



## An Introduction to the Book of Obadiah

### Author and Title

The superscription for the book identifies the genre as a vision, a prophetic revelation from God spoken through his prophet Obadiah. Unfortunately, the only thing known about this prophet is his name, which is a common one in the OT, which means 'one who serves Yahweh'. It is unlikely that he is the same Obadiah as the official over Ahab's household in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century BC (1 Kings 18:3-16), for the book seems to have been written after the fall of Jerusalem in 586BC.

### Date

Because the superscription gives no chronological information, readers can infer only the approximate time of the prophet from the book's contents. Suggested dates range from very early in circa 850BC to very late in circa 400BC. Since the book presents the fall of Jerusalem as a past event (v.11), and the fall of Edom as a future event, a probable date would be after 586BC, the date for the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon, and before 553BC, the date for Babylon's campaign against Edom. Therefore, the most likely situation is the first half of the Babylonian exile. The place of writing is Jerusalem.

### Theme

On the one hand Edom, together with all other nations that oppose Israel's God and his people, will experience God's retributive judgement. On the other hand, God's own covenant people, who have already experienced God's judgement, will receive restoration from their God. The book ends with the promise of the Kingdom of God.

### Purpose

Obadiah exhibits numerous parallels with other OT texts, especially Jeremiah's Edom prophecy (Jeremiah 49:7-22). Essentially the message of Obadiah spells out what Lamentations 4:22 announces: restoration for Zion but doom for Edom.

The Jerusalemites experienced God's judgement (16a) when enemies invaded and 'cast lots for Jerusalem' (v.11). The Edomites, the descendants of Jacob's brother Esau and one of Israel's neighbours to the southeast, should have assisted their brothers during the Babylonian crisis. Instead they sided with the foreign invaders and even took advantage of Israel's misfortune (vv.10-14).

Holy Zion had been profaned, and God's people were put to public shame. Edom felt secure in spite of its complicity in Israel's demise. For all intents and purposes it looked as though Edom and the foreign nations were in charge, ruling over the future of Israel. The Book of Lamentations reveals the extent to which Israel was devastated by the exile: politically, economically, and theologically. Does Israel have a future? Will Zion be profaned forever? Will the plan for Abraham's offspring to bring blessing to the world come to nothing? Will Edom and the hostile nations triumph? Is God indifferent to all of this?

Into this bleak situation the prophet Obadiah proclaimed the word of Yahweh. The first half of Obadiah (vv.1-15) addresses Edom with 'you' singular. The prophet announces coming judgement against Edom and warns Edom to desist from its anti-Judahite hostilities before it is too late, before 'the day of the Lord' comes against 'all the nations' (v.15). The standard of the judgement will be strict retributive justice.

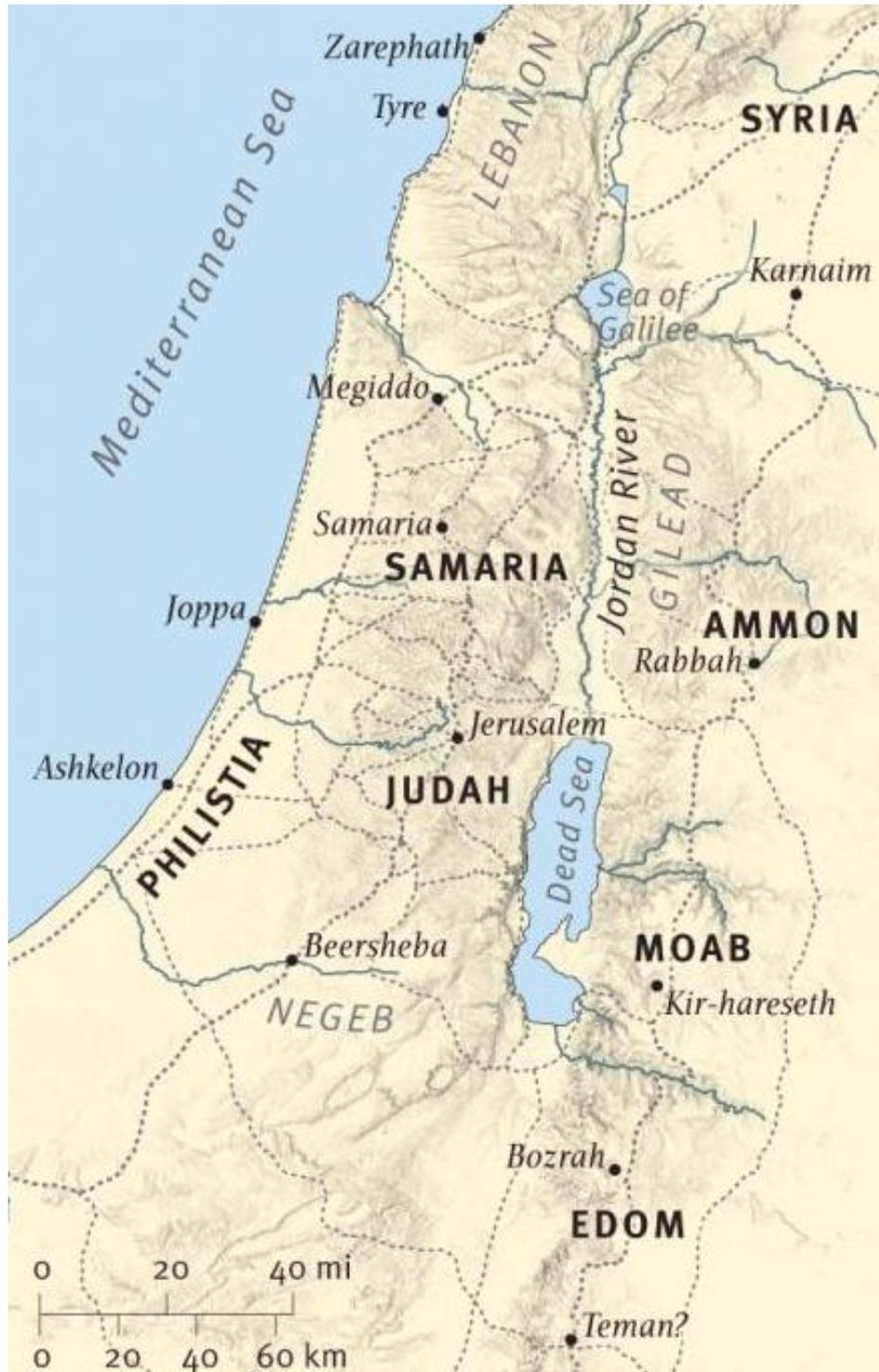
The second half (vv.16-21) addresses the people of Jerusalem with 'you' plural in v.16: <<***For as you have drunk on my holy mountain***>>. Here the prophet gives hope to God's beleaguered people with the good news of the future great reversal. On the terrible day of the Lord the hostile nations will receive God's judgement, but those in Zion will be saved, and Zion will be holy (vv.16-17a). All Israel will be reunited and given the Promised Land and victory over Edom (vv.17b-20). The last line expresses God's ultimate goal: to establish his kingly reign over all the earth (v.21).

### Key Themes

1. Enemies will be put to shame because of their enmity against God's people (v.10).
2. Every proud human effort at self-security will ultimately fail before God's coming judgement (vv.1-9).
3. God's retributive justice is strict and fair, with the punishment corresponding to the misdeeds (v.15).
4. Reunited Israel will experience God's deliverance (vv.16-17), possess the Promised Land, and defeat and rule over Edom (vv.17-21).
5. In the future, Yahweh will definitively manifest his kingly rule (v.21).

## The Setting of Obadiah (circa 570BC)

Although various dates have been given for the prophecy of Obadiah, it was most likely written sometime after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586BC but prior to the fall of Edom in 553BC. Obadiah condemned the Edomites, who were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau, for attacking the Judæans during the Babylonian crisis rather than assisting them.



Regional Map

## History of Salvation Summary

Edom is the target of Obadiah's prophecy of doom because it exemplifies hostility toward God's people. The Edomites took delight in bringing disaster to Jerusalem. Even though Jerusalem fell for its unfaithfulness, and even though Edom was one of God's tools for bringing judgement, the Lord has tied himself to his people and will punish those who hurt them. Eventually, Jerusalem will be restored and its blessings will extend to the Gentiles (vv.19-21).

## Literary Features

The primary genre is prophecy, and as is customary in prophecy, the predictions of the future are couched in oracles of judgement and an oracle of salvation or deliverance. The oracles of judgement against Edom are examples of satire, with discernible objects of attack and a satiric norm by which Edom and other nations are criticised.

## Outline

- a. Proud Edom Will Be Brought Low (vv.1-4)
- b. Pillage and Slaughter Will Repay Edom's Cruelty (vv.5-9)
- c. Edom Wronged His Brother (vv.10-16)
- d. Israel's Final Triumph (vv.17-21)

### **a. Proud Edom Will Be Brought Low**

The vision opens by identifying Obadiah as God's vessel for its delivery and the nation of Edom as the recipient of its judgement. The Edomites lived in a rocky landscape that they believed to be impenetrable to foreign nations but the prophet warns them that God will rally nations against Edom who will prevail and bring them low.

- <sup>1</sup> The vision of Obadiah.  
Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom:  
We have heard a report from the Lord,  
and a messenger has been sent among the nations:  
'Rise up! Let us rise against it for battle!'

## Obadiah 1

The vision of Obadiah both names the prophet and the probable author of this book, although little else is known of him. There are references to men called Obadiah in the OT to both the periods before and after the Babylonian exile, although none of them can be identified as this prophet. Although there are some

who date the prophecy before the exile, it was most likely received afterwards. Refer to the Date section of the introduction.

Thus says the Lord God was a formulaic expression among the prophets, indicating that the prophet reports God's own speech. The prophet as the called and sent messenger of the Lord Yahweh introduces the divine speech that begins in v.2. However, first Obadiah provides background information. The nations are now being recruited by God to rise up against Edom: <<*On a bare hill raise a signal, cry aloud to them; wave the hand for them to enter the gates of the nobles. I myself have commanded my consecrated ones, have summoned my warriors, my proudly exulting ones, to execute my anger. Listen, a tumult on the mountains as of a great multitude! Listen, an uproar of kingdoms, of nations gathering together! The Lord of hosts is mustering an army for battle. They come from a distant land, from the end of the heavens, the Lord and the weapons of his indignation, to destroy the whole earth*>> (Isaiah 13:2-5).

Edom was the land settled by the descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, who had sold his birthright as the elder twin for a bowl of stew and had deeply upset his parents by marrying non-Hebrew women. During the Exodus, Moses asked for permission to pass through the land (Numbers 20:14) but the king refused to allow passage (Numbers 20:18). Despite this, the Hebrew nation was called on not to abhor their brothers in Edom (Deuteronomy 23:7), yet there was frequent conflict between the two. The message is that God will judge Edom for the opposition to his people Israel.

We have heard a report from the Lord is similar language to that used in: <<*I have heard tidings from the Lord, and a messenger has been sent among the nations: 'Gather yourselves together and come against her, and rise up for battle!'*>> (Jeremiah 49:14). Once Edom had sent envoys to Judah to plot against Babylon ((Jeremiah 27:3); now God sends an envoy or messenger to gather nations against Edom.

<sup>2</sup> I will surely make you least among the nations;  
you shall be utterly despised.

## Obadiah 2

I will surely make you least among the nations. God always attributes to himself the rise and fall of nations. If they be great and prosperous, it is by God's providence; if they be low and depressed, it is by his justice. Compared with the Assyrians, Chaldeans or Babylonians, Egyptians, Syrians, Arabs, and other neighbouring nations, the Edomites were a small people.

<sup>3</sup> 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?'

### Obadiah 3

Your proud heart has deceived you. Pride is one of the most destructive of human sins and often leads to the downfall of individuals and nations: <<***We have heard of the pride of Moab – how proud he is! – of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence; his boasts are false***>> (Isaiah 16:6). St. Jerome observes that all the southern part of Palestine, from Eleutheropolis to Petra and Aialath, was full of caverns hewn out of the rocks, and that the people had subterranean dwellings similar to ovens. Here they are said to live in the clefts of the rock, in reference to these caverns. In these they conceived themselves to be safe, and thought that no power brought against them could dislodge them from those fastnesses, i.e. Who will bring me down to the ground? Some commentators believe that by rock, Greek *Petra*, the capital of Idumæa or Edom is intended.

<sup>4</sup>     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.

### Obadiah 4

Though you soar aloft like the eagle. It does not matter how high and lofty individuals or whole nations might believe themselves to be, they are always under the dominion of the creator God, who can bring them low in judgement at any time that he deems to be appropriate. Again, the words of this prophecy are very similar to those of Jeremiah 49:16.

#### **b. Pillage and Slaughter Will Repay Edom's Cruelty**

Edom had turned against its kin and protector state of Judah and sided with the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar when he came against Jerusalem. These people would ultimately pay the highest price for failing to side with their brother.

<sup>5</sup>     If thieves came to you,  
          if plunderers by night  
          – how you have been destroyed! –  
          would they not steal only what they wanted?  
          If grape-gatherers came to you,  
          would they not leave gleanings?

## Obadiah 5

The prophecy indicates just how devastating the judgement would be. The analogies of thieves who would steal only what they wanted, therefore leaving something behind, or grape-gathers who would leave gleanings for others to pick from the crop, is used to compare with the utter devastation that would befall Edom under this judgement.

6 How Esau has been pillaged,  
his treasures searched out!

## Obadiah 6

How Esau has been pillaged. The attacks that would come upon Edom, the land of the Patriarch Esau, would leave it devastated and the people would eventually pass from history. The prophet speaks of this desolation as if it had already taken place.

7 All your allies have deceived you,  
they have driven you to the border;  
your confederates have prevailed against you;  
those who ate your bread have set a trap for you —  
there is no understanding of it.

## Obadiah 7

All your allies have deceived you. The Babylonians are intended here. Edom had been a vassal state ruled from Jerusalem until Nebuchadnezzar had come and sacked the city. Instead of rallying to its brother Jacob, Edom had sided with the Babylonians and would pay the price for choosing the wrong side.

They have driven you to the border. The Babylonians had dislodged the Edomites from their strongholds and pursued them to their border with their enemy Egypt.

Those who ate your bread have set a trap for you. Sharing a meal with someone was considered a sign of friendship and mutual trust. To turn against someone after such fellowship was considered an unforgiveable crime. David writes of such an act: <<*Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me*>> (Psalm 41:9), and it was the actions of Judas Iscariot shortly before his final betrayal of the Lord: <<*Jesus answered, 'It is the one to whom I give this piece of bread when I have dipped it in the dish.'* So when he had dipped the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas son of Simon Iscariot>> (John 13:26).

<sup>8</sup> On that day, says the Lord,  
I will destroy the wise out of Edom,  
and understanding out of Mount Esau.

### Obadiah 8

I will destroy the wise out of Edom. The Edomites were renowned for their great wisdom, but God would bring such great judgment that even their wise men would be destroyed.

<sup>9</sup> Your warriors shall be shattered, O Teman,  
so that everyone from Mount Esau will be cut off.

### Obadiah 9

Everyone from Mount Esau will be cut off. The Edomites were proud of their reputation for wisdom, but God would break their pride and bring them low.

### **c. Edom Wronged His Brother**

The reason for the judgement on Edom is made clear. When the Babylonians attacked Judah, not only did Edom fail to support their cousins but they actively assisted the Babylonians, even setting traps for the fleeing Israelites and handing them over as captives to be taken off into slavery or even killed.

<sup>10</sup> For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob,  
shame shall cover you,  
and you shall be cut off for ever.

### Obadiah 10

For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob. The family lines of both Israel and Edom go back to a common ancestor - Isaac. Esau or Edom was the brother of Jacob, i.e. Israel. This made Edom's sin against Israel all the worse.

Some sins become worse depending on whom the sin is against. It is sin to treat someone else badly; it is worse to treat a brother or sister in Jesus badly. It is sin to speak harshly to anyone; it is worse to speak harshly to a husband or wife. Ultimately, any wrongdoing is targeted against the grace of God.

You shall be cut off for ever. History has since shown that Edom soon ceased to exist as a nation at all and its people dispersed among other nations.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

### Obadiah 11

On the day that you stood aside. The strangers and foreigners here are the Babylonians who came into Jerusalem and sacked the temple, taking away the wealth of the nation with them. This could refer to the first deportation of the city's best and brightest inhabitants in 597BC or the final sacking of the city in 582BC. In either case, Edom did not come to the defence of its brother Israel and therefore is judged to be like one of them.

12 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.

13 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.

14 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.

### Obadiah 12-14

The eight instances of you should not have make it quite clear that the Edomites were not simply remiss in their actions but had not only stood by while the Babylonians raided the city and surrounding countryside but fully participated in the decimation of the descendants of David and his forefather Judah.

Another key repetition is on the day of. This could indicate the actual day when the Babylonian troops first captured the city and made the people subject to Nebuchadnezzar or it could be the day when Jerusalem and its Temple, the symbol of God dwelling with his people, was utterly destroyed.

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. This verse indicates that the Edomites had deliberately and consciously set a trap for those fleeing the Babylonians, perhaps seeking help from their distant relatives, who instead took them captive and handed them back to the Babylonians, no doubt seeking reward for their efforts.

<sup>15</sup> For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations.  
As you have done, it shall be done to you;  
your deeds shall return on your own head.

### Obadiah 15

For the day of the Lord is near against all the nations. In the OT, the day of the Lord can stand for either a time of judgement during world history or the final judgement that will come upon the earth when Jesus returns. The latter is clearly a time when truly all nations will face judgement but the reference here could equally mean all the nations who opposed Israel at that time in history, either colluding with the Babylonians or taking positive action to support them.

The day of the Lord is referred to frequently in Scripture, e.g. Isaiah 13:6, Jeremiah 46:10, Ezekiel 13:5, Joel 1:15, Amos 5:18, Zephaniah 1:7, 1 Corinthians 5:5, 2 Corinthians 1:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:2, 2 Thessalonians 2:2 and 2 Peter 3:10.

As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head. The judgements of God are equitable and justly administered according to the deeds of the perpetrator. This may be calamities that befall individuals and nations during history, as would be the case with both Babylon and Edom, or it could be judgement that comes at the end of time when the books are opened: <<*A stream of fire issued and flowed out from his presence. A thousand thousand served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood attending him. The court sat in judgement, and the books were opened*>> (Daniel 7:10), and: <<*And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books*>> (Revelation 20:12).

<sup>16</sup> For as you have drunk on my holy mountain,  
all the nations around you shall drink;  
they shall drink and gulp down,  
and shall be as though they had never been.

## Obadiah 16

For as you have drunk on my holy mountain. The drink referred to here is the wrath of God, which was first tasted by God's own people for their continued apostasy despite their covenant promises with God: <<*Rouse yourself, rouse yourself! Stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk at the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl of staggering*>> (Isaiah 51:17); as will the nations who opposed them and therefore God: <<*For thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it*>> (Jeremiah 25:15), and: <<*The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath*>> (Revelation 16:19). Even Jesus accepted the cup but not for his own sin. It was for the sin of all humankind: <<*And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want'*>> (Mark 14:35-36).

### d. Israel's Final Triumph

Despite the situation they faced in being taken into exile after their city and Temple had been destroyed, it would be the people of God who would ultimately be restored and God's Kingdom that would see the Glory of their redemption.

- <sup>17</sup> But on Mount Zion there shall be those that escape,  
and it shall be holy;  
and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those who  
dispossessed them.

## Obadiah 17

On Mount Zion there shall be those that escape. Mount Zion is the location of the city of Jerusalem and the prophet promises that God will allow the city to be rebuilt by his people; it will once again be holy, for God will be with his people. The story of how this came to be is told in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The house of Jacob shall take possession of those who dispossessed them. Although the power and influence of Israel over its neighbours has never been restored to its former glory as some hoped the Messiah would achieve for them, Israel does at least exist and to a certain extent it does possess some of the land that was taken from them by the predecessors of the current Palestinian peoples. However, through Jesus Christ, a much better Kingdom has been established that covers far more than this small slice of land in the Middle East. This was recognised by another prophet from a similar time in history: <<*How great are his*

*signs, how mighty his wonders! His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and his sovereignty is from generation to generation>> (Daniel 4:3).*

18 The house of Jacob shall be a fire,  
the house of Joseph a flame,  
and the house of Esau stubble;  
they shall burn them and consume them,  
and there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau;  
for the Lord has spoken.

### Obadiah 18

The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Esau stubble. Although it was the Israelites going off into slavery and the Edomites who would initially remain in their own land their would come a time when this would be reversed with a remnant of Judah surviving to reclaim their inheritance while Edom would become consigned to history: there shall be no survivor of the house of Esau; for the Lord has spoken.

19 Those of the Negeb shall possess Mount Esau,  
and those of the Shephelah the land of the Philistines;  
they shall possess the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria,  
and Benjamin shall possess Gilead.

20 The exiles of the Israelites who are in Halah  
shall possess Phœnicia as far as Zarephath;  
and the exiles of Jerusalem who are in Sepharad  
shall possess the towns of the Negeb.

### Obadiah 19-20

Those of the Negeb are the dwellers of the desert land to the south of Jerusalem, the land of the Philestines lay to the west, the land of Ephraim and the land of Samaria to the north and Gilead to the east. The territory of Benjamin was a small part of the former inheritance of the tribe of Judah, which was reclaimed by those returning from exile. The territories that are mentioned in this verse were reclaimed during the time of the Maccabees (164-63BC), although they relinquished control once the Romans took control of the Middle East.

Phœnicia as far as Zarephath takes in the whole of Syria and Sepharad was in the region of Bosphorus, the boundary between Asia and Europe. These, as well as the regions around Judah in v.19 all came under the influence of Christ as the church spread and grew, just as Jesus had commanded the apostles that it should: **<<But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will**

*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*>> (Acts 1:8).

<sup>21</sup> Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion  
to rule Mount Esau;  
and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.

### Obadiah 21

Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau. The people of God, i.e. the church of Jesus Christ will have dominion on earth to take the Gospel to even the hardest of places to access and conquer. The Gospel will ultimately prevail and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.