

John (April 8)

Reading John

“What did he mean?” the rabbi questioned. “We sent you to evaluate his teachings and to learn whether he follows the traditions. Will his views lead to an uproar, or can this fellow be contained?”

“This one is different,” his colleague replied. “Everyone flocks to him. His teaching is striking, but he leaves you with many questions. We will hear him again if he comes to the feast.”

The religious leaders in Judea had questioned the ministry of John the Baptist and worried about his influence. But after they heard Jesus’ teaching, they knew they were in for trouble. Jesus taught with great boldness and challenged people’s assumptions in simple language. Yet, many of Jesus’ sayings invite the deepest reflection because they expound the eternal mysteries of the faith. The apostle John focused especially on collecting these remarkable sayings of Jesus.

Author and Date

The author is the apostle John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” He was prominent in the early church but is not mentioned by name in this Gospel – which would be natural if he wrote it but hard to explain otherwise. The author knew Jewish life well, as seen from references to popular Messianic speculations, to the hostility between Jews and Samaritans, and to Jewish customs, such as the duty of circumcision on the eighth day taking precedence over the prohibition of working on the Sabbath. The Gospel of John has many touches that were obviously based on the recollections of an eyewitness – such as the house of Bethany being filled with the fragrance of the broken perfume jar.

In general, two views of the dating of this Gospel have been advocated: the traditional view places it toward the end of the first century, circa AD 85 or later. More recently, some scholars have suggested an earlier date, perhaps as early as the 50s and no later than AD 70.

Purpose and Emphases

Some interpreters have felt that John’s aim was to set forth a version of the Christian message that would appeal to Greek thinkers. Others have seen a desire to supplement the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), to combat some form of heresy, to oppose the continuing followers of John the Baptist, or to achieve a similar goal. But the writer himself states his main purpose clearly: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Unique Characteristics

Whereas Matthew and Luke tend to record Jesus’ parables, John records many difficult sayings of Jesus that appear throughout the Gospel and unify its composition. John often notes the trouble the disciples and the crowds have deciphering Jesus’ intent by recording their questions. Jesus’ sayings are more than traditional proverbs. They are often prophetic or have the character of riddles, demanding deep reflection. Jesus’ many “I am” statements should be included among these enigmatic sayings.

Blessings for Readers

John’s Gospel focuses beautifully on both the promise of everlasting life and the bodily resurrection of those who trust in Jesus. As you study the words of Jesus as recorded by John, take comfort in his many great and precious promises to you. His words are spirit, and they are life! Just as the disciples reflected for years on Jesus’ simple yet profound words, commit his words to heart, consider them with hope, and grow by them. Even now, Jesus – the Word made flesh – is working for your blessings and preparing an eternal home for you.