

The Upper Room Experience

Perspectives of the Four Gospel Writers

“He shall shew you a large upper room furnished: there make ready. And they went, and found as he had said unto them: and they made ready the passover. And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him.”
—Luke 22:12-14

3:16

In the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, are recorded many of the events and circumstances surrounding the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of this one whom God sent. He was the “man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a

THROUGHOUT THE WORD of God, from Genesis to Revelation, we have set before our mental vision the harmonious testimony of God’s loving plan for man’s salvation and ultimate recovery from sin and death. The Scriptures further inform us that the focal point for bringing this plan to completion lies in the fact that God, who “so loved the world,” sent “his only begotten Son” to be man’s Redeemer.—John

ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (I Tim. 2:5,6) It is, therefore, most appropriate that we review on a regular basis various aspects of Jesus’ life, all of which provide rich spiritual food for our growth and development as a “new creature.”—II Cor. 5:17

As those striving to be footstep followers of the Master, we find that one of the most meaningful accounts in the life of Jesus is the record of that which took place in the “upper room” during the evening prior to his crucifixion and death. Luke 22:7-14 describes Jesus’ instructions to the disciples concerning the securing of “a large upper room.” All of the Gospel writers record various portions of the events which took place in the hours to follow, each placing emphasis on certain details that they felt were of particular importance, and as they were directed by God’s Holy Spirit.

All four Gospel accounts make manifest the fact that the immediate purpose for the gathering of Jesus and his twelve specially chosen disciples in the upper room was that they might eat together the Jewish Passover meal. (Matt. 26:19,20; Mark 14:16,17; Luke 22:13-15; John 13:1-4) It was a requirement under the Mosaic Law for all Jews to keep the Passover observance each year. Doing so was to serve as a remembrance of their deliverance out of the bondage of Egypt many centuries earlier. (Exod. 12:14,24-27) Jesus and his twelve disciples were Jews and, therefore, obligated to observe this annual ceremony.

MATTHEW’S TESTIMONY

Matthew was one of the twelve gathered in the upper room with Jesus as they kept the Passover

meal. As he later wrote the account of those hours, he recalled that as they were eating, Jesus spoke up and said, "one of you shall betray me." A discussion then ensued among the disciples as they sat around the table, and many of them asked, "Lord, is it I?" It was then revealed that the betrayer was to be Judas.—Matt. 26:21-25

Following the narrative concerning Judas, Matthew next records that as they continued to eat the Passover meal, Jesus instituted a new ceremony. He took some of the bread which was on the table as part of the meal; he blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." Likewise, Jesus then took some of the drink, the "fruit of the vine;" he blessed it, and gave it to the disciples, inviting them to drink of it. He said that this "cup" represented his blood, "shed for many for the remission of sins."—Matt. 26:26-29

This simple ceremony, described here by Matthew, is what consecrated believers during the Gospel Age have termed the "Memorial Supper." Just as the keeping of the Passover was a remembrance, or memorial, of Israel's deliverance centuries earlier from the bondage of Egypt, so this new observance was to be a remembrance of a greater deliverance. Jesus was to die in less than twenty-four hours. He was to be the "antitypical" Passover "lamb of God," which would take away "the sin of the world," and secure the eventual release of mankind from bondage to "sin and death."—John 1:29; I Cor. 5:7; Rom. 8:2

The Apostle Paul later writes, having been provided a vision from the Lord, concerning Jesus' institution of the Memorial Supper. He says that when Jesus invited his disciples to eat of the broken

bread and drink of the cup—the fruit of the vine—he said to them, “This do in remembrance of me.” Paul continues, stating that by keeping this Memorial, “ye do shew the Lord’s death.”—I Cor. 11:23-26

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BREAD AND CUP

The two symbols, the bread and the cup, represent two aspects of “the Lord’s death” which Paul mentions. The bread, which Jesus said symbolized his body, is a fitting representation of the ransom feature of his death. To be a ransom, or corresponding price, for father Adam, Jesus had to be a human being—made flesh. He also had to be perfect, unblemished, as Adam was, before he sinned. Jesus fulfilled both of these requirements. By laying down voluntarily his perfect life, his humanity, his body “broken” for us, he provided the ransom price needed to release Adam and his posterity from the penalty of sin—death.

God, through Hosea, spoke prophetically of the ransom that would be provided, and which would result in the release of mankind from Adamic death. “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction.” (Hos. 13:14) During his First Advent, Jesus identified himself as the “Son of man,” and as the instrument to be used in bringing to pass the fulfillment of Hosea’s prophecy. He said, “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” Paul later stated that Jesus died as “a ransom for all”—God’s “free gift . . . upon all men.”—Matt. 20:28; I Tim. 2:5,6; Rom. 5:15,16,18; John 3:16

The cup, which Jesus said represented his blood, shed for the remission of sins, aptly denotes the requirement that God's great principle of justice must be satisfied. We are told in the Old Testament that "the life of the flesh is in the blood: . . . for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul." (Lev. 17:11) That is to say, since it is the literal blood which supplies life to man's flesh, it is of utmost value to maintain life. Similarly, blood that is shed by means of a righteous life given up, also has great value, or merit, when used for the purpose of making "atonement" for those to whom it is subsequently imputed.

Jesus was righteous to the extent of actual perfection, even unto death. Thus, the value of his life, represented by his blood which was shed, was fully sufficient to satisfy God's justice, and bring "atonement" to all mankind by means of its imputation on their behalf. Paul said, "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." However, he did not stop there, but continued by saying that those who, in faith, receive the value of Jesus' life imputed on their behalf, are counted as "justified by his blood," and "saved from wrath," which had previously fallen upon all while under Adamic condemnation. Therefore, Paul concludes, "We . . . joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement."—Rom. 5:8,9,11

REMEMBERING ISRAEL'S PASSOVER

When Matthew recorded Jesus' words spoken in the upper room concerning the significance of the symbols of the bread and the cup as a Memorial of his impending death, he perhaps thought back to

the instructions given to Moses concerning the institution of Israel's Passover in Egypt. In that typical arrangement, there were also two primary requirements as to its observance. First, a lamb was selected on the tenth day of their first religious month. It was to "be without blemish, a male of the first year," and on the fourteenth day of the month it was to be killed.—Exod. 12:3-6

The selection of an unblemished male lamb, and its subsequent killing, points forward to Jesus, the antitypical Passover lamb. He, too, was unblemished—"holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." (Heb. 7:26) In addition, the specification that the typical lamb be a "male of the first year" underscores the ransom feature of Jesus' death. The man Jesus was a "partaker of flesh and blood," and "made of a woman." (Heb. 2:14; Gal. 4:4) He was the "Son of man," who came "to give his life a ransom for many," symbolized in the Memorial Supper by the broken bread.—Matt. 20:28

The second important requirement of the typical Passover observance had to do with the blood of the unblemished lamb which had been killed. They were to "take of the blood, and strike it on the two side posts and on the upper door posts of the houses" in which they dwelt. (Exod. 12:6,7) How beautifully this pointed forward to the shed blood of Jesus and its application on behalf of mankind, as signified by the Memorial cup offered to the disciples in the upper room. This, Paul says, is the "redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation [an atonement] through faith in his blood." (Rom. 3:25) The Apostle John adds that Jesus is "the propitiation for our

sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”—I John 2:2

During the typical Passover night, both the slaying of the lamb as well as the application of its blood on behalf of those residing in each house had to take place in order to effect the release of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. In the antitype, Jesus, the perfect, corresponding price for Adam had to be slain, but it was additionally required that the value of that life, represented by his blood, be applied to the “balance scale” of God’s justice, that man’s ultimate deliverance might be ensured. Peter’s words aptly sum up the matter: “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things . . . ; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.”—I Pet. 1:18,19

Matthew concludes his record of the upper room experiences by stating that following Jesus’ institution of the Memorial Supper, “when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the mount of Olives.” (Matt. 26:30) Consecrated believers throughout the world continue to follow this practice at each yearly celebration of the Lord’s Memorial. Following the partaking of the symbolic bread and cup, a hymn is sung, ending the service, and each one departs in quiet meditation to his place of abode.

MARK’S RECORD

Mark, who the Scriptures sometimes refer to as John Mark, was not one of the Lord’s twelve specially chosen disciples and, therefore, was not present in the upper room the evening before Jesus’ death. The account of the upper room experience

recorded in his Gospel is found in chapter 14, verses 16-26. It is virtually identical in content to Matthew's narrative, previously considered. For this reason, it is unnecessary to review Mark's record separately at this time and is supposed by many that Mark received information from Matthew—one of the twelve—as to the events of that evening.

There is also another thought proposed as to the source of Mark's information. Various Bible commentators suggest that Mark may have received details for recording his Gospel from the Apostle Peter, including the activities which took place in the upper room. This thought is based primarily on two Scripture passages. The first is in Acts, chapter 12, in which is found the first mention of Mark in the New Testament. This was on the occasion when Peter was miraculously delivered from prison. (vss. 1-11) Following this miracle, Peter came to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where there was a large gathering of brethren who were praying on his behalf, believing that he was still in prison. (vs. 12) Although the account does not specifically state that Mark was present—only that the gathering was in his mother's house—it is presumed that he was there also. If this was the case, he would have then met Peter for the first time—this perhaps being Mark's first encounter with one of Jesus' apostles.

The second reference in which a connection between Mark and Peter is made is found in Peter's first epistle. The apostle indicates that Mark was present with him, and refers to him lovingly as "my son." (I Pet. 5:13) This term of endearment by Peter

gives rise to the thought that he felt especially close to Mark, and had perhaps spent considerable time with him since their first meeting, recorded in Acts 12. Thus, it is concluded by some that over a period of time Peter, who had witnessed these things firsthand, shared with Mark many of the events associated with the ministry of Jesus, which Mark then penned in his Gospel account.

LUKE'S ACCOUNT

Luke, like Mark, was not one of Jesus' twelve chosen apostles, and was not present in the upper room. Luke, sometimes called Lucas, was a Gentile, and most likely became a follower of Christ sometime after the conversion of Cornelius. (Acts 10) He was the author of both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts. (compare Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-3) It is evident from Acts 1:1 that Luke wrote his Gospel account prior to the Book of Acts, perhaps doing so sometime during the years in which he travelled with Paul. (Col. 4:14; Philemon 24; II Cor. 13:14, *KJV postscript*) He probably wrote the Book of Acts near the end of Paul's life, and perhaps his own, while they were together in Rome.—II Tim. 4:11,22, *KJV postscript*)

In the opening verses of his Gospel, Luke states that his account of Jesus' life and earthly ministry came from numerous sources. He does not name them, saying only that they were "eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word." (Luke 1:1,2) This would of necessity include his record of the upper room events which, if provided to him by "eyewitnesses," would indicate that he received information from one or more of the eleven disciples who were

present on that occasion—the same as was no doubt the case with Mark’s account.

Luke’s testimony of the upper room activities is found in chapter 22, verses 13-38. It includes the same incidents that Matthew and Mark record—the discussion about the one who would betray Jesus, and his institution of the Memorial Supper—although the Luke account switches the order of these. (vss. 17-23) In another difference from Matthew and Mark, Luke records Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s three denials as occurring while they were still in the upper room. (vss. 31-34,39) Matthew and Mark both put this as occurring after they had departed. (Matt. 26:30-35; Mark 14:26-31) These minor differences between Luke’s Gospel and the accounts of Matthew and Mark are not of any special concern. As already noted, Luke received his information from various sources, so it is not surprising that the specific order of events does not match exactly.

ITEMS ONLY IN LUKE’S RECORD

Of greater significance, however, is the fact that Luke records certain things which took place in the upper room that Matthew and Mark do not mention at all. One of these is found in Luke 22:24-30. Here, as Jesus and the disciples sat at the table, Luke states that “there was also a strife among them, [as to] which of them should be accounted the greatest.” (vs. 24) The disciples evidently still believed that their Master was going to set up his kingdom imminently, and restore Israel to the glory it enjoyed centuries earlier under kings David and Solomon. Although Jesus had told them on a number of

previous occasions that he would be departing—even that he would be put to death—they did not comprehend the reality of his words. They were still convinced that he would soon establish his kingdom, and as his closest disciples, they would have the highest places of honor and authority along side of their Messiah and King.

As Jesus responded to the disciples' contention concerning which of them would be the "greatest," he exercised great wisdom. He did not criticize them for misunderstanding the times and seasons associated with the reestablishment of Israel's kingdom. He, in fact, reaffirmed to them that this would indeed come to pass at the proper time and, if faithful, they would have a key role to play in that kingdom. Jesus said, "I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me; That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."—Luke 22:29,30

Jesus, however, saw that beyond the disciples' lack of understanding of the times and seasons of his kingdom, they were not exhibiting proper humility concerning how they were to serve the interests of that kingdom, regardless of when it would be set up. He reminded them that kings and their associated leaders, among fallen men, "exercise lordship over" their subjects, who call them "benefactors"—a title of honor. (vs. 25) With his disciples, Jesus says, this should not be the case, "but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he that is chief, as he that doth serve."—vs. 26

To further emphasize his point concerning the importance of humble service, the Master then gave this illustration, in question form: "Which is

greater, the guest who is seated at a meal or the servant who is waiting on him? Is it not the guest? But I am among you as a servant.” (vs. 27, *Bible in Basic English*) What a powerful lesson this was! They were all seated at the Passover meal table. Jesus was the “servant” who was waiting on them—serving them—and they were the guests. Truly, if their Lord and Master was a servant, they must also become servants if they were to have a share in his kingdom.

“PURSE,” “SCRIP,” AND “SWORD”

Another “upper room” occurrence which is recorded only by Luke is found in verses 35-38. Here Jesus reminded the disciples that earlier in his ministry when he sent them out to “preach the kingdom of God,” he had instructed them to go “without purse, and scrip, and shoes,” and they lacked nothing. (vs. 35; chap. 9:1-3) A “purse” was used for carrying money for personal needs and to purchase food, and a “scrip” was a small bag in which was carried food and other personal items. Now, however, Jesus tells them, “he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip.” Then he adds, “he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one.” (vs. 36) *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon* defines the word translated “sword” as a “knife, used for killing animals and cutting up flesh,” rather than a long sword used as a weapon of battle.

The above instructions of Jesus to his disciples were evidently intended to emphasize the fact that he would soon be leaving their midst. In contrast to his earlier words recorded in chapter 9, they

should henceforth be prepared to provide for their own food and other temporal provisions. The suggestion that they each “buy” a sword—better translated knife—is rather interesting. If they had actually done so, all eleven of the disciples would have had a knife at their disposal later that night when Jesus was arrested. The Master quickly realized that eleven knives in the hands of his disciples—even though intended for use only to hunt food—would not be a wise thing, considering he knew that his time had now come to be turned over to the Jewish and Roman authorities.

Thus, when the disciples said, “Lord, behold, here are two swords. . . . he said unto them, It is enough.” (Luke 22:38) He knew their lack of understanding, and was aware that they might try to defend him by an improper use of these knives. Considering what transpired later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, “two swords” were indeed “enough.” Peter, who evidently had one of the two knives in his possession, attempted to use it to prevent the arrest of Jesus. In doing so, he cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest. Jesus immediately healed the servant, and rebuked Peter, saying, “Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?”—Matt. 26:51-54; John 18:10,11

Following the details of Jesus’ instructions to the disciples concerning the “purse,” “scrip,” and “sword,” Luke concludes his account of the upper room experiences, stating that they “went . . . to

the mount of Olives.” (Luke 22:39) After receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, how the disciples must have realized the special import of the upper room’s final lesson. Then they would understand, and communicate to other consecrated believers, that “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal,” “we wrestle not against flesh and blood,” and our only sword is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”—II Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6:12-17

MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE—CONCLUDING POINTS

As we conclude our consideration of the Matthew, Mark, and Luke accounts of the upper room experience, it is noteworthy to mention two other points pertaining to their Gospel testimony as a whole, especially as compared to the fourth Gospel, written by the Apostle John. Matthew, Mark, and Luke’s record of Jesus’ life and ministry is largely “synoptic” in style. That is, they each present a synopsis of his life, including brief accounts and details of many different events. They are also quite narrative in format, recording events in a mostly sequential order. John’s style is much different, which we will consider more fully in Part 2 of this article.

The dating of the first three Gospels’ authorship is not known precisely. Generally, however, it is believed that they were written significantly earlier than John’s Gospel. Many Bible commentators place their writing in a range of years from approximately AD 40 to 65, and John’s Gospel from AD 95 to 100. The specific order of the writing of Matthew, Mark, and Luke is much debated, with various scenarios suggested by historians. Whatever the order might have been, it is probable that all three were com-

pleted sometime prior to AD 70, when Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed. This conclusion is based on the fact that Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record Jesus' prediction of this impending destruction. (Matt. 24:1,2; Mark 13:1,2; Luke 21:5,6,20-24) Yet, none of the three writers make reference in their Gospel accounts to the fulfillment of that prediction. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that they had finished their writing before the destruction took place, else one or more would surely have made mention of such a significant event.

In Part 2 of this article, which will appear in next month's issue, we will consider the testimony of the upper room experience as provided in John's Gospel. His account provides a strikingly different perspective than that of Matthew, Mark, or Luke—one which we believe is of significant importance to the consecrated child of God. Indeed, the many lessons we can derive from all four Gospels are a reminder to us of the words of Paul: "All scripture . . . given by inspiration of God, . . . is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."—II Tim. 3:16,17 ■