

## **Understanding & Applying the Prophets**

Jesus recognised the three-fold division of the Old Testament: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings (Luke 24:44). While each section has its own interpretive challenges, the prophetic books offer particular challenges due to their style. This article will present three principles to help us understand and apply the prophets today. It will employ Obadiah as an example.

There are three so-called Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) which are long. There are 12 so-called Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi) which are much shorter.

## **Consider the Old Testament**

The first step is to carefully consider the Old Testament. The more we know about the Old Testament the better our understanding and application of the prophets. What was role of the Prophets in the Old Testament period? The prophets repeatedly point to God's saving work and covenant keeping. They have been called Covenant Enforcers; holding the people accountable to their covenant with God.

Here in Obadiah, the enforcement of the covenant is positive, God will keep his promises (vss. 16, 19-21). Its enforcement can, however, be negative when the people have not kept the Covenant (Haggai 1:2-4).

Another reason to carefully consider the Old Testament is to learn the historical context in which the prophecy is delivered. Obadiah, for example, challenges a nation named Edom. This nation is descended from Esau, Jacob's twin brother (Genesis 25). These twin brothers, and the nations that descended from them, should have been charitable to each other but they are not (Numbers 20:14-21; Obadiah 10-14). The events that lie behind Obadiah are just the latest in a long history of hostility.

## **Consider the Message**

The second step is careful consideration of the prophet's message. It can be tempting to focus on the prophet, but what he says is more important than who he is. The message is more significant than the man. Obadiah is a perfect example of this—his prophecy offers no biographical details.

Even though Obadiah is obscure, his message is not. There is a clear announcement of God's wrath against those who do evil. Edom is warned against their pride (vs. 3), promised punishment (vss. 6-7), and God's people are assured a glorious future beyond present hardship (vss. 19-21). This message is the significant element of the book of Obadiah. God will punish those against him and reward his own.

We need to focus on the message of the prophet—and it is usually either salvation or judgement—not the man behind the message. This will tell us whether the prophet is challenging us or comforting us.

## **Consider the New Testament**

The third step is careful consideration of the New Testament. Resolution to problems

in the prophets are found in the gospel. We must always press on towards the New Testament. The New Testament often picks up elements of the prophets' message. A couple of examples from Obadiah help illustrate the point.

First, note that King Herod is an Idumean, that is a descendant of Edom. It is this Herod who seeks to kill Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12), a descendent of Jacob. The struggle between these two brother nations persists.

Second, note the theme of enemies. Edom is Jacob's enemy, and because of that God is Edom's enemy. Once, we too were enemies of God and yet he reconciled us by the death of his son (Romans 5:10). We escape to Mount Zion because on the cross Jesus drank the cup of wrath reserved for us (Obadiah vss. 16-17).

## **Conclusion**

Knowing our Old Testament's well will help us more quickly see what lies behind each prophetic book. This in turn should help us grasp the message of the prophet instead of being side-tracked into the person of the prophet. Finally, bringing the New Testament to bear on our reading of the prophet can infuse our application with gospel hope.

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