

## James Philip Bible Readings

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## THE BOOK of OBADIAH

Various views are held as to the date and authorship of this the shortest book of the Old Testament. The close similarity of the first half of the book to a passage in Jeremiah (49:7-22) have led some to think that Obadiah borrows from Jeremiah, some that Jeremiah borrows from Obadiah, and some that both borrow from an earlier source. If Jeremiah borrowed from Obadiah, then Obadiah prophesied prior to Jerusalem's overthrow and captivity by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, since Jeremiah's ministry came in the main before that time. This would mean that the 'fall' of Jerusalem mentioned in Obadiah 11-14 must refer to an earlier assault upon the city, and some commentators take this to be the attack of the Arabians and Philistines upon Jerusalem in the reign of Jehoram as mentioned in 2 Chronicles 21:16,17, between 849 and 842 BC. This would place Obadiah before any of the writing prophets. But it may be questioned whether this misfortune, considerable as it was, warrants the extremes of language employed by Obadiah in his prophecy; indeed it is difficult to escape the conviction that it is Jerusalem's great and tragic fall, as prophesied by his predecessors, that is the subject matter before us. G.A. Smith holds this view, and maintains that the descriptions of the sufferings are so vivid that we must suppose Obadiah to have been almost an eye-witness of them, and that they were fresh in his mind when he wrote. This seems to be the most likely interpretation, and we consequently assume its correctness in the Notes that follow.

**1) 1:1**

Obadiah's prophecy is against Edom, and it will be useful as well as necessary to look at the history of this people that led to such an unsparing denunciation of them by the prophet. The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and the circumstances surrounding the birth of Isaac's sons were surely symbolic of the antagonism that was to mark all their subsequent association. The dissension and mutual antipathy between the brothers were transmitted to their posterity. It is a fact that, as G.A. Smith says, 'of all antipathies which the nation experienced none was more bitter and constant than that towards Edom. The rest of Israel's enemies rose and fell like waves...but Edom was always there, and fretted his anger forever'. As early as the wilderness days Edom opposed Israel (see Numbers 20:14-21, Judges 11:17, 18). In Saul's time Israel fought against Edom (1 Samuel 14:47). David warred against Edom and conquered it (2 Samuel 8:14). In Jehoshaphat's reign (2 Chronicles 20) and in Jehoram's (2 Chronicles 21), as also in Amaziah's (2 Chronicles 25) assaults were made on the Edomites, while in Ahaz's time Edom invaded Judah and carried off captives (2 Chronicles 28:17). At the fall of Jerusalem Edom rejoiced, as we see in 12 (see also Psalm 137:7, Ezekiel 25:12, 14, 35:3-15) and judgment was foretold for her bitter hatred of God's people. The subsequent history of Edom shows that it fell into Arab hands in the 5th century BC, and in the 3rd was overrun by the Nabateans. Judas Maccabaeus subdued the Edomites in 164 BC, and in 109 BC John Hyrcanus conquered them, compelling them to be circumcised and incorporated into the Jewish people. In the Idumean dynasty of the Herods, Edom continued to distress the people of God in our Lord's own day.

This historical review is sufficient to indicate the relentless and unremitting enmity between the two nations and to explain the vehemence of Obadiah's pronouncements against them in his prophecy.

**2) 1:1-2**

We now turn to the text, having filled in the background sufficiently for us to understand the prophet's scorching words against Edom. We should take the Lord's message concerning Edom to begin with the words 'Arise ye...' The phrase 'We have heard a rumour...' stand in apposition to 'Thus saith the Lord...' in a kind of parallelism. In the corresponding verse in Jeremiah 49:14 'we' reads 'I'. The idea of a 'rumour' from the Lord seems to suggest the gradual development of conviction in the prophet's mind as to what the Lord was saying concerning Edom, and this is a valuable indication to us of how the word of the Lord 'comes' to a man, working in his mind a steadily increasing assurance and certainty that God is speaking. We note particularly that it is 'the heathen' who are stirred up by the Lord against Edom. There are two points here. The first is the (by now) familiar pattern seen in the other books of the prophets of heathen nations being raised up by God to execute His judgment upon evildoers, and to do so in His Name as the rod of His anger. The second point is that a distinction is suggested at least between 'Edom' and 'the heathen'. This is a recognition of the fact that Edom, like Israel, was possessed by a sense of distinction from the rest of mankind (so G.A. Smith), sharing a common descent with the people of God from Isaac their father. It is this that explains both the severity of the judgment pronounced on Edom and the bitterness of the hatred between the two nations. Edom (Esau) had a godly background against which he revolted, in a sense that none of the heathen nations ever had.

**3) 1:3-4**

These verses indicate the root of Edom's sin - pride. It is a historical fact that Edom was a naturally fortified country, well-watered and abundant in rocky, mountain fastnesses that tempted its inhabitants to think that they were virtually impregnable (3). The whole lie of the land was conducive to a spirit of isolation and haughty independence of other peoples, not to say contempt of them. From the heights of their rocky caves and fortresses they looked down on others below them, and it was perhaps natural that this geographical attitude should develop into a moral and spiritual one. It is perhaps significant that the word 'stookest' in 11 has the force of 'stookest aloof', for this was in fact their arrogant and contemptuous attitude towards Israel and all their other neighbours. It is also not without significance that the New Testament nominates Esau 'a profane person' (Hebrews 12:16). The root meaning of this word is 'forth from the temple', and has the force of describing a life divorced and dissociated from anything religious. Paul, describing the nature of sin in Romans 1, says that men 'did not like to retain God in their knowledge'. The root of this attitude is certainly the determination to be independent of God (see Genesis 3). G.A. Smith points out that we never hear in the Old Testament of the Edomite gods or that Edom ever had a religion. Their long history of proud, disdainful treatment of Israel and their other neighbours should be seen as the fruit - and the inevitable fruit - of their thoroughly irreligious attitude to life. We shall look more closely at the implications of this in the next Note.

**4) 1:3-4**

One of the things we need to recognise is that the Scriptures are a much more reliable guide than contemporary life when we wish to assess the really disastrous results of irreligion. There are those who are disposed to question whether in fact 'morals without religion' is as impossible an idea as Christians seek to maintain. They point to contemporary life and cite as evidence in support of their case a great deal of genuine humanistic and humanitarian behaviour that characterises people who disavow any religious beliefs. But this is to miss the point. Contemporary life has been undergirt and conditioned for centuries by a tradition of fundamental Christian beliefs, and the Christian ethic has inevitably been woven into the warp and woof of our behaviour patterns, making it inevitable that kindness and courtesy and many other similar Christian virtues should appear to be 'natural' to people who have abandoned religious values. The irreligious man who regards the 'milk of human kindness' flowing in him and 'the quality of mercy' that may characterise his attitudes to others as purely natural products is entirely mistaken. He owes such qualities, whether he realises it or not, to the centuries of Christian tradition and influence in which he has been brought up. It is when we examine irreligious lives that have not been influenced by the same long traditions that we see a very different pattern. The real test is not how humanists behave now, but how they will behave several generations from now, when the influence of Christian and religious values is more remote from them than it can possibly be at present. It is then that they will be seen to run true to type and to prove how unerring is the biblical contention that ungodliness always leads to unrighteousness. The desire for independence of God always leads in the end to moral collapse. Why should we think otherwise, since God is the fountain of all good?

**5) 1:5-7**

These verses describe the completeness of the overthrow that is to overtake Edom. It is a very graphic and impressive statement. It is to be no mere attack by a marauding band of robbers - Edom had known many such - in which more or less plunder might be taken, with plenty resources still left to them, after all. No; this is to be a complete devastation, with everything doomed to destruction in a systematic operation directed by the Lord Himself. One commentator interprets the parenthesis in 5, 'how art thou cut off!' as if to say 'Everyone must perceive a higher hand at work here'. Whether this be a correct interpretation or not, it is certainly true that a higher hand was to be at work. The reference in 7 seems to be to treachery on the part of Edom's allies, and it is a grimly ironic commentary on the situation that it should be these who are used of God to bring this prideful nation to the dust. True loyalty is a scarce enough commodity even amongst those who profess a common concern for the things of God, and it is impossible of attainment among those whose will is set against the will and law of God, for the very good reason that there is something essentially divisive about the kingdom of evil, since evil contains the seeds of destruction within itself. Edom is neither the first nor the last - to have learned this bitter lesson. See Revelation 17:16, 17, where we learn that agreement between the powers of evil is something permitted by God for His own sovereign purposes, not a natural characteristic of unholy alliances. It lasts only as long as suits Him.

**6) 1:8-9**

There is considerable evidence to show that Edom was noted - not to say notorious - for its wisdom and sagacity. Jeremiah 49:7 speaks of the wisdom of Teman, and we recall that one of Job's counsellors was Eliphaz the Temanite (Job 2:11). One can have little doubt that it was a wisdom marked by cleverness, shrewdness and cunning that was bred in this arrogant and proud race, and this is perhaps best summed up in the family it gave to the world of our Lord's day, the Herods, whom G.A. Smith describes as 'clever, scheming, ruthless statesmen, as able as false and bitter, as shrewd in policy as destitute of ideals 'That fox', cried Christ, and crying stamped the race. But this 'wisdom', sufficient to enable the Edomites to lord it over their neighbours, would prove no match for the wisdom of God, when He rose to administer His justice upon them. Their scheming and their cunning would prove abortive and helpless in face of the nations He brought against them in the hour of their destruction. (See Isaiah 29:14; 1 Corinthians 1:19). This, with the same emphasis in 9 with regard to Edom's mighty men, is as clear an indication as possible of the folly of trusting in the arm of the flesh, and is an assurance that human cunning and might, even when it reaches the gargantuan proportions that we see in our modern world (does not the Communist bloc out-manoeuvre the West with almost frightening ease, again and again?) will not have the last word in the affairs of men. We should recall how that master of cunning, Nikita Krushchev, was removed from the seat of world domination almost overnight, and remember for our comfort and hope that 'power belongeth unto God'.



**7) 1:10-14**

There is a good deal for us to learn in these verses, but we take them together because their subject is one. The reference is surely to the desolation that came upon Judah when Nebuchadnezzar took Jerusalem captive. There is a double charge made against Edom here: first, that they stood aloof (11 - so G.A. Smith translates) from God's people, just as, so many centuries earlier, they refused to extend a helping hand to them when they desired a passage through Edom on their way to the Promised Land (Numbers 20:14-21); second, that in the general devastation of Jerusalem, they took an active part (13), and seized what they could of spoil along with the Babylonians. It is this double outrage, or 'violence' against their 'brother Jacob' that called forth such a terrible prophecy against them. What heightens the enormity of their crime is the fact of their common ancestry as descendants of Isaac, and even although the one people were children of the promise and the other not, it is clear that their 'flesh-and-blood' relationship was not without significance in the eyes of the Lord. Indeed, in Deuteronomy 23:7, Moses counselled Israel, 'Thou shalt not abhor an Edomite; for he is thy brother', thus underlining the relationship, in spite of Edom's standing aloof from them in the matter of refusing them right of way on their journey (Numbers 20). Such an injunction to respect family ties would certainly hold good in God's sight so far as Edom's attitude to Israel was concerned also. Hence the severity of Obadiah's strictures against them. There is an important principle here, which we shall do well to ponder in the next Note.

**8) 1:10-14**

Family ties and 'flesh-and-blood' relationships constitute a very real issue, in Scripture and spiritual experience alike. On the one hand, there is the stern, warning challenge of Jesus that 'If any man come to me and hate not his father and mother.... he cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). But on the other hand there is the equally unequivocal condemnation of those who are 'without natural affection', this sin being listed among the blackest, in what is perhaps the darkest passage in all the New Testament. What we must realise is that utter consecration to Christ does not, cannot, and must not, mean loss of natural affection for our own flesh and blood. It is a supreme tragedy that spiritual loyalties should sometimes seem to breed a self-righteous contempt and hardness in the hearts of some believers towards their own families which is the very antithesis of the Spirit of Christ. A wrong turning of a fatal sort has been taken when this happens, and steps need to be retraced very quickly if a complete distortion of the Christian gospel is to be avoided. Love and loyalty to Christ will never mean that we shall love our loved ones the less, but rather the opposite, for when Christ is first in our hearts, we are set free to love others (especially our own flesh and blood) in the manner in which God intends to do, healthily and wholesomely and with great tenderness and understanding. When the opposite happens, and we lose natural affection for them, and have 'no time for them' (either literally or metaphorically), it may be questioned whether, not love for Christ and loyalty to Him, but something far less creditable, lies at its root. There is, after all, such a thing as religious self-centredness and self-absorption, and such unlovely qualities have often become a convenient excuse both for avoiding the plain duties and responsibilities of family life and for obeying the dictates of common sense and human ties alike.

**9) 1:10-14**

There is another lesson to be drawn from this sad record of 'violence against thy brother Jacob', and it concerns wrongs in the Church against spiritual brothers. One recalls Paul's heartsore words in 2 Timothy 4:14, 'Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm', and realises that this unnatural Edomite spirit may all too often reign in a fellowship of believers, to the immeasurable impoverishment of its spiritual life and the hurt of individual members. The quarrels that arise through conflicting ambitions, the long-standing grudges that corrode the human breast and suddenly erupt in bitter words and deeds, the scheming and intrigue of carnal men as they jockey for position against another - these are the things that make Alexander the coppersmith hurt and grieve his brothers in Christ, and leave marks and scars that sometimes a lifetime will not suffice to heal. Well, James tells us that the cries of the hurt and wounded ones enter into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth (James 5:4). 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord' (Romans 12:19). This is always true, and when it seems otherwise, we should remember that the mills of God grind slowly. Men have short memories, conveniently short, and forget so soon - their misdeeds, their hardness and callousness of word and deed fade into oblivion. The victims of their heartlessness do not however forget soon; they are unable to, for they are impaled upon the agonising sharpness of the evil done to them; and God does not forget either. He keeps watch over His own; and the believer who tramples upon his brother and does despite to him in hurt and heartbreak may go on for years in forgetfulness of what he has done, but he will lie down in sorrow in the end, nor will he pass from this life without suffering and chastisement.

**10) 1:15-16**

Obadiah passes from the specific punishment of Edom (presumably at the hands of Babylon or another aggressor) to the thought of the 'day of the Lord'. It is true, of course, that every judgment from God is a 'day of the Lord' to those who suffer it, and part of the significance of such judgments is that they symbolise and point forward to the final Day of which they are but anticipatory expressions. It is natural, therefore, that the prophet should turn from the one to the other. This should encourage us. The fact that God sets to right one glaring wrong is a token and earnest that the day will come when 'all wrong shall stand revealed' and all that ought not to be shall be put right forever. This works in two ways - for those who have done wrong, as in these verses, and for those who have suffered it, as in 17ff. We should note particularly the emphasis in both 15 and 16 on the strict justice of God: 'As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee'; 'As ye have drunk (i.e. in your carousals and rejoicing over Jerusalem) so shall (ye and) all the heathen drink continually (of the cup of My fury)'. This undeviating principle of strict retribution is underlined unmistakably for us in the New Testament: 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' (Galatians 6:7). How well Paul's words underline the truth expressed in the previous Note!

**11) 1:17-18**

These verses express 'the other side' of the day of the Lord, as it relates to those who would be vindicated by it. 'Deliverance' in 17 is rendered 'survival' by G.A. Smith, and Ellicot translates the phrase 'The fugitives who have survived the recent calamity shall be upon Mount Zion'. Zion is represented as an asylum and a sanctuary. 'Holiness' probably has the meaning of 'separation' more than 'purity' here. G.A. Smith suggests 'inviolable' as the description of the position of the survivors. The phrase 'possess their possessions' has been taken in two ways, depending on who 'their' refers to, Israel or their enemies. Is it their own possessions that had been lost, or those of the nations they are to conquer? There seems no compelling reason why both ideas should not be included, for both are true, but the context might seem to indicate the former more than the latter meaning. Certainly from the spiritual point of view the latter is more likely, for it is a return to her lost dignity and glory in the purposes of God that lies behind the prophet's words here. 'Fire' and 'flame' in 18 refer to Israel's role in the judgment of Edom, rather than to her calling to be a light in the world. The fire of Israel will kindle upon Edom and utterly destroy the proud kingdom. In this respect Israel will be the instrument of the God Who is 'a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:19). We must understand this judgment as the inevitable doom that must come upon implacable opposition against God. Esau, as we have seen, was 'a profane person', and persistent, wilful, and final refusal of spiritual values means that nothing but judgment and destruction are left. Obadiah is describing the issues in ultimate terms, in much the same way as Paul does in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10, a passage which may serve to illuminate the prophet's theme here.

**12) 1:19-21**

The force of these words of hope and restoration becomes all the greater when we remember that they were written in what was perhaps the darkest hour of Israel's history, the time of Babylon's triumph over them. They are very revealing. For one thing they bear witness to the prophetic conviction that evil does not and cannot have the last word in the experience of the people of God. For another, they reveal the consciousness that, dark and disastrous as the exile was to be, it would prove to be the crucible in which God's purposes in His people would be fulfilled, the birth pangs of a new order for Israel. Historically, the fulfilment of this prophecy has not yet taken place, and we are faced with two possibilities of interpretation. One is to relate it to the Messianic age at the return of Christ, with a reconstituted Israel literally possessing the land; the other is to spiritualise it as referring to the ultimate destiny and victory of the Church (as the true Israel of God, inheriting the promises made to Israel of old – cf 1 Peter 2:9, 10). Which of these interpretations appeal to us most will depend on which view of prophecy we hold. (This is scarcely the point at which to embark on an excursus on pre-millennial, post millennial, or a-millennial theories!). Whatever misgivings we may have, however, about extreme, literalist ideas about a future earthly kingdom, our studies on Romans 9-11 should effectively prevent us from dismissing Israel as a people as having no further significance in the purposes of God. God's gifts and calling concerning Israel, as Paul says, are without repentance and they will be His people forever. Perhaps the most important thing in these verses, however, is the confident hope of the reversal of the tragic and disastrous situation which had come upon the people of God. It is this idea of reversal, of the restoration of all things, that is the characteristic note in the prophetic testimony, and one which places it in direct relation to the Christian hope of the New Testament, which declares that all that ought not to be - and what an 'all' that is! - will be set to right when 'the kingdom shall be the Lord's' (21). Let us not miss this emphasis, in any lesser preoccupation with the minutiae - and shibboleths - of prophetic interpretation.

**13) 1:21**

It is of interest that some of the early Fathers of the Church interpreted Obadiah allegorically, taking Edom as a symbol or type of 'the flesh' in relation to the spiritual life. This may not be as far-fetched as we might at first think. It is not of course valid as an exposition of the prophecy, but it may be legitimate to make such an application of it. Trace, then, the enmity between Israel and Edom to its beginnings in the fascinating story in Genesis: Isaac's fleshly lust for venison; Rebekah's lust for her son's advancement; Jacob's lust for power over Esau, whereby he stole his brother's birthright and blessing. Here are fleshly manifestations indeed which had tragic and disastrous repercussions! Think also of Abraham. His sin with Hagar led to the birth of Ishmael, the progenitor of the Arabs, to this day the hereditary enemy of Israel. Think of another son of Abraham's, Midian, born to Keturah outside the spiritual promise and unrecognised by God as to the spiritual inheritance. Think also of Lot's downfall; Moab and Ammon, his incestuous sons, became the enemies of Israel's true spiritual welfare down the ages. These things are recorded in Scripture for our learning and admonition. And the lesson they teach us is that fleshly manifestations of whatever sort are always fraught with danger and peril for the spiritual life and the purposes of God in His people. But there is another lesson, and it is this: if Edom is a type of the flesh, the promise given here is that Edom shall be destroyed, and this promise is abundantly fulfilled in the gospel of Christ, by which 'our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin' (Romans 6:6). In this sense also a Saviour has come up on Mount Zion, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's!