

The Prophets

Lesson #2

Introduction To Obadiah

I. **Structure Of Obadiah**

- A. Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, having twenty-one verses. It is never quoted or even echoed in the New Testament. In a brief introduction, the author reveals himself as the prophet Obadiah, a name meaning "servant of the Lord" or "worshiper of Jehovah." He makes it clear that he has received this message directly from God.
- B. Obadiah's entire message can be summed up in a couple of phrases: the destruction of Edom (vss. 1-16) and the restoration of Israel (vss. 17-21). The Lord has announced that He will destroy the Edomites because they have sinned against Israel. They mocked God's people in their hour of misfortune and even participated in the destruction and looting of the capital city, Jerusalem, when it fell to a foreign power. Because of this great sin, Edom will be destroyed. Yet Israel, the prophet declares, will be blessed by God and restored to its native land.
- C. There can be no doubt that the style of Obadiah is remarkably original. In his very diction he deviates from the beaten path, using many words and forms which occur nowhere else. Though his language is simple, it is very suggestive, full of thought and saturated with meaning. Pure and idiomatic, it breathes a high antiquity, unmixed with later forms and distinct from that of the greater prophets. There is a vigor and terseness which carry the reader along and place him by the prophet's side in fullest sympathy.

II. **Authorship And Date**

- A. The author clearly identifies himself as the prophet Obadiah, but this is all we know about him. He bore a very common name among the Hebrews. Twelve Obadiahs are mentioned in the Old Testament (1 Kings 18:3; Ezra 8:9; Nehemiah 12:25), but none of these can be identified for sure as the author of this book. Evidently his work was more important than the worker. For the sake of his prophecy, the author has allowed his identification to slip into the background.
- B. The date of Obadiah's work is ascribed to periods ranging from 845 to 400 B.C. However, the two most probable dates are 845 and 586 B.C. or shortly thereafter. The prophet refers to an attack on Jerusalem which can be narrowed down to two possibilities: the days of Jehoram when the Philistines and Arabians attacked the city (2 Chronicles 21:8-10, 16-17), and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (586 B.C.).

1. Arguments for the later date is made on the "we" of Obadiah 1, which, in the mind of some, would include prophets other than Obadiah. This position is strengthened by statements from two additional prophets, Jeremiah (49:7-13) and Ezekiel (35:1-10), and by the words of an unknown psalmist in Babylon (Psalm 137:7).
2. Arguments for the earlier date is based on the difference between the language of Jeremiah and that of Obadiah, which difference points to the conclusion that Jeremiah was later than Obadiah. The strongest argument for the early date, however, rests on the text of Obadiah itself. Obadiah speaks of foreigners entering Jerusalem's gates, of Jacob's substance being carried away, of lots being cast upon the city, and of destruction and disaster. However, the language is not inclusive enough to describe the destruction by the Babylonians. The destruction of the temple and the royal palace, the carrying away to Babylon of the king and the people, and the remnant that went into Egypt are not mentioned. Furthermore, the language of the prophet implies that people were residing in the city at the time.

III. ***Historical Setting***

- A. This book's condemnation of the Edomites is understandable when we consider the bitter feelings that had always existed between these two nations. It began centuries earlier when the twin brothers, Jacob and Esau, went their separate ways (Genesis 27; 36). Enmity prevailed between Esau and Jacob throughout their lives and between the two nations that sprang from them. Esau's descendants settled south of the Dead Sea and became known as the Edomites. Jacob's descendants settled farther north, eventually developing into the people known as the nation of Israel. Throughout the writings of the prophets Edom stands as a symbol of the earthly, non-spiritual people of the world.
- B. The Bible reports many clashes between these two factions. The Edomites rejected Moses' request to pass through their land as they traveled toward the land of Canaan (Numbers 20:14-21), they opposed king Saul (1 Samuel 14:47), they fought against David (1 Kings 11:14-17), opposed Solomon (1 Kings 11:14-25) and Jehoshaphat (2 Chronicles 20:22) and rebelled against Jehoram (2 Chronicles 21:8).
- C. From the 13th to the 6th centuries before Christ, the Edomites settled in the region of Mount Seir. This was a very mountainous region south of the Dead Sea, of which Sela (Petra) was the capital. So rugged is the terrain that the valley in which Petra is located can only be reached through a narrow canyon guarded by a towering mountain walls 200-250 feet high. During the 5th century B.C., the Nabataeans dislodged the Edomites from their territory, causing them to withdraw

to Idumea in southern Palestine. Toward the close of the second century B.C. they were conquered by John Hyrcanus of the Maccabees, who forced many of them to be circumcised and accept the law. Thus, they became nominal Jewish proselytes. In the following century, the dynasty of Herod the Great, descended from the Idumean stock, came into control of the kingdom of Judea. By 100 A.D., they had become lost to history.

IV. ***Scriptural Contribution***

- A. The book of Obadiah makes it clear that God takes His promises to His people seriously. Obadiah taught with special emphasis the indestructible character of eternal justice. God declared in the book of Genesis that He would bless the rest of the world through Abraham and his descendants. He also promised to protect His special people against any who would try to do them harm (Genesis 12:1-3). This promise is affirmed in the book of Obadiah. God is determined to keep faith with His people, in spite of their unworthiness and disobedience. Edom's vaunted wisdom will completely fail her and her wise men will be blinded.
- B. Obadiah also shows that ridicule springs from pride. Because of this, Obadiah is often called "the prophet of pride." When we ridicule others we reveal a terrible spirit within ourselves. To ridicule betrays a lack of brotherly love. It is often an evidence of real hate. Edom and Israel scorned and hated each other throughout their whole history. For centuries there existed between them an implacable animosity. They constantly waged a war of revenge against each other. To a large degree it was the result of selfish patriotism and tribal jealousy. Patriotism to many means little more than national selfishness which easily degenerates into arrogance.
- C. The book also declares the eternal principle of reaping and sowing. The injustice of cruelty, bitterness and passion of one people against another must be avenged. Finally, Obadiah instructs us that in time of divine judgment, God provides a means and a place of escape for those who will turn to Him. The place provided is His Mount Zion, which represents the church.

V. ***Special Considerations***

- A. Verses 1-9 of Obadiah and Jeremiah 49:7-22 express essentially the same idea, and many of the words and phrases in these two passages are exactly alike.
- B. Some scholars believe Jeremiah drew from the Obadiah passage to emphasize God's impending judgment on Edom. If this is true, it indi-

cates the little book of Obadiah was taken seriously by Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophetic figures in Israel's history.