

Obadiah (December 9)

Reading Obadiah

From the safety of a ruddy bluff, he surveys the desert floor, awaiting opportunity. At a great distance, he sees a line of travelers marching southward, wilting in the brutal summer heat. They have descended from the siege in Jerusalem, where Babylonian towers lifted warriors to the tops of the walls. As the walls came down, refugees poured forth. Though these refugees lacked provisions, they fled in any direction a break in the line of soldiers allowed.

The soaring “eagles” of Edom – likely black, bearded, or griffon vultures – properly represented Edom’s soldiers for the prophet Obadiah. Like vultures, the Edomites preyed upon the desperate Judeans who fled from Jerusalem. And even though the Edomites dwelt securely in their rocky kingdom, carved into the cliffs of Mount Seir, the Lord’s judgment would reach them, and he would rule over them.

Author and Date

The author’s name is Obadiah, which means “servant (or worshiper) of the Lord.” His was a common name. Neither his father’s name nor the place of his birth is given.

The date and place of composition are disputed. Dating the prophecy is mainly a matter of relating verses 11-14 to one of two specific events in Israel’s history:

- The invasion of Jerusalem by Philistines and Arabs during the reign of Jehoram (853-841 BC); in this case Obadiah would be a contemporary of Elisha.
- The Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem (605-586). Obadiah would then be a contemporary of Jeremiah. This alternative seems more likely.

The parallels between Obadiah 1-9 and Jeremiah 49:7-22 have caused many to suggest some kind of interdependence between Obadiah and Jeremiah, but it may be that both prophets were drawing on a common source not otherwise known to us.

Unity and Theme

There is no compelling reason to doubt the unity of this brief prophecy. Its theme is that Edom, proud over her own security, has gloated over Israel’s devastation by foreign powers. However, Edom’s participation in that disaster will bring on God’s wrath. She herself will be destroyed, but Mount Zion and Israel will be delivered, and God’s kingdom will triumph.

Edom’s hostile activities have spanned the centuries of Israel’s existence. Since the Edomites are related to the Israelites, their hostility is all the more reprehensible. Edom is fully responsible for her failure to assist Israel and for her open aggression. The fact that God rejected Esau in no way exonerates the Edomites. Edom, smug in its mountain strongholds, will be dislodged and sacked. Israel will prosper because God is with her.

Blessings for Readers

Little Obadiah would be easy to overlook. However, carefully consider how this short prophecy is emblematic for all the Old Testament prophetic books, emphasizing the Lord’s reign on behalf of his people, which he would extend to other nations. This theme anticipated the coming of Jesus, whose merciful rule creates the Church, which now encircles the globe.