

METROPOLITAN NORTH PASTORAL CONFERENCE

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OVERVIEW OF OBADIAH

The prophecy of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, containing only 21 verses. This distinction tends to obscure its value. Very seldom do you hear it quoted nor are many people (unless they make a thorough study of it) aware of its contents. Yet, it is a book of the Holy Bible, and as the apostle says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works"(II Tim. 3:16-17). The prophecy of Obadiah is in the Scriptures and its canonicity is unquestionable. Obscure as this little book is, it is "profitable" for from it we can and must receive the message God intended it to have.

When studying the book of Obadiah and when consulting a number of commentaries on this book, there are a number of things that stand out and which we will consider in this mini-essay. There are some things on which we can speak positively while there are a number of things that are not clear or are uncertain, such as who the author is and the date when he wrote it. Therefore, we'll take a look first of all at some of the things that are indefinite and then we will take a brief look at the message the prophet offers, something of which we can speak with certainty and conviction.

The Author:

If the book which Obadiah wrote is brief, our knowledge of its author is even slighter. The Old Testament mentions no fewer than twelve other men bearing the same name as the author. Thus, the name Obadiah was a common name in ancient Israel. While a few commentators try to identify the prophet with one or another of these men (such as Jerome, whom Luther says identifies Obadiah with the Obadiah who, under wicked Ahab and Jezebel, feared for the hundred prophets in the caves, as is recorded in I Kings 18:3-4), most are convinced that none of these twelve is to be identified with the writer of this prophecy. From all evidence available, it would be mere speculation to try to guess who this Obadiah was. As Baker in his commentary states, "Fruitless guesses at what God has hidden! God has willed that his name alone and that his brief prophecy should be known to the world. Here he is known only as Obadiah, worshiper of God."

The Date:

If there is uncertainty as to who Obadiah was, there is even more uncertainty as to where he fits into the history of Israel. There is wide disagreement regarding the exact time when the prophecy was written. Basically, there are two schools of thought as to when it was written, and once again, commentators are almost equally divided as to when the prophet wrote the book.

Some scholars date the book as early as c. 850 B.C.; and still others date it later, just after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. As one commentator put it (Archer): "This shortest book in the Old Testament bears the distinction of being the most difficult of all the prophets to date."

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Trying to set the date of the book must be linked with the contents of vv. 10-14. Obadiah has one main theme - the denunciation of Edom, the country of the descendants of Esau. In verses 1 - 9, he tells in vivid words what will happen to Edom; in verses 10 - 14, he explains just why its judgment is coming; and in the closing passages, 15 - 21, he looks forward to the coming retribution upon Edom and to the restoration of Israel in the future kingdom. Thus, it is in verses 10 - 14 which speak about the calamity that befell Jerusalem and in which the Edomites had a part, that the date hinges.

To prove that this took place as early as 845 B.C., some commentators refer to the date of Jehoram when the Philistines and Arabians attacked the city (848 - 844 B.C., cf. II Chron. 21:8-10; 16-17), and the destruction of Jerusalem. They claim that the "we" of Obadiah 1 (Thus saith the Lord God concerning Edom, We have heard a rumor for the Lord...), refers to not only Obadiah, but also other prophets such as Jeremiah, Joel, Amos and others. This position is strengthened by statements from two additional prophets - Jeremiah (49:7-13) and Ezekiel (35:1-10), as well as by the words of an unknown Psalmist in Babylon who wrote, "Remember, O Jehovah, against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundations thereof" (Ps. 137:7).

Further proof for the earlier date (845 B.C.) is the similarity between Obadiah and Joel (Comp. Joel 12:32 and Obad. 17; Joel 3:2-3 and Obad. 11; Joel 3:4-7 and Obad. 15; and others). If Joel quoted from Obadiah, then Obadiah must have written his book before Joel penned his prophecy. Joel, most people are agreed on, prophesied in 850 B.C. Accordingly, Obadiah might have written his book prior to 850 B.C.

Other commentaries set the date at 587 B.C. when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Chaldeans. To prove their point, they base their arguments on the similarity in the language and prophesy between Obadiah and Jeremiah. Jeremiah, we know, lived to see the utter destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans in 588 B.C., but was not carried away captive to Babylon. Keil, among others, uses this argument. The strongest argument for the 587 date 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. But his language is not conclusive 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.

Luther said: To me it seems certain that he prophesied after the Babylonian captivity and that he took his prophecy from Jeremiah, which certain points in this prophet indicate. Also there are clear-cut details that convince me that he was a contemporary of Jeremiah. He sets up his prophecy against the Edomites who were boasting about and taking great pleasure in the destruction and abduction of Jews at the time of the Babylonian captivity. We can see this in Ps. 137:7, which was quoted previously: (Remember O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, etc.) As I have said, this is the consideration that moves me to think that Obadiah was a contemporary of Jeremiah.

I believe another point should be made, and that is the book's position in the Old Testament canon. It is a fact that in the Hebrew canon, Obadiah stands fourth among the minor prophets, showing that they (the early Hebrews and those who drew up the Old Testament canon), regarded it as early.

To summarize, as far as the date of it's writing, there is a great amount of uncertainty as to just when it was written. Some, with good arguments, say early (c. 850 B.C.) while others, with just as good arguments, say late (587 B.C.). Which ever date you choose, the scales are almost evenly balanced.

The Contents:

Obadiah's message can be outlined as follows. First of all, we have nine verses of predicted doom (vv. 1-9). Here Obadiah foresees with startling vividness, the judgment to come upon Edom.

Next, is the section consisting of verses 10 - 14. In the logic of the book these are explanatory; they set forth clear reasons for the doom which Obadiah pronounced against Edom and which history substantiates as having fallen upon that wicked people.

Finally, there are the concluding seven verses (15-21). These speak of the future deliverance of the people of Israel. In them, Obadiah's message broadens to embrace one of the great recurrent themes of Old Testament prophecy, the Day of the Lord.

Throughout, the prophet foretells the destruction of Jerusalem and the consequence Edom will have to pay for it. 1) God commanded the nations to rise up against Edom, 2) determined to lower it; 3) it had trusted proudly in its strong rocky fortresses; 4) yet God would bring it down; and that 5) through no ordinary spoiler, but 6) by one who should search out its most hidden treasures; 7) its friends should be its destroyers, people in whom they had formerly placed their trust, and 8) its wisdom and 9) its might would fail it, and 10) it should perish, for its malice to its brother Jacob; the crowning act of which would be the capture of Jerusalem; (11-14) but God's day was at hand, the heathen should be requited; (15-16) the remnant of Zion being delivered, would dispossess the dispossessors, would spread far and wide; (17-20) a Savior should arise out of Zion, and (21) the kingdom should be the Lord's.

For those who would be further interested in a concise explanation of the meaning of the book of Obadiah, I found Luther's explanation in Vol. 18, to be excellent.

Just to refresh your memories about Edom, the nation which would come and destroy Jerusalem. The early history of Edom begins even before the birth of Esau while the two brothers, Esau and Jacob, were in the womb of their mother, Rebekah. At that time God chose the nation that would descend from the second son over the nation which should come from the first. Enmity prevailed between Esau and Jacob throughout their lives and between the two nations that sprang from them. Highlights in the history of Esau are: the securing of the birthright by Jacob from Esau (Gen. 25:27-34); the securing of the blessing by Jacob from Isaac (Gen. 27); and the meeting of the two brothers years later (Gen. 32 - 33).

The real conflict of the two nations began at the time of the exodus (Num. 20: 14-21), and continued until the subjection of Edom under David (II Sam. 8:13-14). During the reign of Jehoram, son of Jehosphat, king of Judah, Edom revolted (II Kings 8:20-22). The writer of Hebrews sums up God's evaluation of the character of Esau as a profane person, "who for one mess of meat sold his own birthright" (12:16). In the Book of Malachi, he sums up his disposition toward Edom, the nation, when he says, "Esau I hated, and made his mountains a desolation, and gave his heritage to the jackals of the wilderness." (1:3) Throughout the writings of the prophets, Edom stands as a symbol of the earthly, nonspiritual people of the world.

Later the Edomites lived in the rocky country south of the Dead Sea on the west border of the Arabian plateau. Petra was their capital. The Edomites would go out on raiding expeditions and then retreat to their impregnable strongholds in the cliffs (v. 3) of the rocks, where they felt secure. Like their father Esau, they were profane, without religion. They were always bitter enemies of the Jews, perpetuating the enmity between Esau and Jacob, and never missing an opportunity to help an attacking army against the Jews. During their later history the Edomites were eventually driven from their own land at the south end of the Dead Sea and were forced to occupy a territory just south of the land of Judah. Toward the close of the second century B.C., they were conquered by the Maccabees, who forced many of them to be circumcised and accept the law. Then, they became nominal Jewish proselytes. By 100 A.D., they had become lost to history, just as Obadiah prophesied.

"Profitable" for us.

What lessons does Obadiah hold out for us? There are a number of conclusions we can draw from this book and lessons we can learn.

1. The prophet's warning against ridicule. Ridicule springs from pride. When we ridicule others, we reveal the spirit of pride within ourselves. To ridicule betrays a lack of love. It is often an evidence of real hatred. Edom and Israel scorned and hated each other throughout their entire history. They were constantly fighting with each other. Throughout Scripture, the Lord warns against these sins of pride, hatred and lovelessness.

2. The doctrine of strict retribution. Obadiah makes special mention of "the day of the Lord", (v. 10, 15). While he was speaking of that day when God would revenge Edom and all the nations with her who came and destroyed Jerusalem, he was also prophesying against all who reject the Lord and whom He will punish because of their rejection of him.

3. When one shares in the spoils of wrong-doing, though he may not be the instigator of the crime, he is standing "on the other side" and becomes "even as one of them" (v. 11).

4. As a persons sows, so shall he reap.

5. In time of divine judgment, God provides a means and a place of escape for all who will turn to Him. The place He provided for all who believe on Him is Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem (v. 21). This promise constitutes the bright side of "the day of the Lord". It points us to the true peace and joy we all shall experience when we are with Him in heaven. Today, the prophet's words are finding their slow but silent fulfillment in the sure advent of the Kingdom of God and of Christ.

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