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# BOOK OF OBADIAH

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**Approximate date:** 853-841 B.C.E. (some Right); 586-553 B.C.E. (some Right, some conservative-moderate); 400s B.C.E. (some conservative-moderate, Left)

**Time period:** fall of Edom following the fall of Judah

**Author:** Obadiah and/or a close associate (Right, conservative-moderate); Obadiah and anonymous others (Left)

**Location of prophet/author(s):** somewhere in the Land of Israel (Right, conservative-moderate, Left)

**Target audience and their location:** Southern Kingdom Israelites, Edomites

**People:**

Obadiah, Judah (Southern Kingdom), Joseph (Northern Kingdom)

**People mentioned:**

Esau (people of Edom), Jacob (nation of Israel), Philistines

**Places:**

Edom, Teman, Jerusalem, Mount Zion, Negev, fields of Ephraim and Samaria, Benjamin, Gilead, Canaan, Zarephath, Sepharad

**Key Themes and Events:**

God declares judgment against Edom / God decrees that deliverance will be found in Zion / Israel will be restored to its former glory

**Key Scriptures:** Obadiah 15-17 / Edom's destruction (1-16); Israel's restoration (17-21)

**Theological Summary:** The Book of Obadiah is the shortest text in the Hebrew Tanach. The name of the Prophet Obadiah (Heb. *Ovadyah*, עֹבַדְיָהּ) means “servant of the LORD.” While a common name in Ancient Israel, nothing is stated in the text concerning Obadiah’s upbringing or background. Later Jewish tradition associates the Prophet Obadiah with the Obadiah of 1 Kings 18, who controlled the household of prophets against Jezebel (b.*Sanhedrin* 39b),<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Said R. Isaac, ‘On what account did Obadiah have the merit of receiving prophecy? Because he hid a hundred prophets in a cave. For it is said, “For it was so when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them, fifty to a cave” (1Ki. 18: 4)” (b. *Sanhedrin* 39b; *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*).

Cf. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 898; Peter R. Ackroyd, “Obadiah, Book of,” in *ABD*, 5:2.

although most today discount this as speculation. Due to the lack of explicit biographical data, it is difficult for interpreters to not only pinpoint a time of Obadiah's prophesying, but also the specific location where he prophesied. We do, however, know that the purpose for Obadiah's prophecies was to make light of the conflict between Israel and Edom,<sup>2</sup> and Edom's rejoicing over Judah's destruction.

The most serious debate as it concerns the Book of Obadiah among interpreters relates to when Obadiah prophesied.<sup>3</sup> It is quite valid to point out that one "runs the risk of constructing history largely out of prophetic oracles or poetry" (*ABD*),<sup>4</sup> and so any interpretation of Obadiah must be guarded by remembering that one's dating of the text is speculative. The two proposals that are widely made among interpreters is that Obadiah prophesied during (1) the rebellion against Judah during the reign of Jehoram (853-841 B.C.E.; cf. 2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chronicles 21:8-15), or during (2) the Babylonian attacks on Jerusalem (605-586 B.C.E.).

Previous conservatives tended to favor a dating of Obadiah during the Edomite rebellion against Jehoram,<sup>5</sup> but conservatives today largely recognize the calamity that Obadiah describes as being the sacking of Jerusalem by the Babylonians.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the widest amount of discussion concerning Obadiah often relates to the connection of Obadiah 1-6 and Jeremiah 49:9-10, 14-16, and how these sets of verses are related.<sup>7</sup> Some suggest that one borrows from the other, while others argue that since the doom of Edom is a theme of many of the Prophets (cf. Isaiah 34:5; 63:1-6; Ezekiel 25:12-17; 35; Amos 1:11-12; Malachi 1:2-4), both are relying on some kind of common knowledge. It is also argued among interpreters that Obadiah may have been one of those who remained in Jerusalem after the city's fall. A few go even further and propose that Obadiah is post-exilic, composed around 450 B.C.E.<sup>8</sup>

Some liberal theologians adhere for a unity of Obadiah's composition, while others argue that the text is an expanded edition of an original source, or a series of several oracles strung together.<sup>9</sup> Liberals tend to argue for a post-exilic composition of Obadiah.<sup>10</sup>

The Hebrew MT of Obadiah is generally in good condition,<sup>11</sup> and the Greek LXX seldom has to be consulted to correct potential scribal error.

A major theme seen in Obadiah is that Edom has rejoiced over Judah's devastation at the hands of foreign powers (vs. 14-15). Edom will be subjected to God's punishment as a result

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<sup>2</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 898-899; Carl E. Amerding, "Obadiah," in *EXP*, 7:335.

<sup>3</sup> Dillard and Longman, pp 386-387.

<sup>4</sup> Ackroyd, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:4.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur B. Fowler, "Obadiah, Book of," in *NIDB*, 715.

<sup>6</sup> D.W.B. Robinson, "Obadiah," in *NBCR*, 742; J.D.W. Watts, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 3:574; Carl E. Amerding, "Obadiah," in *EXP*, 7:337.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 901; Watts, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 3:575; Ackroyd, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:3; Anthony Gelston, "Obadiah," in *EDB*, 979.

<sup>8</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 902.

<sup>9</sup> Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp 899-900; Watts, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 3:574; Ackroyd, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ABD*, 5:3.

<sup>10</sup> J. Muilenburg, "Obadiah, Book of," in *IDB*, 3:579.

<sup>11</sup> Muilenburg, "Obadiah, Book of," in *IDB*, 3:579; Harrison, *Introduction to Old Testament*, 903; Paul R. Raabe, "Obadiah, Book of," in *EDB*, 979.

of its gloating.<sup>12</sup> Edom was an ancient adversary of Israel, and as such will be judged by the Lord. Edom's judgment is more severe, though, because the Edomites were ethnically related to the Israelites (Genesis 25:23; Malachi 1:3; Romans 9:13), and not a total outside party like the Babylonians (cf. Psalm 137:7; Lamentations 4:21-22).

Obadiah presents the tensions between Israel and Edom (Genesis 36; Deuteronomy 2), and the conflict between the two peoples that had started via the twin brothers Esau and Jacob.<sup>13</sup> Edom was rejected by God, whereas Jacob was accepted. Paul uses this analogy in Romans 9:13 to describe the First Century condition of Israel,<sup>14</sup> and the ancient comparisons of Israel and Edom have caused many to wonder whether Paul is speaking of individual election (as commonly interpreted) *or* corporate election. The Book of Obadiah does contain a warning of what will happen when one fights against God's people, or rejoices when they are judged. God's judgment on the nations indicates His universal control of the world.<sup>15</sup>

In the Jewish theological tradition, Obadiah was commonly read to represent God's disdain for Rome ("Edom"), and then later Christendom.<sup>16</sup> In the Sephardic and Yemenite communities, the entire Book of Obadiah is read as the Haftarah for *V'yishlach* (Genesis 32:4-36:4).

Currently, there has been no distinct Messianic handling whatsoever with the Book of Obadiah. This is likely due to the text's smallness, rather than deliberate omission. Obadiah does ask the Messianic interpreter questions about Judah and Edom as corporate entities, which could alter some perceptions of Romans 9 and God's "election" that will undeniably have to be considered in future theological studies.

### Bibliography

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<sup>12</sup> Muilenburg, "Obadiah, Book of," in *IDB*, 3:578.

<sup>13</sup> Gelston, in *ECB*, 696.

<sup>14</sup> Dillard and Longman, 390.

<sup>15</sup> Watts, "Obadiah, Book of," in *ISBE*, 3:575.

<sup>16</sup> Ehud ben Zvi, "Obadiah," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 1193.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON OBADIAH:

**1. Why do you think God's message of judgment upon Edom is so pronounced and thorough?**

**2. Do you believe that today's Messianic community takes the message and themes of Obadiah seriously?**

## REFLECTION ON OBADIAH'S PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

*Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading the Book of Obadiah:*