CHAPTER 5

The Nations in Obadiah

While Hosea stands out within the Twelve as the only book without an oracle against a foreign nation, Obadiah is notable for consisting almost entirely of oracles against Edom and the nations. Even the oracle of deliverance for Judah/Jerusalem in Obad 19–21 is cast predominantly in terms of taking possession of territories until then under the control of others, so that it is almost in equal part an oracle of destruction against those non-Israelite groups. Obadiah is also remarkable for the force and scope of its perspective on the nations, which leaves little if any place for their deliverance.

5.1 Terminology

5.1.1 Proper Nouns for Groups

The connection of various people groups with their land is very important in Obadiah because of its focus on the expatriation of Judahites in the past and the future undoing of the same by retributive expatriation of her oppressors. A variety of proper nouns refer to ethnic groups indirectly by means of the city/nation-states that they inhabit: Edom (1, 8); Esau (co-referential with Edom; 6; with הר in 8, 9, 19, 21; with בית in 18); Mount Esau (co-referential with Edom; 8, 9, 19, 21); Teman (at least partially co-referential with Edom; 9); house of Esau (co-referential with Edom; 18 [2x]); and Philistines (19).

5.1.2 Cities and Regions

In some cases, territories in Obadiah are or will be without inhabitant, at least until Judahites finally reinhabit them. The following proper nouns probably refer to a region rather than to its population (details will be discussed below), and are all objects of the verb ירש: territory of Ephraim (19); territory of Gilead (19); land of the Canaanites (20); Zarephath (20, as the northern limit of the territory to be possesses by Israel's exiles); Sepharad (20, probably Sardes in

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1 This distinction can be subtle and is sometimes difficult to establish with certainty, but it is worth pursing in Obadiah given the focus on territory in 19–21 over against the focus on people and their actions in 1–18.
Asia Minor, as a place of exile of Judeans); and cities of the Negeb (20, as the southern limit of the territory to be possesses by Jerusalem's exiles).

5.1.3 Language, Language, and Related Terms

Obadiah consistently uses נגוים for the nations around Edom, whether as agents who will attack her (1) or as her general setting (2). When the book’s perspective broadens, Edom remains terminologically distinct from ‘all the nations’ (כל הגוים, 15, 16) but shares their fate. The relationship between verses 15 and 16 seems to require seeing Edom as part of the nations, since its punishment (in the second person singular in verse 15) is explained in 16b as ‘all the nations shall drink continually’ (this difficult passage is discussed below). Obadiah reserves עם-language for Judah, and it appears only in 13 (singular, with a 1cs suffix referring to YHWH).

5.1.4 Generic Terms

Obadiah also attests a number of generic terms for non-Israelite groups, but a distinction between Edom and others often remains apparent. In verse 7, ‘allies’ (אנשי בריתך), ‘those at peace with you’ (אישים שלמים), and ‘[those who eat] your bread’ (לחמך) depict groups other than Edom who despite their common cause and fellowship with Edom are treacherous, plotting Edom’s destruction in a covert way that parallels the overt intention to make war against her in the opening verse (1). In verse 11, a distinction is again present between Edom who stood aloof and the strangers (זרים) and foreigners (נכרים) who plundered and took possession of Jerusalem.

Several generic groups are also present within Edom. Edom’s ‘wise men’ (חכמים) and those with understanding (תבונה) in Mount Esau (8) contrast ironically with the preceding description of Edom in verse 7, according to which it has not perceived any of the hypocrisy of the nations with whom it has made common cause (אין תבונה בו). Similarly, verse 9 warns that despite the presence of ‘mighty men’ (גבורים) in Teman, everyone in Mount Esau will fall in a slaughter.

5.2 Characteristics of the Nations

Since Edom is the nearly-exclusive focus of the oracles of Obadiah, its characterization is by far the most detailed. Here we will note its characteristics

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