

The Prophets, Book 9

Obadiah

Obadiah, with its one chapter of 21 verses, is the smallest book in the Bible, by chapter and verse count; the New Testament books of Philemon and Jude tie for next-to-smallest, each with one chapter of 25 verses¹. It is also perhaps the one about which least is known concerning its origin; the only thing it tells us about itself is the given name of the prophet, Obadiah. Because of this, opinions vary greatly as to its author, date, and place of writing. The book is a prophetic condemnation of Edom and its people.

Edom: the Place. Edom was a region on the eastern edge of a great valley, today called the Araba. Part of the Great Rift Valley, the Araba runs from the Dead Sea, southward to the Gulf of Aqaba; it is 103 miles long and currently forms part of the border between Israel and Jordan². The region is rich in copper and contains some of the World's oldest copper mines. Although blessed areas with water, rich soil, and abundant pasture for livestock, much of ancient Edom was mountainous and rocky, as it is today. The Edomites had carved fortresses from their rocky mountains, and the limited access of their narrow canyon approaches made them easily defended and almost impregnable. They were very proud of what they considered to be their invincibility.

In ancient times (the time of the Patriarchs, prior to the Exodus) Edom probably extended northward, east of the Jordan River, beyond Mount Herman, beyond the high plateau on the Syrian border that is today called the Golan Heights, and as far north as Damascus.

Other Names for Edom. In the Bible, other names are used as synonyms for Edom, including: Seir (for Mount Seir in Edom); Idumea (the Greek and Roman name for Edom); Teman (Esau's grandson and 3rd King of Edom), also called "Tema" in Jeremiah 25:23; Dedan (a region of Edom, or a tribal area bordering on Edom); and Bozrah (a city of Edom). It is also called "Buz" in Jeremiah 25:23.

The Edomite People. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, who was also called Edom after selling his birthright to Jacob³. He and his descendants had occupied that land after driving out its original, Arab, inhabitants, and were living there, across Moses' path to the Promised Land, at the time of the exodus from

¹ By chapter and verse count, Philemon and Jude tie for next-to-smallest. However, in case you are really interested in Bible trivia, by word count Obadiah is the largest of the "Littlest Three" with 723 words, Jude is next with 633 words, and Philemon is smallest with 455 words.

² Parts of the classic movie, "Lawrence of Arabia," were filmed in the eastern Arabah, part of ancient Edom.

³ Genesis 25:27-34.

Obadiah

Egypt. Edom also lay astride a major trade route between Egypt and Asia ("The King's Highway"), and was a prosperous center of trade. The word, "Edom," is Hebrew for "red"; this may be a reference to Esau's ruddy complexion, to the reddish color of his "mess of pottage," to the red sandstone of the rocky terrain, or it may refer to all three.

The Remarkable City of Petra. The capitol city of Edom was Petra (Greek, meaning "rock"), about mid-way between the south end of the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. It is famous for its buildings, tombs, High Place and amphitheater, which were literally carved from the red sandstone hills, and some are very beautiful. Its most accessible approach was a narrow defile, at some points only about 10 feet wide, making it almost impossible to attack the city successfully. It remains today as a remarkable remnant of what the Edomites, and their Nabataean (Arab) successors, carved from the cliffs and crags of that amazing place of red and pink sandstone.

Petra's Discovery. Petra was unknown to the Western World until 1812, when it was discovered by a very brave Swiss explorer named Johan Ludwig Burkhart, who reached it disguised as an Arab sheik. By that time Petra had become sacred to its occupying Arab Muslims, and they killed all "infidels" who approached it. Even after its discovery by Burkhart, safe travel to Petra was not possible until it was opened by the occupying British Army after World War I. Today Petra lies in what has become southern Jordan; it is uninhabited except for tourists and vendors⁴.

A. Author. The human author is a prophet named Obadiah, one of four of the prophets about whom we know nothing except the name⁵. The book does not even tell us the name of his father, which was the customary way of identifying one's self in that time and place.

Judging from the content of the prophecy most commentators believe that he was a prophet of Judah; but even this cannot be known with certainty.

B. Place and Date. Opinions differ widely as to Obadiah's place and date of writing. Our only clue is his reference to Edom's participating in an attack on Jerusalem, and that happened at least four times. Reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, with foreigners carrying away the people of Judah as captives, in Verses 11-14, strongly suggests a date after 600 BC because, of all of the pagan invaders, only Nebuchadnezzar succeeded in conquering and destroying Jerusalem and carrying its people away as captives, in the time of Jeremiah. On the other hand, the reference to Jerusalem's fall could have been predictive prophecy--not a reference to the past.

⁴ Petra has been a location for several movies, including "Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade."

⁵ The other three are Habakkuk, Haggai and Malachi.

Obadiah

Most conservative commentators believe the book was written very early; some even consider it to be the very first-written book of the prophets. Liberal scholars, and some conservative ones, give it a very recent date, usually after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian captivity, in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. These extreme differences of opinion by serious, knowledgeable, scholars are, I think, an eloquent expression of how little we actually know about the man.

C. Theme. Unlike its time and place of writing, the theme of Obadiah is very clear: it is the condemnation of Edom, the nation descended from Jacob's twin brother, Esau, for its ongoing hostility to the children of Israel.

D. Highlights. Highlights of Obadiah include the following:

1. Judgment on Edom Is Declared. (Verses 1-9)

In the opening verses, the prophet pronounces judgment upon Edom. The Lord GOD is offended by Edom's pride. Because of its high, rocky terrain, and the narrow mountain passes, Edom was virtually unassailable. Yet, in the powerful Hebrew poetry of Verse 4, the Lord mocks the pride of the Edomites and says that even if they were eagles, making their nests in the unreachable stars, "thence will I bring thee down." This judgment sounds as if it will be ultimate and final. And, in her downfall, even Edom's allies will turn against her, and there will be no one to help. The mightiest of her warriors will be slaughtered.

2. The Reason for Ultimate Judgment on Edom. (Verses 10-14)

Beginning with Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob for "red pottage" (probably lentil stew), there had been hostility between the brothers and their descendants. When Moses had led the children of Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus, the Edomites had blocked the way to the Promised Land, refusing to allow the Israelites to cross Edom's territory. Since that time Edom had assisted pagan nations which were attacking Israel; and, in the final destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, Edom had even entered into the city and joined in the plundering. They also captured Israelites who escaped from the city, and turned them over to the Babylonians. They had taken pleasure in the downfall of Jerusalem and Judah, and this seems particularly to have angered the Lord.

3. "The Day of the Lord": Final Justice for Edom and Israel. (Verses 15-21)

Obadiah closes with a vision of the Last Days, the time of ultimate victory for the people of the LORD. He uses the expression, "the day of the LORD," an expression used throughout the Bible to refer to the final judgment, the time when all things will be made right for all time. Edom is spoken of as dry stubble, completely destroyed by the flame of God's people. The prophetic statement is clear and ultimate: the Edomites will become extinct. Their land will be possessed by people "of the south" (i.e. Arabs), and the children of Israel will possess Canaan

Obadiah

completely. "Saviors" will pronounce judgment from Mount Zion, and "the kingdom shall be the LORD's⁶."

NOTES:

a. In verse 9, the declaration to "O, Teman" is a reference to the territory and people of Edom. Teman, the man, was the grandson and successor of Esau. In his day the nation also came to be known as "Teman," and the people were known as "Temanites."

b. Only 4 years after the Edomites assisted the Babylonians in the destruction of Jerusalem, they were themselves conquered and driven from their mountain fortress by the same Babylonians. A small remnant of survivors settled in southern Judea, and continued periodic hostilities against the Jews until ca 125 BC. At that time, John Hyrcanus, one of the Maccabean rulers, conquered them and they were absorbed into the Jewish state. When the entire area was conquered by the Romans in 63 BC the Herods, an Edomite family, were selected to reign over Judah as puppet kings of Rome (this, as a deliberate insult to the Jews by the Romans, who knew the history of the two groups). They reigned during the earthly life of Jesus; and when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 71 AD, the Herods, and the remnant of the Edomite people, disappeared completely from history, fulfilling verses 10 and 16 ("...thou shalt be cut off forever"; and "...they shall be as though they had not been")⁷.

c. Because Edom was a place of both plenty and safety, some students of the End Times believe that it will be to Edom that the Sun-clothed woman of Revelation 12 will flee "into the wilderness [desert], where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her" and hide for 3 1/2 years (Rev 12:6).

d. In addition to Obadiah, five other prophets foretold Edom's doom: Isaiah (34:5-15); Jeremiah (49:7-22); Ezekiel (25:12-14, 32:29, 35:1-15); Joel (3:19); and Amos (1:11-12). The Edomites never got the message.

⁶ There will be only one Savior, and that is Christ; and He shall reign from Jerusalem in that day. It is likely that the use of "saviors" here refers to the saints, those of us who will reign with Him (in subordinate positions of responsibility and authority) during the 1,000 years of the Millennial Kingdom (Rev 20:6).

⁷ For more on the Herods and their despotic reign over Israel, see "The Powerful but Highly Dysfunctional Herodian Family" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).