

Voices: Not-so-Minor Prophets: Obadiah

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“Obadiah is the spleen of the Old Testament; we know it’s there, but most of us are hazy about its role in the body.” [Clint Archer](#) uses this evocative—and humorous—metaphor to describe the prophetic book I will explore here.

With 21 verses, Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament. This little Hebrew prophecy is obscure to modern Christians, even when compared to other Minor Prophets like Amos or Jonah. This is a profound shame, and not just because Obadiah is as equally inspired by God and authoritative for God’s people as more popular Scriptures (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Obadiah packs major theological themes into a very brief message and draws on ancient biblical traditions well-known to Christians today—specifically the traditions surrounding Jacob and Esau. Obadiah is like a gemstone: small, but of immense value.

Setting and background

Two pieces of historical information—Babylon’s conquest of Jerusalem and Edom’s ancestral rivalry with Israel—are vital for understanding the message of Obadiah.

Obadiah most likely prophesied soon after the Babylonian empire’s assault on Jerusalem in 587-586 B.C. The prophet specifically references foreigners sacking Jerusalem and the “destruction” of “the sons of Judah” (Obadiah 11-12 NASB; see also 2 Kings 24-25).

However, the Edomites are the primary focus of Obadiah's prophetic invective. The Edomites were Israel's "next-door neighbors" to the southeast, and the prophet condemns their complicity in Babylon's sack of Jerusalem (See also Psalm 137:7-8 and Ezekiel 35).

Why does Obadiah focus on the Edomites? Because according to biblical tradition, the Edomites are the descendants of Esau, making them historic kin to the people of Israel—the descendants of Esau's brother Jacob (Genesis 25:19-28:9, 32:1-33:20 and 36:1-43).

This connection, however, did not lead to friendly relations. The Edomites and the Israelites frequently clashed over centuries (Numbers 20:14-21; 2 Kings 8:20-22). This historic rivalry culminated in the descendants of Esau betraying the descendants of Jacob to Babylon.

Obadiah's message

Obadiah begins by warning the Edomites of God's coming judgment (1:1-9). In his warning, Obadiah highlights the Edomites' arrogance. They lived in rocky terrain, dwelling in elevated cliffs and caves. This gave them a strategic advantage against potential invaders. Obadiah warns them, however, this advantage cannot protect them from God (1:3-4).

As mentioned above, the reason Obadiah gives for God's judgment is the Edomites' complicity in Babylon's attack on Jerusalem. Rather than support their kin, Edom betrayed their ancestral bond, assisting the Babylonians and taking advantage of Jerusalem's destruction. The Edomites gloated over Jerusalem's distress and even went after refugees, killing some and handing others over to the Babylonians (1:10-14).

Obadiah then briefly describes how God's judgment on Edom is emblematic of God's coming wrath on all people (1:15-16) before exploring God's future vindication of Israel. While God's wrath on the nations will be

comprehensive, God will preserve and eventually exalt a holy remnant of his people for himself (1:17-21).

Challenges for contemporary readers

Many Christians may wonder what this ancient history has to do with Christians today. It would be easy for us to approach Obadiah simply as a history lesson, but this would be missing the whole point of the prophet's ministry.

One cannot help but think of many modern refugee crises, such as that facing the people of Ukraine at this very moment, while reading about Edom's mistreatment of Israelite refugees.

Keep in mind: Israel was under God's judgment at this point. If God still judged Edom for their abuse of Israelite refugees even while Israel was being punished for their sins, how much more will God judge us if we abuse or neglect innocent victims of murderous despots?

God's words of wrath against Edom/Esau and the rest of the nations also may make many modern readers uncomfortable. God's wrath is a hard and necessary truth, but people may wonder if there is no hope for the descendants of Esau (See also Malachi 1:1-5 and Romans 9:13).

While Obadiah himself extends no explicit hope for the descendants of Esau, reading Obadiah in canonical context reveals there is hope for these people.

In Romans 9-11, the Apostle Paul picks up the tradition of rivalry between the descendants of Jacob and Esau, but he uses this tradition as part of his argument that God's people are not defined by ethnicity or biological descent.

Rather, God's people are defined by God's mercy and by faith in God's Son,

Jesus Christ. In Christ, there is hope for members of all nations to become part of “those who escape ... the deliverers ... the kingdom [which is] the Lord’s” (Obadiah 17-21).

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