

# Obadiah

## 1. Introduction

### 1. The History of Edom

Obadiah's prophecy is addressed to Edom. It is necessary, therefore, to outline the history of the Edomites.

#### (a) Esau and Jacob

Esau and Jacob were twins whose rivalry began in the womb of their mother Rebekah (Gen. 25:19-23). They were born about 2006 BC. Jacob was born second, clutching the heel of his brother: hence his name – Jacob means “he takes by the heel” (Gen. 25:26).

Sibling rivalry characterised their relationship. They were men of very different temperaments (Gen. 25:27) and while Isaac loved Esau, Rebekah loved Jacob (Gen. 25:28). Jacob “bought” Esau's birthright for a portion of “red stew” – hence Esau got his “nickname” Edom, since Edom means “red” (like the colour of red earth) (Gen. 25:29-34).

The rivalry between the men, and the favouritism of Rebekah for Jacob, reached a low point in the story of Jacob deceiving his father into bestowing on him the blessing of the firstborn which belonged to Esau (Genesis 27). When the deception was discovered, Isaac spoke significant words to Esau: “Behold, I have made him [Jacob] lord over you, and all his brothers I have given to him for servants, and with grain and wine I have sustained him. What then can I do for you, my son?...Behold, away from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and away from the dew of heaven on high. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck” (Gen. 27:37, 39-40). This set the course for the historic rivalry between Israel (Jacob) and Edom (Esau). Esau said, “I will kill my brother Jacob” (Gen. 27:41) – words which are inflected in Obadiah 10, “The violence done to your brother Jacob...”

Jacob and Esau parted company – Jacob going north to Haran to find a wife among his mother's people, and Esau going south to Seir (Gen 32:3). Jacob continued to live in fear of Esau (Gen. 32:7), and although the brothers were eventually reconciled, after a sort, they continued to live apart (Genesis 33), only coming together to bury their father Isaac (Gen. 35:29), c. 1886 BC.

#### (b) Edom and Israel at the time of the Exodus-Conquest

Edom re-emerges in Biblical history at the time of the Exodus when Moses led Israel up from Kadesh in the wilderness to the region east of the Jordan. Edom refused Israel passage on the famous and lucrative south-north trade route which it controlled (Num. 20:14-21). This route, called “the King's Highway”, ran from Ezion Geber (Eilat at the end of the Gulf of Aqaba) up to Damascus on the eastern side of the rift valley that contains the Dead Sea, the Jordan river and the Sea of Galilee.

(c) David's subjugation of Edom

Saul (reigned 1050-1010 BC) fought against Edom (1 Sam. 14:47). But it was David (reigned 1010-970 BC) who established Israel's control over Edom (2 Sam. 8:12-14). This allowed Solomon (reigned 970-931 BC) to establish a seaport in Ezion Geber (Eilat) on the Gulf of Aqaba, which gave him sea routes to the markets of East Africa and beyond the Arabian peninsula (1 Kings 9:26).

(d) Edom casts off its vassal status

Edom revolted against Judahite control during the reign of Jehoram (reigned 848-841 BC) (2 Kings 8:20-22). Amaziah (reigned 796-767 BC) won a great victory of Edom and took the city of Sela, but did not re-establishing control over the nation (2 Kings 14:7). Edom invaded Judah during the reign of Ahaz (reigned 731-715 BC) and carried off captives (2 Chron. 28:17).

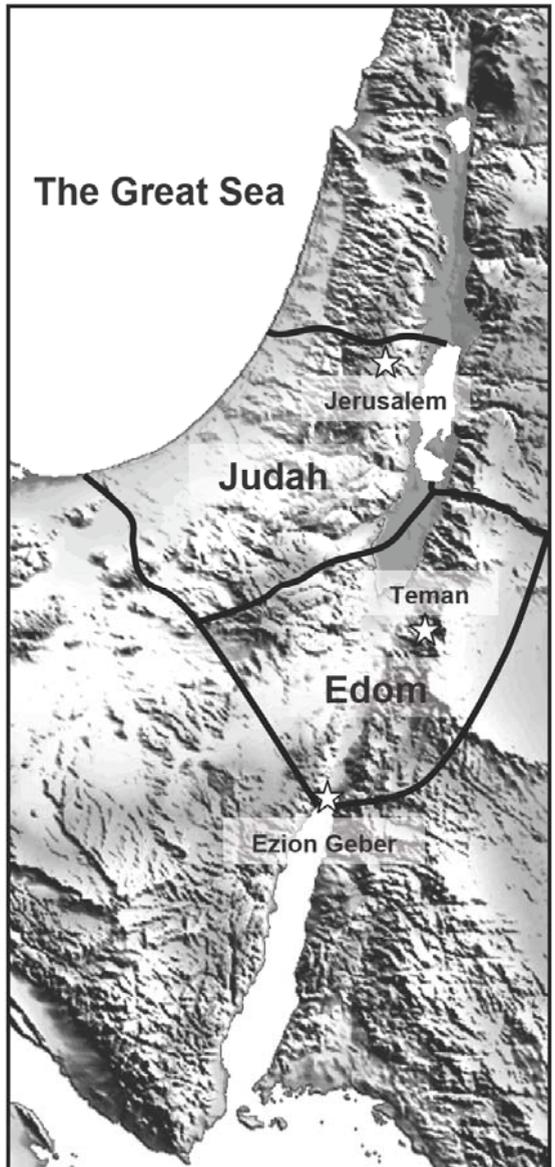
(e) Edom takes advantage of the fall of Jerusalem

Psalms 137:7 indicates that Edom took advantage of the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 587 BC. It is probably to this that Obadiah makes reference in vv. 10-14 – rather than offer help, Edom entered the city and took part in the looting; Edomites also set up road blocks to prevent fugitives from escaping (v. 14).

(f) Edom in the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms

Israel was forbidden, because of kinship, to despise Edomites (Deut. 23:7).

Nonetheless, the ancient promise of Jacobean dominance over Esau is restated by a number of prophets (Num. 24:18; Isa. 11:14). God asserts his sovereignty over Edom in Pss. 60 and 108.



Amos 1:6,9,11-15 portrays the violence of Edom and its participation in the slave trade during the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Ezek. 25:12-14 speaks of God's vengeance on Edom for the crimes Edom committed at the fall of Jerusalem. Jer. 49:7-22 foretells the destruction of Edom: this had taken place by the time of Malachi's ministry (c. 440-410 BC) (Mal. 1:4).

(g) Edom in the Inter-Testamental period

By the time of Darius I (reigned 522-486 BC) Edomites had established control of south Judean towns. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC Arab pressure was forcing them out of their historical homeland. Obad. 1b suggests that plans were already afoot for a military campaign against Edom.

The forced relocation of the Edomites to southern Judah is reflected in the change of their name to Idumean. Judas Maccabeus retook Hebron c. 160 BC. John Hyrcanus compelled the Idumeans to become Jews and submit to circumcision, 140-130 BC. Antipater, the governor of Idumea (whom Julius Caesar made procurator of Judea) was Idumean (died 43 BC). Antipater made his son Herod governor of Galilee. Herod eventually became king of Judea – we know him as Herod the Great (reigned 37-4 BC). When the Romans overran Judea, first in AD 70, and then in AD 135, Idumea disappeared from history.

## **2. Theme: God will avenge the wrongs Edom did to Jacob**

Verses 8-15 are central to the prophecy. A twelve-fold use of the phrase “the day” climaxes with “the day of the LORD” and the central statement: “As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head” (v. 15b).

Obadiah's prophecy is addressed to Edom, and it is very possible that a copy was sent to the Edom court – it was not at all unusual for the prophets of Israel to address foreign kings, asserting that the LORD is God of all the nations.

Nevertheless, the prophecy was certainly also made known for the sake of the exiles of Judah and those Judahites who were left in the land by the Babylonians. John Calvin suggests that Obadiah's purpose was to comfort them: “This prophecy...threatens the Idumeans for the sake of administering consolation to the chosen people...the Prophet here applies comfort and props up their dejected minds, for the Lord would shortly look on them and take due vengeance on their enemies.”

The judgement of Edom adheres to the principle of *lex talionis*, i.e. “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.”

However, Obadiah does not limit his prophecy of vengeance to Edom. In vv. 15-16 he widens his perspective to encompass all the nations:

- “As for Obadiah's message of the judgement of God that is to come upon Edom, it should be remembered that the Edomites were regarded by the prophets as typical of the malignant foes of Israel who hated and opposed all that Israel stood for in their witness to the one true God” (Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 284).

- “Against a background of divine inspiration (vv. 1, 4, 8, 18) the prophet proclaimed a message of divine moral judgement of nations throughout history. Edom was held up as an example of such judgement, primarily because of her intolerable lack of humanity towards Judah, a blood relative” (R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 903).

### 3. Structure and Content of Obadiah

Obadiah makes use of linking verses to tie the sections of his prophecy together, e.g. verse 8 belongs to the first main section which describes the coming destruction of Edom, but the mention of “that day” also ties verse 8 to the middle section (vv. 10-15) which describes Edom’s behaviour “the day” on which Jerusalem fell; likewise v. 15, which announces “the day of the LORD” brings vv. 10-15 to a climax, but also introduces vv. 15-21 which describes the future restoration of the dominance of Mount Zion over Mount Esau.

- v. 1                      Superscription and prologue – Yahweh’s envoy calls the nations to battle against Edom.

#### Part 1 (Obadiah 2-9)      *Edom’s destruction is foretold*

- vv. 2-4              The arrogant and secure nation will be brought down
- vv. 5-7              The wealthy and wise nation will be plundered and deceived
- vv. 8-9              The day of Edom’s destruction

#### Part 2 (Obadiah 8-15)      *The reason for Edom’s destruction is described*

- vv. 8-9              The day of Edom’s destruction
- vv. 10-14          What Edom did on the day of Jerusalem’s destruction
- v. 15                The day of destruction of the nations

#### Part 3 (Obadiah 15-21)      *The re-establishment of the dominance of Mount Zion*

- vv. 15-16          The day of vengeance will bring the nations to an end
- v. 17                Mount Zion, having been desecrated, will once again be holy
- v. 18                Jacob to be instrumental in the punishment of Esau
- vv. 19-20          Israel to re-possess its possessions
- v. 20                Mount Zion, having lost dominion, will once again reign, “and the kingdom shall be the LORD’s.”

# Obadiah

## 2. *A Tale of Two Mountains*

A fruitful way to read Obadiah's prophecy is to listen to what he has to say about two mountains: Mount Esau (vv. 8-9, 19, 21) and Mount Zion (vv. 17, 21). Esau settled in the mountainous region of Seir south of the Dead Sea (Gen. 32:3; 33:16). The main city was Sela (Ob. 3); Sela is the Hebrew for "rock" and denotes the inaccessibility of the city (cf. Ps. 60:9).

Using this "two mountain" approach, the shape of the prophecy is then:

- (a) Mt. Esau, secure and arrogant, will be brought down (vv. 1-9)
- (b) Mt. Esau joined in the violence done to Mt. Zion (vv. 10-16)
- (c) Mt. Zion, desolate and desecrated, will be rebuilt and dominant (vv. 17-21)

### 1. **Mount Esau to be humbled (vv. 1-9)**

The opening passage identifies Edom's sin as "the pride of your heart" (v. 3). The word used for "pride" denotes presumption, disobedience and wilfulness. Interestingly a closely related word means "to boil" and is used in the story of Jacob "boiling" the stew (Gen. 25:29) which Esau so wanted to eat that he (i) sold his birthright to obtain it, and (ii) thereby gained the soubriquet "Edom" (i.e. "red" like the stew).

So Edom is still "boiling" with the presumption of his pre-eminence and strength. He imagines that he is impregnable in his mountain stronghold of Sela (Ob. 3). The word for "lofty dwelling" is used for God's heavenly dwelling, and, indeed, Obadiah imagines Edom making his nest among the stars (v. 4)! But, no matter how high he goes, God will bring him down – the solemn affirmation "declares the LORD" confirms this.

Esau's pride also derived from its control of the south-north trade route from the port of Ezion Geber on the Gulf of Aqaba to Damascus. This brought Edom wealth. The Edomite city of Teman also became proverbial for wisdom (Jer. 49:7), presumably because of the trade that passed through it. But Esau would be utterly plundered of his wealth (vv. 5-6) and bereaved of his wise men (v. 8).

The closing words would have been chilling to the Edomites: "Every man from Mount Esau will be cut of by slaughter" (v. 9).

### 2. **The violence of Mount Esau against Mount Zion (vv. 10-16)**

In the Hebrew text "Esau" at the end of verse 9 is separated from "your brother Jacob" at the start of verse 10 by only 2 words, "slaughter" and "violence".

The expression which opens v. 10 ("Because of the violence [done against] your brother Jacob") is similar to Esau's utterance (1,400 years previously) when Jacob took his blessing by deception: "I will kill my brother Jacob" (Gen. 27:41).

It seems, then, that the violence described in vv. 11-14 is the outworking of this ancient hostility.

Verse 11 opens with Edom standing aloof, i.e. giving no aid to his brother Jacob when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem. But by verse 14 Edom is standing at the crossroads – he has set up roadblocks to apprehend the fugitives and had them back to the Babylonians who will kill some and exile others.

The sacking of Jerusalem is described as misfortune, ruin, distress and calamity – in Hebrew the phrase “their calamity” even sounds like “Edom”. Edom engages in all of this with glee: gloating, rejoicing, boasting. And Obadiah is shocked: eight times he asserts, “You should not have done that!”

### **3. The dominance of Mount Zion to be restored (vv. 17-21)**

But because Edom and the nations “have drunk on my holy mountain” – treated it with arrogant and profane contempt – God will make them drink themselves into oblivion (v. 16). And then he will re-establish Mount Zion as holy (v. 17) and dominant (v. 21).

There will be a remnant of God’s people (v. 17a). Jacob will repossess his possession of God’s land in its south, west, north and east territories (vv. 17b, 19-20). And Jacob will exercise salvation and rule (vv. 18, 21a). I.e. the kingdom will be restored (v. 21b).

Obadiah doesn’t use the word “forever”, but it is implied in the shape of the prophecy: Esau was temporarily dominant and Zion devastated; but God will turn the tables and restore Zion to the position of permanent dominion which he promised Jacob at the very start (Gen. 25:23).

### **4. Applications**

- Esau despised his birthright, married Canaanite women, depended on his native strength, and hated the man to whom God gave the covenant promises. Esau is one of the Bible’s most striking exemplars of arrogant unbelievers. God announces in Obadiah that arrogance will be humbled (c.f. 1 Cor. 1:19-25). This is a warning to us.
- The opposition of the world which followers of Jesus experience should not surprise us (John 15:18-19; 1 John 3:13). It is an expression of the hostility and envy that Mount Esau feels towards Mount Zion.
- But we are not to return hostility for hostility or envy for envy (1 Pet. 2:21-23). Notice that Obadiah does not express any pleasure in his announcement of Edom’s destruction – in fact he expresses shock and lamentation (vv. 5-6). Jesus also wept over the unbelieving, hard-hearted Jerusalem that was going to condemn him to death (Matt. 23:37).
- Obadiah teaches us to put our hope in the promise of God – the kingdom of God has come in the Lord Jesus Christ with grace and judgement, and we look for its consummation every bit as much as did Israel (1 Cor. 15:25-28).