

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE MINOR PROPHETS - PART FOUR - THE BOOK OF OBADIAH

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Old Testament but by no means the easiest to understand and apply today. It is not dated so we can only guess the historical background against which it is written. Presumably it is not important or we would have been told. Assuming that the Minor Prophets are arranged roughly in the order they were written, the most likely time for Obadiah is the reign of King Ahaz of Judah whose troubles with the Edomites, Philistines and Assyrians are described in II Chron.28:16-21. His defeat was the result of trusting in his own resources instead of God's promises. The date then would be late in the eighth century BC. Jeremiah quotes and expands Obad.1-9 in Jer.49:7-22 when he also warns the Edomites of God's coming judgement on them for their arrogance.

This book is nowhere quoted or referred to in the New Testament so we have no clues from there as we do with many of the other Minor Prophets.

Who wrote the book? Obadiah, because he says so in the first verse but there is no further information about him. The only help in understanding from his name is its meaning 'the Servant of the Lord'.

The message of the book resolves around two names Esau and Jacob, representing the two nations descended from the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. In character the sons were totally different but remarkably typical of their descendants. Esau was tough, straightforward, self sufficient - and utterly godless, as the writer of Hebrews describes him in Heb.12:16,17. His life-style and attitudes in Gen.25:27-34 were those of what Paul calls the natural man, the man without God who is determined to stay that way and to live in his own wisdom and strength. (I Cor.2:14)

Jacob was weak, underhanded, tight-fisted - and religious! His attitude to life is best summed up by the story in Gen.27 of him disguising himself as Esau to fool his father and receive his approval. He saw being a Christian as an act to impress others. He met Christ in Gen.28 but bargained with Him for blessing. As a result he was no different from an unbeliever throughout the next 20 years when he lived with his uncle Laban, who was as big a cheat as Jacob.(Gen.29-31) He fought against God and did not know it,(Gen.32) as he had fought Him all his life. He typifies the carnal Christian, the babe in Christ, of I Cor.3:1, who is redeemed and regenerated, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, but lives most of the time as if he was not. Just as Jacob's defeated life infected his wives and children,(Gen.30,34 and 37) the carnal Christians of Corinth led each other into spiritual defeat.

After 20 years as a carnal Christian Jacob was reminded by the Lord with Whom he had been fighting, of all the resources that he had had since he first met Christ, but had not been enjoying.(Gen.32:28) In brief glimpses,(Gen.33, 35, 46-49) he began to behave according to his new name, Israel, the spiritual Christian of I Cor.2:15; 3:1. Jacob as the carnal Christian is a pathetic sight and an object of ridicule to Esau, the natural man. And so in the same condition are we. But it does not have to be that way. This is the message of Obadiah.

For the people of Israel, used to hearing Moses' sermons read to them, there would have been one phrase in Obadiah's message which would have leaped out at them. In verse 17 Obadiah promised a future time when their descendants 'will possess their possessions'. Possession was the theme of Moses' messages to the Israelites on the plains of Moab before they entered the promised land. The words 'possess' and 'possession' occur about 50 times in the book of Deuteronomy, as many as in

the whole of the rest of the Old Testament. The possessions of which he speaks were the promised land of Canaan, a rich fertile land that God had given to them 40 years before but which they had never enjoyed because they had not yet taken possession of it. Canaan is used throughout the Bible to picture to us the riches we have had in Christ from the moment we became Christians but may never have learned or dared to enjoy. The result of doing so is victory instead of defeat. Such victory over sin will bring respect, even from the natural man, instead of ridicule.

An outline of the book of Obadiah could therefore be as follows:

1-9 The natural man, pictured by Esau, with his attitude of arrogance and his inevitable defeat and judgement by God at which time the emptiness of his pride will be exposed.

10-14 The carnal Christian, pictured by Jacob, with his defeat at the hands of the world, his consequent misery and bankruptcy, at the sight of which the natural man just stands back and laughs - which makes his failure even more painful.

15-21 The spiritual Christian, pictured by Israel, who demonstrates God's victory by possessing his possessions and so turns the tables on the natural man. The territory to be repossessed included land to the south, the mountain of Esau, and the cities of the Negev, and to the east, Gilead. Victory was to be in every direction and every situation. Those who would repossess land were not only those still living in the land but the exiles living in Zarephath, part of Sidon, and Sepharad in Assyria.

Those who can know victory when they again possess all they have in Christ are not only those still keeping up the appearance of Christian living but those whose defeat is so complete they have given up even professing to belong to Christ. There is one condition; He must be the only King.(Obad.21)

Amos showed the impossibility of living the Christian life of ourselves, even after we have been redeemed and regenerated. Obadiah shows how God has made it possible in Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What can we learn from verses 1-9 about the characteristics of the natural man?(I Cor.2:14) Think of modern day examples of the same behaviour and attitude.
2. How in the same way do verses 10-14 explain the struggles of the carnal Christian, the spiritual baby who has not grown up?(I Cor.3:1)
3. How according to verses 15-21 can we become spiritual men?(I Cor.3:1) What effect will this have on the unbelievers around us?
4. What is the special message of this little book? Why is it so important for us today? How does it follow the previous three books?