

The Whitefield Seminary Papers

“Law & Religion Forum”

Volume 2, Apostolate Paper #14



A HISTORY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

“Obadiah’s Prophecy: A Prologue to the New Testament”¹

by

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Introduction

The Prophet Obadiah probably lived in the 6th century BC during the period of the Babylonian captivity, which commenced in 597 BC and ended in 538 BC.

However, there is another prophet named Obadiah who lived in the northern kingdom of Israel, prior to Assyrian captivity of 722 B.C.³ Since Obadiah's description of the captivity of the Jews and Jerusalem appear to describe the Babylonian captivity of 597 B.C., most Christian historians and theologians—including Protestant Reformation leaders Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) and John Calvin (1509 – 1564) — place the Prophet Obadiah, who is the author of the Book of Obadiah, in the 6th century, not the 8th century; and this paper adopts that perspective as well.

The Book of Obadiah is both a restatement and a continuation of the story of Esau and Jacob in the Book of Genesis. However, the Book of Obadiah deals with the descendants of Esau and Jacob, several centuries later. Here, we are reminded of the prophecy in Genesis 25:23 (“the elder shall serve the younger”).

Esau, the elder, shall serve the younger brother Jacob, because Esau was dominated by his own fleshly lusts and immoderate appetite, and because Esau despised his “birthright,” which was “honor, holiness, faith, and obedience to God’s word.” Esau preferred the mundane things of this world, because these things quenched his fleshly lusts and desires. In the Book of Obadiah, we find that Esau’s descendants had not much changed.

Accordingly, the Prophet Obadiah explains precisely how and when this prophecy about Esau and Jacob (i.e., “the elder shall serve the younger”) will be fulfilled.

³ “Obadiah,” Wikipedia (online encyclopedia): <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obadiah>

Obadiah is supposed to have received the gift of prophecy for having hidden the "hundred prophets" from the persecution of Jezebel. He hid the prophets in two caves, so that if those in one cave should be discovered those in the other might yet escape. Obadiah was very rich, but all his wealth was expended in feeding the poor prophets, until, in order to be able to continue to support them, finally he had to borrow money at interest from Ahab's son Jehoram. Obadiah's fear of God was one degree higher than that of Abraham; and if the house of Ahab had been capable of being blessed, it would have been blessed for Obadiah's sake.

Chapter One

The Story of Esau (Edom) and Jacob (Israel)

The Book of Obadiah is a prophecy that fulfills the passage in Genesis which describes the fate of “two manner of people” represented in birth of the twin boys Esau and Jacob:

The LORD said unto her,

“Two nations are in thy womb,
and two manner of people shall be separated from thy
bowels; and the one people shall be stronger than the other
people; and the elder shall serve the younger.

Genesis 25:23 (KJV)

As recounted in Genesis, one day Esau came in from the field and was faint.⁴ At that time, Jacob had prepared a red pottage. Esau asked Jacob for some pottage which he had prepared.

“And Jacob said, **Sell me this day thy birthright.** And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point to die: and what profit shall this birthright do to me?

“And Jacob said, Swear to me this day; and he sware unto him: and he sold his birthright unto Jacob.

“Then Jacob gave Esau bread and pottage of lentils; and he did eat and drink, and rose up, and went his way: **thus Esau despised his birthright.**”⁵

Hence, according to Augustine of Hippo, Esau had “**immoderately lusted** after the lentils the younger had prepared for food, and for that price sold his birthright to him, confirming it with an oath. We learn from this that a person is to be blamed, not for the kind of food he eats, but for **immoderate greed.**”⁶

⁴ See Genesis 25: 30 (Esau was “faint,” and “therefore was his name called **Edom.**”)

⁵ Genesis 25:30- 34. See, also, Genesis 25:34 [NIV], stating: “So Esau despised his birthright.”

⁶ Ibid., p. 559.

Thus, *immoderate lust, immoderate greed, and the despising of his own birthright* are the ethical lessons contained in this story of Esau and Jacob.

In the Book of Obadiah, the same condemnation is made against Esau's descendants, Edom, stating:

[t]he pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, who shall bring me down to the ground? Though thou exalt thyself as the eagle, and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the LORD....⁷

And, as the two brothers (Esau and Jacob) experienced contention between them in the Book of Genesis, the Book of Obadiah suggests that this tension continued unabated between their respective descendants (Edom and Israel), stating:

In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into the gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them. But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother I the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress. Thus shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; yea, thou shouldest not have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity; neither should thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress. For the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.

And, as predicted in Genesis 25:23 (“the elder shall serve the younger”), the Book of Obadiah prophesies that Mount Zion (Jacob or Israel) shall govern Mount Esau (Edom), stating:

But upon mount Zion shall be deliverance, and there shall be holiness; and the house of Jacob shall possess their possession.

⁷ Obadiah 1:3-4.

And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be any remaining of the house of Esau; for the LORD hath spoken it....⁸

And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the LORD'S.⁹

⁸ Obadiah 1:17-18.

⁹ Obadiah 1:21.

Chapter Two

Spiritual Symbolism of Esau and Jacob

Genesis 25:37 describes Esau and Jacob as representing “two manner of people.”

In the story of Esau and Jacob, the characters of Esau and Jacob were polar opposites from one another.

“The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was a quiet man, staying among the tents.”¹⁰

“So great a difference existed in their lives and manners,” writes Augustine of Hippo in *The City of God*, “so great a difference in their parents’ love for them respectively, that the very contrast between them produced even a mutual hostile antipathy.”¹¹ “One of these twins [Jacob] was for a long time a hired servant,” Augustine continues, “the other [Esau] never served. One of them lost that honour which was so much valued among their people; the other obtained it. And what shall we say of their wives, their children, and their possession? How different they were in respect to all these!”¹²

Thus, the “two manner of people” whom Esau and Jacob symbolized represented two broad camps or categories of people.

The “elder,” who is Esau, was the first born, and symbolizes the city of man (i.e., the earthly city; the Jews; the Idumeans; the Gentiles); whereas the “younger,” who is Jacob, symbolizes the city of God (i.e., the true Church or the heavenly city).¹³

¹⁰ Genesis 25: 27 [NIV].

¹¹ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), p. 146.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 478-479 (“Of these two first parents of the human race, then, Cain was the first-born, and he belonged to the city of man; after him was born Abel, who belonged to the city of God. For as in the individual the truth of the apostle’s statement is discerned, that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural, and afterward that which is spiritual, whence it comes to pass that **each man, being derived from a condemned stock, is first of all born of Adam evil and carnal, and becomes good and spiritual only afterwards, when he is grafted into Christ**”).

Furthermore, Augustine of Hippo writes that these two boys signified “a type of two people, the Jews and the Christians (although as pertains to carnal descent it was not the Jews but the Idumeans who came from the seed of Esau, nor the Christian nations but rather the Jews who came of Jacob’s; for the types hold only as regards the saying, ‘The elder shall serve the younger’”¹⁴

The Earth (Global Human Society)	
City of Man (“Earthly City”)	City of God (“Heavenly City”)
Esau (unhealthy fleshly lust)	Jacob (healthy spiritual desires)
Reprobates (enemies of God)	Church (sons of God)

Thus, in Reformed theology, Esau and Jacob symbolize two broad categories of people (i.e., “two manner of people,” Gen. 25:23) throughout the entire earth:

“though there are very many and great nations all over the earth, whose rites and customs, speech, arms, and dress, are distinguished by marked differences, yet **there are no more than two kinds of human society**, which we may justly call two cities, according to the language of our Scriptures. The one consists of **those who wish to live after the flesh**, the other of **those who wish to live after the spirit...**¹⁵

by regeneration: so was it in the human race as a whole. When these two cities began to run their course by a series of deaths and births, the citizens of this world was the first-born, and after him the stranger in this world, the citizen of the city of God, predestinated by grace, elected by grace, by grace a stranger below, and by grace a citizen above.”)

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 565.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 441.

Chapter Three

Verse 21 of the Book of Obadiah

Genesis 25:23 states that “the elder shall serve the younger.” The Book of Obadiah describes the fulfilment of that prophecy in verse 21, to wit:

Old Testament	Obadiah 1:21
King James Version	²¹ And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau ; and the kingdom shall be the LORD's .
New International Version	²¹ Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion to govern the mountains of Esau . And the kingdom will be the LORD's .
Orthodox Jewish Bible	²¹ And Moshi'im (Deliverers) shall come up on Mt Tziyon to judge the Har Esav ; and HaMamlachah (the Kingdom) shall be Hashem's .
American Standard Version	²¹ And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau ; and the kingdom shall be Jehovah's .
Christian Standard Version	²¹ Saviors will ascend Mount Zion to rule over the hill country of Esau , and the kingdom will be the LORD's .

Here, we are informed that Mount Zion (i.e., Israel) shall rule or govern the kingdom of Esau (i.e., Mount Esau); and, furthermore, that this kingdom of Esau shall be the LORD'S.

The Book of Obadiah considers Esau or the Edomites to be no different than these other nations, stating: “[f]or the day of the LORD is near upon all the heathen: as thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee: thy reward shall return upon thine own head.”¹⁶

Significantly, the Prophet Obadiah describes a “restored” Israel, stating “the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions... the captivity of this host of the children of Israel shall possess that of the Canaanites... the captivity of Jerusalem... shall possess the cities of the south.”¹⁷

The Prophet Obadiah concludes his prophesy by stating that the Idumeans (Mount Esau) will be saved and governed by the Israelites (Mount Zion), and this is the fulfilment of the prophecy in Genesis (25:23, “the elder shall serve the younger.”)

¹⁶ Obadiah 1:15.

¹⁷ Obadiah 1:17-20.

Chapter Four

Augustine's Commentary on Verse 21 (Obadiah)

According to Augustine of Hippo's *The City of God*, the Book of Obadiah treats Esau or Edom as though it was a member of the heathen Gentiles. Hence, Augustine writes: "Mount Esau is Idumea, which signifies the Church of the Gentiles."

Thus, where Genesis 25:23 states, "the elder shall serve the younger," Augustine of Hippo interprets to mean that "earthly city, in general, shall serve the heavenly city (i.e., Christ Jesus)."

Furthermore, Augustine deduces from Obadiah 1:21 an interpretation which holds that the Church of Jesus Christ ("the younger") will rule and govern the Gentile nations ("the elder"), which is symbolized by "mount Esau." To this very point, Augustine writes:

Now if, by that form of speech in which a part is put for the whole, **we take Idumea as put for the nations**, we may understand of Christ what he says among other things... 'And those who are saved again shall come up out of Mount Sion, that they may defend Mount Esau, and it shall be a kingdom of the Lord.' It is quite evident this was fulfilled when those saved out of Mount Sion—that is, the believers in Christ from Judea, of whom **the apostles are chief to be acknowledged**—went up to defend Mount Esau. How could they defend it except by making safe, through the preaching of the gospel, those who believed that they might be 'delivered from the power of darkness and translated into the kingdom of God?' This he expressed as an inference, adding, '**And it shall be to the Lord a kingdom.**' For Mount Sion signifies Judea, where it is predicted there shall be safety, and a Holy One, that is, Christ Jesus. But Mount Esau is Idumea, which signifies the Church of the Gentiles, which, as I have expounded, those saved again out of Sion have defended that it should

be a kingdom to the Lord. This was obscure before it took place; but what believer does not find it out now that it is done?¹⁸

Hence, the Book of Obadiah's prophetic prediction that a restored kingdom of Israel will one day govern the kingdom of Edom is not a reference to an imperial rulership of a nation-state of Israel over an earthly kingdom called Imudea or Edom; but rather this prophetic prediction points us to the future and eternal lordship of Christ over all nations.

¹⁸ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 636.

Chapter Five

Calvin's Commentary of Verse 21 (Obadiah)

Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509 – 1564) also provide a Christocentric interpretation of verse 21 of the Book of Obadiah. First, Calvin interprets the words “saviours shall come” or “deliverers shall come,” in verse 21, to mean “judges,” as in the Book of Judges. To this very point, Calvin writes:

Here the Prophet says, that there are in God's hand ministers, the labor of whom he employs to preserve his own people. He alludes here, I have no doubt, **to the history of the judges**. We indeed know that the people of Israel were often so distressed, that their deliverance was almost incredible; and that yet they were also delivered in such a way as to have made it evident that the hand of God had appeared from heaven. Since this then was well known to the Jews, **the Prophet here reminds them that God had still in his hand redeemers**, whenever it might please him to gather his people. God then shall send *preservers*, even as he did send them formerly to your fathers. They had indeed found true by experience what the Prophet says here, not only once, but more than ten times. This then ought to have served much to confirm this prophecy.¹⁹

Next, Calvin interprets the words “to judge the mount of Esau” in verse 21 of Obadiah to mean that Christ, through his many ministers or judges, shall govern and judge Mount Esau.” Calvin assures us that Christ or the Messiah is signified in this phrase, “to judge,” writing:

Ascend then shall they who will judge the mount of Esau, — who, being endued with the power of God and his authority, will execute judgment on mount Seir and on the whole nation, and will avenge the cruelty which Edom had exercised towards the children of Abraham.

But this passage shows, that Christ came not to be the minister of our deliverance and salvation in an ordinary way, but that he

¹⁹ Calvin's Commentaries on the Bible (Obadiah 1:21).

became our savior in a special manner; so that he stands alone in that capacity: and this is a very strong argument against the Jews. They confess that the Messiah would be the Redeemer of his people, but they ascribe this office to him in a general way, as they do to David and other kings. But it certainly appears from this passage, that the Messiah would not be of the common class, for saviors would be under him as his ministers. This the Jews dare not to deny, though they grumble: for it would be absurd that he should be one of their number. Since then he was sent to be a Redeemer and Savior in a way different from others, it follows that he is not man only, but that he is the Author of salvation. It would indeed be easy to reply, “Why do you speak to us of many redeemers? Do you not hope for one Savior? If God will commit this office to many in an equal degree, why are there so many glorious promises respecting the Messiah? Why are we ever reminded of him alone? Why is he alone set forth to us as the ground of our salvation?” It hence certainly appears that Christ is to be distinguished from all others, and that others are saviors under his authority; and such were the apostles, and such are all at this day, the labor and ministry of whom God employs to defend and support his Church.²⁰

And, finally, Calvin interprets the words “the kingdom shall be the LORD’S” to mean that the Almighty LORD Jehovah shall indeed govern all nations, upon the Last Judgment. Calvin assures us that this will be done through the person of Christ, stating:

Now he adds, **Jehovah’s shall be the kingdom.** But as it is certain, that **it was God’s purpose to rule among his people after having restored them,** in no other way than by the power of Christ, the Prophet, by saying that **the kingdom of Christ would be Jehovah’s,** means, that it would be really divine, and more illustrious than if he had employed the labor of men. But two things must be here observed by us, — that God himself really rules in the person of Christ, — and that it is the legitimate mode of ruling the Church, that **God alone** should preside, and hold alone the chief power. Hence it follows, that when God does not appear as the only King, all things are in confusion, without any order. Now **God is not called a King by way of an empty distinction: but then only is he regarded a King in**

²⁰ Ibid.

reality, when all submit themselves to him, when they are ruled by his word; in short, when all creatures become silent in his presence. To God then belongs the kingdom. We hence see that the Church has no existence, where the word of God does not so prevail in its authority, as to keep down whatever height there is in men, and to bring them under the yoke, **so that all may depend on God alone, that all may look up to him, and that he may have all in subjection to himself.**²¹

Here Calvin emphasizes the important theological point that the Book of Obadiah is a prophesy about a “restored” Israel. It is not a prophecy about the ancient Province of Judea under the Persians, Medes, Greeks, or Romans. Rather, it is ultimately about the rulership of the promised Messiah under a “restored” Israel.

Since God himself, through the person of a Messiah, shall govern this “restored” Israel, then it stands to reason that when the Prophet Obadiah used the words “the kingdom shall be the LORD’S,” in verse 21, that he was referencing the rulership of Messiah, the man Christ Jesus, over both Edom as well as all other nations of the world.

This is Calvin’s Reformed theological interpretation of the Book of Obadiah.

²¹ Ibid.

Conclusion

Although the Book of Obadiah is the smallest book in the Old Testament, containing only 21 verses, it is a concise description of the “restored” Israel that utilizes the symbolism found in the prophesy of Esau and Jacob in the Book of Genesis.

Esau was the oldest of the twin brothers. He symbolized immoderate fleshly lusts and fleshly desires. He eschewed his birthright.

Jacob was the youngest of the twin brothers. Although there was nothing particularly holy, noble or righteous in Jacob, he was chosen to receive his birthright, which was the heirship of Christ, to wit:

Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine: let the people serve thee: be lord over thy brethren, and let thy mother’s sons bow down to thee: cursed be every one that curseth thee, and blessed be he that blesseth thee.²²

This “blessing of Jacob,” says Augustine of Hippo, “is therefore a proclamation of Christ to all nations. It is this which has come to pass, and is now being fulfilled.... The world like a field is filled with the odour of Christ’s name.... Him the nations serve, Him princes adore. He is the Lord of His brethren, because His people rules over the Jews. Him His Father’s sons adore, that is, the son of Abraham according to the flesh. He is cursed that curseth Him, and he that blesseth Him is blessed.”²³

Where the Scripture says, “the elder (Esau) shall serve the younger (Jacob)” (Genesis 25:23), this means that *the entire world shall serve Christ*. The Book of Obadiah restates this same prophesy in verse 21 where it states: “[a]nd saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the LORD’S.” Politically speaking, this means that the *Church shall govern the nations*.

This is a Reformed theological interpretation of the Book of Obadiah.

THE END

²² Genesis 27:28-29.

²³ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, supra, p. 559.

THE END

