

Why No Book?

Does anyone here know anything about the Old Testament prophet Obadiah? Anything at all? Apparently not, though that's not too surprising since he's a pretty obscure figure. But what about the prophet Nahum? Know anything about him? When he lived, or where, or what he had to say? Nothing much there, either, it would appear. So how about the prophet Zephaniah, not Zechariah, but Zephaniah? What do you know about him? Not much, it seems.

So tell me, how do these guys, who are not the least bit familiar to us, and about whom most of us seem to know almost nothing, have books of their prophecy in the Bible and John the Baptist does not? I mean, if there's room in the Bible for the Obadiahs, Nahums, and Zephaniahs of the world, why isn't there a book of the prophet John the Baptist in the Bible? It could even be either the last book of the Old Testament, or the first book of the New. He's certainly a much more significant figure than any of those three prophets, indeed a major figure in the history of both Judaism and Christianity. So much so, that there was no one greater than he according to Jesus himself. He's certainly as prominent a messenger of God as any of the so-called minor prophets whose works are preserved in scripture, and arguably as much so even as major prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel though he lived nowhere near as long as they did. So why no book?

Now granted that John was not likely to have committed anything to writing himself. But we know that John had a sizable following and even his own disciples; in fact, we know that some of Jesus' disciples had earlier been disciples of John. So even if John had written down nothing himself, why didn't one of his disciples gather a collection of his sayings to preserve them, just as later others gathered collections of Jesus' sayings which then became the basis for the gospels. Given what little we do know of John's sayings, you'd think they would have been extremely memorable.

So again, why no book? Why is all we have just a few snippets of John's preaching preserved in the gospels that altogether don't amount to much more than a paragraph or two? According to Mark, the whole population of Jerusalem went out to hear John preach and hung on his every word, enough so that many of them were baptized by him. So what did he say that had such a powerful impact on so many people? One would think that something of that would have survived, something more than the little bit that we have.

So what do we know about this man we call John the Baptist, and the Orthodox churches call John the Forerunner? Well, we know that like many of the ancient prophets of Israel before him, and like many of the famous ascetics of the early church, John was a man of the wilderness,

having turned his backs on the comforts of human society. As a man of the wilderness, he dressed the part, wearing only wild animal skins and living on a diet of locusts and wild honey, so little did he think of “civilization.” Apparently, he was quite a spectacle when he preached, since Jesus accused some of going out to hear him just for the show.

And it must have been a show. He seems to have been a very colorful speaker, famously referring to the religious authorities of his day as a “brood of vipers.” He preached, Mark tells us, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, calling all to reject their former ways, and to live a new life producing fruits worthy of that repentance, and do it soon, for the one coming after him would baptize them not just with water but with fire. We also know that he baptized Jesus, and proclaimed him at that time to be that One who was coming, one so much greater than John that he said he wasn’t worthy to untie his sandals.

We also know that later on John was arrested for his criticism of Herod, and that while imprisoned seems to have developed some second thoughts about Jesus on the basis of reports about Jesus’ ministry, second thoughts about Jesus truly being the One. He even sent some of his disciples to question Jesus about his actions, leading to Jesus’ famous retort, “Go tell John what you see and hear: the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and blessed are those who take no offense at me.” Of course, we know that shortly afterward John was put to death by Herod, becoming a martyr for the cause of righteousness. A prophet *and* a martyr! So again, why no book?

I don’t know the answer to that question, or whether it’s even a legitimate question, since I’ve never heard anyone else even raise the question, much less suggest an answer. Still, as important a figure as John the Baptist clearly was, it just seems to me that there ought to be more, more about John than just the little bit that is preserved in the gospels. If that’s so, if there should be more and there’s not, then that suggests the possibility that it might not be an accident. That maybe, just maybe, there was more and for some reason, someone thought it best *not* to preserve it and pass it on. Could that someone have been Jesus himself?

Why would I say that? If what is preserved of John’s preaching in the gospels is genuinely reflective of John’s preaching in general, then it may well be that while Jesus had a great deal of respect for John, and honored all that he had done in preparing the way for Jesus’ own ministry, and while Jesus certainly agreed with John on many things, and in particular, his view of the religious authorities of that day, and while Jesus affirmed John’s preaching on the need for repentance, still there’s reason to believe that Jesus may have thought that John was so focused on condemning the ways of the world and demanding that people change their ways that he never got around to proclaiming the message that was for Jesus the true heart of the gospel, which was not condemnation but salvation, not wrath but rather the unfathomable love of God even for us sinners. John was a great preacher of repentance, calling people to account for their sins, but

he wasn't much on comfort, not even offering much comfort to those who had suffered badly at the hands of this world and its rulers. For Jesus, while there was always a need for repentance, there was a time and a place for that, and it should never obscure the proclamation of God's love and God's desire that everyone be brought into the fellowship of God's people.

It wasn't just that John didn't go far enough, that he only preached half the gospel and just never got around to other half, to the really good news. It was the danger that was posed by John's kind of religion, a kind of religion so focused on condemning what was wrong with the world and punishing those responsible for that, that it actually lost sight of the good news, the good news about the love of God for all people, and the comfort that meant for those who needed to hear that word. It's all well and good to call the scribes and Pharisees of this world a "brood of vipers," but that kind of talk can become intoxicating, and if you're not careful, pretty soon it's not about God at all, it's just about us, and about settling old scores of our own, and seeking vengeance on all our enemies. And it's pretty hard to find the gospel in that.

I may be way off track here, but I think that may have been the problem with John, and why then there's not more about him in the gospels, that for all the good John had done in preparing the way for Jesus and his work—and he did an enormous amount of good—still, his way was not *the way*, and certainly not the truth and the life. That's not just an issue with John the Baptist, either. The same is true of all too many people today who claim to be proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, but who are a lot more like John the Baptist than they are Jesus. People who are so focused on condemning what's wrong with the world, and the obvious failings that have so marred human history, and are so bound and determined to blame someone for that and hold them accountable for all that's wrong in this world that they just never get around to the heart of the gospel, the message of God's love for all people, and God's desire that each and every person be comforted. "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." You won't find a trace of that kind of comfort, that assurance of God's love, in the words of John the Baptist. But you certainly do in Jesus, and that's the gospel truth.

*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
to whom be all glory and honor, now and forever...*