Obadiah

# Introduction

Most of the material in the Prophets directly concerns Israel, but a significant number of chapters speaks of other peoples in Israel’s world. This material still concerns Israel, because in different connections Yahweh’s attitude to other peoples in Israel’s world is important to Israel itself. So (for instance) a quarter of Isaiah 1—39 comprises prophecies concerning other peoples. Several rationales lie behind them. There is the danger of Judah being too impressed by other peoples and thus relying on them as potential allies rather than on Yahweh. There is the danger of being too impressed by them being afraid of them, rather than trusting Yahweh. There is the danger of thinking that Yahweh will simply write them off and that they will never have the chance to turn to Yahweh.

Obadiah is concerned with one neighboring people. While relations with Edom were significant for Judah all through Israel’s history, they began to be distinctively significant in the sixth century, and this fact is presumably one consideration that underlies Edom’s general prominence in the Prophets (e.g., Isa. 34; 63; Jer. 49; Ezek. 35—36; and among our six scrolls, Joel 3:19 [4:19]; Amos 1; 9:12). The Edomites’ traditional home was southeast of Judah, south and east of the Dead Sea, but they came to move west and north into Judahite territory, and eventually to control the Negeb and the area north into the Judahite highlands beyond Hebron. Archaeological sources indicate an Edomite presence in parts of Judah from the 600s. Obadiah’s prophecy itself refers to the fall of Jerusalem in 587 and to Edomite dispossession of Judahite territory; the prophecy thus relates to this context. But the action that other peoples took over the same period, as 2 Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah tell the story, looks at least as nefarious. The distinctive thing about Edom is that it is Israel’s brother (vv. 10, 12); hence the references to Esau (vv. 6, 8, 18a, 18b, 21). That’s a major reason why it is the object of such opprobrium.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The prophecy’s function is to promise Judah that Edomite occupation will not continue forever; Yahweh will deal with Edom. One possible setting for delivering such a promise might be prayer services in the ruins of the temple in Jerusalem in the decades after the fall of Jerusalem (cf. Lam. 4:21-22); it would then be a response to the prayers people were praying there. Although the Edomite occupation of Judahite territory continued through the Persian period, Nabonidus did bring the actual Edomite kingdom to an end in the late 550s when he took action to gain control of the trade route to the Gulf of Aqaba.[[2]](#footnote-2) If Obadiah’s prophecy dates from before this event, Nabonidus’s action could be seen as a partial fulfillment of the prophecy and as a basis for holding onto it in the expectation that it would receive more complete fulfillment. The ongoing subsequent process whereby the Nabateans took over Edom’s land (cf. Mal. 1:3) could be taken as further fulfillment.

Some of Obadiah (especially in vv. 1-7) appears in a different form in Jeremiah 49 and elsewhere in Jeremiah. It seems that Obadiah has thus adapted material from Jeremiah or that both prophets have adapted material from elsewhere (cf. the parallels between Isa. 2:2-4 and Mic. 4:1-3). Obadiah also reflects many other phrases from other First Testament writings.[[3]](#footnote-3) On the other hand, Joel 2:32 [3:5] seems to refer to Obadiah 17 as a word from Yahweh. So Obadiah takes its place in a stream of the study of and openness to Yahweh’s word that runs through the prophetic scrolls.

We know nothing about Obadiah apart from his name. Presumably he delivered other prophecies but this was the one that particularly came home to Judah and was accepted as a promise from Yahweh that Judah should especially hold onto, notwithstanding the characteristic Jerome noted as applying to various of the Scriptures: *quanto* *brevius* *est, tanto difficilius* (“the shorter it is, the more difficult it is”).[[4]](#footnote-4)

## Translation

1The vision of ‘Ōbadyāh.

The Lord[[5]](#footnote-5) Yahweh has said this to[[6]](#footnote-6) ‘Ĕdôm.

We have heard a report from Yahweh:

 “An envoy was sent off[[7]](#footnote-7) among the nations:

 Rise, let’s rise against it for battle!”

2There, I’m making[[8]](#footnote-8) you little among the nations;

 you’re going to be despised, totally.

3The arrogance of your mind[[9]](#footnote-9)—it has deceived you,

 as one dwelling in the crevices of the Cliff, the height where he sits,[[10]](#footnote-10)

Saying in his mind,

 “Who could take me down to earth?”

4If you go high[[11]](#footnote-11) like an eagle,

 if your nest is put[[12]](#footnote-12) among the stars,

 from there I’ll take you down (Yahweh’s affirmation).

5If thieves came to you,

 if ravagers by night,

How you’d have been devastated—

 they’d steal enough for themselves, wouldn’t they.

If grape pickers came to you,

 they’d let gleanings remain, wouldn’t they.

6How ‘Ēśāw will have been ransacked,

 the things he has hidden, searched out!

7Right to the border they will have sent you off,

 all the people with whom you had a pact.

They will have deceived, overpowered you,

 the people with whom you had an agreement,

 when the people with whom you ate bread[[13]](#footnote-13) put a trap under you.

He[[14]](#footnote-14) will have no understanding

 8on that day, will he not (Yahweh’s affirmation).

I’ll obliterate experts from ‘Ĕdôm,

 understanding from the highland of ‘Ēśāw.

9And your strong men will panic, Tȇmān,

 in order that[[15]](#footnote-15) each may be cut off from the highland of ‘Ēśāw.

Because of the slaughter,[[16]](#footnote-16) 10because of the violence to your brother Ya’ăqōb,

 shame will cover you and you’ll be cut off permanently.

11On the day when you stood back,

 on the day when aliens took away captive his resources,

When foreigners came into his gates,

 and cast the lot for Jerusalem,

 you too were as one of them.

12You shouldn’t look[[17]](#footnote-17) on the day that comes to your brother,[[18]](#footnote-18)

 on the day of his calamity.

You shouldn’t celebrate over the Judahites

 on the day of their perishing.

You shouldn’t open your mouth wide

 on the day of trouble.

13You shouldn’t come through my people’s gate

 on the day of their disaster.

You shouldn’t look, you too, on its bad fortune,

 on the day of its disaster.

You shouldn’t lay [hands][[19]](#footnote-19) on its resources

 on the day of its disaster.

14You shouldn’t stand at the breakout

 to cut down its escape group.

You shouldn’t deliver up its survivors

 on the day of trouble.

15Because a day of Yahweh is near upon all the nations:

 as you did, it will be done to you,

 your doings will turn back on your head.

16Because as you[[20]](#footnote-20) will have drunk on my sacred mountain,

 all the nations will drink, continually.

They will drink and jabber,[[21]](#footnote-21)

 and be as though they had not been.

17But on Mount Ṣiyyôn there will be an escape group,

 and it[[22]](#footnote-22) will be sacred.

The household of Ya’ăqōb will possess

 their dispossessors.[[23]](#footnote-23)

18The household of Ya’ăqōb will become a fire,

 and the household of Yôsēp a flame,

And the household of ‘Ēśāw straw,

 and they will burn it and consume it.

There will be no survivor

 for the household of ‘Ēśāw,

 because Yahweh has spoken.

19So they, the Negeb, will possess the highland of ‘Ēśāw,

 and the Lowland the Pəlištites.

They will possess the region of ‘Eprayim

 and the region of Šōmərôn

 and Binyāmin [will possess] the Gil’ād.[[24]](#footnote-24)

20The exile community of this force[[25]](#footnote-25) who belong to the Yiśrā’ēlites

 [will possess] what belongs to the Phoenicians[[26]](#footnote-26) right to Ṣārəpat

And the exile community of Yərûšālaim who are in Səpārad—

 they will possess the Negeb towns.

21And deliverers[[27]](#footnote-27) will go up on Mount Ṣiyyôn

 to exercise authority for the highland of ‘Ēśāw,

 and the reign will be Yahweh’s.

## Interpretation

Obadiah is Yahweh’s declaration concerning calamity he intends to bring on Edom. It begins with a commission to the nations to attack Edom (v. 1), which thinks it is in a secure, safe, invulnerable position, but is due for a rude awakening (vv. 2-4). It will be a devastating, thorough disaster, with which neither Edom’s insight nor its military forces will be able to cope (vv. 5-10). The reason for it is the stance it took in relation to Judah when it cooperated with foreigners besieging the city, action of which it now needs to be wary (vv. 11-14). The recompense it receives will come to all the nations (vv. 15-16). But for Israel there will be deliverance, and it will be Yahweh’s means of setting fire to Edom (vv. 17-18). Israel will regain the land it had occupied at the height of its flourishing (vv. 19-21a). And Yahweh will reign (v. 21b).

**Obadiah 1.** The preface to the scroll, presumably provided by a disciple, simply calls it “Obadiah’s vision” (v. 1a). There could be no more succinct way of indicating that what follows is something that comes from Yahweh via a particular human being. It’s odd that we are not given Obadiah’s full name, Obadiah ben x; contrast Hosea, Joel, Jonah, and Micah—not Amos, but at least we are given a little more information about his background. But the conciseness fits the brevity of the entire scroll. The term “vision” is used in a loose sense, like the word “revelation” in English (see Amos 1:1; 7:1-3, and the comments). It appears also in the prefaces to Isaiah and to Nahum (cf. also 1 Sam. 3:1).

Obadiah’s own introduction to his message follows (v. 1bα). First he himself tells us that what follows indeed came from Yahweh. In saying “the Lord Yahweh has said this to Edom” he speaks like the messenger of a human king (see the Introduction to Amos 1:3—3:2). The message thus addresses Edom, metaphorically at least. There is no implication that it is Obadiah’s job to deliver it in Edom: compare the words addressed to Cyrus and to the mountains of Israel in Isaiah 45:1 and Ezekiel 36:4, which it was hardly the prophets’ task to deliver to them. As in those cases, the message that is formally addressed to Edom is for Judah to hear. The point surfaces in the occasional references to Edom in the third person (e.g., vv. 5, 7-8). By means of this message formally addressed to Edom, actually “the suffering community” is assured “that God is at work…. A messenger is simultaneously on the way in their service.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Disconcertingly,[[29]](#footnote-29) an elaboration on the introduction comes next (v. 1bβγδ), defamiliarizing it,[[30]](#footnote-30) before the actual message from Yahweh follows. The elaboration takes the form of a self-contained tricolon, opening with the further striking statement about hearing a report from Yahweh. The effect of v. 1 as a whole is to convey a split-screen impression. Yahweh has issued a message for Edom, and at the same time a process has been set under way which will initiate what the message says.

Who is the “we”? Maybe it’s the “royal we,” and Obadiah just means himself; the plural then adds to his authority. Maybe it’s Obadiah and his people, the Judahites; the plural then invites his Judahite hearers to identify with the report, and to be encouraged by its contents. And/or maybe Obadiah is referring to the earlier prophecy of which another version appears in Jeremiah 49, which he and his fellow-Judahites are familiar with. Or maybe the “we” is the members of the heavenly king’s cabinet to whose deliberations and decision-making Obadiah is admitted as a prophet; the plural then encourages the Judahites to be assured that what follows really does embody Yahweh’s intent.

Whichever is the right answer, the content of the report presupposes that Yahweh and his administration are the unidentified agent lying behind the passive verb “was sent off.” The envoy may be a supernatural figure, a representative or a member of Yahweh’s cabinet, whose job it is to inspire the nations to start a fight against Edom (cf. Joel 3:9 [4:9]). Or it may be an ordinary human emissary who is indirectly sent by Yahweh but directly sent by one nation to other nations with the charge to start the fight. Or it may be a prophet. The subject of “let’s rise” is then Yahweh and these human agents of his. There’s no indication of why the nations should take an initiative and start a fight, except that Yahweh says so; but nations do such things. The sort of people the nations are will be signified further in v. 7. But the plural expression “the nations” often refers to the great imperial power of the day, and it was the imperial power (the Babylonians) that actually took action against Edom in the 550s.

**Obadiah 2-4.** Now at last we get the beginning of the message to Edom to which Obadiah referred. The message begins to tell Edom how Yahweh intends to bring about its downfall.

He first speaks of pulling Edom down from its lofty position (v. 2), using a qatal verb (which would usually denote “Already I have made you little/you are despised”) to signify that in effect he has already acted. At the moment Edom is big and/or it thinks of itself as such. It’s going to become nothing. In the parallelism, the participle “despised” makes explicit the connotation of “little” and intensifies the statement, and the effect is heightened by the adverb that comes as the last word in the verse.

It has a natural confidence (v. 3) deriving from its physically strong position. Its capital, Sela (“Cliff”), possibly to be identified with Petra, sits on a massif. Like Jerusalem, on three sides it is flanked by steep slopes; it can only be easily approached from the southeast.[[31]](#footnote-31) It’s easy to defend and hard to attack. Such a position encourages the assumption that one is unassailable. It’s like a bird sitting in a crevice. But such confidence is self-deception because it leaves God out of account.

Nesting on its cliff (v. 4), it might already seem as well-placed as an eagle. But even if it flies higher, even if it makes its home among the stars, Yahweh can reach it and pull it down. Like the actual mention of Edom, this declaration links with the last chapter of Amos. As Yahweh can reach Israel anywhere, he can reach Edom anywhere. The tricolon brings the subsection to a climax and the reminder about whose affirmation this is then underlines the sense of closure.

**Obadiah 5-7abα.** Edom will not only be brought down but devastated. Yahweh (or Obadiah—the speaker is unidentified) makes the point first by an unfavorable contrast with two other things that can happen to people.

Robbers (v. 5), especially violent and destructive ones (the second colon intensifies the first) have insatiable appetites. Everything can be useful to them; it’s a truly devastating experience. Admittedly, on the other hand, people looting Edom’s grape harvest (it’s good country for vines) don’t take every grape. The “wouldn’t they” phrases (which open vv. 5a and 5b in the Hebrew) may suggest that these are two traditional sayings.[[32]](#footnote-32)

This ransack of Edom won’t work by half measures (v. 6). Its invaders will look in every corner of the land and take everything worth taking. Here for the first time Obadiah mentions Esau (who gets few references in the First Testament outside Genesis) and thus “sets up the motif of conflict between brothers that will be developed further in vv. 10-14.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The attackers will drive off the Edomites themselves (v. 7abα) to the very borders of the Edomites’ own country. Further, those who are doing the ransacking and the driving off are people with whom the Edomites had a treaty relationship; the word for “pact” is *bərît*, commonly translated “covenant.” The ransackers will have reneged on their commitment (cf. Ps. 55:20 [21]). They will have betrayed and gone back on their agreement. People with whom the Edomites ate bread in solemnizing their mutual commitment (cf. Ps. 41:9 [10]), the further unexpected closing third colon says, are the very ones who will ensnare Edom. The Edomites will be the victims of self-deceit (v. 3) and deceit by their allies.

**Obadiah 7bβ-9.** The transition to talk of understanding links with what follows. It’s been thought that the Edomites had a reputation for insight and understanding,[[34]](#footnote-34) but the evidence is thin. Explicit links of Edom and insight are confined to this verse, an equivalent in Jeremiah 49, and an allusion in Baruch 3:22-23 which could (like much of Baruch) be based on these references in the Prophets.

But any people needs insight and expertise (v. 7bβ-8a) if it’s to be able to run its affairs and cope with crises (e.g., Isa. 19:11-12; Jer. 50:35). One factor in bringing about Edom’s downfall “on that day” will be its lack of any insight into what’s going on. Yahweh affirms that this is how it will be.

Yahweh can affirm it because he is again behind it (v. 8b). Edom is going to lose its experts and be unable to formulate political and military polices that will work. The expression “the highland of Esau” comes only in Obadiah. It’s not really a name—the equivalent actual name is Mount Se’ir or the Highland of Se’ir (cf. Gen 36:8-9). But Esau was Jacob’s twin brother and the ancestor of Edom, as Jacob was the ancestor of Israel. Both peoples are referred to by those alternative names on the basis of stories told in Genesis (Gen. 25:30; 32:29; see also 36:8, 43). Israel was aware of a brotherly relationship with Edom (Num. 20:14-21; Deut.23:7).

Teman (v. 9) is the name of the eldest son of Esau’s eldest son (Gen. 36:10-11) and the ancestor of a key Edomite clan whose name can thus be a name for Edom as Ephraim can be a name for the northern kingdom of Israel. Alongside expert politicians, a nation’s other military necessity is its strong men, its actual fighters. Yahweh will also ensure that Edom’s warriors will be too scared to fight. And the aim of Yahweh’s action is to bring about a complete elimination of them.

**Obadiah 10-11**.Whereas so far Obadiahhas been mostly expounding the significance of the prophecy that also comes in Jeremiah 49, he now speaks words that (as far as we know) Yahweh gives him directly. Edom was just one among many peoples for Jeremiah, who does not focus on Edom or speak of things Edom has done. Obadiah does so focus, and the material in vv. 10-15 shows the reason. Obadiah brings the prophecy in Jeremiah up to date in light of events, and promises its imminent fulfillment, a little like Matthew 24 and Luke21 in relation to Mark 13. Ten times Obadiah now refers to “the day” when disaster came to Judah, when Edom aided and abetted its attackers, and these references to this day come between the references to another day, “that day” (v. 8), “a day of Yahweh” (v. 15). “The book situates the prophet between the two ‘days,’”[[35]](#footnote-35) and situates Edom and Judah between them, too.

Why is Yahweh set on destroying Edom (v. 10)? It’s because Edom dishonored its brotherly relationship with Jacob. Obadiah begins this line with a “double beat of a drum,”[[36]](#footnote-36) the reference to slaughter and violence. But the words “violence” and “brother” especially shouldn’t come in the same sentence. Grammatically, Obadiah relates the two words even more closely. Yahweh takes action because of Edom’s brother-violence. It isn’t the whole rationale for his action, but it’s an element in the picture. Whereas any nation hopes to gain honor through winning victories, as is illustrated by the victory parades that Western nations hold, a defeat means humiliation and shame, and total defeat means complete humiliation. It will cover Esau like a garment. It will not just be the military who are cut of (v. 9); Esau has cut off, and the nation as a whole will be cut off.

Specifically, Edom stood back (v. 11) on the day when a brotherly relationship implies standing with one’s brother. Obadiah is a bit ambiguous about exactly what the Edomites have done. He doesn’t quite say that they were directly involved in the slaughter to which he has referred, and here he simply speaks of them watching but holding back from coming to Judah’s support. Resources (*ḥayil*) can cover wealth in both people and things (cf. Joel 2:12, 22, 25), and both could apply here. The reference to taking things or people captive (the verb *šābāh*) is the first explicit clue to the event Obadiah is referring to, the taking of Jerusalem in 587 and the captivity of many of its people (the verb recurs in Solomon’s prayer about the prospect of captivity in 1 Kings 8:46-51). The aliens or foreigners are unnamed; perhaps naming them would take the focus on Edom. They came into Edom’s brother’s gates, which is not merely a literal statement (2 Kings 25:4 says the Babylonians actually broke through the city wall) but a symbolic one. The gates stand for the community (e.g. Exod. 20:10; Zech. 8:16). The community was invaded and subject to assault. The aliens carved up the city like the Western powers carving up the Middle East after the First World War. “For Obadiah, Jerusalem was Mount Zion, Yahweh’s holy mountain…, but for the attackers it was a commodity to be contested over.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Edom stood and watched, so it was implicated in the action. It fits with Obadiah’s ambiguity that Second Kings doesn’t speak of an Edomite involvement with the Babylonians in the action against Jerusalem which comes to a climax in its the siege and capture; it is Aram, Moab, and Ammon that get mentioned (2 Kings 24:2). But brother Edom didn’t help either. And the period did see a gradual Edomite encroachment on Judah from the south, so that the Edomites eventually dominated the territory almost as far as Bethlehem (cf. Ezek. 35; 36:1-5), and it would make sense if Obadiah has this penetration in mind. The tricolon form of v. 11b suggests that we should see it as the end of a little subsection; the third colon itself carries emphasis.

**Obadiah 12-14.** A further double drumbeat recurs through this next subsection: “You shouldn’t” (*‘al* plus a second-person yiqtol verb), almost ten commandment-like,[[38]](#footnote-38) and “at/on the day of” (*bəyôm*). Obadiah sets about implicitly expanding on the preceding explanation or accusation, though again he doesn’t quite indict Edom for specific actions. Although he has the fall of Jerusalem in mind, he doesn’t talk about what Edom has allegedly done but rather issues an exhortation designed to have purchase now. It would even carry the implication that a proper response on Edom’s part would make Yahweh rethink the question of acting against Edom.

He’s your brother, for goodness’ sake (v. 12)! “Looking” can have a positive or a negative connotation—it can suggest (e.g.) compassion or grief or contempt or satisfaction; the next line points to the implication here. Just looking (and not doing anything by way of offering assistance) also restates the idea of standing back. In the context someone’s “day” will imply a bad day (cf. Hos. 7:5 and the comments), but the parallel colon again makes the point explicit. “Opening the mouth wide” restates the point again if it refers to mocking or laughing, but like the English expression “opening your big mouth” it may rather refer to things people say.

As well as being your brother, Israel is “my people,” for goodness’ sake (v. 13)! Coming in at the city gate has a different implication from coming through the gates in v. 11. The Edomites are warned about coming in like ghoulish rubberneckers and people interested in how they can profit from what they see. “Their disaster” is *‘ȇdām*, which is too close to the word Edom to be coincidence, especially given thatObadiah then uses the word *‘ȇd* twice more in this verse. Edom is invited to perceive a worrying similarity between its name and this word.

The final lines of exhortation (v. 14) link further with the idea that Edom is more a spectator and marauder at a distance than one directly involved in the capture of Jerusalem. The city’s peril, siege and capture meant many people fleeing for refuge to the areas around, including Edom (e.g., Jer. 40:11). But the reference to a breakout and to delivering up fugitives also suggests a link with the fate of Zedekiah (see 2 Kings 25:4-6). That story, too, makes no reference to the involvement of anyone but the Babylonians, and Obadiah isn’t quite indicting the Edomites for such actions. He is more implying that they are people who do that kind of thing and urging them not to be. That fact issues a further reminder that vv. 12-14 is not designed to be a sober account of what the Edomites actually did in connection with the fall of Jerusalem. Obadiah is listing the kinds of things that Edom shouldn’t do and opening up a space between these exhortations and anything that they actually did. And anyway, more broadly, this continues to be poetry and preaching. Treating it as a news report misses the point.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**Obadiah 15-16.** Obadiah now sets Yahweh’s action against Edom in the context of something much bigger. In the Septuagint, Obadiah follows Joel, and Joel closes with a declaration about the nearness of Yahweh’s day for all the nations. Joel also notes that Yahweh’s day will be bad news for particular nations, including Edom (Joel 3:19 [4:19]).

Conversely, in Obadiah (v. 15) requital for Edom turns into a facet of Yahweh’s day coming for all the nations, and Obadiah makes explicit that this requital will be one where the punishment fits the crime. Reading these Prophets in the Hebrew order is suggestive in a different way. Amos turned upside down the assumed implications of Yahweh’s day. Obadiah turns them right side up again. The language of things coming back on someone’s head also suggests that that the coming of calamity to Edom will be part of a process built into the way the world works, even though one can also refer to it in terms of Yahweh’s direct personal action. On the other hand, the implication of the “because” is that the proper response to the exhortations in vv. 12-14 could indeed mean that the coming day of Yahweh need not be a day of terrible requital for Edom.

The nature of the threatened requital is restated (v. 16) in terms of another imagery. Experiencing defeat or rout and thus being knocked over is like being caused to drink something that’s been spiked. Being the victim of Yahweh’s wrath is like being made to drink something similar (see e.g., Isa. 51:17-23, “a fine commentary on this present verse”;[[40]](#footnote-40) Jer. 25:15-29). You are disoriented, shaken, destabilized, knocked down, unable to get up. Edom is to have that experience. At first we might think that Edom’s drinking on Mount Zion referred to its celebrating the city’s downfall (cf. Tg), but the parallel colon suggests rather that it refers to Edom drinking that chalice, Mount Zion being the place of judgment (cf. Joel 3 [4]).

There is an abb’a’ sequence in vv. 15-16: vv. 15a and 16aβb refer to the nations, vv. 15b and 16aα refer to Edom. But the twofold “because,” opening each of the verses, ties the verses together, the first thus applying to the nations, the second to Edom. Actually, the nations’ drinking will be worse than Edom’s. It will go on and on, and not in a good way (contrast Prov. 15:15).[[41]](#footnote-41) It will involve babbling like someone drunk or poisoned, and it will render the people more than drunk or poisoned: they will be like spies in a thriller whose entire existence has been deleted and is untraceable.

**Obadiah 17-18.** Whereas the obliteration of the nations and of Edom will leave nothing of them, this fate will not apply to Israel.

Judah will have an escape group (v. 17), notwithstanding the Edomites’ possible efforts noted in v. 14. It will be on the sacred mountain, but not drinking a poisonous chalice. The group itself will be sacred. Obadiah’s promise compares with the close of Isaiah 6, which promises that at least a stump will survive the felling of the Israelite tree, and designates the stump a sacred seed or sacred offspring. The promise that the household of Jacob will dispossess its dispossessors suggests a link with the Edomite takeover of Judahite land. That dispossession will be reversed.

The account of burning (v. 18) reexpresses the point. Edom is like straw on Judah’s land, and straw needs to be burnt up if the land is to be available to grow next year’s crop. So Israel is the flame that will consume the straw. In other words, Yahweh will set light to the straw, in some way using Israel to do so; Obadiah does not indicate how that metaphor will become reality.[[42]](#footnote-42) Like “highland of Esau,” “household of Esau” comes only in Obadiah, and this expression, too, looks like one he invented, to parallel the more familiar expressions for Jacob and Joseph. The surprise in the verse is the mention of Joseph’s household, which surely must denote the nation of Ephraim, long ago exiled and effectively non-existent. De facto, then, Jacob’s household is Judah, but there are some Ephraimites in Judah, the descendants of people who moved south at the time of the fall of Samaria, and apparently they are taken to be a continuing embodiment of Ephraim and to be part of the escape group on Mount Zion. Their existence encourages Israel to keep alive the expectation that God’s future for it will honor his commitment to Israel as a whole (cf. Ezek. 36—following on Ezekiel’s prophecy about Edom in Ezek. 35). On the other hand, if Edom takes action to surrender Jacob’s survivors (v. 14), Yahweh will ensure that Esau has no survivors. The subsection’s closing affirmation is once again that this entire unbelievable prospect will become reality because Yahweh has spoken.

**Obadiah 19-20.** As it comes near the end, the scroll fills out God’s intentions in a different way. I have laid out the scroll’s closing verses as poetry; they manifest some parallelism, but they are prosaic, making much use of the object marker, the relative particle, and the definite article. They promise that Israel will regain possession of the traditional bounds of its land, bounds one might associate with the time of David. Obadiah thus again links with the last verses of Amos.

First (v. 19), the people of the Negeb will possess Edom’s own heartland the other side of the Arabah, as opposed to the Judahite territory that Edom is occupying, which was the immediate concern of preceding verses. In the other direction, the people who live in the Shephelah, the foothills between the Judahite highland and the area where the Philistines live, will take possession of those Philistine areas. The people in general will regain possession of the territory of Ephraim and specifically the territory around its capital, which to the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and then the Persians was the province of Samaria. Benjamin in particular (*de facto* part of Judah) will repossess the Ephraimite land across the Jordan, with which it has a common boundary at Jericho. The promises thus work southeast, west, north, and east, or clockwise.[[43]](#footnote-43)

“The exile community of this force who belong to the Israelites” (v. 20) will be the people living in the areas just listed who were the descendants of Ephraimites who had taken refuge in Judah. They will take possession of the Phoenician territory (adjacent to Ephraim) as far the area between Tyre and Sidon. The second exile community is then the descendants of Judahites exiled in 597 and 587. Sepharad later became the name for Spain (cf. Tg), but in Aramaic the name is more or less the same as that of Sardis in Turkey (cf. Vg’s Bosforus). The significance of either place will be that they allude to the dispersion of Judahites way across the Mediterranean, and thus to the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises about such exiles coming home (e.g., Isa. 60). The further reference to the Negeb rounds off the geographical survey; the double reference fits with the fact that it was an area the Edomites first infiltrated and took control of.[[44]](#footnote-44)

**Obadiah 21. “**“The three brief cola are related to the three chief figures in the book – Jerusalem, Edom, and Yahweh.”[[45]](#footnote-45) In the Book of Judges “deliverer” describes one of the individuals who exercised authority in parts of Israel from time to time before there were kings, when the Israelites were still entering into possession of the country. The more frequent term there is the word commonly translated “judge” which more accurately suggests a leader or someone who exercises authority, and the verb from which that title comes appears in the parallel colon here. From Mount Zion these leaders will rule the former Edomite territory as well as the area of which Jerusalem is the titular capital.

Thus the reign will be Yahweh’s. Deliverers who exercise authority are compatible with Yahweh ruling or reigning, as human kings are not according to Gideon, and according to Yahweh in what he had to say to Samuel (Judg. 9:22-23; 1 Sam. 8:5-7).

## Theological Implications

1. Obadiah’s uniquely succinct preface first invites readers to listen to the scroll as a vision or revelation. This recognition is especially significant for Western readers who do not care for scrolls full of judgment (it is neat that the designation” vision” or “revelation” is also given to Nahum, another scroll that Westerners don’t like). It reminds such readers that it confronts our understanding, which is what a revelation is designed to do. Further, it forewarns such readers that the scroll’s language will be more like that of (say) Daniel’s visions or the Revelation to John than like the more down-to-earth language of (say) 2 Kings or Mark. Readers must not read its poetry prosaically. “Obadiah is not the news. It is a vision of the will of God.”[[46]](#footnote-46)
2. The scroll’s omitting to identify Obadiah or to fix his vision in a clear temporal frame adds to that warning.[[47]](#footnote-47) The bareness of the reference to the scroll’s authorship confronts the postmodern reader who wants to know about the person who lies behind the message. The scroll declines to collude with that desire. It says that the author does not matter. The bareness of its identifying of him combined with the nature of the scroll’s contents also makes it hard to fix the prophet chronologically, almost as impossible as is the case with Joel. Thus this introduction confronts the modern reader’s assumption that fixing the date of a scroll is essential to its interpretation.
3. There is another way in which Obadiah confronts Western readers, who are wise to seek to silence it. “A reader who is concerned for the welfare of oppressed subjects will easily endorse Yhwh’s mission, through Obadiah’s vision, which seeks to avenge Edom’s role in Jerusalem’s destruction. It is a vision of deliverance and a message of hope for people who have suffered the kind of cruelty that Jerusalem suffered. In this hearing, the vision of Obadiah is liberating … for the house of Jacob.”[[48]](#footnote-48) The prophecy declares that Yahweh will bring disaster to “the nations,” which is often a cypher for the superpower of the day. Yet admittedly it more directly speaks to the temptation for one smaller people to ally with the superpower at the expense of another smaller people, or simply to stand back and watch. But because its particular concern is with the suffering people of God, Obadiah offers that people a promise that God will restore them from the ravages of their attackers.
4. In Obadiah “God’s Word to the congregation and Yahweh’s authority in the world of the Gentile nations are coordinated.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Yahweh is the lord of the nations, and not least of the empires, and is capable of summoning nations to take action against other nations and of being their leader in this action even if they don’t realize what is happening.
5. Even as Yahweh’s messenger, a prophet may well take up another prophet’s words and rework them.
6. Individual nations are inclined to assume that their strength and position makes them invulnerable. It is an aspect of their necessary assumption that they understand what’s going on and can formulate wise polices. They may well be mistaken. “If he protects us under his wings, we shall be safe in the midst of innumerable dangers; but if we think that subterfuges will be of any avail to us, we deceive ourselves.”[[50]](#footnote-50)
7. Arrogance is a vice. Obadiah has in mind not the kind of pride that denotes self-respect, a proper self-confidence, and a pleasure in one’s achievements, but the kind of pride that does not recognize God as God and that has the self-confidence that makes us ruthlessly ambitious and willing to tread on other people.[[51]](#footnote-51)
8. “Two messages emerge from Obadiah. First, there is no such thing as an innocent bystander…. The second message has to do with how we deal with erring relatives”—for instance, within the congregation. Obadiah calls for tough love.[[52]](#footnote-52)
9. “‘Whatever amount you measure out for others will be measured back for you’ (Matt. 7:2). Justice would be done, the prophet assured his contemporaries,”[[53]](#footnote-53) and Jesus thus agrees. Matthew 3:12 further suggests that Jesus is the embodiment of Israel who will burn up the chaff—with unquenchable fire. Yet Obadiah doesn’t talk in terms of judgment and punishment but in terms of “the workings of an order—a moral order—that is ‘built into’ creation.” It’s not so much the punishment fitting the crime as God the creator letting sin have its natural effects.[[54]](#footnote-54)
10. Jewish interpretation came to value God’s promises about Edom because they took Edom as a symbol for Rome, partly in light of Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Thus “the present Rome is Edom” (Leviticus Rabbah 22, maybe from the mid-first millennium). When the church took over from Rome and in light of Christian persecution of Jews, the church naturally inherited this application. But B. Abodah Zara 10b tells a story about a legendary Roman emperor asking a rabbi, “Shall I enter the world to come?”

“Yes!” said Rabbi. “But,” said Antoninus, “is it not written, There will be no remnant to the house of Esau?” [Obad. 18]. “That,” he replied, “applies only to those whose evil deeds are like to those of Esau.” We have learnt likewise: There will be no remnant to the House of Esau, might have been taken to apply to all, therefore Scripture says distinctly — To the house of Esau, so as to make it apply only to those who act as Esau did. “But,” said Antoninus, “is it not also written: There [in the nether world] is Edom, her kings, and all her princes?” [Ezek. 32:29]. “There, too,” Rabbi explained, “[it says:] ‘her kings,’ it does not say all her kings; ‘all her princes,’ but not all her officers!”

1. “Who could adequately sing the praises of the ineffable goodness of the just Judge” towards Edom and the nations for combining the prophetic words and the threats so as both to terrify them and win them over?[[55]](#footnote-55) Obadiah expresses “astandard postexilic hope for a kind of renewed empire, but one founded on justice and peace—one in which foreign nations can participate once they have been judged in their turn, as Judah was judged through its destruction by the Babylonians.”[[56]](#footnote-56)
2. God’s promises to his people about their land do not provide a quick answer to questions about Middle Eastern politics (see the comments on “Theological Implications of Amos 9). But neither should proper support for Palestinians make Christians sidestep the significance of those promises.
3. There is no Messiah in Obadiah. In Obadiah’s politic there is a place for deliverers who will exercise authority as they did in the time before there were kings. But Obadiah affirms the wildly impractical idea that Yahweh is his people’s king. “A discourse communicating and reflecting the idea of YHWH’s universal rule/kingship draws on a common matrix of images and metaphors used to legitimize hegemonic or imperial powers for centuries in the area.” But here the deities’ universal rule does not legitimize a world order allegedly controlled by these deities’ servants. Obadiah does not claim there will be an Israelite universal empire.[[57]](#footnote-57)
1. Cf. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, 230-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See e.g., Bradley L. Crowell, “Nabonidus, as-Sila’, and the Beginning of the End of Edom,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 348 (2007): 75-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See the detailed comparison in Raabe, *Obadiah*, 22-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [*In Abdiam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Abdiam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) (PL 25, column 1100b). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. On the form *‘ădōnāy*, see *IBHS* 7.4.3e. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Obadiah does (rhetorically) address Edom, so *lə* more likely means “to” than “regarding.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. LXX, Vg “he sent an envoy” imply *šālak* for MT *šullāk*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The qatal verb designates something on which Yahweh has made a determination and has initiated (in sending the envoy) so that in effect it has already happened. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Anatomically, “heart”: but see the note on Hos. 2:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Literally, “the height of his sitting.” LXX, Vg “making his dwelling high” implies *mērîm* for MT *mərôm*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I take the hiphil as inwardly transitive. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. LXX, Vg “you put” imply *tāśîm* for MT’s *śîm*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The previous colon reads literally “the people of your agreement.” Here “the people with whom you ate bread” is literally simply “your bread”; I take it that “the people of” carries over into this colon. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. TNIV has “you,” but the Hebrew is third person, which is one factor suggesting that this colon marks a new start (cf. JPSV). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ləma’an* should surely not be reduced to “with the result that” (against JM 169g). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. With LXX, Vg, I link this phrase with v. 10 not with v. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tg has a past verbs, “how you looked,” and similarly through vv. 12-14, but one would then expect qatal verbs rather than yiqtols. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Literally, “on the day of your brother.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Tišlaḥnāh* looks ungrammatically feminine plural, but see GK 47k; it adds further to the variation of forms in the subsection which interweaves with the repetition-combined-with-variation of the references to the day (cf. e.g., “his calamity” and “their perishing” in v. 12, “people” (singular) and “their disaster” in v. 13, “you” singular and plural in vv. 15-16—see next note). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. “You” is plural, but it must surely still refer to Edom (cf. Tg; LXX thus has singular), not to Judah, which Obadiah never directly addresses. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. NRSV “gulp down” takes the verb as BDB’s *lûa’* I rather than *lûa’* II. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I follow Tg in taking the “it” as the escape group. LXX, Vg take it as Mount Zion (the colon then simply repeats the point made in v. 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. While TNIV takes *môrāšȇhem* to signify “their possessions” (cf. BDB), JPSV takes it as “those who dispossessed them”; compare LXX, Vg, and *mwryšyhm* in Mur88 (one of the few differences from MT in Mur88). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Unlike the other nouns, the Negeb, the Lowland, and Benjamin have no object marker, so (with LXX, Vg, Tg) I take them as the subject of the verbs, giving sharper definition to the “they.” [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For MT *haḥēl* *hazzeh* NRSV reads *ḥalaḥ zeh* (for Halah see 2 Kings 17:6; 18:11; 1 Chron. 5:26); see Raabe, *Obadiah*, 262-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Kəna’ănîm*, hence TNIV “Canaan”; see Hos. 12:7 [8] and the note. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. LXX, Aq, Th imply *mûšā’îm* (people delivered) for MT *môši’îm*, assimilating to the context; Sym has the active (cf. Jerome, [*In Abdiam prophetam*](http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/04z/z_0347-0420__Hieronymus__Commentariorum_In_Abdiam_Prophetam_Liber_Unus__MLT.pdf.html) [PL 25, column 1115d]). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. See e.g., Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 16; though it’s rather unfair to Esau himself: see Jione Havea, “Releasing the Story of Esau from the Words of Obadiah,” in Alejandro F. Botta and Pablo R. Andiñach (eds.), *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 87-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. So e.g., Raabe, *Obadiah*, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Raabe, *Obadiah*, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Rudolph, *Joel-Amos-Obadja-Jona*, 308. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Raabe, *Obadiah*, 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Sweeney, *Twelve Prophets* 1:293. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cf. John R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1989), 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Cf. Raabe, *Obadiah*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Jerome links it with the rule of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah in Judah and Samaria (*In Abdiam prophetam* 1111c-1112a). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Cf. Jenson, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Cf. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Robert B. Robinson, “Levels of Naturalization in Obadiah,” *JSOT* 40 (1988):83-97 (95). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Robinson, “Levels of Naturalization in Obadiah,” 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Havea, “Releasing the Story of Esau from the Words of Obadiah,” 88 (he goes on to note that it is not so liberating for the household of Esau himself: see the comments on v. 6). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Calvin, *Minor Prophets* 2:431. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Cf. Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Bellis, (ed.), *Many Voices*, 63-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, 160. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Fretheim, *Reading Hosea-Micah*, 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Twelve Prophets*, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ben Zvi, *A Historical-critical Study of the Book of Obadiah*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)