

## God's Wrath and Judgment on Ethnic Hatred and Hope for Victims of Ethnic Hatred in Obadiah: Implications for Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*Ethnic hatred has caused many lives on the African continent. In many cases victims of ethnic hatred are left without hope for the future. The book of Obadiah shows that there is hope for victims of ethnic hatred. This article looks at the book from the viewpoint that considers God's wrath and judgment on ethnic hatred, his assurance of justice and his plan to give hope to victims of ethnic hatred. Compared to Judah's misfortune, the Edomites used their advantage to participate in the destruction of "a brother" nation. But God would administer justice which would lead to the abasement of Edom and offer hope to Judah. Victims of ethnic hatred in Africa should console themselves with the fact that God will administer justice that would see to the punishment of those who take advantage of their condition and offer them (victims of ethnic hatred) a better future.*

**Key words:** Africa, ethnic hatred, God's justice, judgment and hope, brotherhood

### A INTRODUCTION

The African continent is plagued with ethnic conflicts that have cost many lives and properties. Yet, it is the continent on which Christianity is said to grow daily. African Christians read the Bible as God's authoritative word for the church's beliefs and practices. One wonders why, in spite of the widespread reading of the Bible, Africa continues to experience ethnic conflicts. There is a high probability that not many African Christians have read the book of Obadiah and that those who have read it, perhaps have lost sight of the idea of ethnic hatred in its content.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Simundson indicates that the book of Obadiah "seems to be relatively unimportant among the many biblical books. It is small, the shortest book of the Old Testament, and it tends to get lost between the lengthier and more interesting books of

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The book of Obadiah shows that God disapproves of ethnic hatred and that he is on the side of victims of ethnic hatred to give them hope in the future. This article aims at showing that God abhors the many ethnic conflicts that have engulfed the African continent. It will show that in his own time God will administer justice on behalf of victims of ethnic hatred, that he is concerned about their present conditions and that he has good future plans for them.

## B EXPLANATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

Before any attempt to analyse the text under review, there are two issues that need clarity: (1) the meaning of the term אָח, and (2) the nature of the brotherhood between Edom and Israel/Judah.

### 1 The Meaning of the Term אָח

The Hebrew word for “brother” is אָח. Helmer Ringgren provides the various meanings of this common Semitic word.<sup>2</sup> First, it denotes a person’s blood relation. It is used for a blood brother as in the case of Cain and Abel (Gen 4:8-11), Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:26; cf. Hos 12:4 [Eng. v. 3]), Joseph and his brothers (Gen 37:2, 4-36; 42:3-8) and Aaron and Moses (Exod 4:14). The OT does not make a sharp distinction between brother and half-brother (cf. Exod 4:14; 2 Sam 13:4). In some cases, however, the words, “son of [the same] mother,” are added when stress is laid on blood brothers (e.g., Deut 13:7 [6]; Judg 8:19; Ps 50:20; cf. Gen 27:29).<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, אָח refers to one’s kinsman. In Gen 14:14, it is used for Abraham’s relation to his nephew Lot. In Gen 13:8 Abraham expressed his relationship to Lot as “we are brothers.” In a wider sense, however, the term may refer to a fellow tribesman or a fellow countryman as in Jacob’s relation to Laban (Gen 31:32), Moses’ relation to the Hebrews (Exod 2:11; 4:8) and as sons of a cousin (Lev 10:4). In addition, it is used for the other Israelites in relation to the Reubenites and the Gadites (Josh 1:14-15) and Abimelech’s relation to the citizens of Shechem (Judg 9:18). The basis of this later usage is the idea that the tribes and the nation descended from the same father. Thus, in many passages genealogies are expressed by making individuals representatives of a tribe or a nation, and also by describing relationships between tribes in categories normally used for family relations<sup>4</sup> (cf. Gen 9:25; 16:12; 25:18; 49:5; Judg 1:3, 17; 20:23, 28). As Ringgren notes, this type of expression occurs often when refer-

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Amos and Jonah.” See Daniel J. Simundson, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 242. James M. Boice notes “Who knows what is in Obadiah? Very few, even among conscientious Bible students.” See James M. Boice, *The Minor Prophets* (vol. 1; ExComm; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 235.

<sup>2</sup> Helmer Ringgren, “אָח,” *TDOT* 1:188.

<sup>3</sup> Ringgren, *TDOT* 1:189.

<sup>4</sup> Ringgren, *TDOT* 1:190.

ence is made to Jacob and Esau or Israel and Edom. Many biblical examples express this: when blessing his sons Isaac promised that Esau will serve his brother (Gen 27:29, 40); when Israel sent messengers to the Edom, he said, "Thus says your brother Israel" (Num 20:14). It is important to note that God when speaking to the Israelites, referred to Edom as "your brothers the sons of Esau" (Deut 2:4). The same meaning can be found in the expression "You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother" (Deut 23:8 [7]).

So far it is clear that the idea of brotherhood extended to include tribesmen and fellow countrymen, which indicates the demand for solidarity. It was in this regard that the Holiness Code and Deuteronomy issued various duties toward a brother or countryman (cf., e.g., Lev 25:35-43; Deut 22:1-4). It was in the light of this that Obadiah condemned Edom's attitude toward a brother nation. Similarly, the prophet Amos condemned Edom for pursuing his brother, the Israelites with the sword (Amos 1:11).

## 2 The Nature of the Brotherhood of Edom and Israel/Judah

Obadiah speaks of Esau/Edom as a brother of Jacob/Israel/Judah (vv. 10, 12).<sup>5</sup> Thus Obadiah follows the ancestral narratives in Genesis that present Esau/Edom and Jacob/Israel as brothers, twins of the same parents (see, e.g., Gen 25:20-30; 32:2; cf. also Num 20:14; Amos 1:11). Biblical authors or redactors presented their descendants as kin with a common ancestry and an interwoven genealogy.

However, since at least the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> critical biblical study has questioned the historicity of the Genesis genealogies. R. Coggins, for instance, states that "it is impossible to treat as strict history the idea that Jacob and Esau were literally the founders of the two nations all of whose people were descended from them."<sup>7</sup> He argues that the relation between the stories of Jacob and Esau in Genesis and the later "brotherhood" of nations is a complex one because of the geographical shift that took place. He explains that Edom was in the far south, whereas the stories of Jacob and Esau place their activities in central Transjordan. In view of this, three theories have been advanced to

<sup>5</sup> In addition to Obadiah a number of OT passages speak of Edom as Israel's brother (Gen 25, 27, 36; Num 20:14-21; Deut 2:4-8; 23:7; Jer 49:7-11; Amos 1:11-12; Mal 1:2-4). See John Bartlett, "The Land of Seir and the Brotherhood of Edom," *JTS* 4 (1977): 2-27, for a helpful analysis and discussion on these passages.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of the question of the historicity of genealogies, and for an argument against making sweeping generalizations, see Robert Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," *JBL* 94 (1975): 169-89. Wilson advocates a case-by-case study of ancestors or relationships in genealogies.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Coggins, *Israel among the Nations: Nahum, Obadiah* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 70-71.

explain the nature of the "brotherhood" that existed between Edom and Israel/Judah.

First, it has been suggested that the history of Edom and Judah accounted for their brotherhood. Dicou suggests by associating Edom with Esau's land, Mount Seir, Esau could become the father of the Edomites, and Edom Israel's brother.<sup>8</sup> This view draws attention to a common history of Edom and Israel with reference to many Edomites who migrated to the land west of the Arabah and even came to live in former Judean territories.<sup>9</sup> In the Hebrew writings of the Persian period we encounter repeated allusions to the northward advance of the Nabataeans, who invaded the districts lying south and east of the Dead Sea, including especially the territory of Moab, Ammon, and Edom. The encroachment of these Arab tribes on the domain of their neighbours on the north is a fact of considerable significance for the history of the Jews. As the Nabataeans gradually moved northward, the Edomites were the chief sufferers from their advance; and they in turn, being at length driven out from their old territory, were forced into southern Palestine, of which they finally gained possession. The result was a complete shift of the positions of these two peoples: the Nabataeans ultimately occupied old Edom, while the Edomites move into the region (new Edom) lying between the southern part of the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean, for the most part former territory of the tribe of Judah.<sup>10</sup> As Dicou notes, some oracles against Edom attest Edom's interest in Judean land. For instance, Ezek 35:10 speaks of "Mount Seir's" intention to take possession of the land "of YHWH." In addition, the promise in Obad 19 that the Israelites will possess "the Negeb, Mount Esau" again, shows that the Negeb at the time was occupied by Edom. This is also affirmed by v. 20 that indicates that returning exiles from Jerusalem "shall possess the cities of the Negeb."<sup>11</sup>

The second suggestion about the "brotherhood" between the two nations is that they both belonged to a similar religion. This suggestion holds that in the religious history of Israel and its neighbours, there is no mention in the OT of the most important Edomite god, Qos, whilst the gods of the other nations are specifically named.<sup>12</sup> It appears that while the gods of the other neighbouring

<sup>8</sup> Bert Dicou, *Edom, Israel's Brother and Antagonist: The Role of Edom in Biblical Prophecy and Story* (JSOTSup 169; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 174.

<sup>9</sup> See Charles C. Torrey, "The Edomites in Southern Judah," *JBL* 17 (1898): 16-20; cf. John Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 140-43; John Bartlett, "From Edomites to Nabateans: A Study in Continuity," *PEQ* 111 (1979): 53-66; Jacob M. Myers, "Edom and Judah in the Sixth-Fifth Centuries B.C.," in *Near Eastern Studies* (ed. Hans Goedicke; Baltimore, Md., 1971), 377-92.

<sup>10</sup> Torrey, "Edomites," 16.

<sup>11</sup> Dicou, *Edom*, 176.

<sup>12</sup> On Qos, see, e.g., Th. C. Vriezen, "Edomite Deity Qaus," *OtSt* 14 (1965): 330-53; Ernst A. Knauf, "Qaus," *UF* 16 (1984): 93-95; Bartlett, *Edom*, 200-207. The only

nations are mentioned by their names and rejected, this is not the case of the Edomite god or gods. M. Rose, in reference to Solomon's idolatry in 1 Kgs 11:1-8, asserts that following his foreign wives, Solomon served Ashtoret of Sidon, Milcom of Ammon (v. 5), Chemosh of Moab, and Molech of Ammon (v. 7). But Solomon's Edomite wives (v. 1) do not appear to have lured him to serve other gods.<sup>13</sup> With this we are urged to assume the possibility of similarity between Edom's Qos and Israel's YHWH, which prevented the rejection of Qos in Israel's religious history.<sup>14</sup> Bartlett speaks of "the essential similarity and close connection between the Edomite Qos and the Israelite Yahweh." He uses the term "co-religionists" in this regard. Bartlett asserts that a feeling of religious affinity between the two nations may have been "one contributing factor" that identified Edom as Jacob's/Israel's brother.<sup>15</sup>

A third suggestion is to interpret the brotherhood in terms of a treaty. M. Fishbane has argued that, in the light of Akkadian treaties and their frequent correspondence in form and content with Deuteronomy, the Hebrew use of  $\pi\aleph$  can in certain contexts be understood as "treaty partner."<sup>16</sup> This seems to be a valid point, and there are without doubt political implications for Israel's interaction with the inhabitants of Seir in Deut 2.

In sum, any of these suggestions could be a possibility. In other words, we cannot be certain as to the real nature of the "brotherhood" of Edom and Israel/Judah. It should be noted that sociological considerations both of modern tribal societies such as the Bedouins and, more generally, of ANE Semitic societies have suggested that it is not uncommon for traditions about ancestral relationships to be "invented" or change through time in order to establish community cohesion through kinship bonds.<sup>17</sup>

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reference to the worship of the "gods of the Seirites," the "gods of Edom" is in 2 Chr 25:14, 20. But the parallel version of the story in 2 Kgs 14:7 does not mention such worship.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Rose, "Yahweh in Israel—Qaus in Edom?" *JSOT* 4 (1977): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars even assert that there existed a correspondence between YHWH and Qos. They think the names of both gods are probably Arabic. Qos is an Arabic name meaning, "bow," (cf. Vriezen, "Edomite," 334-35; Rose, "Yahweh," 29-30; Bartlett, *Edom*, 201-202) whilst YHWH is a northwest Arabic name meaning "he blows" (cf. Ernst A. Knauf, "Yahwe," *VT* 34 [1984]: 467-72).

<sup>15</sup> Bartlett, "Land of Seir," 21.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Fishbane, "The Treaty Background of Amos 1:11 and Related Matters," *JBL* 89 (1970): 314-315. Cf. John Priest, "The Covenant of Brothers," *JBL* 84 (1965): 400-406.

<sup>17</sup> See, e.g., P. Kyle McCarter, "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," in *Ancient Israel: A Short History from Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple* (ed. Hershel Shanks; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 15-16, 20-21.

As a result, this essay is based on the understanding that אָח can refer to any close ties other than blood relations, but could include blood relations. And so, the “brotherhood” of Edom and Israel refers to a close relationship that saw them as neighbours and fellow semites and not necessarily blood brothers. However, this relationship was such that encountering someone as אָח placed a moral responsibility upon the one to whom the other is אָח. Thus special care to provide for and keep from harm was placed upon the relationship.<sup>18</sup>

### 3 African Concept of Brotherhood

As was the case among Judah/Israel and Edom, Africans’ conception of brotherhood goes beyond blood relations. The Akans of Ghana, for instance, use the word “brother,” *me nua*, in many ways, just like the Hebrew usage of the word. First, the word is used for children of the same mother or father. Secondly, it is used for children of one’s mother’s sisters or children of one’s father’s brothers. Thirdly, it is used for people from the same clan or even tribe (ethnic group); thus, people with one common ancestry. In a broader sense, it could refer to people from the same village or town. An Asante man who lived in Kumase in the Ashanti region, on noticing another Asante who lived in Accra in the Greater Accra region in England, could refer to him as *me nua*, “my brother.” In addition, on noticing an Asante man of Ghana in a foreign land, an Ewe man of Ghana could also refer to him as “my brother,” even though they come from different ethnic groups altogether. Furthermore, a Nigerian noticing a Ghanaian abroad could refer to him as “my brother” because they both come from Africa and are black. This depicts the strong, innate brotherliness among Africans and calls for solidarity among African ethnic groups and nations.

## C BRIEF EXEGESIS OF OBADIAH

### 1 Oracles Concerning Edom – vv. 2-15

#### 1a God’s Wrath and Judgment on Edom (vv. 2–9)

Verses 2–9 contain three oracles of YHWH’s judgment on Edom. This section draws the attention of YHWH’s audience to what he intends to do to Edom. He describes the intentions of Edom and the reason for that condition. YHWH outlines the imminent degradation of Edom.

Verses 2–4 contain the first oracle of YHWH. The oracle begins with the interjection הִנֵּה “behold” or “indeed” or “see” (v. 2) with the purpose of attracting the attention of the hearer to the judgment Yahweh is about to mete out to

<sup>18</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “The Wilderness Journey in Deuteronomy: Style, Structure, and Theology in Deuteronomy 1-3,” in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 581.

Edom.<sup>19</sup> The verb *נָתַתִּיךָ* "make" with the pronominal suffix "you" is a prophetic perfect. As Barton points out, if the perfect verb is taken to refer to the past, it would have to relate to some earlier humiliation of Edom that, according to Obadiah, was going to be extended in the future. But the passage concerns the future.<sup>20</sup> It is typical of oracles against foreign nations, where YHWH speaks in the first person and uses the "prophetic perfect" "I have made you" or "I will make you" to emphasise that the punishment is virtually accomplished already. In other words, YHWH's threat is so certain of fulfilment that it is expressed as already accomplished.

The Hebrew word *קָטַן* "small" connotes Edom's reduction in size and influence. So as Stuart posits, two curse types, decimation and dishonour/degradation, are pronounced about Edom's future.<sup>21</sup> Edom will be utterly *despised*. Verse 2 therefore shows Edom's abasement. Verse 3 explains that the cause of Edom's certain abasement is its pride or insolence. Edom was proud because her dwelling was set *בְּחַגְוֵי-סֵלַע* "in the *clefts of the rock*." Thus, Edom was proud because of her defenses. Because of her unique geographical situation, Edom was almost impregnable. Stuart draws attention that Edom's rock location (*sela*, סֵלַע "rock") is a pun on the name of its capital, Sela. He explains that Sela's location on the Umm el-Biyara plateau was surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs that made it difficult for any enemy to mount a surprise attack from one side only. In addition to Sela, Stuart mentions that Edom's main cities, Teman and Bozrah, as well as the nascent fortress city of Petra near Sela, were located in nearly impenetrable high rock formations.<sup>22</sup> Edom therefore found her safety and security in her physical setting. In v. 4, Edom is metaphorically portrayed as to soar *כְּנֶשֶׁר* "like the eagle" and make her nest among the stars. The eagle was the largest bird in the region (Ezek 17:7) with a powerful wing span (Isa 40:31), known by observation to build its aeries in high, inaccessible mountainous rocky crags. Structurally, the passage depicts a metaphorical development from rocky heights (v. 3) to the very heavens (v. 4). This progression exemplifies Edom's increasing self-assurance and source of pride.

Barton, referring to Isa 26:5, draws attention to the fact of divine opposition to all that is "haughty" or "lofty." He explains that the description in Obadiah belongs to the OT's perception of the relative status of God and humanity, and its absolute conviction that no one must challenge the supremacy of YHWH. That the Edomites have set their dwelling "among the stars" should

<sup>19</sup> Leslie Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 147.

<sup>20</sup> John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 136.

<sup>21</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah* (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 416-17.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 417.

ring warning bells, if one has read Isa 14:12-14.<sup>23</sup> Barton explains pride used here is not a psychological issue. Thus it is not used to connote a "sense of one's own God-given place in the world that affirms one's achievements and evaluates them justly," but rather to connote "the broad canvas of ambition and ruthlessness of nations who think nothing of liquidating their neighbors."<sup>24</sup>

The two ׀ "though" are subordinating conjunctions. They introduce a concession to show that in spite of Edom's high and mighty position which was described by means of several metaphors, she will not survive Yahweh's onslaught. Therefore, Edom's question "Who will bring me down to the ground?" in v. 3 is answered by Yahweh, "I will bring you down" in v. 4. The repetition of *bring . . . down* in vv. 3 and 4 creates a structural parallel in which the punishment fits the crime. Edom made a great mistake by boasting; the pride of her heart *deceived* her. Although humans could not reach her, Edom had forgotten the incomparable greatness of Yahweh. Thus, Edom was deluded in her "illusions of superhuman invincibility"; she could not escape the reach of Yahweh's justice.<sup>25</sup> Baker is right to title the first oracle against Edom as, "Pride Goes before Destruction."<sup>26</sup> Edom's attitude corresponds to what Brevard S. Childs describes as an OT motif of blasphemous arrogance,<sup>27</sup> which often presents an attitude of defiance as the motivation for divine punishment (cf. e.g., Isa 10:5-19; Ezek 28:1-10; 35:10-15). Barton draws attention to the fact that we cannot certainly say the Edomites were notably more arrogant than the nations or even than the Judahites. He asserts that the prophets assume that foreigners are all arrogant and proud.<sup>28</sup>

Allen shows that vv. 5-6 develops the thought in vv. 2-4. Both units depict Edom as the victim of future destruction. He draws attention to two ambiguities here. The first is about its aspect of time. He states that the Hebrew verbs in the exclamations are in the perfect state, as are those in the temporal clauses. So, regarding the question, "Does vv. 5-6 look back to an overthrow that has already taken place?" Allen attests that v. 1 speaks of preparations for an attack and therefore it is more likely that the perfect verbs are to be construed as prophetic perfects, like the verb in v. 2, and that the imperfect verbs in the two clauses of v. 5 are normal futures. However, the line falls outside the structure of the oracle and so, as Barton has suggested, it could be a comment on it rather than part of it. In that case we find here a scribal interpolation, reflecting on Obadiah's words, after Edom had been destroyed.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 137-38.

<sup>24</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 138.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 147.

<sup>26</sup> David Baker, *Obadiah* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Brevard Childs, *Isaiah and the Assyrian Crisis* (London: SCM, 1967), 88.

<sup>28</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 137.

<sup>29</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 141.

The second problem is about the nature of the reference to thieves and grape-gatherers. Allen points out two possibilities. Either the prophet had a contrast in mind, where both leave behind pieces of property and grapes respectively, or he had a double comparison in mind, where the reckless, ruthless stripping of house and vineyard predict the destruction of Edom’s wealth. Allen concludes that the latter interpretation is more realistic because of the wording in the first comparison.<sup>30</sup> However, the former can also be true to show that while thieves take away what they can carry and grape harvesters normally do not have time to totally pick every grape, Edom would be ransacked (v. 6) and no hidden treasure will remain undiscovered.

The exclamation  $\text{איך}$ , “how” in v. 5 is paired with another exclamation,  $\text{איך}$  in v. 6. In v. 6 the second colon of the bicolon ties in with the meaning of the first colon. The author of Obadiah chose  $\text{הפש}$  instead of the similar-looking verb  $\text{השף}$ , “to strip bare” chosen by Jeremiah in Jer 49:10a. The two verbs differ only in the order of their consonants. As Dicou shows  $\text{בעה}$  (“to seek out”)  $\text{מצפניו}$  (“treasures”) fits in better with  $\text{הפש}$  (“to pillage”).<sup>31</sup>

The three  $\text{אם}$  “if” are subordinating conjunctions that introduce real conditions; they introduce temporal sentences. They indicate two conditional interrogatives, both of which are rhetorical questions. They show the completeness of Edom’s impending destruction as against theoretical instance of partial loss.

In v. 6, the term “Esau” is used for Edom as in vv. 8, 9, 18, 19, and 21.<sup>32</sup> Stuart points out that this usage is confined to Deut 2, Jer 49, Josh 24, Mal 1 and Gen 27-28. He adds that in the OT, Edom is the term used for the nation as opposed to the eponymous ancestor Esau.<sup>33</sup> Thus like traditions in Gen 27-28 and Mal 1:2-5, Obadiah identifies Edom with the patriarch Esau, the brother of Jacob. The theme of brotherhood then comes to the fore in the following oracles, vv. 8-11 and 12-14 (15b).

Commenting on *allies*, Stuart posits that Edom was weak militarily. He attributes this to Edom’s small population and its limited agricultural wealth,

<sup>30</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 149.

<sup>31</sup> Dicou, *Edom*, 66.

<sup>32</sup> For Ben Zvi such a reference presupposes an audience that is acquainted with the equation Edom=Esau, and alludes to the traditions of Esau, the brother of Jacob=Israel, which will play an important role in the next units, already in vv. 8-10. Thus the reference to Esau here leads the (re)readers of the Book of Obadiah to “activate” the memory of these traditions, and to develop a reading of this text that is informed by them. As a result, the enemy of YHWH (i.e., Edom) is now presented as the brother of Jacob, who is Israel and whose god is YHWH. See Ehud Ben Zvi, *A Historical-Critical Study of the Book of Obadiah* (BZAW 242; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1996), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 417.

which prevented it to form powerful armed forces. As a result, Edom had to depend on alliances with more powerful states, especially Babylon.<sup>34</sup> But Edom's allies will defect. These allies are described as *confederates*; it speaks of those who have entered into formal pact or treaty with the Edomites; they are also described as friends. The Hebrew for *friends* connotes the idea of "those who eat with you."<sup>35</sup> The two words put together refer in this context to the sealing of a treaty by sharing a meal (Gen 31:54; Exod 24:11).<sup>36</sup> So, the trusted friends of Edom will deceive its armies and will lure them out of their strongholds. Edom will suffer treachery at the hands of those on whom she depended because of a covenant sealed by the eating of bread. There is a play on words here; the Hebrew root for "bread," לֶחֶם, can also mean "do battle"<sup>37</sup> (e.g., Pss 35:1; 56:1–2). In other words, "Edom's allies, who have covenanted by breaking bread to fight *for* Edom, will now fight *against* it."<sup>38</sup>

We once again encounter the problem of timing here. It appears the actions of the allies have taken place already. But as both Allen and Stuart show, the overall context envisages the perfects as prophetic, referring to the future betrayal of Edom's allies.<sup>39</sup>

Verses 8 and 9 indicate the destruction of the wise men and mighty men of Edom. The destruction will happen "on that day." This phrase is often a marker of an "eschatological" addition to an earlier oracle collection. But in this context, this is not so because the reference is to an imminent act of God's vengeance on the Edomites for their ill treatment of Judah. In the OT, it is only two other passages, Ezek 24:25 and Ezek 38:14, that have "on that/the day" preceded by *halo* ("will it not happen"). Usually, "on that day" is followed by a verb in the imperfect (*yiqtol*). In v. 8, however, it is followed by a "consecutive perfect" (*weqatal*) form, but as Barton shows, "this is well within the range of acceptable usage."<sup>40</sup> In sum "that day" refers to the specific day of God's wrath and judgment on Edom (v. 2) and not "the Day of the Lord" that is first mentioned in v. 15a.

In v. 8 the wise men of Edom will be destroyed "on that day." Edom was renowned for its wisdom (cf. Jer 49:7), but on this occasion wisdom and the understanding will not save Edom. Edom is addressed directly by Yahweh as Teman, a northern town of the kingdom (Ezek 25:13), which was named

<sup>34</sup> Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 417-18.

<sup>35</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 150, n. 27.

<sup>36</sup> See Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981), 253-54 and n. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Davos Dommershausen, "lhm," *TDOT* 7: 521-22.

<sup>38</sup> Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah* (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 379.

<sup>39</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 149; Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 418.

<sup>40</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 143.

after Esau's grandson (Gen 36:11; 1 Chr 1:36). Note that one of Job's counsellors, Eliphaz, was from Teman. His counsel to Job (4:8-9) is now applied to his nation. Barton suggests that the kind of "wisdom" the prophet has in mind is probably political wisdom, rather than the "insight" into the ways of God. He asserts that this oracle is similar to Isaiah's condemnations of the vaunted "wisdom" of the counsellors of Pharaoh (Isa 19:11-15), and may imply, in the same way, that the people in Teman are not really very wise anyway, since they have not foreseen Edom's downfall.<sup>41</sup> Wolff intimates that the wisdom of the wise does not mean only "reflection about questions of teaching, law, natural phenomena, and theology," but also includes "the examination, discernment, and guidance of right and successful action in public life."<sup>42</sup> Verse 8 contains a rhetorical question, "Is it not so," asked by God and which expects an emphatic "yes" answer.

In v. 9 the *mighty men* (warriors) of Teman would also be dismayed or demoralised. As Allen shows, Teman, an important city of Edom, is used here poetically as a part for the whole.<sup>43</sup> Dismay depicts the picture of Edom's soldiers who lose their sense of moral and flee in panic. With the destruction of the Edom's political advisers and military corps, every single person on Mount Esau would be killed.

As Dicou asserts, *Mount Esau* is the most common designation of Edom in Obadiah (vv. 8, 9, 19, 21).<sup>44</sup> "The land of Edom" is the most common name for the Edomite territory. Usually, the region of Edom is called *Mount Seir* (Deut 1:2), "the land of Seir" (Gen 36:30) and the combined name, "the land of Seir the field of Edom" (Gen 32:3). Ezekiel thus terms the Edomite territory "Mount Seir and all Edom" (Ezek 35:15). The name Seir is apparently related to the Horites; this is especially evidenced by Gen 36:20: "These were the sons of Seir the Horite, who were settled in the land" (cf. Deut 2:12).

### **1b The Reason for God's Wrath and Judgment on Edom (vv. 10–14)**

Allen posits that the initial words of v. 10 stress that the punishment related in vv. 2-9 is not arbitrary but provoked by enough cause. He intimates that the basic charge of v. 11 sets the scene for the more specific accusations, which are to follow.<sup>45</sup> In v. 10 the main reason for God's wrath and judgment on Edom is given: "For the violence done to your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you,

<sup>41</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Hans W. Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (trans. Margaret Kohl; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 51.

<sup>43</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 153.

<sup>44</sup> Dicou, *Edom*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 154.

and you shall be cut off forever." Thus, as Boice notes, Edom's specific sin was an aggravated lack of brotherhood.<sup>46</sup>

The kinship between the two nations of Edom and Israel, and its corresponding obligation, are stressed in Deut 23:7: "You shall not regard an Edomite with abhorrence, because he is your brother." Judah is clearly called Jacob in Obadiah in order to bring out this relationship. Other than that the text would make no sense, for we know that in the OT Jacob is used to represent the entire Israel, the twelve tribes, for Jacob became Israel. If this usage is indicated here (v. 18; cf. Num 20:14; Deut 23:7; Amos 1:11) it would mean that Edom's violence was directed against the entire Israel, which does not agree with the book's context: Edom's dealings with Judah.

Here we are reminded of the historic conflict between these two brother nations and its association with and attribution to their ancestors Esau and Jacob (Gen 25:19-34; 27:1-28:9; 33). However, we are not certain how far the "kinship" between Edom and Judah was accepted in Edom. We are not sure if there were Edomite versions of the stories of Jacob and Esau; if there were, they might well have included Edomite reactions, not unlike Obadiah's, to the treacherous behaviour Jacob had showed to his brother on more than one occasion, and might have suggested that the Israelites had not in this respect changed their spots.

Violence to his brother is tantamount to breaking the bonds of kinship. The two words *violence* and *brother* are used antithetically. In spite of the bitter rivalry between their progenitors, the prophet thinks that there is no justification for Edom's mistreatment of a brother nation in times of crisis. As Allen asserts, "Kinship creates obligation, which cannot be neglected with impu-

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<sup>46</sup> Boice, *Minor Prophets*, 244. While the nomenclature that Obadiah employs in relation to its subjects is varied (Edom is spoken of in multiple ways: Edom [vv. 1, 8], those in who live in the clefts of rocks and dwell on high [v. 3], Esau [v. 6], Mount Esau [vv. 8, 9, 19, 21], brother of Jacob [vv. 10, 12], and the house of Esau [v. 18]), a key issue is the use of the term "brother." Indeed, many commentators have noted the importance of the term "brother" for understanding Obadiah (Wolff, *Obadiah*, 52; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Joel, Amos, Obadja, Jona* (KAT 13; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1971), 309. Ben Zvi concludes that the "Edom as brother" motif is the only reasonable explanation for the vitriol in the book (Ben Zvi, *Obadiah*, 238-246). Barton comments that the brotherhood language creates certain particular expectations so that "this is not simply a general principle applicable to all international relations." See Barton, *Joel*, 128). The kinship language employed in Obad 10-12 refers to the violence done to brother Jacob and the gloating over the brother on the day of his misfortune. These reprimands seem to be rooted in the accusation of v. 11. In other words, it is the issue of brotherhood that implies Edom should have acted differently from the others, and is the basis for the prophet's disappointment with his neighbour. See William Brown, *Obadiah through Malachi* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 12; Johan Renkema, *Obadiah* (trans. Brian Doyle; HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 160.

nity."<sup>47</sup> Edom was violent toward its brother nation. The Hebrew word *הַקָּטָוּ*, "violence" is a general word that originally referred to killing, but is often used by the prophets to denote any kind of violent crime. It could mean "a basic disregard for human rights,"<sup>48</sup> or "every kind of wrongful, hurtful action against another, particularly oppression, cruelty"<sup>49</sup> and false witness. Hence, Edom's attitude is seen as *shameful* and deserves *destruction*.

"On the day" in v. 11 refers to the events in 587 B.C.E. when Babylon ransacked and destroyed Jerusalem. On that day Edom *stood aloof* without making any effort to aid his brother nation when *strangers* and *foreigners* cast lots for the spoils of Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for *strangers* is *זָרִים*. When the prophets address Yahweh, their own people or the other nations they often used the term *זָרִים* to designate the enemy, the aggressor, or the occupying power. In addition, *זָרִים* is synonymous with "usurpers, tyrants" or "violent nations" and "foreigners." So *strangers* is used here to connote not merely people who are different because they were foreign (*nokrim*) but the destroyers who despoil Jerusalem and its sanctuary of its splendor.<sup>50</sup> With this hateful complicity, Edom acted as if he was *one of them*. This implies that Edom gleefully aided in the looting of the city. Allen observes that the mention of strangers and foreigners, instead of specifying them by name, is intended to bring out Edom's heartlessness in failing to come to the aid of its kinsmen.<sup>51</sup> On Edom's attitude here, Stuart indicates that given the long enmity of Edom and Israel/Judah, one could hardly expect Edom to rush to help Judah against Babylon. He believes that Edom is castigated for comfortably biding its time while the Babylonians carved up Jerusalem as the Edomites could never have done, in anticipation of moving in like vultures for the city's leftovers.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Barton posits the prophet did not imply that the Edomites themselves killed the Judahites; but the Edomites "were like hyenas, taking the pickings after a death caused by some other animals."<sup>53</sup>

In vv. 12–14 the literary device of repetition is used to express Edom's atrocities against Judah. Here there are eight prohibitions in the typical syntactical style that indicate not a general prohibition (אֵל "not" + imperfect), but a specific, individual-circumstance prohibition (אַל "do not" + imperfect).<sup>54</sup> With the use of similar constructions and of the word "day" with synonyms of misfortune – ruin, distress, calamity – the writer emphasises the horrendous

<sup>47</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 155.

<sup>48</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 155.

<sup>49</sup> Theodore Laetsch, *Bible Commentary: The Minor Prophets* (St Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1956), 200.

<sup>50</sup> Lambertus A. Snijders, "zûr/zar," *TDOT* 4:54.

<sup>51</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 155.

<sup>52</sup> Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 418-19.

<sup>53</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 145-46.

<sup>54</sup> Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 419.

wickedness of Edom against Judah. The verb forms are in the future tense so that the prophet speaks as if the onslaught on Jerusalem had not yet taken place and warns the Edomites against their wicked acts. As a result Bartlett thinks, "these verses in Obadiah should not be understood as an historian's description of Edom's behaviour in 587 B.C. The poet derives his picture largely from his imagination."<sup>55</sup> Against Bartlett, Barton asserts that although no one would describe what we have in Obadiah as "a historian's description," Obadiah was reasonably well informed about some events that actually occurred. For him the detailed presentation involving entering the city, taking booty, gloating over the defeated inhabitants, and then preventing them from escaping cannot be imagination.<sup>56</sup> For Barton to interpret these verbs in the future "produces an odd effect, since until now the prophecy has clearly referred to what the Edomites have *already* done."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, it would be appropriate to translate these prohibitions in the past tense, *you should not have*. Barton draws attention to examples of such use of the imperfect in the OT to express a wish with reference to a point in time in the past (cf. Job 10:18; Lev 10:18; Num 35:28). Barton concludes, "this interpretation gives a satisfactory sense" and indicates "it is hard to see any solution other than to use the imperfect, which is regularly the form in modal and counterfactual sentences."<sup>58</sup>

Verse 12 adduces three offences of Edom – "gloating" at, "rejoicing" over and "ridiculing" Judah in its calamity. The verbs progress in involvement from an internal attitude to an outward action. Edom did not only gloat and rejoice over Judah's calamity, but he also entered the city gates and *laid hands* on Judah's substances (v. 13). Thus, Edom followed the acts of Judah's enemies of looting. The sins of the Edomites continue to a climax in v. 14 with an attack on Judah's refugees. They stood at the crossroads outside Jerusalem, set roadblocks, captured the fleeing Judahites, and handed them back to the Babylonians. In addition, acting as traitors, they rounded up the Judahites who were still hiding in the city. Thus the offenses of Edom were both passive and active:<sup>59</sup> standing aside when Jerusalem was invaded and looted (v. 11), gloating and rejoicing over Judah's misfortune (v. 12), joining in the looting (v. 13), blocking the flight of fugitives and handing them over to the enemy (v. 14). On such a terrible "day" for Judah, when help and comfort were desperately needed, Edom became "like one of them" (v. 11), an enemy instead of a "brother (v. 10).

There is a progression in this list (vv.12-14). First, there is looking with indifference or pleasure at the suffering of Judah (gloating, rejoicing). This

<sup>55</sup> Bartlett, "Edom and the Fall of Jerusalem," *PEQ* 114 (1982): 21.

<sup>56</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 149.

<sup>57</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 148.

<sup>58</sup> Barton, *Joel*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Simundson, *Hosea*, 247.

leads to mocking and boasting. Next the Edomites enter the city (v.13) and there in the city take another look with malicious pleasure at Judah's suffering (gloat) after which they go around stealing the belongings of the Judahites (looting). Finally, v.14, having done their worst in the city, the Edomites go back outside and stand at the very places the Judahites passed as they tried to escape the Babylonians in order to round up these refugees and hand them over to the Babylonians. It is important to indicate that while the detailed list of crimes ascribed to the Edomites in vv. 8-14 gives or uses an eyewitness report, some scholars argue that this text is primarily a literary text and does not give information on what actually happened.<sup>60</sup>

## 2 The Day of YHWH (vv. 15-21)

### 2a Change of Situation (vv. 15-18)

This section is framed by its references to YHWH as the initiator of word and event –“day of YHWH . . . YHWH has spoken.” The sequence of themes follows reversal of roles juxtaposed in a plain antithesis: destruction and deliverance; survivors and no survivors; possessors and dispossessors; Joseph-Jacob and Esau.

The “Day of YHWH” in v. 15a refers to the day YHWH will bring judgment of the nations. Verse 15b depicts the consequences of Edom's cruelty to his brother. For the author of Obadiah, YHWH rules the world with moral principles. The talion law of tit for tat will be applied to the Edomites: “As you have done, it shall be done to you; your reprisal shall return upon your own head” (v. 15b). Thus, Edom will not go unpunished. Edom will suffer the very cruelty he meted out to his brother. Thus, says Allen, “the traitor will be betrayed in turn, and the unfaithful will discover how bitter is the taste of infidelity.”<sup>61</sup> Obadiah, therefore, reassures Judah that YHWH is still in control.

In v. 16 Edom is presented as the prototype of all the nations. As Edom *drank* in rejoicing at Judah's suffering, so will Edom drink, this time not in rejoicing, but from the cup of God's wrath. As Edom has done so will the nations. Nations will gulp down God's wrath and punishment to an extent that they will be destroyed, *and be as if they had never been*.

In vv. 17-18, the goodness of YHWH in his covenant with Israel will be realised and the Day of YHWH will restore Israel to their initial position, while bringing judgment on Israel's enemies. In v. 17 the contrast conjunction ׀ “but” is used to show that contrary to the nations in v. 16 and to Edom in particular (vv. 1-15), on Mount Zion the oppressor's plan will be thwarted. Instead of refuge (v. 14), there will be deliverance, and it will be holy. The root underly-

<sup>60</sup> Bartlett, “Fall of Jerusalem,” 20-21; Bartlett, *Edom*, 154-55; Robert B. Robinson, “Levels of Naturalization in Obadiah,” *JSOT* 40 (1988): 83, 90-91.

<sup>61</sup> Allen, *Books of Joel*, 157.

ing פְּלִיטָה implies escape from danger and widespread destruction, used, for instance, for fugitives from military disaster (e.g., Gen 14:13; Judg 12:4-5; Obad 14). It is applied most consistently to YHWH’s gracious preservation and purification of a remnant in Israel, particularly after the Fall of Jerusalem (cf. Ezra 9:8-13; Isa 4:2; 10:20; Jer 50:28).<sup>62</sup> The blessing of Mount Zion stands against the heights of Edom’s pride (v. 3).<sup>63</sup> The *house of Jacob* will also occupy her possessions or inheritance, the “promised land.” *Jacob* could represent all Israel or only Judah, with *Joseph* representing the other ten tribes. In either case, all of the tribe, those previously exiled by Assyria and those now taken by Babylon, will be involved in Edom’s judgment. *Fire and flame* (v. 18) represent YHWH’s wrath which is actualised through his people. Edom, Judah’s original opponent in vv. 2-14, is juxtaposed with Israel in the metaphor of stubble, and fire and flame. As Jacob had been devoured, so will Edom be consumed. Edom had tried to eradicate Israelite refugees (v. 14), but while Israel had few survivors, Edom will have *no survivors*. Thus vv. 17-18 serves as the climax of hope for YHWH’s people: their desperate state will be corrected and the benefits of the covenant with YHWH will again be enjoyed. The phrase הַבֵּר יְהוָה, the traditional formula of the prophetic messenger, guarantees the fulfilment of the prophecy.

## 2b Return of the Kingdom (vv. 19-21)

Verses 19 and 20 describe the full extent of the new territorial possessions of the formerly dispossessed (v. 17). Israel will inhabit its former territory as well as that of its enemies, Edom and Phoenicia. Borders will be extended in the north as far as Zarephath and in the south into *the Negev* (v. 19).

Verse 21a corresponds to vv. 19-20, which it summarises with special reference to Edom. It reiterates the theme of conquest, which is expressed in the word שָׁפַט (“govern” or “judge”). The Hebrew word מוֹשְׁעִים (“deliverers”) has similar connotations of military victory (cf. Hab 1:2; 3:13, 18). Verse 21a depicts that proud Mount Esau will now be ruled from Mount Zion, geographically a far less notable mountain. However, theologically there is no higher place than Mount Zion. Thus, as Staton shows, “Israel will once again dominate Edom – politically and theologically.”<sup>64</sup> The phrase וְהָיְתָה לַיהוָה הַמְּלִיכָה in v. 21b shows that the international war against Edom (v.1) will end in the recognition of the kingdom of YHWH. Thus the victory is not merely a nationalistic reawaking but the symbol of divine sovereignty. This affirmation reveals the theological justification of the message of Obadiah. YHWH’s victory

<sup>62</sup> Carl Armerding, “Obadiah,” *EBC* 7: 354.

<sup>63</sup> Michael B. Dick, “A Syntactic Study of the Book of Obadiah,” *Semitics* 9 (1984): 14.

<sup>64</sup> Cecil P. Staton, Jr., “Obadiah,” in *Mercer Commentary on the Old Testament* (ed. Watson E. Mills and Richard F. Wilson; Marcon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2003), 760.

includes the restoration of his chosen people and the judgment of their enemies. As Samuel Pagán indicates, v. 21 makes important theological statements: (1) YHWH will raise up deliverers to fulfil his purpose in history, (2) that victory will be an ultimate triumph over those who oppose the divine will, and (3) victory exemplifies YHWH's rule in history.<sup>65</sup>

## **D IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN ETHNIC GROUPS**

The book of Obadiah is included in the canon of scripture embraced by many Africans. It is important because Africa is filled with many stories of "Edoms" and "Israel/Judah" in both national and interpersonal relationships. The book of Obadiah illumines some important issues for contemporary African ethnic groups to reflect on. It presents a somber criticism of lack of solidarity, it shows God's anger and judgment on perpetrators of ethnic hatred, and it offers a word of hope to victims of ethnic hatred.

### **1 Commitment to Meeting the Needs of Others**

Africans should see the behaviour of the Edomites as an example of the way God responds to the lack of solidarity with commitment to the needy, the excluded, and the persecuted of society. The people of Judah were going through a grave crisis, and the Edomites, rather than sympathising with and responding to the needs of their neighbour, betrayed them in a disgraceful way. African ethnic groups should learn to be committed to the needs of others outside their ethnic group. Seeing other people's needs, the others should react with a sense of responsibility and solidarity. The lack of concrete demonstration of love constitutes an act of betrayal of both God and the people in need.

### **2 God's Wrath and Judgment on Ethnic Hatred**

The book of Obadiah clearly shows that God's wrath and judgment came upon Edom for mistreating a "brother" nation. God exercised authority in punishing Edom to the extent that no survivors were left for her. African ethnic groups need to learn a great lesson from this. God is aware of how we mistreat people of other ethnic groups. God will rise up to punish any ethnic group that mistreats her "brother" ethnic group. As he did to Edom, the tables will turn around to inflict upon those who mistreat others with the very things they meted out to others.

### **3 Hope for Victims of Ethnic Hatred**

The book of Obadiah indicates that God had a better future plan for Israel/Judah. Thus there was hope for Mount Zion and the house of Jacob. God turned the misery of Judah into joy and restored her to God's plan for his people. In the same way, the book of Obadiah carries a message of hope and

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<sup>65</sup> Samuel Pagán, "The Book of Obadiah," *NIB* 7: 456.

restoration to victims of ethnic hatred in Africa. Victims of ethnic hatred should comfort themselves that if a neighbour refuses to show solidarity, God will one day raise deliverers for them to regain possessions lost – land and property. They are to know that the prophet Obadiah offers the promise of a future in God's kingdom for those who suffer under the enormous burden of oppression (vv. 15-21). He joins the chorus of the larger biblical witness in announcing the good news all sufferers long to hear, "the kingdom shall be the LORD's" (v. 21b).

## E CONCLUSION

Obadiah's message was a "word from God" for a particular difficult moment in the history of the people of God, yet a moment that has recurred more than once since these words were spoken. Ethnic hatred has created and continues to create a lot of problems in Africa.

The book of Obadiah declares the terrible consequences for those who participate in cruel and inhuman oppression of neighbours or stand idly by watching the oppression of others. It also promises hope for those who suffer oppression of any kind. The book reminds any group of people who think they are powerful and superior and so mistreat others, that power is not ultimately in their hands but that dominion will belong to God. Such groups consider themselves independent, but they are reminded who has actual control.

This essay has shown the important role that the book of Obadiah plays in Africa. It has clearly demonstrated the relevance of the book in contemporary African society where ethnic fighting has claimed lives and properties. The essay has derived those implications that Obadiah has for African ethnic groups. It teaches that African ethnic groups should see themselves as "brothers" and so should support rather than destroy one another. It has indicated that God disfavors ethnic hatred and rains judgment on perpetrators of ethnic hatred. It has also shown that God is on the side of victims of ethnic hatred. The essay has shown that God is in control over human history and that he is the ultimate power over affairs of human beings and that at his time he will act to bring justice.

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