

THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

Lesson 1, Introduction and Chapter 1

The Book of Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament, but that hardly makes it the smallest when it comes to its importance and relevance, or in its complexity. In Hebrew, the name of the Prophet is **oved-yah**, which probably means something like servant of God or perhaps worshipper of God. The primary subject of Obadiah is a prophecy of doom against the nation of Edom. While Edom is mentioned regularly in a number of the Prophetic books as a nation that will suffer God's judgment, Obadiah pays the most attention to it. Even so, as we move through Obadiah I will incorporate others of the various Prophets' messages about Edom to add some much-needed flesh to the bones that Obadiah leaves out because he is quite aware that earlier Prophets had already established the context concerning God's stance towards Edom, and so, for the Judeans of his day, there was little need to repeat it as it was already well known.

There is a foundational principle the undergirds the words of Obadiah that we'll see in action in all of the 12 Minor Prophets. It is that those who are the people of God, and those who are not, will each experience different end results in the fullness of time. Those who are God's people will be blessed and they will be delivered; those who are not, will not. Those who are not God's people may not see their negative consequences playing out in their earthly lifetimes; but nevertheless, these curses upon them will manifest in the everlasting world of eternity that is to come.

The Bible is clear that although Edom and other foreign nations are depicted as those who are not the people of God and thus they will be judged harshly, it is **not** that a human being must be an ethnic or racial Israelite to be part of, and seen as, one of God's people. God planted a special people to be His...the Hebrews that began with Abraham... but also gave the opportunity for others to join His people or to support His people if they so choose. We read in Genesis about the mixed multitude of various ethnicities who left Egypt with Israel, choosing to be part of Israel. On the other hand, Paul went a step further and even suggested that not everyone who is ethnically or racially a Hebrew will be automatically accepted by God as part of Israel.

CJB Romans 9:6 *But the present condition of Isra'el does not mean that the Word of God has failed. For not everyone from Isra'el is truly part of Isra'el;*

The point I'm making is that merely being descended from Esau, or being part of the nation of Edom, did not by itself condemn a person to God's judgment...nor did being from any other foreign nation. Obadiah does not make such a claim, nor do the other Prophets. Yet, since this mere 21-verse oracle of God revolves around the subject of Edom and a great judgment it is facing, it's pretty clear that Edom holds some special significance to Yehoveh, God of Israel. Therefore, I think it's important to recognize who Edom is historically, exactly where it is located, how it evolved over the centuries, and what role it plays in the development of Israel. That way, when we read Obadiah and then begin to dissect it verse-by-verse, we'll have the background needed to better understand what is happening and why God's ire is raised against it.

"The land of Edom" is the most common name in the Bible for this region in the Middle East. It had, however, other names that include "the field of Edom", "Seir", "Mount Seir", and "the land of Seir" along with a few combinations of the names I just gave to you. There's a fair amount of scholarship that believes that a few times in the Bible when we come across the name Aram (that typically is clearly meant to denote Syria), in fact the context suggest it is a copyist error and ought to read Edom. How, you ask, could Aram be mistaken for Edom? It's because both of these words are only 2 letters long. The vowel sounds (for "a", "e", and "o") are not used in Hebrew. So, Aram is spelled **reysh-mem** while Edom is spelled **dalit-mem**. The issue is that the Hebrew letters **reysh** and the **dalit** look nearly identical and so it is among the most regular mis-readings and copyist errors when Bibles are hand copied as they were for millennia until the 16th century A.D. with the invention of the printing press. According to certain Egyptian and Akkadian sources, the name "Seir" is probably the first name the region was given and known by and it likely occurred no earlier than the 14th century B.C. This means it had this name prior to the time of Moses. The name Seir is likely what the residents of that area, the Horites, called it as we find it recorded in *Deuteronomy 2:12*. Only sometime after the Horites were ejected did these new residents change the name to Edom.

The territory of Edom is only roughly defined in the Scriptures and the perceived boundaries changed over time with each new civilization that moved in to the

area. Further, establishing and describing precise boundaries for nations that we are used to in modern times wasn't possible in the ancient past. Once the area was given the name of Edom the boundaries consisted of the mountain range that stands at the northern end of the Dead Sea and on down to the Red Sea (or the Gulf of Aqaba as it is also known by in modern times) in the south. The northern border of Edom was the Zered River (Wadi al-Hesa), which was also the recognized southern border of Moab. To the east its boundary was the desert and an area that is now part of Jordan. Edom's southern border was what today is the port city of Eilat. There was probably no fixed or well-discernable western boundary, however it seems that it very likely extended to what the Bible calls the Zin Desert. Kadesh seems to also be some sort of western boundary identifier because during Israel's exodus from Egypt we read in *Numbers 20:16* that the Israelites asked permission to pass through Edom and recorded: "Now we are in Kadesh, the town on the border of your territory". Still another place used to help define what Edom considered to be its western border is recorded in *Numbers 20:23*, as "Mount Hor on the boundary of the land of Edom". What is key to understand is that Edom's boundaries were not perfectly fixed or clear, and over time the territory claimed and occupied by Edom would expand or contract. This was not an unusual state of affairs for nations in very ancient times.

The capital of Edom was likely Bozrah since Bozrah seemed to be the richest and most important city in Edom. In this era, the thought of a nation having a single identifiable capital city (like a Washington D.C. or a London) wasn't universal. Rather, in some nations a king might choose some city where he preferred to live and establish his palace...and it could have been in more than one place...and the government simply followed him there. Thus, capitals for some nations were more along the lines of what we might call "unofficial". What is rather astonishing to realize is that archaeological findings and research show that the region of Edom (long before it was called Edom) was settled and had a pretty high level of civilization as early as 2200 B.C.... well before the time of Abraham. But, as often happens with these ancient civilizations, either some kind of a disaster befell the people...perhaps a drought or pestilence...maybe even invaders... and destroyed that 400-year-old civilization around the mid-1800's B.C. For the next 5 centuries that region would remain mostly empty and was just a stop-over place for nomads. In other words, there was no nation or government or even a city in

existence there. Therefore, it was open territory for the next people group looking for a new home to arrive and establish itself...and of course that's what happened.

Archeology tells us that at the end of the 14th century B.C. there was a renewal of an agricultural civilization among the Edomites, the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Amorites, who quickly divided into national groups within better defined territorial boundaries. These kingdoms all prospered from about the 13th to the 8th centuries B.C. until their destruction in the 6th century B.C., about the time when Judah was invaded and exiled to Babylon.

It is informative that our knowledge about Edom comes mostly from the Bible and what we learn about Edom well exceeds what the Bible tells us about other kingdoms neighboring Israel. This great amount of material in the Bible about Edom is so very helpful from the historical point of view. Genesis 36 devotes itself to the people who would inhabit Edom, how Edom got its name, the family relationships involved and clearly these inhabitants are all descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother.

Once the tribes descended from Esau moved in to the region, they were much like the Israelites when they first arrived in Canaan. That is, they were anything but a cohesive nation. Each tribe had their own territory to control and so were masters of their own domain. On the flip-side, each tribal prince also cared only about what was his. But, in time, kings came into power and the tribes lost their independence. During this period of tribal princes and then kings, Edom was strong and its borders secured by a string of border fortresses which prevented nomadic tribes coming from the desert to invade them. A series of Edomite fortresses were discovered during an archaeological survey in eastern and southern Edom, and some also in western Edom. There is almost no biblical information in regard to contacts between Israel and Edom during this period, except that Edom is listed among the nations troubling Israel; nations that King Saul fought against at the end of this period.

While Edom is certainly a largely arid region, it was not without influence or advantage. Edom's geographical location proved to be strategically important in the ancient world. The region was blessed with valuable resources, particularly copper mines. The city of Timna was renowned for its copper production, and

these mines contributed to Edom's economic prosperity. Edom was also located at the crossroads of key trade routes, which added to its significance and its wealth. So, while the Arab world to this day claims that Esau got the short end of the stick and his descendants were unjustly relegated by Israel to a wasteland, that is simply not historically accurate.

Here I want to inject something that we need to keep in mind as we study Obadiah when it comes to understanding just who Edom was, is, and why they reacted against Israel as they did (and still do)...and why God reacted towards the descendants of Esau as He did (and He still does). In the Book of 1st Samuel, we are told this:

CJB 1 Sam. 15:2-3 ² Here is what ADONAI-Tzva'ot says: 'I remember what 'Amalek did to Isra'el, how they fought against Isra'el when they were coming up from Egypt. ³ Now go and attack 'Amalek, and completely destroy everything they have. Don't spare them, but kill men and women, children and babies, cows and sheep, camels and donkeys.'"

Who is Amalek and where did they come from? Esau is considered the father of the Edomites but he is also the grandfather of Amalek. According to the Book of Genesis, Amalek was the son of Eliphaz and his concubine Timna. Eliphaz was the first-born son of Esau by his wife Adah. Amalek is the tribal founding father of the Amalekites. Are the Amalekites and Edomites different names for the same tribe? Or are the Edomites a different tribe with a separate lineage to Esau? Although different groups, they were united equally by very close family relationship as well as by their primary common desire: the annihilation of Israel in its entirety. Their lives were centered around despising God's chosen people and attacking anything related to them. Edom and Amalek were cut from the same cloth: Esau, who hated his brother Jacob for what he saw was a stolen birthright. It also seems that Amalek was infiltrated by the dreaded **Nephilim**...the illicit hybrid spirit-being/human-being people that came from the sons of God coming down from Heaven to have children with the daughters of men (human beings). So, it ought not be surprising that God singled Amalek out for extinction, and paid special attention to Edom for His wrath. Many, if not most, of the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank today are related to Esau so it is no wonder that they have this maniacal hatred towards Israel and openly stated intent to kill all the Jews and wipe Israel off the face of the earth. These long relationships matter,

even if the modern people who represent these ancient peoples don't understand it.

Because of the constant threat from Edom, King David finally conquered Edom after a decisive battle in the Valley of Salt. Contrary to his usual way of dealing with the other nations of the Transjordan that he conquered, David did not leave the Edomite king in power as a vassal but made Edom into an Israelite province ruled by Israelite governors. His reasons for turning Edom into what was essentially an Israelite province was probably primarily economic since Edom had the wherewithal to give up substantial tribute, and they controlled the all-important trade routes, both overland – the "King's Highway" – and maritime – the port of Ezion-Geber-Elath. Israel's rule of Edom by means of governors lasted throughout David's reign and apparently also through most of Solomon's time, until Hadad, a descendant of the last Edomite king, rebelled against Solomon.

We have no information about Edom from the end of Solomon's reign until Jehoshaphat came to the throne either from the Bible or from other sources. It may be reasonably assumed that after the death of Solomon and the kingdom's quick descent into civil war and finally its division into separate and independent northern and southern kingdoms, and especially after the Egyptian King Shishak's campaign in Judah and Israel, Edom finally overthrew the repressive rule of Israel and re-established itself as an independent kingdom...but it was a kingdom that lasted for only around 50 years. With the expansion of Judah southward in the time of Jehoshaphat, Edom was again conquered by Judah. Later during the time of King Joram, Edom rebelled against Judah, regaining its independence. Then at the time of King Ahaz, Edom came under the rule of Assyria as a vassal state. Back and forth the saga went for Edom; from oppressing Israel to being themselves controlled or conquered by a foreign power.

Towards the end of the kingdom of Judah (at the first part of the sixth century B.C.), when Judah was rising up against Babylonian rule, Edom was ready to join them in rebellion since they, too, had been subjugated by Babylon. The king of Edom sent messengers to a meeting of rebels called in Jerusalem by Zedekiah king of Judah. But, alas, Edom soon showed its historic true colors and during the invasion of Judah by Babylon, Edom switched sides and sent its troops against

Judah. Even though Edom gained so much of the wealth of Judah by piggy-backing upon the Babylonian's success and subsequent exile of the Judeans, in just a few years Edom became the target of Babylonian destruction. After that, several small nomadic tribes infiltrated the now severely weakened Edom, and the historical residents of Edom turned toward Judah's territory and settled in its only lightly populated southern desert region. Here, then, is also when due to the Edomites more or less vacating their historical homeland led to what archeologists call The Nabatean Kingdom. In the 4th century B.C., the Nabateans, a nomadic Arab tribe, migrated into the vacated Edomite region and established a powerful kingdom centered around the amazing city of Petra that has been featured in many movies and draws thousands of visitors each year to view it. The Nabateans prospered through control of trade routes and the development of advanced water management systems. 3 centuries later, the land of Edom went through yet another great transition.

By the 1st century B.C., the Roman Empire had conquered the Nabatean Kingdom, incorporating Edom into the broader province of Arabia Petraea. This marked the final chapter of Edom's independent history. The region experienced a slow decline, exacerbated by changing trade routes and economic shifts and soon the area became known as Idumea, and it retained that name right on through the time of Christ.

It should not go without notice that the infamous King Herod was an Idumean; meaning he was really an Edomite even though he attempted to pawn himself off as a Jew. As we read in the New Testament, he was hated by the Jewish people who well knew that he came from the line of Esau...from Edom...their historical enemy. At this same time the understanding of just where Edom was located geographically changed radically from what it had ever been. Edom hadn't so much expanded into southern Judah as they had fled to it, and so they lost the part of their territory that was on the east side of the Jordan River. Their main home became the southern Judean desert and it was during that time it was renamed Idumea.

During those early days of Edom being more or less forced into a shrinking territory in the south of Judah, a substantial change in the relations between the two nations took place in the days of the Maccabees when John Hyrcanus, at the end of second century B.C. conquered the whole of Idumea and undertook the

forced conversion of its inhabitants to the religion of the Jews. The Edomites worshipped a number of gods of nature and fertility, but their main god, their national God, was Qos. Thus, the Edomites were pagans and being forced to accept the Hebrew faith. From that time forward the Edomites, now called Idumeans, became a section of the Jewish people. Since King Herod was an Idumean (an Edomite), Idumea served in general as the firm basis of his authority as he quite naturally considered the Idumeans to be much more loyal to him than the Judeans who hated him.

The Idumeans (think Edomites) participated in the Jewish rebellion against Rome that resulted in the destruction of the Temple in 70A.D. Strangely enough, they found themselves in league with the radical Jewish Zealots who were not only fighting against Rome, they were also fighting against the mainstream Jews who were under the leadership of Anan b. Anan, because the Zealots were thoroughly convinced that Anan and those Jews with him intended to deliver the city into the hands of the Romans rather than engaging in battle with Rome believing that such a fight would be pointless and suicidal. Not long later, Idumea fades from the pages of history and the long history of Edom seems to largely go underground and undetected. But when the will of a line of people is focused solely on going against God's will, and against God's set-apart people, the Adversary who leads them doesn't accept such a temporary set-back as the end of the story. Like a river that goes underground only to re-emerge from time to time, Edom seems to re-surface from time to time in history, as persecutors of the Jewish people, and no more so than we see today in 2023, as they once again do battle against Israel under the name of "Palestinians".

There is no academic consensus as to when the Book of Obadiah was written. However, the predominance of Bible scholars places it early in the 6th century B.C. at around the same time Babylon had invaded Judah and leveled Jerusalem. The reason for this date placement is that the prophecy Obadiah wrote speaks about Edom's role in aiding Babylon's onslaught against Judah. As we wind our way through Obadiah it's always important to keep in mind that when the various biblical Prophets wrote, it was usually in the context of what was going on in their time even though at least some of their prophecy concerned future happenings. Especially in Obadiah's day, Edom was second only to Babylon as the chief persecutor of Israel so it is not surprising that it was they who were the focus of Obadiah's prophecy.

Because Esau's descendants continued to harbor tremendous jealousy and enmity towards Jacob and his descendants (and still do to this day), they used the opportunity of Babylon conquering Judah to move into and take over the southernmost part of Judah's territory since so many of the Judeans had either abandoned their homes to flee from the Babylonian army, or they had been captured and hauled off to Babylon. Thus, there were many Judean homes, farms, and vineyards that the Edomites simply moved into and took over. They also were most pleased to block the fleeing Judeans from escaping Babylon's forces by capturing those Judeans that were fleeing towards the southwest, and giving them over to Babylon. The long and short of it is that Edom helped Babylon to oppress Judah and so Obadiah prophesies that Edom is going to have essentially the same thing happen to them in return.

The thing we must note is that Edom was not being severely punished because they accidentally bumbled into doing something to Israel that Yehoveh didn't like. It is precisely because they did know better, but did it anyway, that is bringing God's heavy hand down upon them. We find more or less this same fate being pronounced among all the foreign nations that either directly attacked and harmed Israel, or aided and abetted (or in some way supported) those nations who did. Remembering that it is essentially the descendants of Esau that are attacking Israel from Gaza today, then it doesn't take much more than reading the news headlines to know who stands with Gaza versus who is opposed to Israel, and thus what fate awaits Israel's enemies sooner or later. The God-principle is simple, timeless, and irrevocable: Israel is God's people. Therefore, to harm, fight, or oppress Israel, or to aid Israel's enemies to do so, is the same as fighting against God.

As we have discussed in other lessons, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in the mid-200's B.C. This translation is called the Septuagint and it is the basis for some of the English (and other language) Bible translations of the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, the anti-Jewish Constantinian Church immediately adopted the Greek Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew text, for its Old Testament translation at least partly because Greek was the predominant language of the Roman Empire. But doing so injected a significant issue...an unintended consequence... for proper understanding of the Prophets, especially,

because the Prophets tended to intersperse Hebrew poetry in their writings. Don't think of Hebrew poetry quite the same way English and modern Western poetry works where the rhyming of words is its main attribute. Hebrew poetry did sometimes involve rhyming, but even more often the "poetry" aspect was reflected by using two parallel statements of the same length. Some scholars have taken to calling Hebrew poetry "thought-rhythm". Word-play was also part of Hebrew poetry. We don't need to get into all of its nuances; it's only that you need to know that the problem with the Greek translation (the Septuagint), and frankly many English translations that are even taken from the Hebrew Old Testament and not the Greek, is that Bible translators and teachers did not and do not always grasp Hebrew poetry and so misinterpret what is meant by what is being said. Obadiah employs much Hebrew poetry and so we'll be cognizant of that as we study its inspired words in order to arrive at a better understanding of the intent.

So much of the prophecies of doom against Edom and all the nations come together in the concept of the Day of the Lord (the Day of Yehoveh) that the Christian and Messianic world is pretty familiar with. While the Day of the Lord is not a single event that occurs only once, nor does it represent something that happens in a single 24-hour time span, it does always signify an act of divine wrath. It is God's sovereign intervention into the affairs of men to put down the wills of men in order to establish His will. And, yet, it also reassures those who are truly people of God that they will be delivered and preserved.

With that, let's open our Bible and read the 1-chapter Book of Obadiah.

READ OBADIAH CHAPTER 1 all

In Hebrew the opening words of Obadiah are ***hazon ovad-yah*** meaning Obadiah's vision. Some scholars say it means Obadiah's revelation, but vision and revelation are similar in meaning so as there is no need to quibble over which is right. Hazon occurs 35 times in the Bible, with about 1/3rd of the occurrences in the Book of Daniel. From a purely generic standpoint, the word means "to see" something. However, in the Prophets it always refers to the content of the prophetic revelation. In academic terms this rather standard form for beginning a book is called a superscription. Since so many Bible books begin with a

superscription, but its relevance is rarely ever talked about or explained, its significance goes unnoticed by Bible students. So, let's briefly delve into the literary use and meaning of superscription as we find it in the Bible.

The basic definition of 'superscription' is, "Something written above or outside something else." In the Bible, they contain four possible types of information: First, personal names (usually including the Hebrew preposition *lë*). For instance, more than 70 psalms invoke the name David; some Psalms have Asaph (Psalms 50 and 73–83). There are even Psalms that begin with the words "the sons (or descendants) of Korah" (we find that in Psalms 42, 44–49, 84 & 85, and 87 & 88). The name Solomon is found to begin Psalms 72 and 127, Ethan in Psalm 89, Heman in Psalm 88, and Moses in Psalm 90. Again: all these are superscriptions so we ought to be able to grasp without being theologians that it matters who the author of a Psalm was.

The second type of superscription are "Genre" classifications such as "psalms" (in Hebrew *mizmôr*) or "songs" (in Hebrew *šîr*), and sometimes some very nuanced literary terms like *miktām* or *makkîl* are included.

The third type of biblical superscription is about liturgical directions, such as *lamnaššēah*, meaning "to the leader"; and there are also sometimes included other obscure terms denoting melodies, musical instruments, and proper ritual procedures that are to be performed.

The fourth type are references that relate to certain individual psalms concerning David's life (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34 and several others). Many of these include technical notations whose exact meaning was of course clear to the writer and the people of his day, but they are not so clear to us. For example, most of the Psalms are described in the original Hebrew as *mizmôr*, a "psalm," but this almost certainly included the understanding that *mizmôr* meant that when the words were recited they were to be accompanied by musical instruments. A number of Psalms called "Song" (Hebrew *šîr*) also include more nuanced directions as to exactly what type of musical instruments were to accompany the

singing or chanting, such as Psalm 4 with its note, "To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments"; and Psalm 5 with its direction, "To the choirmaster: for the flutes." There are 55 of these Psalms. We also regularly find the word "selah" in the superscription and while there are many educated guesses about the word, the truth is that its meaning remains a mystery. The way the Greek Septuagint translates it, it is taken to mean a musical interlude or even a pause or intermission...this is highly doubtful. Bottom line: there *can* be a lot of information in a simple superscription that begins a Bible book. In the case of Obadiah, we find the author's name along with the kind, or source, of the message he is going to deliver: it comes from a vision he had.

Continuing in verse 1, following the superscription we get the words: "Thus spoke the Lord Yehoveh to Edom". I prefer not to get us bogged down in too much technical jargon, and yet as with our realizing the importance of what the information the superscription brings with it brings to us, so it is that we need to understand what these next words mean that completes what academics after call "the messenger formula".

So, the first part of the messenger formula is the superscription. Then, the next word is the Hebrew word ***koh*** that means "thus" in the sense of "what follows". The second word is ***amar***, which simply means "spoke". This is followed by the name of the speaker: the Lord Yehoveh, and then recipient of the message, Edom. So "the messenger formula" that we find 19 times in the Hebrew Bible always consists of 3 parties being identified. The messenger (in this case Obadiah), the sender and author of the messenger (the Lord Yehoveh), and the recipient of the message, Edom. This gives us a very plain understanding of the process by which this communication is occurring and relieves us of any ambiguity. That is, this is not Obadiah's message nor is it his words... it is the Lord Yehoveh's message and the Lord Yehoveh's words. And, it identifies Obadiah as the authorized person who is to deliver the message. In addition to the 19 times when God is the one that is sending the message, there are also over 400 times in the Bible when this same messenger formula is used, but the sender is a human being. This tells us that the "messenger formula" was embedded and understood within the biblical Hebrew culture.

So, to begin Obadiah we have the sentence: ***hazon oved-yah koh amar adonai Yehoveh le edom***. "*Obadiah's vision; thus spoke the Lord Yehoveh to Edom*".

Notice that God's formal name is used. This is not rare, but to the average Bible reader it would certainly seem so. The reality is that God's formal name is written over 6000 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. However, English Bibles omit it nearly entirely, perhaps allowing God's name to appear a half-dozen times on average. Instead of God's name (as it is written), we'll just find it as Lord God, or as Lord. Part of the reason for this is because when we get to the New Testament, we find Yeshua regularly referred to as "Lord". Thus, the Constantinian Church began a tradition of sorts to transfer the office of God from being Yehoveh to being Jesus by simply using the word Lord (instead of Yehoveh) and thereby allowing the Christian reader to assume that this must mean Jesus. If, like myself, you find it important to know which personage or attribute of God commanded certain things or gave visions, etc., then knowing for certain it was the Father, Yehoveh, rather than The Son, Yeshua, matters.

OK. There's been a great deal of information imparted in this lesson, and I think we'll leave it for today.