

Obadiah: *The Story of* *Twin Brothers*

By Dr. Dallas Burdette

WEBSITE: freedominchrist.net

As we approach the Book of Obadiah,¹ we are immediately confronted with determining the relevancy of this book for the Christian community. Are there instructions from this book that are still significant for our daily walk with God in the twenty-first century? Just a casual reading of this short book reveals a devastating sentence by God against Edom for its behavior against the nation of Israel. The sins of Edom against Israel are still sins that often confront Christians in their dealings with others, especially those of the household of faith. Obadiah deals with pride as one of its topmost downfalls from God's favor. Another sin that is extremely heinous to God is the sin of jubilation, or delight, over the misfortunes of others, which sin Edom exhibited in its enjoyment over the disasters that befell Jerusalem, possibly from the Babylonians under the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar (605 BC, 598 BC and 586 BC).²

Why should Christians read the Book of Obadiah today? Paul explains the necessity of reading the Old Testament in his Epistle to the Romans. He captures the very essence of the need for study of the earlier writings when he pens: "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). Again, he puts pen to paper: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17). What "was written" in the past and "all Scripture" refer to the Old Testament writings. With these two Scriptures in mind, this study seeks to unravel God's instructions for His people today. The Book of Obadiah is an excellent book about avoiding the sin of pride, which sin was the undoing of the descendants of one of the boys of Isaac, namely, Esau.

¹The Book of Obadiah unfolds the reason of God's displeasure with Edom.

² See Thomas J. Finley, "Obadiah" in Kenneth Barker, ed., *The Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary: Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1990), 342. See also page 341 for the earlier date (845 BC), which occurred during the reign of Jehoram (848-841 BC).

The first verse of Obadiah is packed with information concerning the nature of this prophecy. He writes: “The vision of Obadiah. This is what the Sovereign LORD says about Edom—We have heard a message from the LORD: An envoy was sent to the nations to say, ‘Rise, and let us go against her for battle’” (Obadiah 1). Edom is related to the nation of Israel through Isaac (2066-1886 BC) and Rebekah (Genesis 25:19-26). The Book is called the “vision of Obadiah.” The word *vision* suggests that the prophet ‘saw’ mentally and spiritually a message that came by divine revelation which he communicated and recorded.”³ The name *Obadiah* means “servant” or “worshiper of Yahweh.” Obadiah states that this is a prophecy to Edom. Even though this Book is addressed to Edom, nevertheless, this prophecy is still a warning to God’s people about the sin of pride and the sin of gloating over disasters that befall other people.

JACOB AND ESAU

To assist us in the interpretation of this short book, a brief overview of the history of the twin boys (born 2066 BC)⁴ sets the stage for understanding the shortest book in the Bible. Edom is the key, so to speak, of comprehending this Book. For us to grasp and identify Edom, we must go back to the Book of Genesis. Moses writes: “This is the account of Esau (that is, Edom)” [Genesis 36:1]. Again, Moses gives more information about Esau:

Esau took his wives and sons and daughters and all the members of his household, as well as his livestock and all his other animals and all the goods he had acquired in Canaan, and moved to a land some distance from his brother Jacob. ⁷ Their possessions were too great for them to remain together; the land where they were staying could not support them both because of their livestock. ⁸ So Esau (that is, Edom) settled in the hill country of Seir. ⁹ This is the account of Esau the father of the Edomites in the hill country of Seir. (36:6-9)

The Edomites were those descended from Esau and the Israelites were those descended from Jacob. In Genesis 25, Moses gives the historical background of these twin boys. He details the events as Rebekah, wife of Isaac, gives birth to the twins:

The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, “Why is this happening to me?” So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” (25:22-23)

In the narrative revealed by Moses concerning these twin boys, each of whom became a nation, one discovers competition even before birth:

³Samuel J. Schultz, “Obadiah,” in Thoralf Gilbrant, International Editor, *The Old Testament Study Bible*, 15 volumes, Vol., 15, (Springfield, MO: The Complete Biblical Library, 1999), 363.

⁴For a detailed study of chronology, see Dallas Burdette, “Date of the Exodus?” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Series of Specialized Studies from Ephesians • Philippians • Exodus • Prophets • Pastoral Epistles • Apologetics* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2010), 430-481.

When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵ The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.^b ²⁶ After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.^c Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them. (25:24-26)

The father, Isaac, favored Esau and the mother, Rebekah, favored Jacob. Esau sold his birthright⁵ to Jacob for “red stew,” which is “why he was called Edom” (25:30). Later, Jacob, through trickery, received Isaac's blessing (Chapter 27),⁶ which blessing belonged to Esau. After this deception, Jacob had to flee in order to keep his brother from killing him (27:41-45). Several years later, the two brothers experienced a brief period of reconciliation (Chapter 32). This initial hostility continued through the centuries and exhibited its hatred when Moses (1526-1406 BC) led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage in 1446 BC (560 years after Jacob and Esau's birth). Again we observe this continuing hostility when Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem in 586 BC (1,420 years after the birth of the twin boys).

Toward the end of Moses' life (1406 BC), he instructed the Israelites against any hostility toward Edom: “Do not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother. Do not abhor an Egyptian, because you lived as an alien in his country” (Deuteronomy 23:7). The Edomites did not honor this relationship of family ties. After the downfall of Jerusalem in 586 BC, Ezekiel (prophesied under the Babylonian Empire) issued a prophecy against Edom for its refusal to come to Israel's aid. They refused to assist because of an ancient hatred. Listen to the Lord as He speaks to Ezekiel:

The word of the LORD came to me: ² “Son of man, set your face against Mount Seir; prophesy against it ³ and say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against you, Mount Seir, and I will stretch out my hand against you and make you a desolate waste. ⁴ I will turn your towns into ruins and you will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the LORD. ⁵ Because you harbored an ancient hostility and delivered the Israelites over to the sword at the time of their calamity, the time their punishment reached its climax.’” (Ezekiel 35:1-5)

God pronounced judgment against Edom for its lack of concern for brotherly love toward the Israelites. Again, God issues His promise of punishment against Edom:

Because you have said, ‘These two nations and countries will be ours and we will take possession of them,’ even though I the LORD was there, ¹¹ therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I will treat you in accordance with the anger and jealousy you showed in your hatred of them

^b *Esau* may mean *hairy*; he was also called Edom, which means *red*.

^c *Jacob* means *he grasps the heel* (figuratively, *he deceives*).

⁵ Jacob takes advantage of his brother's hunger by offering him a bowl of stew in exchange for his birthright. One is immediately conscious that Jacob is scheming, dishonorable, unloving, and materialist in his dealings with Esau. The birthright entitled one to a double portion of his inheritance. In the ancient world one could barter his birthright. In this transfer of Esau's birthright, Jacob made Esau swear, which oath made this a legal binding transaction.

⁶ Jacob becomes known from this encounter as a skillful plotter, or schemer. He is portrayed as one who is cunning, untruthful, resourceful, and fraudulent, which is what one expects of one who is a trickster. He accomplishes this clandestine operation on mistaken identity.

and I will make myself known among them when I judge you. ¹² Then you will know that I the LORD have heard all the contemptible things you have said against the mountains of Israel. You said, ‘They have been laid waste and have been given over to us to devour.’ ¹³ **You boasted against me and spoke against me without restraint**, and I heard it. ¹⁴ This is what the Sovereign LORD says: While the whole earth rejoices, I will make you desolate. ¹⁵ Because you rejoiced when the inheritance of the house of Israel became desolate, that is how I will treat you. You will be desolate, O Mount Seir, you and all of Edom. Then they will know that I am the LORD. (35:10-15)

Brief Analysis of the Twin Boys

Our analysis of the Book of Obadiah should involve an analysis of the characteristics of the two boys. Moses, in Genesis 25, gives us a brief account of these two boys. At first glance, we automatically want to identify with Esau, not Jacob. Jacob is a clever schemer in his manipulating circumstances in order to gain the upper hand. Leland Ryken (professor of English at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois) expresses it well:

Esau is an overgrown infant, whining that he is *about to die* simply because he is hungry. He is someone with an inverted sense of values, who lives only for the moment, is unable to postpone immediate gratification for a future benefit, and has no appreciation for the covenant promises that accompanied this particular birthright. The very vocabulary used by and about Esau demonstrates his lack of manners and vulgarity. English translations tone down Esau’s speech in verse 30; an accurate rendering is, *Let me gulp down some of this red stuff.*⁷ (Emphasis mine)

E. A. Speiser (1902-1965, a Jewish Polish-born American Assiriologist) characterizes Esau this way: “Esau is depicted as an uncouth glutton; he speaks of ‘swallowing, gulping down,’ instead of eating, or the like.”⁸ Again, Speiser calls attention to the second half of verse 34 in which Obadiah “presents a staccato succession of five verbal forms, which is evidently calculated to point up Esau’s lack of manner and judgment.”⁹ The Hebrew text reads: “and he drank, and he rose up, and he went, and he despised” (Genesis 25:34). Vernon McGee (1904-1988, an ordained Presbyterian minister and later a pastor of a non-denominational church) calls attention to the relevance of Esau’s attitude to the present day:

This is an illustration of a great truth for believers today. It is a picture of Christians. A believer has two natures within him, and they are struggling with each other and against each other. In Galatians 5:17 Paul says, ‘For the flesh lusteth [wars] against the spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.’ These are the two natures of the believer, the new nature and the old nature, and Jacob pictures the spirit of the new nature.¹⁰ (Emphasis mine)

⁷Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 77, 78.

⁸E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1964), 195.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ J. Vernon McGee, *Obadiah*, Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee, Vol., 3 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), 726, 727.

In spite of the negative connotations attached to Jacob, ultimately the Messiah came through his lineage. It is through the stories related in Genesis concerning Jacob and Esau that one gains insight into what God knows about the nature of the two boys. Genesis acts as an interpretive lens through which one sees the significance of Jacob over Esau. The story of Jacob reaches its climax in Genesis 32 and 33 when Jacob reaches the point of condescension in his life. Beginning with Genesis 25, one moves from story to meaning. In the climax of the story, God changes Jacob's name to Israel (32:28). In order to see the full picture of Jacob, one must read the whole story. Jacob's life falls into three sections: (1) early life at home, (2) twenty years in Haran, and (3) return to the land of his origin.

APPLICATION: "THEN" AND "NOW"

Hatred toward Others

One objective of this study is to draw parallels from the "then" to the "now." How do we treat God's people who happen to meet behind another religious label than the one we have chosen—Baptist, Methodist, Church of God, Church of Christ, and so on? Do we love one another? If God condemned Edom's descendants for lack of brotherly love, will He not also condemn us who are deficient in Christian love toward others? About six hundred years after the writing of the Book of Obadiah, James, our Lord's brother, addressed this subject of animosity toward others, which brings the past to the present:

Who is **wise** and **understanding** among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. ¹⁵ Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. ¹⁶ For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. ¹⁷ But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸ Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (James 3:13-18)

It is not uncommon for Christians to exhibit hatred or animosity toward other believers in the same way that Edom did toward Israel. John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, called forth Cain, who killed his brother, as an example from the Old Testament to warn God's people to avoid such hatred. Pay attention to John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, as he paints a detailed picture of abhorrence:

This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. ¹² Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. ¹³ Do not be surprised, my brothers, if the world hates you. ¹⁴ We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. ¹⁵ Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. (1 John 3:11-15)

Just as John called forth Cain as an example to be avoided, so it is that Christians today can analyze the characteristics of the twin boys to learn of the kind of behavior that will bring honor to God. The Book of Obadiah is the book that unfolds God’s statement about Esau in the Book of Malachi (433 BC). This prophet records the following words from the Lord:

“I have loved you,” says the LORD. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” the LORD says. “Yet I have loved Jacob,³ but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.”⁴ Edom may say, ‘Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.’ But this is what the LORD Almighty says: “They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD.”⁵ You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the LORD—even beyond the borders of Israel!’” (Malachi 1:2-5)

The Sin of Pride

This statement about God’s hatred for Esau is not found in the Book of Genesis. This statement was made over fifteen hundred years after the birth of the twin boys, which births occurred, as stated above, in 2006 BC. The Book of Obadiah explains in detail God’s statement about Esau as recorded through the prophet Malachi. In other words, Obadiah unfolds, or makes known, the reason for God’s extreme dislike of Edom. He summons awareness to the sin of pride, which offense resulted in their ultimate collapse as a nation. In fact, for almost two thousand years this country became virtually unknown until 1812. As Obadiah narrates their sin of pride, he paints a graphic picture in order to capture their arrogance and haughtiness:

See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised.³ The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’⁴ Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” declares the LORD. (Obadiah 2-4)

God describes His sentence against Edom: “See, I will make you small among the nations; you will be utterly despised” (v.2). Edom would be made insignificant among the nations. This verse anticipates the destruction that Obadiah explains in vv. 2-9. He calls attention to the sin of pride. Pride is the charge against Edom: “**The pride of your heart has deceived you**” (v. 3a). This pride resulted from their fortifications, which they considered unconquerable. Pay attention, once more, to the words of Obadiah as he explains the nature of their pride:

The pride of your heart has deceived you, you who live in the clefts of the rocks^a and make your home on the heights, you who say to yourself, ‘Who can bring me down to the ground?’⁴ Though you soar like the eagle and make your nest among the stars, from there I will bring you down,” declares the LORD. (vv. 3-4)

^a Or of Sela

Sela (Petra) is the name of the capital city. They took refuge within Sela, which denotes a rock or cliff. Jeffrey Niehaus (Professor of Old Testament) writes: “Perched on top of this natural fortress, the Edomites assimilated from their habitat a superior attitude of impregnability.”¹¹ R. K. Harrison (1920-1993, Old Testament scholar) expresses it this way: “This area ranged in elevation from about 5,000 ft. above sea level at Bozrah to nearly 5,500 feet near Teman.”¹² An eagle cannot soar too high for God to reach and even if they could make their nest among the stars, God can still reach them. Earlier, God, through Amos (760 BC), rebuked Israel for their disregard for justice with similar language:

Though they dig down to the depths of the grave,^a from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down. ³Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, there I will hunt them down and seize them. Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them. ⁴Though they are driven into exile by their enemies, there I will command the sword to slay them. I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good. (Amos 9:2-4)

Again, we emphasize that one of the major problems with the country of Edom had to do with the heart: “The pride of your heart has deceived you” (v.3). Samuel J. Schultz (1914-2005, Old Testament scholar and an ordained minister with the Christian Missionary Alliance) writes:

Pride would ultimately be Edom’s undoing. The country of Edom stretched southward in a mountainous terrain from the Brook Zered, with a highway on its eastern border used by caravan traders between Damascus and Ezion-Geber. About fifty miles south of the Dead Sea, their capital was settled “in the clefts of the rock” (*sela* HED #5748), a rock fortress known as Petra, located on the high plateau of Umm el-Biyara. This rock mass had perpendicular walls except for a sloping ascent from the southeast. Perched on top of this fortress, the Edomites developed a superior attitude of impregnability.¹³ (Emphasis mine)

Are we, too, filled with pride in our relationship with other Christians? We should never forget that one of the reasons that God hated Esau (Edom) focused upon her pride, which Obadiah names as a scandalous sin in the sight of God. God through Solomon (king of Israel from 970 to 930 BC) enumerated “pride” as one of six sins he hated:

There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him: ¹⁷haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸a heart that devises wicked

¹¹Jeffrey Niehaus, “Obadiah” in Thomas Edward McComiskey, ed., *The Minor Prophets: An Exegetical & Expository Commentary*, vol., 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 516.

¹²R. K. Harrison, “Edom,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol., 2, D—G (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 202. See also John D. W. Watts, *Obadiah* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Alpha Publications, 1981), 13, where he writes: “Edom’s major cities included Teman in the south and Bozrah in the north. Sela was a small but famous forerunner of the well-known and oft-visited fortifications of Petra of later fame.”

^a Hebrew to *Sheol*

¹³Samuel J. Schultz, “Obadiah,” in Thoralf Gilbrant, International Editor, *The Old Testament Study Bible, 15 volumes*, Vol., 15, (Springfield, MO: The Complete Biblical Library, 1999), 363.

schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil,¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers. (Proverbs 6:16-19)

The KJV translates the first of these sins as “a proud look.” Again, Solomon writes: “To fear the LORD is to hate evil; **I hate pride and arrogance**, evil behavior and perverse speech” (8:13). Paul, too, wrote about pride: “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.^a Do not be conceited (Romans 12:16). Paul warns believers about deeming themselves superior in wisdom. The church of the Resurrected One should be marked by unity, harmony, agreement, humility, and concern for one another.¹⁴ Everyone is made in the image of God. Whenever the people of God decide it wants only a certain “class” of people, that is to say, only those who will kowtow to the dictates of their leader. This sectarian mind-set of the church departs from God’s ideal of oneness among His people. The community of those who live by faith should reflect upon the words of Paul to the Philippians as he seeks to curb haughtiness and superiority of knowledge:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:1-5)

As Christians, we should exercise caution against pride capturing the emotional and intellectual center of our being. Where does pride come from? Listen to John as he explains: “For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.¹⁷ The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:16-17). The KJV translates, “the pride of life.” Even when one contemplates his or her salvation, God does not allow boasting about one’s salvation, except boasting in what God’s brought about through the sacrifice of His Son. Paul writes about this to the Corinthians:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 1: 26-31)

^a Or *willing to do menial work*

¹⁴For an examination of unity among God’s people, see Dallas Burdette (b. 1934), “Introduction,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), xvii-xxx.

CONCLUSION

The “pride of life” is an ambition that results in self-display and self-glory, which is seen in the sin of Eve as well as in the lives of many Christians. Two sins stand out in bold—(1) hatred and (2) pride. This short Book of Obadiah consists only of one chapter and twenty-one verses, which writing instructs us in holiness, that is to say, instructions in righteousness. Once again, we need to remind ourselves of the words of Paul in his correspondence to Rome as well as to Timothy. We should weigh carefully the following words of this Apostle of God:

For everything that **was written in the past** was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,¹⁷ so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:14-17)

The Book of Obadiah is a book that instructs us in how we, as Christians, should live our lives. This inspired account can **teach** us, **rebuke** us, **correct** us, and **train** us in righteous behavior. We should pray that God will help us to remember that the pride of Edom is the pride that declares it is alright to live one’s life without God and His laws. Can men and women live fruitful lives without God? Our next study of Obadiah’s writings will focus, in greater details, upon the Edomites as a nation that sought to live life without God.