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**OBADIAH**

## Introduction to Obadiah

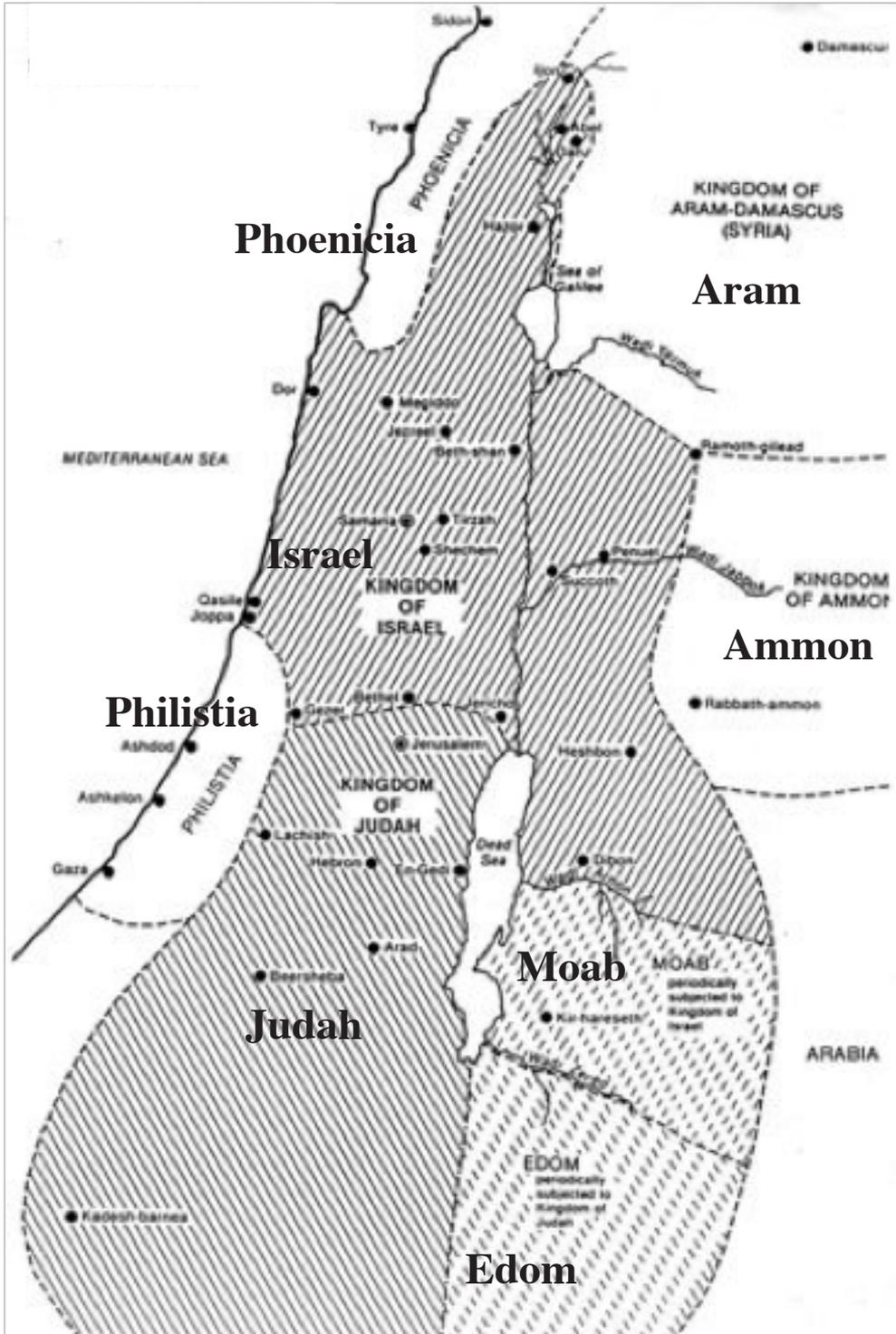
The prophecy of Obadiah is entirely focused on proclaiming God's judgment against Edom. On its own this gives us no precise indication as to the historical context within which it was uttered, for in spite of the fact that the Edomites were recognised as being ethnically related to the people of Judah, their relationship, from the beginning, was one of intense rivalry. Both these dimensions find expression in the stories of Jacob and Esau (see Genesis 25, 27 and 36). The Edomites were a problem for Israel's first king, Saul (see 1Samuel 14:47). David subdued them (see 2Samuel 8:13-14), but in the ninth century Edom regained its independence (see 2Kings 8:20), and the two nations were in conflict from that time on. The prophet Amos spoke out against Edom in the years just before the middle of the eighth century (see Amos 1:11-12).

Most scholars agree that Obadiah is writing some time after Edom sided with Babylon in bringing about the collapse of Judah and Jerusalem in 598 and the destruction of the city in 587. These tragic events led to the exile in Babylon and a huge loss of population as well as economic depression in Judah. The map opposite shows the territory traditionally occupied by Edom. It was bordered on the east and south by the Arabian desert. Its western border was the Negeb of southern Judah and a mountainous area that extended down to the Gulf of Aqaba. To the north was the Zered Gorge which marked its border with Moab. In rough figures Edom was a little over 100ks from north to south, and about 25ks from east to west. Compare this to the map on page 15, which shows that the traditional land of Edom had been overrun by the Nabatean Arabs. The Edomites moved west into the area formerly part of Judah.

The skirmishes that were a constant feature of the rivalry between these two nations was one thing, quite another was the (from Judah's point of view) unforgivable way in which the Edomites cooperated with the Babylonians in bringing about the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 587. Obadiah accuses them of 'slaughter and violence' against Judah (verse 10). He blames them for not coming to Judah's aid (verse 11), for gloating over her ruin (verse 12), for looting (verse 13), and for handed over to the enemy those who had escaped (verse 14). Such sentiments could have been expressed any time after 587. A violent oracle against Edom is included in the Jeremiah scroll (49:7-22). Writing in the early years of the exile, Ezekiel condemns Edom for its role in the catastrophe (see Ezekiel 25:12-14).

However, Obadiah confidently holds out hope that Judah will reclaim the land occupied when Judah was unable to protect itself (verses 17-21). This fits better some time after the return of the exiles in 538.

Without claiming certainty, we join those scholars who place Obadiah some time in the first half of the fifth century.



**<sup>1</sup>The vision of Obadiah.**

**Thus says the Lord YHWH concerning Edom. We have heard a report from YHWH, and a messenger has been sent among the nations: “Rise up! Let us rise against it for battle!”**

The words of Obadiah are classified as a ‘vision’ (חֲזוֹן, *h<sup>a</sup>zôn*). Obadiah has been enlightened by God, and is commissioned to share this enlightenment with others.

His name (עֲבַדְיָהוּ, ‘*ōbadyâ*) means ‘servant of YHWH’.

For the traditional area occupied by Edom, and for the changes that resulted from the collapse of Judah and the pressure from the peoples of Arabia, compare the maps on pages 15 and 23.

Edom (אֶדוֹם, ‘*ēdôm*) may derive its name from the reddish stone and sand that are typical of the area.

The scene depicted in verse 1 is that of YHWH and his heavenly council. A decision has been made to wage war against Edom and a messenger (שׂוֹד, *šôd*) has been sent out from the council to the nations, ordering them to prepare for war.

Obadiah appears to be modelling himself on Jeremiah, who is speaking in relation to Edom:

I have heard tidings from YHWH, and a messenger has been sent among the nations: “Gather yourselves together and come against her, and rise up for battle!”

– Jeremiah 49:14

Obadiah, in Judah, is the recipient of this message, which, he, in turn, is sharing with his contemporaries.

This sets the tone for the whole of the text, in which YHWH, the Lord of history is declaring his judgment against Edom. Judah is being assured that divine justice will not permit the betrayal by Edom to go unpunished.

Verses 2-4 announce the fall of Edom. Obadiah continues to rely on Jeremiah, thereby affirming the authority of an earlier prophet and the continued relevance of his words to a later generation:

I will make you least among the nations, despised by humankind. The terror you inspire and the pride of your heart have deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rock, who hold the height of the hill. Although you make your nest as high as the eagle's, from there I will bring you down, says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 49:15-16.

Edom is being addressed, but the speech is heard by the people of Judah. They are being assured of God's determination to destroy their southern enemy. Sela, the capital of Edom was nestled in among high mountains. It felt that it could 'soar aloft like an eagle', secure against attack.

Verses 5-6 recount the extent of Edom's destruction. Once again Obadiah draws on Jeremiah:

If grape-gatherers came to you, would they not leave gleanings? If thieves came by night, even they would pillage only what they wanted. But as for me, I have stripped Esau bare, I have uncovered his hiding places, and he is not able to conceal himself. His offspring are destroyed, his kinsfolk and his neighbours; and he is no more.

– Jeremiah 49:9-10

Edom may hope that something would be left after they have been plundered. Not so! Edom is called 'Esau' here, as Esau, Jacob's brother, was considered the founder of the nation (see Genesis 36). In verse 7 Obadiah is imagining Edom looking back after it has been destroyed, bewildered by the fact that those who were considered its allies had betrayed her, and taken over her territory.

Verses 8-9 describe a complete routing of Edom. Her pride in her savvy will be no match for YHWH (compare Jeremiah 49:7), nor will her army (compare Jeremiah 49:22). In this context 'Teman' stands for the nation, as in Jeremiah 49:7. The protective mountains in which Edom had put its trust are called here 'Mount Esau', for the reasons given in the comment on verse 6.

**<sup>2</sup>I will surely make you least among the nations; you shall be utterly despised. <sup>3</sup>Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights. You say in your heart, "Who will bring me down to the ground?"**

**<sup>4</sup>Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says YHWH.**

**<sup>5</sup>If thieves came to you, if plunderers by night – how you have been destroyed! – would they not steal only what they wanted? If grape-gatherers came to you, would they not leave gleanings? <sup>6</sup>How Esau has been pillaged, his treasures searched out!**

**<sup>7</sup>All your allies have deceived you, they have driven you to the border; your confederates have prevailed against you; those who ate your bread will establish a place of foreigners in your stead, in which there is no understanding.**

**<sup>8</sup>On that day, says YHWH, I will destroy the wise out of Edom, and understanding out of Mount Esau. <sup>9</sup>Your warriors shall be shattered, O Teman, so that everyone from Mount Esau will be cut off.**

Edom's crimes against Judah

**<sup>10</sup>For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. <sup>11</sup>On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them.**

**<sup>12</sup>But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress. <sup>13</sup>You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity; you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. <sup>14</sup>You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives; you should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress.**

**<sup>15</sup>For the day of YHWH is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.**

Verses 10-15 give the reasons for the divine punishment. It is their behaviour when Jerusalem was sacked (586). Though there were constant problems between Judah and Edom, there was still an understanding that Jacob was Edom's 'brother'. Deuteronomy goes so far as to command Judah:

You shall not abhor any of the Edomites, for they are your kin.

– Deuteronomy 23:7

Their betrayal of Judah in 586, and their taking part in the plunder, was unforgivable. In Psalm 137 we read:

Remember, YHWH, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"

– Psalm 137:7

Similarly in the following lament:

Rejoice and be glad, O daughter Edom, you that live in the land of Uz; but to you also the cup shall pass; you shall become drunk and strip yourself bare. The punishment of your iniquity, O daughter Zion, is accomplished, he will keep you in exile no longer; but your iniquity, O daughter Edom, he will punish, he will uncover your sins.

– Lamentations 4:21-22

Obadiah lists Edom's offences in verses 12-14.

The 'day of YHWH' refers to the time when God's judgment is manifested in history. Amos 5:18-20 upset the expectations of his contemporaries, who assumed that the Day of YHWH would reveal to others that Israel is God's favourite. Amos declared it would be a day of judgment against Israel. Zephaniah 1:4, 14 speaks of the day as one to be feared. Here Obadiah is speaking of the time when Edom will have to face divine punishment for its infidelity. They treated Judah in a shocking way. Now it is their turn. They have brought on their own downfall.

Verse 15 is repeated from the previous page, because, as well as bringing to a head the threat against Edom (in the second part of the verse), it introduces this final section which opens the threat of God's judgment (the 'day of YHWH') beyond Edom to 'all the nations'. Edom is not the only nation to have treated Judah badly, and it is not the only nation that must drink the bitter cup of divine justice (verse 16; compare Jeremiah 49:12). The 'you' in verse 16 is Judah (Yehud) which is being directly addressed in this final section.

Verse 17 speaks of restoration and deliverance for Jerusalem, with special mention of the temple mount, which 'will be holy', probably in the sense of being set apart and inviolable. There will be no repetition of 587. Judah will recover the land taken from it by Edom.

In verse 18 Obadiah asserts that Israel ('the house of Jacob'), which will include the mountain area of the Joseph tribes to the north ('the house of Joseph'), will go out as the instrument of YHWH's justice against Edom ('the house of Esau') and destroy it (verse 18). They have YHWH's word for it.

In verses 19-21 the verb 'possess' (פָּרַשׁ, *yāraš*) recalls the period of the conquest of Canaan. The Negeb is the southern part of what was formerly Judah. It is occupied now by the Edomites, but it will be restored. The Shephelah, the western slopes of what was formerly Judah, is now occupied by the Philistines. It will become Judah's possession once again, as will the land of what was formerly the territory of the northern kingdom, on both sides of the Jordan.

The lot of the exiles who are in what was formerly the northern kingdom (in the land of Canaan) will be reversed. They will occupy the land as far as Zarephath (some 16ks south of Sidon). The Aramaic Targum identifies Sepharad as Spain. It may refer to Sadis, the capital of Lydia in Asia Minor (western Turkey). YHWH will be completely victorious on behalf of his chosen people, however distant their land of exile.

**<sup>15</sup>For the day of YHWH is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head. <sup>16</sup>For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, all the nations around you shall drink; they shall drink and gulp down, and shall be as though they had never been.**

**<sup>17</sup>But on Mount Zion there shall be those that escape, and it will be holy; and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those who dispossessed them.**

**<sup>18</sup>The house of Jacob shall be a fire, the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; they will burn them and consume them, and there will be no survivor of the house of Esau; for YHWH has spoken.**

**<sup>19</sup>Those of the Negeb will possess Mount Esau, and those of the Shephelah the land of the Philistines; they will possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria, and Benjamin will possess Gilead.**

**<sup>20</sup>The exiles of the Israelites who are in Canaan will possess Phoenicia as far as Zarephath; and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad will possess the towns of the Negeb. <sup>21</sup>Those who have been saved will go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom will be YHWH's.**

