

“The Beginning and the End of Edom”
Genesis 25:19-34 and Obadiah
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OK, let's be honest. Who here has recently read the book of Obadiah? I had not read it for at least ten years, not since Seminary, and only then because I needed to pass a test. No, the book of Obadiah is not on a lot of people's reading lists, and not on the three year rotation of the lectionary. You could almost be forgiven for not knowing it is there, since it is the shortest book in the Old Testament, is only 21 verses long, and takes up only about a page and a half of your Bible, but since it is in the Table of Contents, you can only plead so much ignorance. But be that as it may, tonight we are looking at the words of Obadiah, and we'll see if we can't discern why it's in the Bible at all, since it is not really even about the people of Israel, and only tangentially addresses them. But since it has survived to be in our Bibles today, there must be something worth keeping about it, and so let's see what we can find.

The first thing we need to know about Obadiah is that it is a word of God's judgment on the nation of Edom, not on just any nation, but on a nation favored by God because it was Esau's nation. For all of Esau's failures as Isaac's son, God never despised Esau. He may have sold his birthright for a pot of red stew. He may have been at the wrong place at the wrong time while his brother Jacob tricked their father into blessing the younger son, instead of the rightful son. He may have

vowed to kill his brother. But God did not forget him, nor did God despise him, and though Israel and Edom were often adversaries, they were frequently allies, kindred nations who remembered their shared roots in Rebekah's womb. Indeed, as the Israelites roamed the desert for forty years following their escape from Egypt, they encountered Esau's descendents, the people now called Edom. And rather than fight the Edomites, Moses and his followers are called to remember that the Lord established Esau in his lands, and they are commanded to pass through in peace, and even to engage them in trade.

The nation of Edom lay south of the Dead Sea, in a region of some altitude. It was centered around Mount Seir, what we see labeled in Obadiah as Mount Esau. Esau is in fact a variation on the word "seir" which means hairy, as we heard Esau was, even at birth. As we also heard, Esau came out red, and craved that red stew, characteristics which led to the naming of his people Edom, the word for red. Esau took his people and settled in this largely barren land, and for centuries they were one of the region's major players. The Edomites held a strategic advantage against their enemies, due to the heights of the territory, a geographical feature which gave rise to the first part of Obadiah's prophecy against them: "Your proud heart has deceived you, you that live in the clefts of the rock, whose dwelling is in the heights. You say in your heart, 'Who will bring me down to the ground?' Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, from there I will bring you down, says the Lord." Obadiah reminds them that although

they were on top of the world geographically, they didn't live up to those lofty heights morally and ethically, and it would lead them to the depths of despair. Perhaps if they had taken the wisdom of the Rev. Jesse Jackson when he said, "Never look down on anybody unless you're helping him up," they might have avoided their fate. But instead, from their mountaintops, they let down their neighbors, their very kin, when they needed them most.

You see, it was in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC, that cataclysmic event in Israel's history, that Edom sealed its fate in God's eyes, as they not only watched the nation of Babylon sack the city Jerusalem and did nothing to prevent it, but took advantage of Israel's weakness and joined in the plunder. The bonds of kinship that had prevented Edom's defeat in the old days were long forgotten. Perhaps it was the legacy of Jacob's deception that set the standard for the relationship between the nations for the future, but in the end it was the failure of Edom to come to Israel's aid that led to their condemnation and eventual demise. Seven times in Obadiah, the refrain rings out, "You should not have..." each followed by one of the catalogue of sins against their kindred nation for which they are being condemned, each worse than the one before it—standing aside as strangers entered in, gloating over its misfortune, rejoicing in the ruin of the city, boasting on its day of distress, entering its gate on the day of its calamity, looting the goods of the people, handing over the survivors. "For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut

off forever.” And they were. There is no historical mention or record anywhere of the nation of Edom from the fifth century BC onward. The rest of the book recounts how although Israel was laid low by the plunder in which Edom participated, it will not be cut off forever. Mount Esau will perish; Mount Zion will endure forever. Just like in the beginning, when Jacob ruled over Esau, “Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord’s.”

Well, we’ve now reviewed pretty much the entire book of Obadiah, and you may still be wondering why it’s here, in our Bibles, in our consciousness. As you have probably picked up, there isn’t much grace in Obadiah, at least not for those to whom the dire pronouncements are directed. Unlike the prophecies of doom brought to the Israelites, which always included a ray of hope for at least a remnant, no such good news shines through for the nation of Edom. The end is coming; you are out of luck; end of story. Perhaps the Israelites read this book as grace, since it announces their survival and the demise of an enemy, but let us hope they too were disturbed by the finality of the pronouncement against a kindred nation. Otherwise, it would be something like Costa Ricans rejoicing if every Nicaraguan were to fall prey to a deadly virus, and for that country to be an emptied wasteland; for all their difficulties over the years, the two nations are bound up in a common history and there can be no joy at the suffering of a sibling. We do have to remember that this word from God is part of the Hebrew Bible, and

not the Edomite Bible, if there ever was such a thing. Although our God is a jealous God, it would seem hypocritical of God to call Edom to account at the expense of Israel, only to allow Israel to do the same thing. And so, I think we are probably safe if understand the prophecy against Edom as a word of wisdom for Israel's future, for that time when they would once again be in the position that Edom was in when they made their fatal mistake. Remember that in the grand Biblical scheme of things, Israel is not called to be the center of a great Empire, but a light unto the nations, not a military power, but the people who help the whole world recognize God as their creator and sovereign Lord.

And so if there is grace in Obadiah, it comes in the form of a warning, perhaps meant for the Israelites to overhear, and if not for them, than for us. You see, Edom's sins are easy enough for another nation to repeat, easy enough for a church to repeat, easy enough for an individual to repeat. You see, the sins of Edom were hubris and cowardice, and the failure to stand up for another victim of injustice. The sin of Edom was kicking another while they were down, rather than offering that hand up. The sin of Edom was the betrayal of a common heritage, if not a common humanity. All of these are great, great temptations in every age, and especially when we find ourselves on the heights, with the opportunity to look down on others from our perches of health, wealth, and security.

I am reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," written in response to those who, like the Edomites, could look down on their "enemies," and criticize them even while proclaiming their kinship. King's letter was written in response to a letter published in the Birmingham newspaper by eight white clergymen in Alabama who decried the street-level non-violent actions of the civil rights movement as causing too much disorder and violence in their community. It was, of course, directed at King and other Christians, their kin, and they could only do it by virtue of their lofty positions in their community's more prestigious pulpits. It is noteworthy that in response, God gave Martin Luther King, Jr. not a modern day version of the message of Obadiah, but rather the following words, which work more like a commentary on Obadiah. In justifying the protests, King wrote: "Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial 'outside agitator' idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds." We may not have read Obadiah lately, but it seems that neither did the esteemed clergymen of the Birmingham of the 1960s.

Sometimes the good news is news we'd rather not hear, a corrective tweak which hurts for a time, a pointed word which helps us see something in a new way. Even though it hurts, it is still good news, because it helps us to change our ways, or avoid a sin, or do something God is calling us to do. For the Edomites, it was more than a corrective tweak, to be sure, but Obadiah's prophecy lingers on that we might not suffer the same fate, but be instructed by God's vision for the welfare, the shalom, of our kin. We know now that our network of "kin" is far wider and deeper than Canada or the United Kingdom if we are from the US, or Nicaragua or Spain if we are from Costa Rica or vice versa. The light of Jesus Christ has illuminated the common humanity of all the nations, and the common bond of the earth that sustains all those nation, and so too, we must pray, our sins against one another. Let it not be said seven times of us one day, "You should not have..." followed by a litany of our sins. Instead, let us be able to say, as Martin Luther King, Jr. did when he concluded his letter, "If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. [But] If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me," for it is God to whom we, like the Edomites, must eventually answer. Amen.