

Brother vs. Brother

If you are not familiar with the Old Testament book of the Prophet Obadiah, indeed, if you've never heard of Obadiah in your life, you are not alone. Dr. Pam Scalise, herself an Old Testament scholar of some renown, recently told me a story about a colleague and friend of hers named Bob Robinson. When he was in his very first teaching job, at the University of Missouri in Columbia back in 1982, he mentioned to his department chair, a church historian, that he was doing research on Obadiah. "You're pulling my leg," the elder scholar said to him. "There's no such book in the Bible."

Part of the reason for the obscurity of Obadiah, I think, is its length – just one chapter of 21 verses, or 440 words, which puts it in fourth place for the shortest book of the entire Bible behind Philemon at 335 words, Second John at 245, and Third John at 219. By comparison, the Book of Nahum, which we looked at in September, is a giant, with three whole chapters! For most folks trying to read Obadiah, there isn't a lot of context for the prophet's wrath. Unlike most of the Old Testament's prophetic books which include "oracles against the nations," there is no famous ancient foe here like Assyria, Babylon, or Egypt. Obadiah's opprobrium is saved for Edom, a nation completely lost to time. And not even Biblical scholars can tell us anything about the prophet himself or even when he wrote.

So, why am I bothering you with this obscure book, other than my somewhat obsessive insistence on completeness? Well, to tell that story, we're going to have to go all the way back to Genesis and work our way forward through the great Exodus to when the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, to the stories of King David and his son, wise King Solomon, to the destruction of Israel and Judah and the Babylonian Exile, and, finally, to the time of Jesus. We'll end up talking about issues of justice and family feuds that still ring true in our own time. Ready? Here we go!

The country and people of Edom may be obscure to us today, but they loomed large in the history and memories of the Children of Israel. Other than the three "big bads" I listed a moment ago (Assyria, Babylon, and Egypt), Edom is the most mentioned nation in the prophets' "oracles against the nations." According to Douglas Stuart, in the Word Biblical Commentary, there are seven of those fairly lengthy oracles against Edom in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Obadiah, and Malachi, plus four shorter condemnations in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Joel. Edom was truly one of Israel's most hated enemies. Why? Well, part of the explanation is that they were also cousins and you know there's no feud like a family feud.

You will remember, I hope that the combined kingdom of Israel was named after the father of the twelve tribes, a man given the name Israel, "He wrestles with God," after a famous encounter at the river ford at Jabbok. Before that, and sometimes after, that man was known as Jacob, the son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. I hope you also remember that Jacob had a twin, older by just moments, named Esau. The two boys were rivals in everything, it seemed. They even looked quite different. As was hilariously remembered in a classic bit of comedy on the British stage in 1960 called "On the Fringe," written by Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Alan Bennett, and Jonathan Miller, "My brother Esau is an hairy man but I am a smooth man." If you ever want to hear some deliberately bad and very funny preaching, look up the recording on YouTube sometime. But I digress... Esau was born with a fine covering of red hair all over his body and, in Hebrew, the word "red" is "edom." The most famous story involving Jacob and Esau is, of

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course, the way in which Jacob got Esau to sell him his “birthright,” the privileges according to the older son, for what the old King James Bible called “a mess of pottage;” in other words, a bowl of bean soup, often a rich reddish-brown in color. With these two stories, Esau was saddled with a nickname we would say “Red” – “Edom.”

Jacob went on, with the help of his mother, Rebecca, to fool his aging, nearly blind father into giving him Esau’s blessing. Esau was outraged and threatened to kill Jacob and Jacob fled to his uncle Laban’s house, several hundred miles distant, where he married Laban’s two daughters and built up his own large flock before returning home. Remembering Esau’s rage, Jacob sent his servants, wives, children, and flocks ahead of him, hoping to placate his brother with substantial gifts from the flocks. As it turns out, he needn’t have worried. Genesis 33 tells the story: “Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept... Esau said, ‘What do you mean by all this company that I met?’ Jacob answered, ‘To find favor with my lord.’ But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’” I find Esau’s greeting to Jacob, the brother who had wronged him, to be truly beautiful. We’ll come back to that a bit later. But, to finish the story, Esau invites Jacob to come home with him for a party in his honor. We have no reason to doubt Esau’s sincerity. But the ever-suspicious Jacob sends Esau on ahead, promising he’ll be about a day behind him because of the necessity to travel more slowly with women, children, and flocks. Jacob then turns his caravan north, once again getting as far from Esau as he can in the land they have inherited. As far as we can tell from the Biblical witness, the brothers meet again only once more – to bury their father. How each received the other is not recorded.

But for all of Esau’s good-heartedness, one suspects that bitterness begins to build up between the two families. Esau’s family has settled in a less-fertile section of the inheritance of Isaac, due to Jacob getting the birthright. What became the nation of Edom is rocky, mountainous terrain in what is now the Kingdom of Jordan. If you’ve seen pictures of the ancient city of Petra, carved out of the rocks, that was the site of one of the chief cities of Edom. Even if Esau forgave Jacob, his children and grand-children may well have held the grudge against their cousins for “stealing” the good land from their side of the family. We can’t know that but what we do know is that the two branches of the family were almost continually at odds. The Children of Israel, a.k.a., Jacob, went down to Egypt during a famine some years later. There the eleven brothers found the twelfth brother whom they had sold into slavery, Joseph, who had become Pharaoh’s right-hand man. The reunited brothers brought their father and all he possessed to Egypt to join them, where they eventually fell into slavery under “a Pharaoh who knew not Joseph.”

You know the rest of the story. Moses in the bullrushes; Moses raised as a prince; Moses encounters God in the burning bush; Moses says to Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” And so on. Condemned to wander the wilderness outside the Promised Land for their disbelief, Moses and his followers encounter their long-lost cousins, Edom. Moses sends a messenger to the king of Edom, asking for permission to cross their territory by the King’s Highway, promising not to steal crops or use wells. We find the king’s response in Numbers 20: “But Edom said to him, ‘You shall not pass through, or we will come out with the sword against you.’ ...And Edom came out against them with a large force, heavily armed. Thus, Edom refused to give Israel passage through their territory; so Israel turned away from them.” Not an auspicious family

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reunion. Nevertheless, the Book of Deuteronomy records Moses forbidding Israel from taking any land from Edom, because of the family ties, and reminding the Israelites to respect their cousins.

The two related peoples continued to chafe at each other for several hundred years. During the reign of David, the Israelites defeated the Edomites decisively. For some time after that, Edom was a vassal state of Israel, then Judah. During the reign of David's son, Solomon, the Israelites exploited the iron and copper mines of Edom, adding insult to injury by shipping the metals, as well as conducting a good deal of other lucrative trade, through the Edomite port of Ezion-geber on the Gulf of Aqaba, leading to the Red Sea. The fabulous wealth of Solomon would probably not have been so legendary without those mines or that port. The ill-will between the Children of Esau and the Children of Jacob would have continued to grow.

Like the Kingdom of Judah, the Kingdom of Edom escaped destruction but not domination by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. During the period before Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon, the two kingdoms would have seemed to have common cause. And so, when King Zedekiah of Judah plotted to revolt against Babylon with the help of Egypt, he took the king of Edom into his counsel. But when Zedekiah actually put the revolt into action, not only did Egyptian assistance not materialize but Edom took the field on the side of Babylon. The sons of Esau had betrayed the sons of Jacob. Following Jerusalem's destruction and the partial depopulating of Judah, the Edomites took advantage, spreading out from their kingdom in the rocks into the richer land of southern Judah.

This may have been the point at which Obadiah wrote his oracles against Edom, as they surely reflect the betrayal. Listen again to verses 10-14: "For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever. On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them. But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress. You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity; you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah's disaster on the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives; you should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress."

But some scholars feel that Obadiah may have been written after the return of the Exiles, as he seems to have knowledge of some events in the fourth century, BCE, more than 50 years after the events in Ezra. At that time, the Edomite homeland was invaded by a group of Arab peoples known as the Nabateans. The Edomites were forced out into the southern part of Judah they'd already partially claimed; a land known later as Idumæa, the Greek form of Edom. The capture of the rocky fortresses of Edom is either predicted or related by Obadiah in verses 3 & 4: "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."

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There is a little more to the story of the Children of Esau and the Children of Israel. James D. Newsome summarizes that bit of history in his book, The Hebrew Prophets: “At the time of the Maccabean wars for Jewish independence in the second century, Jewish armies overran Idumæa and forced its inhabitants to convert to Judaism. By a curious twist of history, the members of an Idumean family, that of Antipater, became the last rulers of Judah, then the Roman province of Judea.” Oh, do you not recognize the name of Antipater? Not surprising. The dynasty he founded was actually known by the name of his son, Herod, the same cruel king who had the babies of Bethlehem slaughtered, according to Matthew, and who built the Temple that Jesus’ disciples gawked at. And so, we’ve traced this family feud from Genesis to the Gospels.

All of which is very interesting, at least to me and ancient history nerds. But how does Obadiah apply to us? Let me suggest a couple of potential lessons. First, we should remember that whether Obadiah wrote his oracle against Edom in the immediate aftermath of the Babylonian Exile or around a century later, he was expressing the rage of an oppressed people against a longtime enemy that had participated in and profited from their downfall. To the Judeans for whom Obadiah wrote, the Edomites were like the jackals following the lion of Babylon, mopping up against the shattered forces of Judah on the battlefield and picking over the spoils of the land. In the eyes of a defeated and humiliated people, even generations later, these opportunistic, unfaithful allies were deserving of punishment from God. If, indeed, Obadiah wrote after the Nabatean invasion of Edom, the Arabs would have been seen as the instruments of God’s vengeance.

We may decry such a primitive sounding, violent theology – in fact, I hope we do – but as with the oracles of Nahum against Assyria, we need to remember that we have been privileged not to have our homeland invaded, our friends and neighbors killed or taken away, while we are left in greatly reduced circumstances. It’s easy for us to deplore the thirst for vengeance when we’ve not experienced the violence, degradation, and trauma which Nahum and Obadiah remember. We also need to be mindful of how we view current events. When people who have been oppressed for generations or even centuries lose patience with the dominating system and riot, burning buildings and destroying property, well, as Dr. King said, “a riot is the language of the unheard... And, what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the economic plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years.” It was true in 1966 and it’s true again in 2020.

When we truly hear that language of the unheard, the cry of the oppressed, then we should remember that Jesus came with good news for the poor, “to proclaim release to the captives and ... to let the oppressed go free.” Our calling is to do the same and, at the very least, to make sure that we are not empowering and tacitly approving oppression. But, as I said before, we are called by Jesus not to pursue the strategy of vengeance but to resist non-violently and to forgive.

One of the true tragedies of the long-running feud between Israel and Edom was that neither side seemed to learn anything from the example of Esau. “Esau ran to meet (Jacob), and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept...” Does that remind anybody else of a story that Jesus told? “But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.” It is, of course, the parable of the Prodigal Son, interpreted by Jesus’ followers for centuries as a picture of God’s love for the

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lost. Sadly, we tend to remember Esau as the hungry bumbler who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage, and not as the loving brother who foreshadowed Jesus' story of divine love. How might relations between Israel and Edom have played out, I wonder, if the story of Esau's forgiveness rather than of Jacob's trickery been passed down by the two families? What if Jacob had accepted Esau's forgiveness and gone to his brother's home rather than expecting the worst and running away? To accept the outstretched hand is to follow God's mercy.

It is another challenge to us. As we look back on the sound and the fury of the last week, the last eight months, the last five years, are we going to look for reasons to hold grudges or do we look for ways to break the cycle of recrimination, anger, even hatred and violence? Do we remember the words of Obadiah, "As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head?" Or do we remember the words of Esau: "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself?" Do we remember the words of Jesus: "If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent, forgive them. Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

My sisters and my brothers, things have happened in our world that make us angry. We may have felt, like the Psalmist, that God has turned God's back on our nation and our world. But God does not turn away. It is we, in our delusions, that turn away from God. Now is a time to reach out in forgiveness, to stand for what we know is right but to be ready to start afresh with those who have injured us and our siblings. We must hold up the truth that we are one family in the love of God but, with God's love in our hearts, we must accept one another even as we seek to be accepted. We dare not give in to hate, for "hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." In the name of Jesus, the Christ, let us love. Thanks be to God. Amen.