibility of rendering judgment and delivering Israel from its foes (as in the case of Deborah or Samson). After all, these officials came to power as the result of God’s act of deliverance. Remember, in the book of Judges, this recurring pattern: Israel sins; God sends punishment; Israel cries out for help; God raises a deliverer, a “judge.” When deliverance is effected, the judge administers justice and there is peace in the land so long as that judge lives. This pattern, then, is portrayed by Obadiah as effective even in his day. But he cautions that these new “judges” will have a judge over them as well, and he is the Lord (v. 21).

So what is the message of Obadiah for Christians who live at the front end of the 21st century? *Schadenfreude*? Longing for vengeance? Hopefulness that our enemies, real or imagined, be wiped off the face of the earth? No. Instead, the message of Obadiah to his contemporaries and to us is one and the

same: the God who calls you to be God's people will see to it that no matter what your present circumstances may be, God has neither forgotten nor abandoned you. And God will see to it God's self, by God's own power and mighty majesty, that you are preserved and restored. No obstacle will keep God from it.

This God, then, can be trusted both to punish the wicked (so that we ourselves need not be concerned with it or even seek it) and to reward the righteous (who by and large are completely unknown to us, but perfectly known to God). Obadiah invites us to enter this reality with both feet and wholeheartedly.



Dr. Jim West is Adjunct Professor of Biblical Studies at the Quartz Hill School of Theology and Pastor of Petros Baptist Church, Petros, Tennessee. He has written a number of books and articles and serves as Language Editor for the Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament.

Cover image from Martin Luther's *Die Propheten alle deudsch* (1541), courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

The **Bible Briefs** series is a joint venture of Virginia Theological Seminary and Forward Movement Publications.



www.vts.edu

www.forwardmovement.org



© 2009 Virginia Theological Seminary