

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Obadiah

"Am I my brother's keeper?" This ancient question, posed by Cain when the Lord inquired about his missing brother Abel, has become a metaphor for sidestepping responsibility. But Cain was in fact guilty of murdering his brother. Even to stand aloof when innocent people are violated is to share in the crime. Edom, a neighbor and relative of Judah, watched in delight and participated as Babylon destroyed Jerusalem. Now God would hold Edom accountable. God's judgment always follows such injustice.

Setting

The people of Edom were descended from Jacob's brother, Esau (see [Gen 25:30](#)). The Edomites mostly inhabited the highlands east of the Arabah and south of the Dead Sea. Edom existed throughout most of Israel's monarchy (around 1050–586 BC) and was often a vassal to the southern kingdom of Judah ([2 Sam 8:14](#); [1 Kgs 11:14–16](#); [2 Kgs 8:20–22](#); cp. [2 Kgs 3:9–14](#)). Edom was probably infiltrated and supplanted by Arab kingdoms around 600–400 BC. In postexilic and New Testament times, Edom resurfaced in southern Judah under the Greek name *Idumea*, whose most infamous citizen was Herod the Great, the self-styled "King of the Jews."

As a nation, Edom replayed Esau's original animosity toward Jacob. For example, Edom opposed Israel's exodus from Egypt ([Num 20:14–21](#); [21:4](#)). Much later, when the kingdom of Judah was attacked and taken into exile by the Babylonians, Edom not only rejoiced in the event but also sided with the Babylonians against Israel, seeking to enrich themselves. This infidelity toward their "brother" Israel prompted Obadiah's prophecy.

Summary

Obadiah is built around two related themes: the destruction of Edom, and the vindication and restoration of Judah.

In Obadiah's introduction ([1:1–9](#)), a messenger is sent to call the nations to battle against Edom, and Edom's judgment is announced. The overthrow of Edom would completely destroy the pride of this nation that was secure in its physical location and its intellectual achievements.

The second section ([1:10–14](#)) gives the reasons for Edom's humiliation in a series of taunts. The errant nation had a duty to its brother Jacob that it not only ignored but actively repudiated.

In the third and final section ([1:15–21](#)), Obadiah envisions a coming day of the Lord that will culminate in a universal Kingdom belonging to God. Those who do evil will suffer terrible consequences ([1:15–16](#)), and those who have suffered unjustly will be restored ([1:17–21](#)). The people of Jerusalem will repossess the land inherited from their forefathers and will spill over their borders in every direction. Their nemesis, Edom, will be subjugated as an example of what happens to those who oppose the Lord's rule, and the whole world will recognize the Lord as King.

Authorship and Date

Obadiah's name means "servant of the Lord." He is known only from his prophecy and from clues that the text provides as to his time and place. Several individuals in Old Testament Israel were named Obadiah, including King Ahab's palace supervisor at an earlier time ([1 Kgs 18:3–16](#)).

Obadiah's prophecy was motivated by the invasion of the kingdom of Judah. In 586 BC, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar terminated Judah's independence and exiled its last king, Zedekiah ([2 Kgs 25:1–30](#)). Outside of the book of Obadiah, there is little reference to Edom's specific response to this event (see also [Isa 34:5–10](#)). Obadiah probably wrote his prophecy shortly after Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC.

Literary Features

Obadiah's message about Edom echoes that of other prophets, and parts of it closely follow [Jeremiah 49:9, 14–16](#). It should probably be read in conjunction with other prophecies regarding Edom's future and may even function as an expansion of such passages as [Joel 3:19](#) and [Amos 9:12](#).

Meaning and Message

On first reading, it is easy to regard Obadiah's prophecy as little more than a prophetic tirade in which the Lord's wrath is directed toward Israel's enemies. The Lord's wrath is real, and evil does not go unpunished, but the book has far more to say than this.

Nations, like individuals, should attend carefully to what they plant, because the time of harvest will quickly come. God is offended by wrongdoing, and he brings justice for the oppressed. What Edom did to Judah, whether actively or passively, would rebound on them according to the ancient law of retribution (*lex talionis*): "As you have done . . . so it will be done to you" ([1:15](#)).

The day of the Lord will break in, bringing full justice to the oppressed, punishment to the oppressors, and the onset of a universal kingdom in which the Lord rules over all nations. On a local and historical level, this meant that Israel would be restored to her land and given sovereignty over the lands of Edom. On a universal level, Edom's punishment was only part of a larger scenario of judgment. Not just Edom, but "all . . . nations" ([1:16](#)) will drink the cup of the Lord's wrath. When the Lord returns as King to a restored Jerusalem, Mount Zion will be at the very center of the new order.

This picture of God dominates Obadiah's theology and forces modern readers to face a decision. Whom will we serve—a god who is indifferent to evil, or the God of justice that we find in Obadiah? Only a God who judges evil can reassure us that evil will not ultimately triumph. Obadiah looks forward to that new day when "the Lord himself will be king" ([1:21](#)). This hope of Israel became the hope of the whole world when Christ announced, "The Kingdom of God is near" ([Mark 1:15](#); [Luke 10:9-12](#); [21:31-33](#)).