

THE RECEPTION OF OBADIAH:

SOME HISTORICAL, IDEOLOGICAL, AND VISUAL CONSIDERATIONS

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1. Introduction

Obadiah is the shortest book in the Hebrew Bible, a fact that can present both challenges and opportunities when one is exploring the reception of this prophetic text. On the one hand, Obadiah's brevity has meant that it has not been given as much attention as other biblical books in religious tradition, commentary, or wider Western culture, and so there is less reception to explore. It is noteworthy, for example, that Obadiah is not mentioned in either the New Testament or the Qur'an. This has led to its neglect elsewhere; Thomas Aquinas, for instance, does not make mention of or reference to Obadiah in the entirety of his *Summa Theologica*. On the other hand, we should not be fooled by the book's size; this short text is exceptionally complex, and has inspired a good deal of noteworthy comment through the years. Indeed, as far back as Jerome it was noted that the book's difficulties seem to be in inverse proportion to its size ("*quanto brevius est, tanto difficilius*").¹ In other words, in spite of its length, there is plenty of material with which one might engage when exploring the use and impact of this small book.

There are, naturally, different reasons why one might explore the reception history of a biblical text.² While a number of such issues will be investigated here, the point of departure

¹ See Jerome's *Commentariorum in Abdiam Prophetam Liber Unus*, PL 25, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1845), 1100.

² Reception history focuses on how the Bible has been read, understood, and received down through the years. As one recent handbook has put it, reception history "is a recognition of the dynamic, living relationship between texts and readers, rather than an attempt to isolate and stabilize textual meanings" (Jonathan Roberts, "Introduction", *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb, Emma Mason, and Jonathan Roberts [Oxford: OUP, 2011], 8). It is important to keep in mind that reception history is not a method of exegesis. It is, rather, as Hans-Georg Gadamer was keen to point out, a form of philosophical

for the present study will be the reception of Obadiah itself. I will focus on three particular issues: questions concerning the historical setting and context of Obadiah, issues raised by the rhetoric and ideology of Obadiah, and finally visual representations of Obadiah. In the course of exploring each of these issues, I will tease out what some of the implications and indeed contributions might be from this type of reception-focused research, namely, that reception history can alert us to the situatedness of interpretation, that it cautions us against absolutizing our own perspectives and concerns, and that it encourages interdisciplinary reflection.

2. Obadiah's historical setting and context

One of the more intriguing aspects of the reception history of Obadiah is how readers have understood the book's historical setting and the circumstances to which it might refer. The book itself gives few overt clues as to its origins and context. Nevertheless, for those at all familiar with the story of the Hebrew Bible, it is hard to read Obadiah today without envisioning specific events that might have inspired Obadiah's diatribe against Edom. That which is most frequently invoked is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 BCE. The connection of Obadiah with this era is based on the assumption that vv. 10-14 describe the Edomites' complicity in Judah's downfall to the Babylonians, and the reference to "exiles" (וגלות) in v. 20 is seen to lend further credence to this context.³

As we will see, this assumption is prevalent in contemporary biblical scholarship. However, for much of this book's afterlife, readers have *not* associated Obadiah with the destruction of

hermeneutics. Indeed, the purpose of reception history is to enable what Mark Knight describes as "an interpretative conversation rather than to define a new scientific methodology" (Mark Knight, "Wirkungsgeschichte, Reception History, Reception Theory", *JSNT* 33 [2010] 137-46, here at 137).

³ "Most readers of Obadiah who are familiar with the rest of the Old Testament are likely to think that vv. 10-14 are a reference to Edomite involvement in the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E." John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 120.

Judah and Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians and Edomites. Indeed, associating Obadiah with these events is a rather recent interpretive move, as the preponderance of pre-modern interpretation focused instead on canonical, figurative, and theological associations.

One might first note a reference to Obadiah in the Babylonian Talmud. In Tractate Sanhedrin we read the following: “Said R. Isaac, ‘On what account did Obadiah have the merit of receiving prophecy? Because he hid a hundred prophets in a cave. For it is said, “... when Jezebel cut off the prophets of the Lord that Obadiah took a hundred prophets and hid them, fifty to a cave”’”⁴.

The rabbis here make a canonical association between Obadiah the prophet and the Obadiah found in 1 Kings 18, the latter a servant of King Ahab, the 9th century BCE king of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Obadiah of 1 Kings is known, amongst other things, for hiding away some of the prophets during a time of purging by King Ahab’s wife Jezebel, and this is the reason given by the rabbis in the Talmud to justify Obadiah’s status as a prophet. Thus, when the rabbis want to find out who the prophet Obadiah might be and why he was set apart for this vocation, they turn to the broader canon of Scripture, which leads them to 1 Kings.

This was a common reading in ancient Judaism, and we find it picked up and expanded on in the work of Rashi. The medieval rabbi’s comments are worth noting, as he follows the Talmudic connections of Obadiah with the character of 1 Kings, but also draw a connection with events from Genesis, based on Obadiah’s reference to Esau, the twin brother of the patriarch Jacob, and Esau’s progeny, Edom (Gen 25-36). Rashi writes:

⁴ *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 39*; cf. Jacob Neusner, *Habakkuk, Jonah, Nahum and Obadiah in Talmud and Midrash: A Source Book*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham: University Press of America, 2007), 144.

Why is Obadiah different that he was chosen to prophesy concerning Edom and did not prophesy any other prophecy? Our Sages of blessed memory stated: Obadiah was an Edomite proselyte. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: From them and in them will I bring upon them. Let Obadiah, who dwelt between two wicked people, Ahab and Jezebel, and did not learn from their deeds, come and impose retribution upon Esau, who dwelt between two righteous people, Isaac and Rebecca, and did not learn from their deeds.⁵

There are several interesting aspects to Rashi's identification of Obadiah. First, Obadiah the prophet is assumed to be one and the same with the Obadiah found in 1 Kings. However, an interesting wrinkle is added here in the statement that Obadiah was an Edomite proselyte, a common trope in early Jewish interpretation.⁶ Thus, the harsh message toward Edom comes from none other than one of their own. A second interesting dimension of Rashi's reading is the connection to the events of Genesis, stating that the convert Obadiah was faithful in spite of his difficult surroundings, while Esau, the patriarch of the Edomites, did not learn from the righteousness of his parents.⁷ Here the Obadiah of 1 Kings is said to be an Edomite

⁵ From Rashi's commentary on Obadiah (available online at <http://www.chabad.org/>), drawing extensively from the *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin* 39.

⁶ Cf. *Leviticus Rabbah* 18.2.

⁷ While Rashi is here following rabbinic tradition, his concern to read Obadiah in light of the Genesis stories concerning Jacob and Esau comes through in a variety of ways in his comments on the book. A few examples will suffice. To begin with, Rashi notes that in v. 2 Edom is referred to as being made "small" (קטן), even though Esau is referred to as Isaac's "big" son (בנו הגדול; Gen 27:1). In Obad 3, the text refers to those who dwell in the clefts of rocks. Rashi interprets this to mean that the Edomites are taking refuge in their ancestors, Abraham and Isaac. When v. 7 refers to the eating of bread, Rashi ties this in to the meal which Jacob made for Esau when the elder despised his birthright (Gen 25:27-34). Finally, v. 21 speaks of those who will go up to judge Mount Esau, followed by a statement concerning the kingdom belonging to YHWH. Rashi explains, "This teaches you that his Kingdom will not be complete until He exacts retribution from Amalek." This is most likely a reference to Esau's genealogy, where Amalek is mentioned as a descendant of Esau (Gen 36:12). Thus, Rashi does not appear to be overly concerned with any particular historical circumstances that would implicate Edom; rather, he understands Obadiah as a general (and warranted) condemnation of Esau's descendants based on circumstances that stretch far back into history. For more on this, see Bradford A. Anderson, *Brotherhood and Inheritance: A Canonical Reading of the Esau and Edom Traditions*, LHBOTS 556 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 178-79.

convert, and is juxtaposed with Edom's ancestor, Esau, who does not live up to expectations.⁸

Thus, early Jewish interpretations of Obadiah tend to focus on canonical associations in Genesis and Kings, assuming that Obadiah is the servant of Ahab, and thus situating the prophet several centuries before the Babylonian conquest.

Early Christian interpreters of Obadiah offered their own distinctive readings regarding the setting of Obadiah. Both Cyril of Alexandria and Ephrem the Syrian make reference to the Babylonians. However, neither commentator suggests that the Edomite complicity in the events of the sacking of Jerusalem is the backdrop to Obadiah's prophecy. Rather, Cyril points to the return from the Babylonian exile as the reference for the restoration of Israel in the latter portions of the book,⁹ while Ephrem notes that the Babylonians would be the ones to bring about the predicted destruction of Edom, also foretold in the book.¹⁰ Indeed, Ephrem explicitly notes in his commentary that Obadiah was a contemporary of Hosea, Joel, and Amos. Thus, both of these Fathers see events from the post-exilic period as the fulfilment of Obadiah's message, while not necessarily correlating such fulfilment with the book's setting.

However, other early Christians assume Obadiah to be located in a much earlier period. As in the Jewish tradition, commentators such as Jerome would equate Obadiah the prophet

⁸ This connection between Obadiah and Genesis can also be found in the Jewish liturgical tradition, as the book of Obadiah serves as a *haftarah* reading in several Jewish traditions for Vayishlach, the Torah reading concerning Jacob and Esau (Gen. 32:4–36:43). Thus, both the rabbinic and liturgical traditions of Judaism have drawn attention to the canonical and intertextual dimensions of Obadiah.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Obadiah*, PG 71:593; quoted in *The Twelve Prophets*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro, ACCS 14 (Downers Grove: IVP, 2003), 125.

¹⁰ Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Obadiah*; quoted in Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, 122.

with the servant of Ahab in 1 Kings.¹¹ Others locate the prophet in the period of Assyrian dominance, presuming the prophet to be a contemporary of Hosea, Amos, and Isaiah. This assumption may be based in part on the book's placement toward the beginning of the Book of the Twelve, whose other books tend to be pre-exilic in setting.¹² And yet, these questions of historical setting are in the minority. Rather, the main concern of early Christian interpreters has to do with drawing out the spiritual dimensions in the text. The fathers are quick to point out lessons that can be gleaned from Obadiah with regard to pride, as well as how this briefest of prophets points toward Christ and the reign of God.

Taken together, many of these early interpreters in both the Jewish and Christian traditions showed little concern for pinpointing Obadiah's historical circumstances, at least in terms that contemporary readers would understand as historical. Those who make mention of any historical context tend to place the book in the pre-exilic period, either because of its association with Obadiah the servant of Elijah, or because of the book's placement in the Book of the Twelve. Not surprisingly, we find a greater concern for reading Obadiah in light of other elements of the Scriptures, or figuratively, as pointing to Christ and other spiritual issues.

It was not until the early modern period that those commenting on Obadiah began seriously to explore the historical setting and referent of the book. The Reformation commentators began to look for a more particular, historical setting in which to contextualise the book of

¹¹ Jerome, *Commentariorum in Abdiam Prophetam*, 1099. This reading seems to have remained viable well into the medieval period; see, e.g., Hugh of St Victor, *Expositio Moralis in Abdiam*, PL 175, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne), 372. There is some debate about the latter and its connection to Hugh of St Victor, with some now attributing the commentary to Richard of St Victor. See H. Pollitt, "The Authorship of the Commentaries on Joel and Obadiah Attributed to Hugh of St. Victor", *RTAM* 32 (1965), 296-306.

¹² See, e.g., Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Obadiah*. Theodore of Mopsuestia follows the LXX ordering of the Twelve, which differs from that of the MT, as in the Septuagint Obadiah follows Joel and precedes Nahum. With this in mind, Theodore also places Obadiah in the 8th c. BCE. See Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, 117-18.

Obadiah. Martin Luther, for example, was convinced that Obadiah prophesied in the context of the Babylonian captivity, and believed Obadiah to be using Jeremiah as a source. Drawing parallels with Ps 137:7, Luther sees the destruction of Jerusalem at the heart of Obadiah's message.¹³ He writes: "Against the Edomites he prophesies that the vengeance of God would occur because the Edomites were quite delighted at the time of the Babylonian captivity that the Jews were being grievously afflicted and led into captivity. Yet, because the Edomites were brothers of the Jews, they should have showed compassion."¹⁴

Like Luther, Calvin also cites similarities between Obadiah and Ps 137, and says that it is unlikely that Obadiah was as early as Isaiah. However, the most Calvin is willing to concede is that Obadiah may have been a contemporary of Jeremiah, at which point he abstains from more detailed historical reconstruction.¹⁵ Nevertheless, when Luther and Calvin are taken together, we see during the Reformation period an interesting shift: while these commentators retain a focus on spiritual and theological issues, their renewed focus on the plain sense of Scripture invites them to consider with more attention the historical circumstances that might have given rise to the prophetic critique of Edom, and with this the subsequent contextualising of Obadiah nearer to the Babylonian exile.

From here we find a history of biblical interpretation with which many are familiar. The commentators of the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries would further this focus on the

¹³ Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets I: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi*, Luther's Works 18, ed. Hilton C. Oswald, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia, 1975), 193.

¹⁴ Luther, *Lectures*, 194. Luther's literal, historical reading ends with Obad 16. As with the church fathers, Luther has a hard time understanding how vv. 17-21 can be read as anything but figurative language for the kingdom of God and the gospel being preached to all people. Luther, *Lectures*, 202.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets, vol. 2: Joel, Amos, Obadiah*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1846), 417-18. Cf. Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 135-36.

historical aspect of the text, narrowing in on issues of authorship, redaction, and dating.¹⁶ Indeed, as Brevard Childs points out, the questions of the historical setting and literary integrity of Obadiah became *the* defining questions of the past several centuries that would guide academic study of this prophetic book, mirroring similar developments in the broader field of biblical studies.¹⁷ And while some conservative scholars in the 19th c. held to an earlier date for the book, the influence of such readings did not last, particularly when compared with what would become the dominant approach: associating the book with the exilic and/or post-exilic periods.¹⁸

A brief survey of developments in the modern period points to the building of this consensus. Like most other books in the Hebrew Bible, Obadiah has been the subject of various redaction- and source-critical studies.¹⁹ In such cases, as seen in the work of Wellhausen and others, the Babylonian conquest remains an important part of the book's reconstruction: the first part of Obadiah is often assigned to the exilic era, and the latter portions to a later period.²⁰ With the rise of form criticism, scholars began to focus on Obadiah's form and setting, with many (such as Wolff) situating Obadiah as a cult prophet

¹⁶ Paul R. House, "Obadiah, Book of", *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 542-544.

¹⁷ On the history of interpretation of Obadiah in the modern period, see Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 412-13. See also Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 23-29.

¹⁸ An early pre-exilic (9th c. BCE) context is suggested by C. F. Keil, *The Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 1 (trans. James Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 349. E.B. Pusey locates Obadiah's ministry during the reigns of Uzziah and Jeroboam II (*The Minor Prophets with a Commentary* [Oxford: Parker, 1860], 227-31). While Pusey suggests an earlier date for Obadiah, one can sense the shift toward a concern for historical issues as the entirety of his introduction to the book deals with the issue of Obadiah's setting, a good deal of which is in conversation with the works of Eichorn and Ewald. A more recent reading that locates Obadiah in the 9th c. is found in Jeffrey J. Niehaus, "Obadiah", *The Minor Prophets, An Exegetical & Expository Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Edward McComiskey (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 496-502.

¹⁹ See, e.g., J. Wellhausen, *Die kleinen Propheten übersetzt, mit Noten* (Berlin: Reimer, 1893), 214; John Merlin Powis Smith, William Hayes Ward, and Julius A. Bewer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Micah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Obadiah and Joel*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1911), 5; Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 120-23.

²⁰ For more on issues on structure and unity, see Theodor Lescow, "Die Komposition des Buches Obadja", *ZAW* 111 (1999), 380-98, here 389-92; G. Fohrer, "Die Sprüche Obadjas", *Studia biblica et semitica Theodoro Christiano Vriezen dedicate*, ed. Wilhelm C. van Unnik and Adam Simon van der Woude (Wageningen: H. Veenman, 1966), 81-93; and S.D. Snyman, "Cohesion in the Book of Obadiah", *ZAW* 101 (1989) 59-71.

responding to the events of the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians.²¹ Meanwhile, those who have suggested that Obadiah can be read as a unified whole have also tended to place the book near the exile. For example, Raabe discusses the date and setting of Obadiah at length. After sifting through the historical and literary evidence, and considering a host of possible dates and contexts, he concludes that “the original setting for the book of Obadiah can best be placed in Judah during the first half of the exilic period, and perhaps the book presents a prophetic response to the laments given at the ruined temple site in Jerusalem”.²²

Other readings have emerged over the years that have called in to question, if not the whole, then at least elements of this interpretation of Obadiah. Bartlett, for example, has questioned whether Edom played any role in the events of 587 BCE, and has argued that Obadiah portrays a widespread misrepresentation of the Edomites.²³ While some are sympathetic to this view and to Bartlett’s concerns, they maintain that Obadiah must be reacting to *something*, and most revert to the events surrounding 587 BCE as the most likely setting.²⁴ This example is interesting in that if one wishes to put forward an alternative reading of Obadiah, one essentially has to argue against the dominant reading which assumes the book to be in some way related to the events of 587 BCE and the Edomitic complicity therein, thus reifying the status of this interpretation in modern discourse.²⁵

²¹ Hans Walter Wolff, “Obadja—ein Kultprophet als Interpret”, *EvTh* 37 (1977) 273-84.

²² Paul R. Raabe, *Obadiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 24D (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 56.

²³ J.R. Bartlett, “Edom and the Fall of Jerusalem, 587 B.C.”, *PEQ* 114 (1982) 13-24.

²⁴ See John J. Collins, *Joel, Obadiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, NCBC 17 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2013), 30-35; Barton, *Joel and Obadiah*, 121; Renkema, *Obadiah*, 34-35; Raabe, *Obadiah*, 52-54. Commentators often note that such action might be implied in Ps 137:7 and Lam 4:21. However, the usefulness of these texts for historical purposes has been questioned on several fronts. See Ackroyd, “Obadiah, Book of”, *ABD* 5:4.

²⁵ Other commentators who suggest an exilic or post-exilic setting for parts or all of Obadiah include, amongst others, Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel, Amos, Obadja, Jona*, KAT 13:2 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971), 295-98; Georg Fohrer, *Die Propheten des frühen 6. Jahrhunderts*, PAT 3 (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1975); John D.W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk and Zephaniah* (Cambridge: CUP, 1975), 51; Johan Renkema, *Obadiah*, HCOT; trans. Brian Doyle (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 29-31; Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (New York: de Gruyter, 1996), 61; Sheldon H. Blank, “Studies in Post-

Reception history and situated interpretation:

The broad contours of the history of Obadiah's interpretation outlined above highlight that while equating Obadiah with the events of 587 BCE has dominated the academic discourse surrounding Obadiah for several centuries, these have not always been the conclusions drawn when readers have approached this text. Indeed, these are relatively recent concerns in the history of interpretation. For nearly two thousand years, other issues predominated. This is not to minimise these historical concerns or findings, but rather to acknowledge that our situatedness as readers predisposes us to ask particular types of questions when we are reading texts.

The fact that exploring a text's reception history can play a role in the recognition of the situatedness of the reader is not coincidental. Indeed, as Roberts and Rowland note, "reception history was developed, from its inception, to contest the uncritical adoption of an empirical methodology and attitude in the humanities".²⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, often considered the philosophical founder of reception history, was concerned with the notion that any one method (in this case historically oriented methodologies) could have a monopoly on meaning and truth claims.²⁷ In response, Gadamer teased out the different ways in which our contexts shape our knowledge and understanding, which in turn affect the ways in which we read texts. This hermeneutical situation foregrounds all of our interpretive endeavours, and thus needs to be taken into consideration. As such, one role of reception history is to highlight this situatedness, both that of ourselves and of those who have gone

exilic Universalism", *HUCA* 11 (1936) 159-91; and Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 129-33.

²⁶ Jonathan Roberts and Christopher Rowland, "Introduction", *JSNT* 33 (2010) 133.

²⁷ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Sheed and Ward, 1989; reprinted London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

before us.²⁸ In this light, reception history is an exercise in forming historical consciousness while cultivating perspective on our own interpretive situation.

As Callaway comments, one of the goals of reception history “is to make readers aware of something they took for granted; to make strange what was assumed to be natural, make local what was unconsciously taken to be universal”.²⁹ This rings true when exploring the reception of Obadiah. What contemporary readers take as a relatively straightforward reading of Obadiah’s setting and context was in fact a marginal reading before the Reformation. And yet, readers throughout history have found meaning in Obadiah in ways which reflect the predominant reading strategies of their day, even if these seem foreign to modern ears.

3. Rhetoric and ideology

A second issue one encounters in the reception of Obadiah revolves around the rhetoric and ideology of the book. Along with the historical issues noted above, the contemporary reader of Obadiah is likely to note the stark language of the book, including the harsh rhetoric and imagery used in relation to Edom. It should not be surprising that interpreters have in recent decades begun to offer comment on these very issues.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 349-51. This resonates with other ideological and “committed” approaches that have influenced biblical studies in recent decades. As Schüssler Fiorenza notes, “Modern ‘scientific’ studies... have promoted in the name of ‘pure reason’ a mode of inquiry that denies its own rhetorical character and masks its own historicity in order to claim scientific historical certainty and value-detached objectivity. This modern posture of value-neutral inquiry in the interest of pure reason and its claims to universality has been thoroughly challenged by diverse postmodern discourses, such as philosophical hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, ideology critique, and critical theory”. See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, “Changing the Paradigms: The Ethos of Biblical Studies”, in *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 31-56 (here 35). This critique of detached objectivity has led to a greater acknowledgment of the situatedness of readers, along with a deepening recognition that “the bare text is mute”: “The basic theoretical assumption of Reception Theory is that texts do not ‘have meaning’; meaning is rather produced by readers who engage texts”. Mary C. Callaway, “What’s the use of Reception History?”, paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting 2004, San Antonio, Texas; available at <http://bbibcomm.net>; accessed on 20 October 2012, 4; cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999).

²⁹ Callaway, “What’s the Use”, 12-13.

Robert Carroll, for example, in an article on Obadiah in the *SCM Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, refers to the book's "savage xenophobia".³⁰ More recently, Julia O'Brien has explored the ideological underpinnings of the portrayal of Edom in Obadiah and particularly the ease with which the prophet can speak negatively and violently about Edom and its downfall.³¹ O'Brien takes special note of the "brotherhood" language used of Esau and Edom in Obadiah. Drawing together a number of different historical, archaeological, and sociological observations, O'Brien concludes that Obadiah's use of "brother" language is ideologically driven, and is used to serve Judah's own purposes. That is, Judah did not really conceive of Edom as a brother, but the terminology is used to underscore Edom's behaviour. While Obadiah does not want Edom to have Judah's land, the prophet has no problem with Judah expanding its own borders and boundaries. This, for O'Brien, indicates that *"Obadiah's use of brother language, as well as its particular recounting of charges against Edom, reflects a self-interest, particularly regarding land"*.³²

Thus, O'Brien makes the case that Obadiah is ostensibly using kinship language while in fact reinforcing the otherness of Edom. O'Brien reads Obadiah with a view to critiquing issues of identity, otherness, and power relations, issues that are very real concerns in our current context. The danger is that those who read Obadiah as Scripture might find license in this book for denouncing others, and that Obadiah would be seen as a model for how others can be treated. For O'Brien, these and other texts require care and their unhelpful ideologies need to be unmasked; these texts are dangerous, or at least hold the possibility of being used in such a way—and readers of the Bible, particularly theologically committed readers, need

³⁰ Robert Carroll, "Obadiah", *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, eds. R. Coggins and J.L. Houlden (London: SCM, 1990), 496-97.

³¹ Julia M. O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 153-73.

³² O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, 166. Italics in original.

to be aware of this.³³

It was noted above that exploring the ways in which a text has been used and understood can be instructive in that it can help to highlight the situatedness of interpretation. A second and related issue that is important in reception history is the impact or effect that texts have had in various times and places. As John Sawyer notes, reception history encourages us to ask, What do texts do? What impact do they have? Has their reception been benign? Has a text inspired worship? Has it encouraged oppression? Has it been a force for liberation?³⁴ The use and reception of biblical texts gives us an insight into their impact, into the history of their effects, as an important indicator of what they have meant to readers and hearers.

Turning our attention back to Obadiah, we might ask: has this prophetic book been used in the ways in which O'Brien suggests it might? What has been the impact of this text?

A cursory look into the history of Obadiah's interpretation would suggest that O'Brien's concerns are not without warrant. Obadiah has been used to reify the other. As noted above, the rabbis were especially keen on using Obadiah to denigrate Esau. Esau did not learn from his parents, while Obadiah became righteous in spite of his contemporaries Ahab and Jezebel (Rashi). Another tradition notes that Esau was considered the greater by his parents,

³³ She writes, "Bringing into focus the often-invisible assumptions that govern the thinking of ancient authors and modern readers allows a level of reflection on culture and self that other reading strategies do not. It also invites theological engagement beyond simple assent or objection to biblical texts. Theology in this vein becomes not simply learning from the prophetic books but also exploring the implications of their explicit and implicit claims about God" (O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, 175).

³⁴ John F.A. Sawyer, "The Role of Reception Theory, Reader-Response Criticism and/or Impact History in the Study of the Bible: Definition and Evaluation", paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting 2004, San Antonio, Texas; available at http://bbibcomm.net/?page_id=183; accessed on 20 October 2012, 9-10.

but that God saw Esau and his descendants as lowly (*Pesiqta DeRab Kahana* 3.13, 18).³⁵

While it is not always clear whether the rabbis are speaking of Esau or using him figuratively, there is nevertheless a recurring theme of using Obadiah to belittle the character Esau, and in turn others who might be associated with him. Early Christian interpreters also found reasons to castigate others using Obadiah. Jerome, for example, understood the allegorical meaning of the book as an allegory concerning the day of judgment for all heretics. He has very strong words for those who, in his language, have brought hardship on the church.³⁶ These various readings seem to corroborate O'Brien's concerns: texts such as Obadiah allow for and even encourage the reader to castigate rather than to welcome the "other".

However, while these readings are not uncommon, it is worth noting that readers have for centuries read this book in a variety of other ways. For example, an important aspect of ancient Jewish interpretation reads Obadiah in light of contemporary politics, notably concerning Rome. This reading follows the rabbinic tendency to equate Edom with the enemies of God, a title which, in the Jewish tradition, Rome held for some time.³⁷ In the case of Obadiah, it is understood that the prophet is referring to how Rome, though it sees itself as large and lofty, will be brought down and made small, an event that will coincide with the reestablishment of Israel. Hence, Obadiah is not actually concerned with Edom, but points in a figural manner to Rome and the eventual downfall of this oppressor (e.g., *Leviticus*

³⁵ The Targum of the Minor Prophets seems to reflect this as well. The reference to Edom as "least" in v. 4 of the MT is read as "weak" in the Targum. See Kevin J. Cathcart and Robert P. Gordon, *Targum of the Minor Prophets*, ArBbib 14 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1989), 99.

³⁶ Jerome, *Commentariorum in Abdiam Prophetam*, 1109-11.

³⁷ Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Jacob et Esau ou Israel et Rome dans le Talmud et le Midrash", *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 201 (1984) 369-92.

Rabbah 13:5).³⁸ When read in this light, Obadiah can be seen as an anti-imperial text, a call to end oppression, and perhaps a statement of eschatological hope.³⁹

Similarly surprising readings are found in the Christian tradition. There are a number of church fathers, for example, who read Obadiah pastorally. The book has been read as a warning against pride, as a chance to reflect on the nature of justice, and as a chance to consider notions of judgment and mercy. For example, Jerome offers an extensive warning about being deceived by pride,⁴⁰ while Theodoret of Cyr notes that the case of Edom should teach us to truly rejoice when others rejoice, and mourn when they mourn.⁴¹ Ambrose makes similar claims, but takes the challenge personally: he prays that he, as a bishop, will truly hear those who come to him, and suffer with those who suffer.⁴²

Like their Jewish counterparts, Christians have also read the book figuratively and eschatologically. For instance, the restoration of Israel and defeat of Edom points, for many (primarily pre-modern) Christian interpreters, to the ultimate victory of God through Christ and defeat of evil. A good deal of this type of figurative commentary is based on v. 21 and its mention of *מוֹשְׁעֵי יִם*, often translated as “saviours” or “deliverers”.⁴³ This term proved a natural launching pad for much Christological and apostolic interpretation.

An example of this is found in Augustine’s *City of God*. He writes:

³⁸ Cf. *Song of Songs Rabbah* 22.1, 2; quoted in Neusner, *Habakkuk, Jonah, Nahum, and Obadiah*, 136. This typology may also be reflected in the Targum, where at several points the MT’s “mount” (הַר) is rendered as “citadel” (root כִּרְתָּ; vs. 8, 9, 19, 21). See Cathcart and Gordon, *Targum of the Minor Prophets*, 99-102.

³⁹ This eschatological understanding may be why the final verse of Obadiah is read as part of the afternoon service for Yom Kippur in some traditions.

⁴⁰ Jerome, *Commentariorum in Abdiam Prophetam*, 1103-4. Jerome teases out in an imaginative manner the various ways in which the word “rock” is used in Scripture in order to make his point.

⁴¹ Theodoret of Cyr, *Commentary on Obadiah*; quoted in Ferreiro, *The Twelve Prophets*, 126.

⁴² Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance*, 2.8, trans. H. De Romestin, NPNF 2:10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 354.

⁴³ For more on this term and its use here, see Raabe, *Obadiah*, 268-69.

if, by that form of speech in which a part is put for the whole, we take Idumea as put for the nations, we may understand of Christ what he says among other things, “But upon Mount Sion shall be safety, and there shall be a Holy One” (Obadiah 17). And a little after, at the end of the same prophecy, he says, “And those who are saved again shall come up out of Mount Sion, that they may defend Mount Esau, and it shall be a kingdom to the Lord” (Obadiah 21). It is quite evident this was fulfilled when those saved again out of Mount Sion—that is, the believers in Christ from Judea, of whom the apostles are chiefly to be acknowledged—went up to defend Mount Esau. How could they defend it except by making safe, through the preaching of the gospel. . . . For Mount Sion signifies Judea, where it is predicted there shall be safety, and a Holy One, that is, Christ Jesus. But Mount Esau is Idumea, which signifies the Church of the Gentiles, which, as I have expounded, those saved again out of Sion have defended that it should be a kingdom to the Lord. This was obscure before it took place; but what believer does not find it out now that it is done?⁴⁴

Augustine here makes several interesting interpretive moves. First, Mount Zion is the place from where salvation will come, and this refers to the work of Christ. Second, Augustine reads Edom as symbolic of the nations, and so Mt Esau is equated with the church of the Gentiles. Taken together, when salvation goes forth from Mt Zion, it is the apostles who go forth with the gospel, bringing salvation and making Mt Esau safe. Accordingly, in Augustine’s reading, Obadiah does not vilify the other, but is actually inclusive in nature: rather than being overcome, Mt Esau is defended and made safe.

⁴⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 18.31, trans. Marcus Dods, NPNF 2, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 377. For the Latin, see *De civitate Dei*, PL 41, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1841), 588.

Augustine is not alone in this Christological, even missiological reading. In fact, we find similar strains in the works of Theodoret and Jerome, as well as in later commentators such as Luther and Wesley. Of course one might note that Augustine's reading raises other issues, such as the ideological dimensions of mission, colonialism, and empire, and I do not wish to minimize these. Nevertheless, it is worth noting the impact or effect of the text; while to many modern ears Obadiah reads as ideologically oppressive and exclusive, that is far from the only impact it has had on readers through the centuries.

Reception history and the history of effects:

Callaway, drawing on Gadamer, notes that reception history is useful and important in part because it helps us see the perspective of the other while refusing to absolutize our own perspective. This, we might suggest, is especially important when examining the effect or impact of texts that are ideologically and theologically complex. As Callaway notes, reception history "can keep us alert to the limitations of our own readings, and especially to the moral consequences of absolutizing our own horizon". This, in turn, can help us transpose ourselves "to the perspective of the other, in order to understand how the other's reading might be right, even if from our own perspective it is impossible".⁴⁵

The reception of Obadiah again proves useful in this regard. We see that readerly presuppositions, as well as social and political contexts, determine greatly the ways in which a particular text is perceived and used. As has been noted, contemporary readers are often struck by the ideology of Obadiah, and its oppressive possibilities. In highlighting the ideological complexities of Obadiah, for example, O'Brien pushes contemporary readers to

⁴⁵ Callaway, "What's the Use", 12-13.

be cognizant of these, and to suggest that there are ethical dimensions involved in reading the Bible. And, as we have seen, this short and difficult book has been used throughout history to separate and mark off the “other”. However, that is not the whole story; Obadiah has also been read for many centuries and in various contexts as pastorally insightful, as inclusive, as a call to counter-imperial liberation, and, indeed, as an eschatologically hopeful text.

Thus, reception history, and the reception of Obadiah in particular, reminds us that even the most difficult texts have been read in surprising ways, that their effects are not always what we imagine they might be, and that we should exercise caution when tempted to absolutize our own perspectives and their concomitant concerns.

4. Obadiah and visual reception

Although visual representations of Obadiah are not as prevalent as examples from other prophets in the Hebrew canon, there are nonetheless some striking depictions. Further, an interesting aspect of these depictions is that there is a suggestive correlation between representations of Obadiah and the interpretive trajectory of the book throughout history in written exegesis.

General representations, particularly in Bibles and ecclesial contexts, provide little that might distinguish Obadiah from other prophets. These depictions tend to be ahistorical in nature, a characteristic which is not uncommon in representations of prophetic figures. There are, however, two medieval depictions from the 12th and 13th centuries that are very specific in their portrayal of the prophet. The first is a depiction found in the 12th century

Winchester Bible. One image from this Bible is entitled *visio abdia*, linking it with the prophet. Yet the depiction is of Obadiah providing food to others, presumably those prophets whom he had hidden away.

A second noteworthy occurrence is found in a collection of engravings from Amiens Cathedral (13th c).⁴⁶ Along with depictions of the rest of the twelve prophets, we find here a four-fold depiction of Obadiah. Again, these depictions all come from the story of Obadiah the servant of Ahab as recounted in 1 Kings 18. Examples on the cathedral include Obadiah feeding the prophets whom he had hidden from Ahab and Jezebel, as well as Obadiah meeting Ahab alongside Elijah. There is a further portrayal of Obadiah on another side of the Cathedral, and it too has Obadiah feeding the hidden prophets.

<INSERT PHOTO 1>

Thus, we have at least two medieval examples of depictions of Obadiah that associate the prophet with the character found in 1 Kings 18. As noted earlier, this was a common interpretation in early Jewish literature, and does appear in some early Christian interpretation as well. The fact that this interpretation occurs in two Christian visual representations raises some interesting questions about the pervasiveness of this reading up through the medieval period, and might even encourage us to examine more closely interpretive trajectories between and across religious traditions.

Moving to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries we find depictions of Obadiah which look to portray the content and message of the book. These representations of Obadiah depict the

⁴⁶ I am grateful to Dr. Stuart Whatling for his assistance with the Amiens representations. See <http://www.medievalart.org.uk/> for further images and depictions.

prophet delivering his message in a much more textualized fashion, and most depict Obadiah near a city. Several woodcarvings from this period are particularly acute in their renderings.⁴⁷ Images of falling cities and eagles which are to be brought down from the heights are common in such carvings. These visual depictions are noteworthy because of the interpretive shifts happening with regard to Obadiah around the time of the Reformation and the early modern period, an era in which scholars began to focus much more intently on the complicity of Edom in the downfall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar. As noted earlier, Luther was a key voice in these developments, and it is interesting that a number of these representations are found in illustrated versions of Luther's Bible.⁴⁸

When we come to the contemporary era, a number of depictions of Obadiah are quite striking in their emotional resonance. And here is perhaps where the congruent trajectory of written exegesis and artistic representation part ways. While contemporary textual commentaries of Obadiah have continued to focus on historical and ideological matters, notable contemporary depictions of Obadiah increasingly focus on the pathos of the prophet. Among his many other pieces of work, Marc Chagall has devoted attention to Obadiah, again conjuring much in a simple pencil sketch ("The Vision of Obadiah", ca. 1955). While this Chagall image retains the notion of a city on a hill, perhaps with people fleeing from it, the depiction of the prophet is far from congratulatory or triumphalistic, lacking the point finger common in previous depictions. Rather, the prophet sits, his head slightly bowed, possibly already holding the eagle which has fallen from the heights. There is an element of ambiguity and even reflectiveness introduced in Chagall's Obadiah.

⁴⁷ A number of such examples are held at Emory's Pitts Theological Library, and can be viewed online: <http://www.pitts.emory.edu/DIA/>.

⁴⁸ For background on these woodcuts, see Carl C. Christensen, "Luther and the Woodcuts to the 1534 Bible", *Lutheran Quarterly* 19:4 (2005) 392–413.

What might be the most evocative of the contemporary representations of Obadiah is found in John Singer Sargent's "Frieze of the Prophets", a mural of the Twelve Prophets at the Boston Public Library. Again, far from a prophetic voice that exults in castigating its neighbour, Sargent's partially-robed Obadiah seems to be in pain, huddled close to the ground with head bowed. We are not given access as to what motivates this response, whether it is the plight of his fellow people, or the severity of the message he has to deliver. Whatever the case, Sargent clearly focuses in on the humanity of the prophetic figure, something which we are much more apt to ascribe to Jeremiah the weeping prophet than to Obadiah, the vitriolic one.⁴⁹

Reception history and interdisciplinary reflection:

These visual representations of Obadiah highlight yet another way in which reception history can be useful and important, in that this type of reflection can reconnect the study of the Bible to lived experience outside of the scholarly enterprise of biblical studies, and thus serve as a catalyst for interdisciplinary reflection. Roberts and Rowland note that reception history

contests the idea that exegesis should be confined to written explication of texts. ... Rather, its openness to other media of exegesis, and to the varieties of effects of biblical texts, puts biblical studies in touch with wider intellectual currents in the humanities and in faith communities.⁵⁰

Thus, an important contribution of reception history is that it reminds us that the Bible has been an integral part of cultures and societies for millennia, in ways that stretch far beyond

⁴⁹ For more on Sargent's prophets, see Sally M. Promey, "The Afterlives of Sargent's Prophets", *Art Journal* 57 (1998) 31-44.

⁵⁰ Roberts and Rowland, "Introduction", 132.

written exegesis, and that these disparate uses are interpretations in their own right. As such, visual arts, literature, music, film, political discourse, and liturgical use are all important dimensions of understanding how and why a text has been read, understood, and used throughout history.⁵¹

Again, the visual reception of Obadiah is instructive. As we have seen, the artistic representations of Obadiah reflect the diversity of ways in which the book has been read down through the years, and at several points these depictions offer points of contact with their historical counterparts in written exegesis. We find ahistorical depictions, those highlighting canonical resonances, and, with the rise of early modernity, those focusing in on the book in a textualised manner. And yet, we also find disjunctions between written and visual exegesis, particularly in more contemporary engagement with the book and the prophet.

Examples such as these would seem to point to real possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration. Those with a keen interest in the text of the Bible have much to contribute to other discourses surrounding the use of the Bible, and vice versa. For example, what are the intersections of visual and written exegesis? What are the disjunctions, and why might these occur in the times and places in which they do? Taking seriously the reception history of the Bible outside of traditional written discourses is a dimension of biblical study that remains ripe for exploration.

5. Conclusion

While the afterlife of Obadiah is interesting in its own right, the reception of this prophetic

⁵¹ Sawyer, "The Role", 11. See also William John Lyons, "Hope for a Troubled Discipline? Contributions to New Testament Studies from Reception History", *JSNT* 33 (2010) 207-20.

book can also offer some helpful points of entry for reflection on the role and usefulness of reception history. First, exploring how Obadiah's setting and historical context have been construed over time reminds us that all interpretation is situated, and that readers and their contexts are important parts of the meaning-making process. In this light, reception history is helpful in that it makes strange what we assume to be natural. This leads to the second issue, the rhetoric and ideology of Obadiah. Reception history encourages us to explore the impact and effects that texts have had over time. It was noted that while this is an ideologically difficult text that has indeed been used to alienate the other, it has also been read in a variety of surprising and even counterintuitive ways over time. To borrow again from Callaway, both of these issues should remind us of the need to resist absolutizing our own horizons and perspectives. Finally, a brief account of visual representations of Obadiah was offered, highlighting the points of contact such depictions have with the interpretive history of the book in written exegesis. It was suggested that reception history can remind us that interpretation of the Bible has taken place in innumerable ways throughout history beyond the written text, and should encourage us to forge interdisciplinary connections that might illuminate the afterlife of the Bible in surprising and enlightening ways.

Thus, the reception of Obadiah, this briefest of the prophets, provides fertile ground for thinking about how and why people have engaged with this difficult text, as well as offering room to reflect on the very nature of what it means to read and interpret the Bible.