A View of Value from A Servant of Yahweh

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A carefree attitude to authorship and literary integrity was, of course, universal in the ancient world and it finds further illustration in the little post-exilic fragment of Obadiah — the shortest and perhaps the least illuminating book in the Old Testament. It is mainly a denunciation of Edom, concocted from other prophetic writing.

This quotation from Canon E. W. Heaton’s book The Old Testament Prophets provides us with a starting point. Argument is not raised here with Heaton’s attitude toward Old Testament authorship or even with, as might well be done, the statement of the “concoction” of the “fragment” of Obadiah from other prophecies. The point with which this article takes issue is the attitude which seems so prevalent concerning Obadiah, the view that this shortest book in the Old Testament is of little value, that indeed, it is as Heaton suggests, “least illuminating.” At another place the author, Heaton, further demonstrates his estimate of Obadiah. He refers to it as “... the un-rewarding little book of Obadiah . . .”

Canon Heaton is not alone in his depreciation of this word of God by the prophet. There are others who share a similar low estimate of the writing. To give only one other as an example, compare this statement of the eminent late O. T. scholar, George Adam Smith.

The Book of Obadiah is singular in this, that it contains nothing else than such feelings and such cries. (i.e., feelings and cries of vengeance). It brings no spiritual message. It speaks no word of sin, or of righteousness, or of mercy, but only doom upon Edom in bitter resentment at his cruelties . . .

Professor Smith saw little value of a spiritual nature in Obadiah. It is quite true that he recognized in this little book of only twenty-one verses an excellent illustration of “many of the main problems of Old Testament criticism.” This “value” is so stressed in the writing as to give the impression that Dr. Smith strained to find something good to say for the book!

The thesis from which this paper proceeds is that this prophecy, “The Vision of Obadiah,” is valuable, relevant and enduring because of the nature of its message. We hope thus to show that there is another perspective from which the book can be studied even by the “critically oriented” student of the Bible.

We limit the treatment of this book to three major items of interest: 1. The prophet Obadiah, 2. The message of the prophet, and 3. A View of Value.

ONE / THE PROPHET OBA Diaz

The brief book of Obadiah stands in the Old Testament canon among the twelve prophets between Amos and Jonah. The book bears the simple designation “the vision of Obadiah.” This prophet’s name, like so many other Hebrew names, is in combination with Yahweh. In this case the first part of the name is from the stem ‘b d which means basically to work or serve. The proper name itself means Servant of Yahweh or, as with the Massoretic pointing, Worshipper of Yahweh.

There have been numerous but unprofitable attempts to identify this Obadiah with one of the other bearers of the name (cf. I Kgs. 18:37, 16; I Chron 27:19; II Chron. 34:12; Ezra 8:9). What has generally been concluded from internal evidence is that the prophet was certainly an ardent Judean, a truly devoted servant of the Lord, a student of the Israelite scriptures and history and, as were others, an enemy of Edom.
The message of Obadiah is unmistakably clear. It appears that the one chapter of the writing has but one main theme, the denunciation of that "bitter brother of Israel." To say that the two nations, Israel and Edom, had not been friendly is to understatement the fact. Bitter enemies for years of their history, their story goes back to Esau and Jacob, the anything-but-identical twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen. 25:23,24). There are numerous references to Edom's opposition to his brother Israel in which the Trans-jordanian nation refused permission for Moses and the people to pass through their land (Numbers 20:14-21), revolted from the rule of Judah (II Chron. 21:8-10), and led raiding bands into Judah's territory (II Chron. 28:17). Other prophets had spoken with a vitriolic flare concerning this land of "covenant-breaking" brothers. Obadiah mingles his voice with the chorus of doom as he too speaks out, "Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom,"

Behold, I make thee small among the nations; Thou art greatly despised; The pride of thy heart hath beguiled thee, O thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, Thy habitation on high; That sayest in thy heart: 'Who shall bring me down to the ground? ...' I will bring thee down from thence, saith the Lord ... To the end that every one may be cut off from the mount of Esau by slaughter (Obadiah 2-4,9).

God has decreed Edom's destruction. Nothing can save this guilty nation from the doom which is to be final. Her rock fortresses, her impregnable cities, her proud and wise men are to avail her nothing. Her craft is to be baffled, her rich storehouses plundered, her power broken, her pride humbled, and her name wiped from the lips of the people of the earth. What could cause such an outbreak of wrath as this? What was there in the relationship of the nations which could evoke from Yahweh such a bitter denunciation of the Edomite nation?

The clue to reasons for such a verdict as this from the Judge of judges is given to us in Obadiah 10 — 14. The key word for this denunciation might well be "brother" in verse ten: "For the violence done to thy brother." We have already noted the enmity through the centuries between the descendants of Esau and Jacob. Here is another marked example of that rancor which estranged the twins.

Opinions vary concerning which siege of Jerusalem is referred to by Obadiah as the precipitant occurrence for the oracle, but that which we assume here as correct is the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 B.C. In this exceedingly important event in Judah's history the "brother" nation, Edom, had a hand. Other Old Testament writers in addition to Obadiah have spoken of the part which Edom played in that destruction (cf. Ps. 137:7; Joel 4:2,3; Lam. 4:21,22). Obadiah leaves little to the imagination as he enumerates the sins of omission and commission of Edom. A paraphrase of these verses in modern English which spell out Edom's sin reads like this:

For the outrageous action against your own brother you shall be completely humiliated. In your utter indifference on the day that you permitted strangers to loot his city you even lowered yourself so much as to be like one of them. You should not have stood by apathetically watching what was going on, let alone rejoicing over your own brother's destruction. More than this, you were proud. As if you in your impregnable fortress could never be harmed. In your self-abase-
ment you also looted, kept your brother from escaping, and, worst of all, captured your own brother and turned him over to the enemy. You'll get "yours," Edom. As you have drunk the wine of enmity and discontent you will also drink the cup of nothingness, and you shall be as if you never were.

The "day of the Lord" of which Obadiah writes (Obad. 10-14,16), in addition to being a day of judgment upon all the nations and particularly Edom, is a day of restoration for Israel. Verses seventeen through twenty-one carry what can be considered a message of hope for Judah. Jacob will once again rule over Esau (cf. Obad. 17,18). Couched in these words are the hope of deliverance in which the remnant is preserved; Jacob and Joseph (Judah and Israel) will again be united and restored (cf. Isa. 11:13; Jer. 3:18; Ezek. 37:16-17, et al.). Then will come the destruction of Esau and the rule of Jacob. "The words, 'for the Lord has spoken,'" says Jacob M. Myers, "are like a signature of the Eternal establishing the validity of the prophecy." Also, there will be an apportioning of the nations to Judah (Obadiah 19,20), and, finally, the message draws to a close with the announcement of the Lord's kingdom. God has the last word, and his righteousness will prevail as his people are restored and the nations judged.

We see then that the prophet's message has two major portions with a word of judgment separating them:

1. The Doom of Edom including the reasons for his doom is stated in verses 1-14;
2. The Word of Judgment in 15, 16;

THREE / A VIEW OF VALUE

If the writer were to hold the same opinion as E. W. Heaton, George Adam Smith, and others who think this prophecy is of little value, it would be impossible to write a section such as this. The fact is the writer believes there is much value in this short book which can be used in teaching and in preaching the word of God to contemporary man. With this as a goal we look at this "view of value" through the spectacles of three phrases: (1) "Obadiah, the worshipper of Yahweh," (2) "You should not have . . . .," and (3) "And the kingdom shall be the Lord's."

First, let us consider Obadiah, the worshipper of Yahweh. This "worshipper of Yahweh" is one who believes God is in active control of every phase of his creation and that he has framed the universe according to the law of righteousness. Obadiah was certain of the inflexible integrity of God. The prophet stands in direct contrast to those upon whom he announces doom and destruction. In only two verses of Scripture, II Chronicles 25:14,15, is there any hint of Edom's religious practices or objects of worship. Yet Yahweh is often referred to in Scripture as dwelling in Mt. Seir, Mt. Sinai, Mt. Horeb, and Mt. Paran, all within Edomite territory (cf. Deut. 33:2; Judges 5:4,5; Hab. 3:3). It is provocative to think that Edom would not have "known" the God of its own land. Is it any wonder that a "Worshipper of Yahweh" would look with such disfavor on a people so blind to their own environs? Rather than worshipping Yahweh the Almighty, the Ruler of nations and kings, the Redeemer of Israel, Edom apparently turned to other gods, though as George Robinson pointed out, it is striking that neither in Scripture or apart from Scripture is there any allusion to an Edomite national deity corresponding to Chemosh of Moab, Milcom of Ammon, or Yahweh of Israel. There are a few deities of the Edomites which supposedly are known. Robinson lists the names of several: Kaush, Hadad, Edom, Esau, and Ai, all theophorous names. Josephus mentions an Edomite god, Koze, but says nothing about him. W. F. Albright and Nelson Glueck have identified the Koze of Josephus' writings with Qaus, lord of the bow. However, we know virtually nothing of this god, Qaus, or Koze, or Kaush, and hence know virtually nothing of the religious practice of the Edomites. This is significant. Here is a nation surrounded by nations who show at least cursory allegiance
to a "national god," but apparently Edom does not. Edom is a nation whose god is "self," a nation whose "pride of the nation" makes her feel secure in the mountain retreat of Sela, this nearly inaccessible stronghold. Overweening pride leads her inhabitants to say, "Who shall bring me down to the ground (Obad. 3)?" What better value can be seen than this, to take note of Edom's pride and contemplate its consequences? The pride of Edom is not unique among nations or among men, for all men fall easy prey to the subtleties of pride. She is no respecter of persons; young or old, male or female, affluent or in poverty, pride is an attacker. Pride is universal. There is pride of birth, of authority, of displaying riches, pride of genius and intellect and talents and pride of friendship. Pride is a damning attitude. The reason it is so is because the very essence, the very core, the very cornerstone of Christian virtue is humility. Humility is David crying out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God." Humility is Isaiah crying out, "Woe is me, I am undone, I have seen the Lord." Humility is Jesus Christ wrapped in a towel washing the dirty feet of the disciples. Humility is a cross now empty, stained with the blood of the servant Lord whom we confess as Master. The pride of our lives stands in stark contrast to the humble servant Obadiah, the worshipper of Jehovah. Note the end of this overbearing pride of one who defies allegiance to anyone or anything higher than "self." Note the certainty and severity of the destruction. If thieves and robbers came they would take only until they had enough. Even grape-gleaners would leave a little but the Lord will utterly and completely cut off everyone from the Mount of Esau by slaughter (Obad. 5-9). The words of the proverb ring unceasingly true, "Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). Pride is no less sinful in twentieth century man than in the fifth century B.C. Let us take heed to this enduring value of the prophet Obadiah as he speaks to us today.

Secondly, consider the phrase, "You should not have ..." It is possible to finish the phrase in the many ways Obadiah completes it as he enumerates the reasons for Edom's doom (cf. Obad. 12-14). We shall examine only one of these in our "view of value."

The sentence "You should not have gazed on the day of your brother, on the day of his disaster" (Obad. 12), points to a particular kind of gazing. This was not merely seeing the destruction of Jerusalem before their very eyes. The use of the words "do not gloat" (Obad. 13b) carries with it the meaning "to gaze at especially with exultation or triumph." The Edomites feasted their eyes upon the plight of their brothers of Judah. They gloated over Jacob in his day of disaster. Indifference and aloofness is bad enough, but the haughty and pride-filled men of Edom stood ridiculing the helpless men of Judah as Nebuchadnezzar's men swept over the city.

The language of the prophet leads us to recall another place where men, looking at another scene, are described in the same terms. In the twenty-second Psalm, a well-known psalm traditionally regarded as messianic, the writer cries out, "They look and gloat over me" (Ps. 22:18; cf. Judges 6:27; Micah 7:10; Ps. 54:9, 112:8; 118:7 and Ezek. 28:17). This phrase can be related to the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ where the chief priests and scribes and elders mock him and 'wag heads' at him. What a horrible plight it is to become so insensitive as to ridicule and mock one's brother! For this reason the Edomites are doomed.

Are we less guilty when we look contemptuously, for one example, upon South Africa's political-racial upheaval with eyes worse than indifferent to the shedding of our brother's blood? Let us take heed as evangelical Christians who have all too often been indifferent and withdrawn in our relationship to other human beings. Let us take heed and study Obadiah's proclamation as it relates to the area of our individual attitudes toward Christian social responsibility.

In his recent book, The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition, M. Eugene Osterhaven has made abundantly clear that the Reformed tradition has exercised immense in-
fluence upon society in times past, but he insists that the strength of that tradition, based on the prophets and the New Testament, is its ability to discharge its social responsibility in the present time. One value of Obadiah is to uncover the pride of men, to exhort them to the recognition of God's sovereignty in their lives. Osterhaven says that the Reformed church is in "a favorable position to contribute to contemporary thinking in the relation of the state to its spiritual foundations." Agreed! One way to do this is to continue to proclaim from such texts as Obadiah the falseness of national and personal pride in the face of God's sovereign will.

Lastly, consider the final phrase of Obadiah, "And the kingdom shall be the Lord's" (Obad. 21). This manifests the tremendous faith of the prophet. The denunciation has been made and the reasons given; the day of judgment has been announced and the nation of Judah has been assured of restoration. Through all of this God has ruled, and through the judgment and vindication of his people, together with the subjection of their enemies, God will establish his dominion. This closing thought points forward to the New Testament establishment of the Kingdom of God. In the final analysis the Lord is God and his Kingdom will and must be established forever.

Once again the Psalmist's voice is heard echoing the voice of the prophet:

May he have dominion from sea to sea,
and from the River to the ends of the earth!
May his name endure forever,
his fame continue as long as the sun! . . .
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
who alone does wondrous things.
Blessed be his glorious name forever;
may his glory fill the whole earth!
Amen and Amen! (Ps. 72:8, 17-19).

Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" from The Messiah also sets forth in majestic tone the same magnificent message as the closing phrase of Obadiah with its concern for the kingdom which shall be the Lord's: "And He shall reign forever and ever, King of kings and Lord of lords, Amen."

It is extremely difficult to understand how it is that men can read and study this prophecy of Obadiah and still refer to it as "unrewarding," "unenlightening," or "relatively useless." I am firmly of the opinion that the prophet Obadiah, though briefly written, is not without influence. There is no doubt that much value can be found in a critical study of the book, but far more value is apparent, at least for this writer, in the areas of devotional study and homiletical insight, and in some sense as programmatic for attitudes in prominent social issues of our day. I would commend the study of these twenty-one verses to anyone interested in the Sovereignty of God, the indifference and blatant ugliness of man against man, and in the need for a proper person to worship, for, in the words of Obadiah, "We have heard a message from the Lord" (Obadiah 1).