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Obadiah: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Transcript

Obadiah is a difficult book to get a handle on. It is the fourth of the prophets in the Book of the Twelve, but historically placing the book presents challenges. Obadiah verse 17 is seemingly cited in Joel chapter 2 verse 32, For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be those who escape, as the Lord has said, and among the survivors shall be those whom the Lord calls.

Presumably then Obadiah preceded Joel. There are also points of contact between Jeremiah chapter 49 verse 7 to 22 and its description of the judgment on Edom and the judgment of Edom in the Book of Obadiah. Some scholars historically have identified the figure of Obadiah with the Obadiah that was over Ahab's household, an Elijah's contemporary.

Yet such an identification is incredibly difficult to maintain when we consider other details about the book. The book speaks of Edom's plundering of Judah and Jerusalem and the judgment that it would receive in consequence. Given that many texts of the Old

Testament speak to Edom's involvement in the overthrow of Judah and Jerusalem, this strongly points to Obadiah being a response to Edom's part in the downfall of the Southern Kingdom around 586 BC.

Judah had already largely lost possession of the Negev, presumably to the Edomites, prior to the final overthrow of Jerusalem. Jeremiah chapter 13 verse 19 suggests this. 1 Ezra chapter 4 verse 45 says that the Edomites burned down the temple in Jerusalem and verse 50 of that chapter says that the Edomians had taken over much of the territory of Judah by the period of Darius I. By the time of Malachi chapter 1 verses 2 to 5 however, Edom was devastated.

I have loved you, says the Lord. But you say, How have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.

If Edom says, We are shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says, They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called the wicked country and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever. Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, Great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. Other scriptures single out Edom for judgment in connection with their role in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Lamentations chapter 4 verses 21 to 22. Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, you who dwell 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 of Zion, is accomplished. He will keep you in exile no longer.

But your iniquity, O daughter of Edom, he will punish. He will uncover your sins. Ezekiel chapter 25 verses 12 to 14.

Thus says the Lord God, Because Edom acted revengefully against the house of Judah, and has grievously offended in taking vengeance on them. Therefore thus says the Lord God, I will stretch out my hand against Edom, and cut off from it man and beast, and I will make it desolate, from Timan even to Dedan. They shall fall by the sword, and I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel.

And they shall do in Edom according to my anger, and according to my wrath. And they shall know my vengeance, declares the Lord God. Ezekiel chapter 35 contains an even more extensive condemnation and declaration of judgment upon Edom.

Psalms 137 verse 7 also speaks to the Edomites sins. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations. It seems most natural then to read the book of Obadiah as a response to these same events, in which case it needs to be dated earlier than the completion of the book of Joel, but almost certainly after the destruction of Jerusalem, as it is responding to

the Edomites actions in Jerusalem's downfall, and prophesying reversal.

As in other parts of the book of Joel, the theme of the day of the Lord is an important and prominent one in the book of Obadiah. This great day of reversal would be one in which the Lord repaid the enemies of his people for their wrongs. The book of Obadiah is introduced as a vision or revelation, it's a message received from the Lord, and it begins with a report of a summons to battle against Edom, a report that had been spreading among the nations.

Edom is condemned to being greatly diminished among the nations and the peoples. They imagine themselves secure, sheltered in the clefts of the rock, presumably referring to the capital of Edom, Sela, which is a natural rocky highland stronghold. The pride of the Edomites is expressed in their boast that no one would be able to bring them down.

However the Lord is able to bring them down, and to humble their exalted pride. Their lofty dwelling is connected with their pride, and also with their hubris, that they believe that they can raise themselves up to heaven, soaring aloft like the eagle, or setting their nest among the stars. Verses 5 and 6 describe the completeness of the sentence that would fall upon Edom.

Had they merely been set upon by thieves, they would lose only those things that the thieves wanted for themselves. If they were a great vineyard in which people were gathering grapes, there would be many left over as gleanings. The Edomites, however, would be stripped, utterly bare, nothing would be left behind.

The severity of the judgment falling upon Edom was in large part due to Edom's treachery. Edom, descended from Esau, had betrayed his brother Israel, stabbing him in the back. Now Edom itself would suffer similar betrayal.

It would discover that its allies, and those with whom it thought itself to be at peace, had deceived them. Even though the Edomites might have shown favour to these people, the people are going to turn upon them and destroy them. Edom prides itself in its might and also in its wisdom.

When thinking about the wisdom of Edom, we might think about the character of Job, Job being associated with the land of Uz, which many have identified with territory within the land of Edom. Eliphaz the Temanite, a character within the Book of Job, is also from the region of Edom. Edom's wisdom, however, would be confounded and cut off.

Likewise, their mighty men would fall by the sword. Priding themselves in their military might and in the impregnability of their capital, they would find themselves dragged down to earth, and their military might greatly humbled. All of this is on account of the way that they had betrayed their brother Jacob.

In verse 11 they begin by standing aloof in the day of Jerusalem's destruction. However, they don't stand aloof for long, like carrion birds and scavengers. Once the great lion of Babylon brought their brother down, they swooped in to take what they could from the scraps.

All of this seems to have fed their pride because the prophet goes on to warn them not to gloat. As they had boasted and gloated in their brother's ruin, they would discover that their pride went before their fall. There is likely some play upon the word Edom in the use of the word calamity in verse 13.

Similar plays upon Edom and calamity and blood are found in Ezekiel 35, verses 5-6. By entering into the gate of Judah and looting the wealth of Judah in the day of his calamity, Edom now has Judah's blood upon its hands. Verse 14 suggests that Edom's involvement was far more extensive.

They were complicit with the enemies of Judah, handing over fugitives into their hands. All of this occurred in the day of Judah's calamity, in the day of the Lord as it came upon Jerusalem. There is, however, another day of the Lord approaching, a day of the Lord which will come near upon all of the nations, a day prophesied by such as Jeremiah, who spoke about the cup of the Lord being handed around among the nations.

On this rapidly approaching day, they would experience their comeuppance. They would suffer retribution for what they had done. We find similar statements to those of verses 15 and 16 in Isaiah 51, verses 21-23.

Verses 17 and 18 speak of the reversal that would follow. Mount Zion would be the place of a restored remnant who had escaped the earlier disaster. They would be set apart as holy to the Lord and their land would be restored to them once more.

Beyond this, the house of Jacob and of his firstborn Joseph would be raised up above the house of his brother Esau. The house of Jacob would be like a consuming fire, the great agent of the Lord's wrath. The house of Esau, particularly as a political body, would then be cut off.

The Edomites had taken possession of the Negev, but now that situation would be reversed. Those of the Negev would take possession of Mount Esau, and other parts of the land would be restored to the people. Those of the Sheffler would possess the land of the Philistines, and the nation would once more expand into the region of the Transjordan.

This statement of the Lord's vengeance upon Edom might remind us of Ezekiel 25, verse 14. And I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel, and they shall do in Edom according to my anger and according to my wrath, and they shall know my vengeance, declares the Lord God. These concluding verses serve to fit the account

of the Lord's vengeance upon Edom into the larger picture of the coming day of the Lord, and the broader eschatological framework of the prophets.

We should recognise something of a broadening of the frame here then. The frame is not merely upon Edom by itself, but dealing with the nations more generally, and the larger reality of the Lord restoring his people and establishing his kingdom. Paul Raab notes the implicitly two-stage process of the final verse, saviours going up to Mount Zion and then ruling Mount Esau.

He suggests that we think of the saviours here like the deliverers of the judges. First Mount Zion is going to be liberated, and then second its rule is going to spread out, extending the rule of the Lord over the surrounding nations, and this is all going to be a means by which the kingdom shall be the Lord's. Within the book of the Twelve, although the successive prophets don't naturally follow from each other chronologically, there are thematic connections, and in this respect we should probably connect the book of Obadiah with the end of the book of Amos, in Amos 9 verses 11-12.

In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old, that they may possess the remnant of Edom, and all the nations who are called by my name, declares the Lord who does this. In those verses Jacob's brother Edom is seen as the first example of the wider nations. Its remnant is to come under the reign of the Lord, that remnant of Edom becoming the first of the wider nations that would be called by the Lord's name.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which the kingdom of Edom relates to the people of Israel over the course of their respective histories?