

Historical Context. Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament consisting of only one chapter with twenty-one verses. The people of Edom are descendants of Esau who steals his twin brother Jacob's birthright. The intense rivalry between the descendants of the two brothers continues for many generations.

When the Babylonians destroy Jerusalem in 587BC, they are assisted by the Edomites, who are using the occasion to occupy some of the territory of Judah. The people of Judah deeply resent these actions of "their cousins." Their resentment is expressed in the prophecy of Obadiah.

Focus of message. God is the Lord of human history; the evil in any nation invites divine judgment. God is the defender of what is right and the avenger of the oppressed poor. Tyrants will suffer from their own tyranny: they will fall into the pit they have dug for others. Like most of the prophets, Obadiah also has a note of hope. He speaks about the "Day of the Lord" when Israel's enemies will be defeated and God will reveal his salvation to his people.

The prophecy can be divided into three parts:

- Oracle against Edom (vv 1-14)
- Oracle against the nations (vv 15-16)
- Prediction of restoration for Judah (vv 17-21)

"See I will make you small among the nations; you are held in dire contempt." (v.2)

"Because of violence to your brother, Jacob, disgrace shall cover you...." (v.10)

"But on Mount Zion there shall be a portion saved; the mountain shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those that dispossessed them." (v.17)

Verse 1 states the intent of the prophecy, the destruction of Edom: *"Up! Let us go to war against him!"* Peter Craigie writes: *"Edom's downfall will be a direct consequence of God's action in human history. Human history unfolds through human actions, but those actions are mysteriously penetrated by the action of God, towards judgment and justice."*

Edom's pride is condemned. *"The pride in your heart has deceived you"* (v.3). Edom's violence towards Judah in her hour of need is the focus of verses 10-14. *"Because of violence to your brother, Jacob, disgrace shall cover you, and you shall be destroyed forever"* (v.10).

Verses 15-16 constitute an oracle against the nations. The evil they have done to others shall be done to them.

Verses 17-21. The "Day of the Lord" that will mark Edom's doom will also be a day of salvation for Judah. Mount Zion will be a holy mountain once again, the worship of its Temple restored; and the citizens of the land will repossess those territories of which they have been dispossessed by the Edomites and other nations.

In his book *The Bible companion-A Catholic Handbook for Beginners*, Fr. Ronald Witherup writes:

"Obadiah is generally not regarded as an important prophetic book. It lacks the appeal of many other prophetic books, yet we should not relegate it to oblivion. Its prophetic message is primarily directed to a foreign nation. It indicates that God's law ultimately applies in broad ways beyond the boundaries of Israel. Obadiah thus provides some testimony to the universalism of God's message, which entails both responsibility and accountability" (p. 119).

Resources

- Collegeville Bible Commentary
- Collegeville Bible Handbook
- The Daily Study Bible Series—The Twelve Prophets