

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DATE OF OBADIAH

(Tom Constable)

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, who displaced the Horites (also known as Hurrians) that we read about in the Book of Genesis. The Horites and the Amorites were the original inhabitants of Canaan.

During the [United] Monarchy, David captured Edom, stationed a garrison there, and made Edom a vassal state (1 Chron. 18:12-13). Solomon later developed the port city of Ezion-geber (Elath; 1 Kings 9:26-28) in southern Judah near Edom. Hadad, a member of the Edomite royal family, opposed Solomon and set up a government in exile in Egypt (1 Kings 11:14-17). But Judah still governed Edom during the reign of King Jehoshaphat, who posted a governor in Edom (1 Kings 22:47-48). Edom gained her freedom from Judah, in 845 B.C., by rebelling against Jehoram, the son of Jehoshaphat (2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chron. 21:8-10, 16-17). King Amaziah of Judah partially recaptured Edom between 790 and 770 B.C. (2 Kings 14:7). King Uzziah of Judah recaptured the port of Ezion-geber (2 Kings 14:21-22). Aram (Syria) later took back Ezion-geber from Judah (2 Kings 16:5-6). After that the Edomites revolted and attacked Judah a second time, during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah (2 Chron. 28:17). Finally, when King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Judah, the Edomites assisted the Babylonians (Ps. 137:7; Jer. 49:7-22; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35:1-15).

After the Babylonian invasion of Judah—and of their former ally against Judah, Edom—the Nabatean Arabs took over the capital city of Sela (Gr. Petra) and forced the remaining Edomites into southern Judah, where they settled. The Greeks named this area Idumea, and its inhabitants Idumeans, following Alexander the Great's conquest of Canaan in the 4th century B.C.

After the Romans replaced the Greeks as the dominant power in Canaan, they permitted the Idumeans to enjoy some sovereignty. King Herod the Great, who was in charge of Palestine when Jesus Christ was born, was an Idumean. The Idumeans later joined the Jews in revolting against the Romans in 68-70 A.D. Their defeat resulted in their scattering, and they ceased to exist as a people. This was the fulfillment of Obadiah's prophecy of judgment on their nation. In summary, Edom's history of antagonism against Israel was long and consistent.

### DATE

Since we do not know anything about the writer, other than that his name appears to have been Obadiah, it is very difficult to date this book and to determine where Obadiah lived and ministered.

"This shortest book in the Old Testament, consisting of only twenty-one verses, bears the distinction of being the most difficult of all the prophecies to date."<sup>1</sup>

There are three clues concerning when the prophet wrote it: (1) references to historical events in the book, (2) the book's place in the Hebrew canon, and (3) possible quotations or allusions to the writings of other Old Testament prophets in Obadiah, and quotations or allusions to Obadiah in other Old Testament books. Discussion of each of these clues follows:

First, regarding references to **historical events in the book**, Obadiah referred to a time in the apparently recent past when the Edomites had gloated over a successful invasion of Jerusalem (vv. 10-14, 16). There are at least seven occasions during the ministry of the writing prophets when we know that Jerusalem, the capital city



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<sup>1</sup> Gleason Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p.299.

of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, experienced invasion and suffered a defeat. One of these may be the event he referred to:

1. *During Rehoboam's reign (930-913 B.C.; 1 Kings 14:25-26; 2 Chron. 12:2-9)*
2. *During Jehoram's reign (853-841 B.C.; 2 Kings 8:20-22; 2 Chron. 21:8-10, 16-17; cf. Amos 1:6)*
3. *During Amaziah's reign (796-767; 2 Kings 14:13-14; 2 Chron. 25:23-24)*
4. *During Ahaz's reign (732-715 B.C.; 2 Chron. 28:16-18)*
5. *During Jehoiakim's reign (609-598 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:1-4; 2 Chron. 36:6-7)*
6. *During Jehoiachin's reign (598-597 B.C.; 2 Kings 24:10-16; 2 Chron. 36:10)*
7. *During Zedekiah's reign (597-586 B.C.; 2 Kings 25:3-7; 2 Chron. 36:15-20; cf. Lam. 4:21-22; Ps. 137:7)*

A few scholars have proposed that Obadiah's entire oracle awaits an earthly and eschatological (end times) fulfillment. This view is not widely held.

Of these past invasions and defeats, the ones that seem to fit Obadiah's description of the Edomites' behavior were: the one in King Jehoram's reign, and the one in Zedekiah's reign, when Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. Most scholars believe that one of these times is in view, and most believe that the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. is in view. The second most popular view is that the invasion of Jerusalem during Jehoram's reign is what Obadiah referred to. This would make Obadiah a contemporary of Elijah and Elisha (cf. 2 Chron. 21:12-15).

The second clue to the date of Obadiah's prophecy is ***the place of the book in the Hebrew canon.*** The Minor Prophets are called minor, of course, because they are shorter than the Major Prophets. The Jews put all 12 of the Minor Prophets on one scroll, for convenience sake and in order to keep them from getting lost. The order in which they appear in the Hebrew Bible is basically chronological, and this order continued in later translations of the Old Testament, including English translations. This would lead us to conclude that the ancient Jews regarded Obadiah as one of the earlier prophetic books.

But the order is not completely chronological. Hosea seems to have been put first because it is the longest of the pre-exilic Minor Prophets. The recurrence of similar themes and/or words also appears to have influenced the order, since Joel, rather than Amos, the second longest pre-exilic minor prophet, follows Hosea. [Leslie] Allen suggested that Obadiah may follow Amos because it "may have been viewed as a virtual commentary on Amos 9:12." [Douglas] Stuart suggested that Obadiah follows Amos because Obadiah used the name "the Lord God" (Adonai Yahweh, v. 1), a not frequently used name for God in the prophets, which Amos also used.

"In the arrangement of The Twelve in the Hebrew Bible the chronological principle which seems to have determined the over-all order was as follows: (1) the prophets of the Assyrian period were placed first (Hosea to Nahum); (2) then followed those of the Babylonian period (Habakkuk and Zephaniah); (3) the series closed with the three prophets of the Persian period after the exile (Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi)."<sup>2</sup>

The third clue concerning the date of Obadiah is evidence that ***one prophet depended on another.*** There are similarities between Obadiah 1-6 and Jeremiah 49:9 and 14-17, and between Obadiah 10-18 and Joel 1:15; 2:1, 32; 3:3-4, 17, and 9:13. There are also similarities between Obadiah 9, 10, 14, 18, and 19 and Amos 1:2, 6, 11-12, and 9:13. However, in all these instances it is really impossible to determine if Obadiah referred to the other prophets, if they referred to Obadiah, if they all depended on another common source, or if the Holy Spirit led each prophet independently to express himself in similar terms.

Fortunately, discovering the correct date of this prophecy is not crucial to understanding it.

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<sup>2</sup> Greg Goswell, "The Order of the Books in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51:4 (December 2008):673-88.