

Obadiah

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Summary: *Obadiah — the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible at 21 verses — is a single, concentrated oracle against Edom for betraying Judah during the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The prophecy moves in three stages: Edom's pride and false security in their mountain fortress will be shattered (vv. 1-9); their specific crimes against 'your brother Jacob' during Jerusalem's fall are enumerated (vv. 10-14); and the coming day of the LORD will bring justice — what Edom did will be done to them, while Israel will be restored and possess Edom's territory (vv. 15-21).*

What Makes This Remarkable: *Obadiah's oracle shares extensive verbal parallels with Jeremiah 49:7-22, raising questions about literary dependence — either Obadiah drew on Jeremiah, Jeremiah on Obadiah, or both used a common source. The repeated 'you should not have' (al + jussive) construction in verses 12-14 is unique in prophetic literature — eight prohibitions in rapid succession, each condemning a specific act of betrayal during Jerusalem's fall. The theological center is the kinship principle: Edom descended from Esau, Jacob's twin brother (Genesis 25:24-26), making their betrayal not merely political treachery but fratricide. The book ends with a remarkable theological statement: 'the kingdom will belong to the LORD' (ve-hayetah la-YHWH ha-melukkah) — the ultimate resolution of all political conflict.*

Translation Friction: *The date of Obadiah is debated — the reference to Jerusalem's fall could indicate 586 BCE (Babylonian destruction) or an earlier raid. We treat it as post-586 based on the specificity of the accusations in verses 10-14. The word sepharad in verse 20 is famously uncertain — it may refer to Sardis in Lydia, a location in Media, or somewhere else entirely (later Jewish tradition identified it with Spain, giving us 'Sephardic' Jews). We transliterate without speculating. The relationship between Obadiah's text and Jeremiah 49 required careful attention to ensure our rendering reflects the Hebrew of Obadiah specifically rather than harmonizing with our Jeremiah rendering.*

Connections: *Parallel passages in Jeremiah 49:7-22. The Esau-Jacob conflict traces back to Genesis 25-36. Edom's betrayal during Jerusalem's fall is also condemned in Psalm 137:7 ('Remember, LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem'), Lamentations 4:21-22, and Ezekiel 25:12-14, 35:1-15. The 'day of the LORD' theme connects to Joel 2:1-2, Amos 5:18-20, and Zephaniah 1:14-18. The final statement 'the kingdom will belong to the LORD' anticipates Revelation 11:15.*

¹The vision of Obadiah. This is what the Lord GOD says concerning Edom: We have heard a report from the LORD — a messenger has been sent among the nations: 'Rise up! Let us rise against her for battle!' ²Look — I have made you small among the nations; you are utterly despised. ³The pride of your heart has deceived you — you who live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is high, who say in your heart, 'Who can bring me down to the ground?' ⁴Even if you soar as high as the eagle, even if you set your nest among the stars — from there I will bring you down, declares the LORD. ⁵If thieves came to you — if robbers in the night — how utterly you would be destroyed! Would they not steal only what they wanted? If grape-pickers came to you, would they not leave some gleanings? ⁶How Esau has been ransacked! His hidden treasures have been sought out! ⁷All your allies have driven you to the border. Those at peace with you have deceived you and overpowered you. Those who eat your bread have set a trap beneath you — and you do not even understand it. ⁸On that day, declares the LORD, will I not destroy the wise from Edom and understanding from the mountain of Esau? ⁹Your warriors will be shattered, Teman, so that everyone from the mountain of Esau will be cut off by slaughter. ¹⁰Because of the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame will cover you, and you will be cut off forever. ¹¹On the day you stood by while strangers carried off his wealth, while foreigners entered his gates and cast lots over Jerusalem — you were just like one of them. ¹²You should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune. You should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin. You should not have boasted on the day of distress. ¹³You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their disaster. You should not have gloated over their suffering on the day of their disaster. You should not have reached for their wealth on the day of their disaster. ¹⁴You should not have stood at the crossroads to cut down his fugitives. You should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress. ¹⁵For the day of the LORD is near against all the nations. As you have done, it will be done to you. Your deeds will return on your own head. ¹⁶Just as you drank on my holy mountain, so all the nations will drink continually. They will drink and gulp down, and they will be as though they had never existed. ¹⁷But on Mount Zion there will be deliverance, and it will be holy. The house of Jacob will possess their rightful inheritance. ¹⁸The house of Jacob will be a fire and the house of Joseph a flame, but the house of Esau will be stubble. They will set them ablaze and consume them, and there will be no survivor from the house of Esau — for the LORD has spoken. ¹⁹Those of the Negev will possess the mountain of Esau, and those of the lowland will possess the land of the Philistines. They will possess the territory of Ephraim and the territory of Samaria, and Benjamin will possess Gilead. ²⁰The exiles of this host of the people of Israel who are among the Canaanites as far as Zarephath, and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad, will possess the cities of the Negev. ²¹Deliverers will go up to Mount Zion to govern the mountain of Esau, and the kingdom will belong to the LORD.

TRANSLATOR NOTES

1. The superscription identifies this as a *chazon* ('vision') — the same word used for Isaiah's prophecy (Isaiah 1:1). The name Obadiah (*Ovadyah*) means 'servant of the LORD.' Nothing else is known about this prophet — no genealogy, no hometown, no date marker. The shift from 'we have heard' (*shamu'ah shamanu*, first person plural) to the divine messenger's call among the nations creates a dramatic scene: God has summoned the nations to war against Edom, and the prophet overhears the mobilization order.
1. The word *tsir* ('messenger, envoy, ambassador') indicates a formal diplomatic mission — God has sent an official envoy to rally nations against Edom.
2. God addresses Edom directly in second person. The word *qaton* ('small') contrasts with Edom's self-perception as powerful and secure. The word *bazui* ('despised') is emphatic with *me'od* ('utterly, greatly') — Edom will be treated with contempt by the very nations they thought were their allies.
3. The word *zedon* ('pride, arrogance, presumption') is from a root meaning 'to boil over' — Edom's heart seethes with overconfidence. The geographical description is precise: Edom's capital Sela (later Petra) was built in narrow rock clefts (*chagvei sela*) accessible only through a narrow canyon (the *Siq*). The word *sela* ('rock') is also the name of the Edomite city (2 Kings 14:7). Edom's geography reinforced their arrogance — perched in inaccessible mountain strongholds, they believed themselves impregnable.
3. The rhetorical question 'Who can bring me down?' (*mi yorideni arets*) is the classic voice of hubris — the assumption that geographical advantage equals invulnerability. God will answer this question in the next verse.
4. God's answer to Edom's question escalates beyond geography to cosmology. Even if Edom's height surpassed eagles (who nest on the highest cliffs) and reached the stars themselves, God would pull them down. The verb *oridekha* ('I will bring you down') answers *mi yorideni* ('who can bring me down?') from verse 3 — God can. The eagle (*nesher*) was associated with Edom's mountain dwelling; the stars represent the absolute limit of height. Neither is beyond God's reach.

5. The parenthetical exclamation *eikh nidmeytah* ('how you are destroyed!') breaks the hypothetical comparison — the prophet cannot contain his astonishment at Edom's coming ruin. The logic: even thieves take only what they need and leave the rest; even grape harvesters leave *olelot* ('gleanings,' the small clusters left for the poor per *Leviticus 19:10, Deuteronomy 24:21*). But what will happen to Edom will be worse than any robbery — nothing will be left.
6. Edom is called by its ancestor's name — Esau — personalizing the judgment and connecting it to the Genesis narrative. The verb *nechpesu* ('ransacked, searched through') implies a thorough, deliberate looting. The *matsponav* ('his hidden things, his treasures') refers to the wealth Edom stored in the recesses of their rock-cut cities — treasures they thought were as secure as their geography. Petra's rock-cut chambers, later famous in the Nabataean period, served as both tombs and storage.
7. Triple betrayal by three groups: allies (*anshei beritekha*, 'men of your covenant'), peace partners (*anshei shelomekha*, 'men of your peace'), and table-companions (*lachmekha*, 'your bread'). The irony is precise: Edom betrayed their 'brother Jacob,' and now Edom's own allies betray them. The word *mazor* is difficult — it may mean 'wound,' 'trap,' or 'net.' We rendered 'trap' because the parallelism with deception suggests a hidden snare. The final phrase *ein tevunah bo* ('there is no understanding in him') recalls Edom's famed wisdom tradition (cf. *Jeremiah 49:7*) — the wise nation has become utterly foolish.
8. Edom was renowned in the ancient world for its wisdom tradition — Eliphaz the Temanite (*Job 2:11*) came from an Edomite city, and *Jeremiah 49:7* asks, 'Is there no longer wisdom in Teman?' God will destroy the very thing Edom is famous for. The phrase *har Esav* ('mountain of Esau') is Obadiah's distinctive designation for Edom, used throughout the book, emphasizing the connection to the patriarch and the mountainous geography.
9. Even Edom's military strength (*gibborekha*, 'your warriors') will be shattered (*chattu*). Teman, in the south of Edom, is addressed directly — it was a major Edomite city associated with both wisdom and military power. The purpose clause *le-ma'an* ('so that') indicates the destruction of warriors serves a larger goal: total elimination (*yikkaret*, 'cut off') from the mountain of Esau. The verb *qatal* ('slaughter') is blunt and violent.
10. The accusation is now stated directly: *chamas achikha Ya'aqov* ('violence against your brother Jacob'). The word *chamas* ('violence, wrongdoing') is one of the Hebrew Bible's strongest terms for social violence and injustice — the same word used for the violence that provoked the Flood (*Genesis 6:11, 13*). The familial language ('your brother') is the theological heart of Obadiah — Esau and Jacob were twins, and Edom's crime is fratricide. The punishment — being 'cut off forever' (*nikharta le-olam*) — is permanent.
11. The indictment becomes specific: 'the day' refers to the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. Edom 'stood by' (*amadekha minneged*, literally 'stood opposite, at a distance') — they watched the destruction as spectators. The foreigners who entered Jerusalem's gates and cast lots (*yaddu goral*) over the city divided its spoils like gamblers. The devastating final clause: *gam attah ke-achad mehem* ('you too were like one of them') — Edom was not merely a passive bystander but complicit, equivalent to the destroyers themselves.
12. The first of the eight 'you should not have' (al + jussive) prohibitions that structure verses 12-14. Each condemns a specific crime during Jerusalem's fall. The verb *tere* ('look, gaze') here means 'gloat' — looking with satisfaction at another's suffering. Three escalating responses are condemned: gloating (looking), rejoicing (internal emotion), and boasting (*tagdel pikha*, literally 'making your mouth big' — loud, arrogant speech). The triple repetition of 'on the day of' (*be-yom*) hammers the specificity of the accusation.
13. The crimes escalate from passive observation (v. 12) to active participation. Edom entered Jerusalem's gates (the defense perimeter), gloated over the suffering (*gam attah*, 'you too'), and reached for (*tishlachnah*, 'stretched out hands toward') the wealth (*chelo*) of the fallen city. The triple repetition of *be-yom eido* ('on the day of their disaster') creates an incantatory rhythm of accusation. The word *eido* ('his disaster, his calamity') comes from the root '-y-d meaning 'distress, destruction.'
14. The worst crime is saved for last: Edom stationed troops at the *ha-pereq* ('crossroads, mountain pass, fork in the road') to intercept fleeing Judean refugees and either killed them (*lehakhrit*, 'to cut off, annihilate') or handed them over (*tasger*, 'surrendered, delivered up') to the Babylonians. The words *pelitav* ('his fugitives') and *seridav* ('his survivors') describe the most vulnerable people — those who escaped the initial slaughter only to be betrayed by their 'brother' at the escape routes.
15. The transition from Edom-specific judgment to universal judgment: the *yom YHWH* ('day of the LORD') extends to all nations (*kol ha-goyim*), not just Edom. The principle of proportional justice — *ka'asher asita ye'aseh lakh* ('as you have done, it will be done to you') — is one of the clearest statements of *lex talionis* (retributive justice) in the prophets. The word *gemulekha* ('your recompense, your deed-consequence') carries the sense that actions generate their own consequences — Edom's violence will circle back to Edom's head.
16. The 'drinking' (*shetitem*) on God's holy mountain (Zion) likely refers to Edom celebrating or feasting amid Jerusalem's ruins — drinking victory wine on the temple mount. The metaphor shifts: the nations will drink God's cup of wrath (cf. *Jeremiah 25:15-29, Isaiah 51:17, 22*). The verb *la'u* ('gulp, swallow') suggests being forced to drink deeply. The result — *ve-hayu ke-lo hayu* ('they will be as though they had never existed') — is total annihilation, the erasure not just of life but of memory.
17. The contrast with verse 16 is total: the mountain where Edom drank in celebration will become a place of *peleitha* ('deliverance, escape, a remnant that escapes') and *qodesh* ('holiness'). The verb *yreshu* ('possess, inherit') applied to *morasheim* ('their possessions, their rightful inheritance') indicates recovery of what was taken — the land and blessings that belong to Jacob by covenant promise.
18. The fire metaphor reverses the power dynamic: Jacob and Joseph (united Israel and Judah) become fire and flame, while Esau (Edom) becomes *qash* ('stubble, straw') — the most combustible and worthless material. The phrase *lo yihyeh sarid le-veit Esav* ('there will be no survivor from the house of Esau') echoes the language of total destruction. The closing formula *ki YHWH dibber* ('for the LORD has spoken') seals the oracle as irrevocable divine decree.

- 19.** A geographical restoration map: each region of restored Israel expands into adjacent territory. The Negev (southern desert) absorbs Edom; the Shephelah (western lowlands) absorbs Philistia; the central highlands recover Ephraim and Samaria (the former northern kingdom); Benjamin extends east to Gilead (Transjordan). The vision is of a reunited and expanded Israel recovering all its historic territory.
- 20.** This verse envisions the return of scattered exiles. Zarephath (modern Sarafand in Lebanon, between Sidon and Tyre) represents the northern diaspora. Sepharad is one of the most debated place names in the Hebrew Bible — it has been identified with Sardis in Lydia (modern Turkey), a location in Media, or Spain. The later Jewish identification with Spain gave the name 'Sephardic' to the Jewish communities of the Iberian Peninsula. We transliterate without resolving the debate. Both exile communities will return and repopulate the Negev cities.
- 21.** The final verse resolves the entire oracle. The moshi'im ('deliverers, saviors') echoes the judges of the pre-monarchic period (Judges 2:16, 3:9, 15) — God raises up leaders to execute justice. The verb lishpot ('to judge, to govern') means not merely punishing Edom but establishing right governance over Edom's territory. The book's last words — ve-hayetah la-YHWH ha-melukhah ('and the kingdom will belong to the LORD') — transcend the Edom-Israel conflict entirely. The ultimate resolution is not Israel's supremacy over Edom but God's supremacy over all. The kingdom — all political authority, all sovereignty — belongs finally and fully to the LORD. This is the theological conclusion not only of Obadiah but of all the prophets' vision of history's end.