OBSCURE OBADIAH AND HIS MESSAGE

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Obadiah is the shortest of the Old Testament books, having only twenty-one verses. The message, the values and even the problems presented by the book are altogether out of proportion to its brevity.

Obadiah is an obscure prophet. The name is quite common among the Hebrews, meaning “servant of Jehovah” or, “worshipper of Jehovah.” Oesterley and Robinson suggest the probability that in the instance of the prophet for our study Obadiah may be a title rather than a proper name.¹ So, the man is shrouded in obscurity. No information is given concerning him.

From the brief message can be gathered somewhat of a personality pattern; at least some qualities of character are apparent. The prophet was bold and vindictive, a man keenly sensitive to evil which he himself was experiencing together with his compatriots. He manifests an insight into, and is an interpreter of, manifested pride which issued in the ridiculing of those suffering violence.

The identity of the prophet is of minor importance. The message he has to deliver remains the same. In the book are presented two antagonisms, the antithesis of two persons—Esau and Jacob; two peoples—Edomites and Israelites; two fundamental basic principles of living and of conduct—sensualism and spirituality; two ideals—materialistic security and spiritual aspiration.

Esau was irreligious, “profane,” says the New Testament. Here is a graphic description of Esau and the Edomites. “Profane” is derived from the Latin pro-fanum—“before the temple,” “outside the temple,” hence unholy. A profane, irreligious person is one who has no spiritual conceptions, no consciousness of the Eternal, no fellowship with the Divine, no sense of dependence upon God. As far as I have been able to determine there is only one reference in the Scriptures to the religion or gods of Edom.² No doubt they had gods, all people have. Esau and the Edomites could get along without them or him. How different are Jacob and the Israelites, whom God used as an instrument and claimed for His divine purpose and plan. To be sure, God had to make and mould Jacob and the Israelites, who at times were obstinate and needed to be firmly

¹Introduction to the Books of the Old Testament, p. 370.
²II Chron. 25:14.
dealt with by the sovereign hand of God. They were, nevertheless, God-fearing, God-honoring, and finally efficient instruments in His plan in the Heilsgeschichte.

The one of these antitheses is to be dishonored and destroyed, the other to be honored and preserved. "I loved Jacob; but Esau I hated"; so says God through his prophet Malachi. We need to remember that God's love for Jacob and His hatred for Esau were not the causes from which their characters resulted, but the inevitable results of what they were in character.

The brief prophecy of Obadiah is directed against Edom. The prophet's thought is progressive. The opening paragraph points to the ultimate issue of Edom, which is its destruction inasmuch as Jehovah has determined to humble Edom's pride.

The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is high, who say in your heart, "who will bring me down to the ground?" (vs. 3)

The rock referred to is very likely Petra, so called by the Greeks, which is a translation of the Hebrew Sela. This was, from earliest times the central stronghold of the nation. The land of Edom to the south of the Dead Sea forms a strip of about one hundred miles long and fifty miles wide. The stronghold Sela, or Petra, is, in a sense, unique for situation and sheer beauty. It is located deep down among the mountains of Seir. It is a "wonder of the desert." In the city were rock-hewn dwellings, tombs, temples, many literally cut out of the solid sandstone rock.

The ruins indicate that the entire city and its environs were an immense panorama of multi-colored cliffs, chasms, rocky shelves, narrow valleys, gorges and plateaus. The city was able to repel any invasion.

It was such a "rocky fastness" that Edom felt his security and in which he took great pride.

Edom's security was a false security, for the prophet says:

Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, thence I will bring you down, says the Lord. (vs. 4)

A further sense of security, which again is a false security, was Edom's confidence in a confederacy he had formed:

All your allies have deceived you, they have driven you to the border. Your confederates have prevailed against you; your trusted friends have set a trap under you . . . so that every man . . . will be cut off by slaughter. (vs. 7-9)

By cooperation of the very forces in which Edom takes pride, God is working Edom's destruction.

In verses 10-16 the prophet states the reason for this humbling, namely because Edom had ridiculed Judah in the day of Judah's humiliation and calamity.

3 Malachi 1:2, 3.
Finally, in verses 17-21, God’s spokesman gives assurance of an ultimate operation of retributive righteousness through which Edom will be destroyed, whereas Israel shall be restored. It is a victorious conquering people possessing their own land. A final word of predictive prophecy is uttered in the glorious statement: “The kingdom shall be the Lord’s.” That, in general, is the content of the little book. The progression in thought, and consequently making for unity of the message, has a bearing on the dating of this prophetic work.

What lies back of this “indignant oration”? That is the way George Adam Smith labels Obadiah’s message.

I propose to have us think of Obadiah’s message along the following lines: The historical antecedents, The historical pattern, The historical sequence, and finally, The values of the message.

**THE ANTECEDENTS**

The antecedents of Obadiah’s message are both historical and prophetic. The message is deeply rooted in the history of two persons and families developed from them. This takes us back in history to the time of Isaac and Rebekah.

And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. The children struggled together within her and she said, “If it is thus, why do I live?” So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, “Two nations are in your womb and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.” When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. The first came forth red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they called his name Esau. Afterward his brother came forth, and his hand had taken hold of Esau’s heel; so his name was called Jacob.”

Here is a prophetic utterance pointing to the future, to the time of Obadiah and beyond.

“The boys grew,” says the Bible, and in their maturity the basic qualities of character were increasingly revealed. There is the narrative of the bargaining for the birthright, and subsequently, the birthright blessings were so significant in patriarchal history. The narrative is quite familiar.

Esau came in from a hunting expedition so tired and hungry that he really felt quite faint. Clever Jacob immediately sensed the psychological moment. When Esau asked for a portion of “red pottage,” Jacob was perfectly willing to share it with his older brother on condition that he first sell him his birthright. Why not sell it? How hungry Esau must have been, for says he: “Behold, I am about to die, and what profit shall the birthright do to me?”

That day, Esau sold his right to the family headship. He sold out the double portion of the inheritance of the first-born. He bargained

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"Genesis 25:21-26."
away the priestly prerogatives as the head of the family upon decease of
the father; and finally the covenant blessings inherent in the birthright
blessing were forfeited. All of this bargaining away for a mess of red
pottage. That makes Esau a sensualist and his descendents, the Edomites,
materialistic sensualists with him.

Sometime later, having sold the birthright itself for red pottage, from
which he receives the name Edom, Esau was, nevertheless, anxious to
obtain the birthright blessings from his father, Isaac. Of course, it is too
late. Clever Jacob, the supplanter, together with the help of his mother,
had already obtained the blessings associated with the purchase. Never­
theless, upon Esau's pleading, blind Isaac, though hesitating at first, does
pronounce a blessing upon him. It was not what Esau expected, for again
the letter to the Hebrews comments:

When he afterward desired the blessing, he was rejected; for he found no
place for a change of mind in his father though he sought it diligently with
tears.6

Esau was experiencing the bitterness of the bad bargain he had struck.

There is, however, a blessing. When Esau lifted up his voice and
wept bitterly, Isaac pronounced the words:

"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 break loose you shall break his yoke from
your neck." Now Esau hated Jacob because of the blessing with which his
father had blessed him, and Esau said to himself, "The days of mourning for
my father are approaching; then I will kill my brother Jacob."7

From that time on there was virtually a poisonous family feud. When
Israel was led through the wilderness on the way to the land of promise,
they asked for permission to pass through Edom's territory, they pleaded
for passage, they promised not to be destructive. But note Edom's re­
response:

"Thou shalt not pass through," and Edom came out against him with much
people and with a strong hand. Thus Edom refused to give Israel passage.8

Because they were descendents from Abraham, Israel did not war
against Edom.

In the altogether strange prophetic utterances of Balaam the seer,
 occur these words:

There shall come forth a star out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of
Israel . . . and Edom shall be a possession, who were his enemies; while
Israel doeth valiantly.9

The writer of II Samuel, recording David's victories, also says:

And he put garrisons in Edom; throughout all Edom put he garrisons, and all
the Edomites became servants to David.10

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6Hebrews 12:17.
7Genesis 27:39-41.
8Numbers 20:20-21.
9Numbers 24:17.
10II Samuel 8:14.
And so, the family feud continues as revealed in history and in prophecy. That brings us to a consideration of the historical pattern which served as the immediate occasion for Obadiah's message.

**Historical Pattern**

As a rule, the prophets do not speak out of a vacuum. Obadiah, as others, speaks out of, and to, an historical situation. Some recent siege of Jerusalem prompted this prophet's fiery oration. At such a time the Edomites had been guilty of gross insult and injury to Judah. They themselves were not the principal enemy force; they probably did not participate in the actual attack itself but displayed gleeful delight at Judah's misfortune and calamity, and evidently shared in the plundering of the city. They intercepted those who attempted to flee, butchered them or surrendered them to slavery.

Just when did this take place in history? Historians and interpreters are not at all in agreement. Verses 11-14 give the clue:

> On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. But you should not have gloated over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted in the day of distress. You should not have entered the gate of my people in the day of his calamity; you should not have gloated over his disaster in the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods in the day of his calamity. You should not have stood at the parting of the ways to cut off his fugitives; you should not have delivered up his survivors in the day of distress.

What clue does the passage give? Students of Old Testament history and prophecy have suggested several possible dates and patterns of history. There are no definite, specific historical and chronological data given in the book; thus we are dependent entirely on other historical records.

There were several invasions of Judah and threats to Jerusalem that caused great distress. One such invasion was at the time of Rehoboam, immediately following the disruption of the monarchy, when Shishak of Egypt plundered Jerusalem. Edomites, however, are not mentioned.

Again, the time of Jehoram, king of Judah (c. 845 B.C.), has been suggested. During his reign the Philistines and Arabians attacked Jerusalem and carried away possessions out of the royal palace.

Some students think the reign of Ahaz, of Judah (c. 731 B.C.), is an appropriate setting. During his reign frequent calamities befell Judah.

Many scholars ascribe the book to the Chaldean period when Jerusalem was besieged and destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. and its inhabitants carried away to Babylon. Hitzig, Bewer, Wellhausen, Geo.

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11 Kings 14:25, 26.
12II Chron. 21:16, 17.
13II Chron. 28.
A. Smith, Driver and others are quite confident that this was the occasion for the message.

This position seems quite tenable and reasonable and is supported by the description which is given of the catastrophe which had befallen God’s people. It is spoken of as “the day of distress,” “the day of calamity,” “the day of destruction.”

Rather serious difficulties stand in the way, however, in accepting this pattern with complete confidence. Jeremiah’s prophecy in chapter 49: 7-22 contains much that is also found in Obadiah.

Note for example the parallelisms: Obadiah vss. 1-4 and Jer. 49: 14-16; Obadiah vss. 5, 6 and Jer. 49: 9, 10; and between Obadiah 8, 9a and Jer. 49: 7b, 22b. Who does the borrowing—Jeremiah or Obadiah? Or, do both prophets borrow and quote from a common source?

Jeremiah frequently quotes from other sources. This makes it a priori probable that he is also borrowing here. Jeremiah’s prophecy against Edom apparently was delivered in the fourth year of Jehoiakim; at any rate, preceding the destruction of Jerusalem, for the judgment on Judah is still future.

Furthermore, the prophecy in Obadiah seems to be a well-arranged unity. Its unity would be seriously jeopardized if it were not the original and thus quoted by Jeremiah.

If it is maintained that Obadiah does have reference to the Chaldean capture of Jerusalem, and does not quote Jeremiah, then one must adopt the hypothesis that both prophets quote a common source, that both are borrowing from an earlier prophecy against Edom. This is, no doubt, possible. But it is only an hypothesis, and again, there is much that can be said for the progression and unity of thought in Obadiah. “It forms a symmetrical whole. The doom of Edom is naturally followed by the reason for that doom, while the promise of restoration forms the natural counterfoil to the fate of Edom and an appropriate conclusion to the prophecy.”

Another argument that the message does not have its origin in the 586 B.C. pattern is the fact that Obadiah does not say that the city and the temple were completely destroyed. There is no reference to Nebuchadnezzar, nor to the Chaldeans, nor to a wholesale deportation.

Obadiah is placed quite early in the canon, fourth in the Book of the Twelve. This is an additional accumulative argument that the message comes out of an occasion earlier than 586 B.C.

The most probable pattern is that of the reign of Jehoram, c. 845 B.C.

14Cf. Jeremiah 48, Isaiah 15, 16.
15Jeremiah 46.
16Kirkpatrick, Doctrine of the Prophets, p. 37.
This is the date maintained by Kirkpatrick, Von Orelli, Pusey, Sellin, and others. It is the pattern adopted in this study.

Placing Obadiah here conforms to its position in the canon; it maintains the basic unity of the book; it meets the conditions described. Edomites were not the chief offenders. It is probable, however, that they would join a raid on Judah from whom they had recently revolted.\(^{17}\) Condemnation of Edom’s pride is appropriate shortly after they had asserted their independence.

Joel, who was active during the reign of Joash, was familiar with Obadiah. There seems to be a direct reference in Joel 2:32 to Obadiah v. 17.

Amos condemns Edom,\(^ {18}\) pointing out the same guilt as does Obadiah,\(^ {19}\) and Amos was active during the eighth century B.C. We notice, too, that Amos looks forward to the restoration of a united house of David, repeating the words of Obadiah to possess the remnant of Edom.\(^ {20}\)

These arguments may not be conclusive. There is still a variety of opinion and conviction. The pattern out of which Obadiah speaks does not alter the message of the book. Its message and value remains the same. That is why Calvin in his commentary leaves the question of date unanswered and wide open saying: “It is sufficient for us to know, that this prophecy was added to other prophecies, that the Israelites might feel assured, that though their kindred the Idumeans might prosper for a time, yet they could not escape the hand of God, but would shortly be constrained to give an account of their cruelty, inasmuch as they had without cause been all in a flame against the distressed and afflicted people.”\(^ {21}\)

THE HISTORICAL SEQUENCE

If we are correct in placing Obadiah in the period of the reign of Jehoram, it was not long before Obadiah’s prophecy found fulfillment. Amaziah, king of Judah, captured the rocky fortress of Sela in which Edom boasted security. A terrible vengeance was inflicted upon them.\(^ {22}\)

A little later Edomites were making raids upon Judah at the time of Ahaz.\(^ {23}\) They spread over the south country even to Hebron. Before the end of the fourth century B.C. their old capital passed under control of the Nabateans. The Maccabees, during the inter-testamental history, waged successful war against them. John Hyrcanus compelled the Edomites to submit to circumcision and to conform to the Hebrew law.

\(^{17}\) II Kings 8:20.
\(^{18}\) Amos 1:11.
\(^{19}\) Vss. 10, 12.
\(^{20}\) Amos 9:11, 12.
\(^{21}\) Commentary, Minor Prophets, Vol. II, p. 419.
\(^{22}\) II Kings 14:7.
\(^{23}\) II Chron. 28:16, 17.
When the Lord Jesus Christ was born, King Herod, an Idumean, an Edomite, was on the throne. It was he who issued the edict to slaughter the infants—particularly him born at Bethlehem, born "king of the Jews" of the tribe of Judah, the House of David, an Israelite. Here the antagonism reaches its height.

The king, Herod Antipas, at the time of our Lord's ministry, was an Edomite. To him Jesus sent a message: "Go and say to that fox, behold I cast out devils and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I am perfected."

When Titus destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D., Edomites were present and are referred to for the last time in historical records. They are destroyed as a nation, as a people, and are swallowed up by other nations. How insecure was their boasted impregnable Petra of which they were so proud. Edom destroyed, but Israel preserved.

The closing paragraph of the book lifts the message out of the sordid. The prophet promises deliverance to the Israelites. They are to be restored to safety: "In Mount Zion shall be escape." God is mindful of his covenant and his covenant people. The house of Jacob shall "possess their possessions." To them shall be restored what had been lost through significant crises in their history. Though they had been ridiculed, though they had suffered violence, they are yet God's own possession, His own agent through whom He will work out His divine plan. They shall possess what had been originally promised to Abraham and his seed.

"The kingdom shall be Jehovah's." In this the prophet points eschatologically to the consummation of history. Here he gives a glimpse of the Messianic kingdom to which so much of predictive prophecy pointed, for which prophets longed and prepared the way. The writer expresses his confidence in the continuing of Israel and Israel's religion. That religion, Israel's contribution to the world, is indestructible and will one day prove its validity and supremacy in and to the world. Calvin speaks of this as the continuing and triumphant church of God. The prophet's words find fulfillment in the sure advent of the kingdom of God, pointing forward to that time "when the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdom of the Lord and his Christ."

VALUES OF OBADIAH'S MESSAGE

The question is sometimes asked, "Of what value is such a 'hymn of hate,' of such an 'indignant oration'?' There must be a purpose for its place in the divine library. Undoubtedly the message was a real encouragement to the generation who first received it. They needed the encouragement, a firm faith and trust in God's just government and his unfailing steadfast love. The Israelites needed just that in the face of
critical experiences as a people. God's promises to his own were assured by this prophetic voice.

For later generations of the Hebrews who knew something of the past history and prophetic utterances within the framework of history this message had significant meaning and value. When they learned and observed the fulfillment, at least in principle, of the predictive utterances of Obadiah against Edom, they must have experienced a reassurance and faith in the unfailing word of God as uttered and written.

For still later generations, including ours, the message with its warnings, its predictions fulfilled, ought to instill greater confidence in the divine origin of prophetic words uttered and now written. As an assurance that here is the word of God, here is a good example of the New Testament verdict:

No prophecy ever came by the will of man: but men spoke from God, being moved by the Holy Spirit.