

# Preparing for

By Argile A. Smith, Jr.

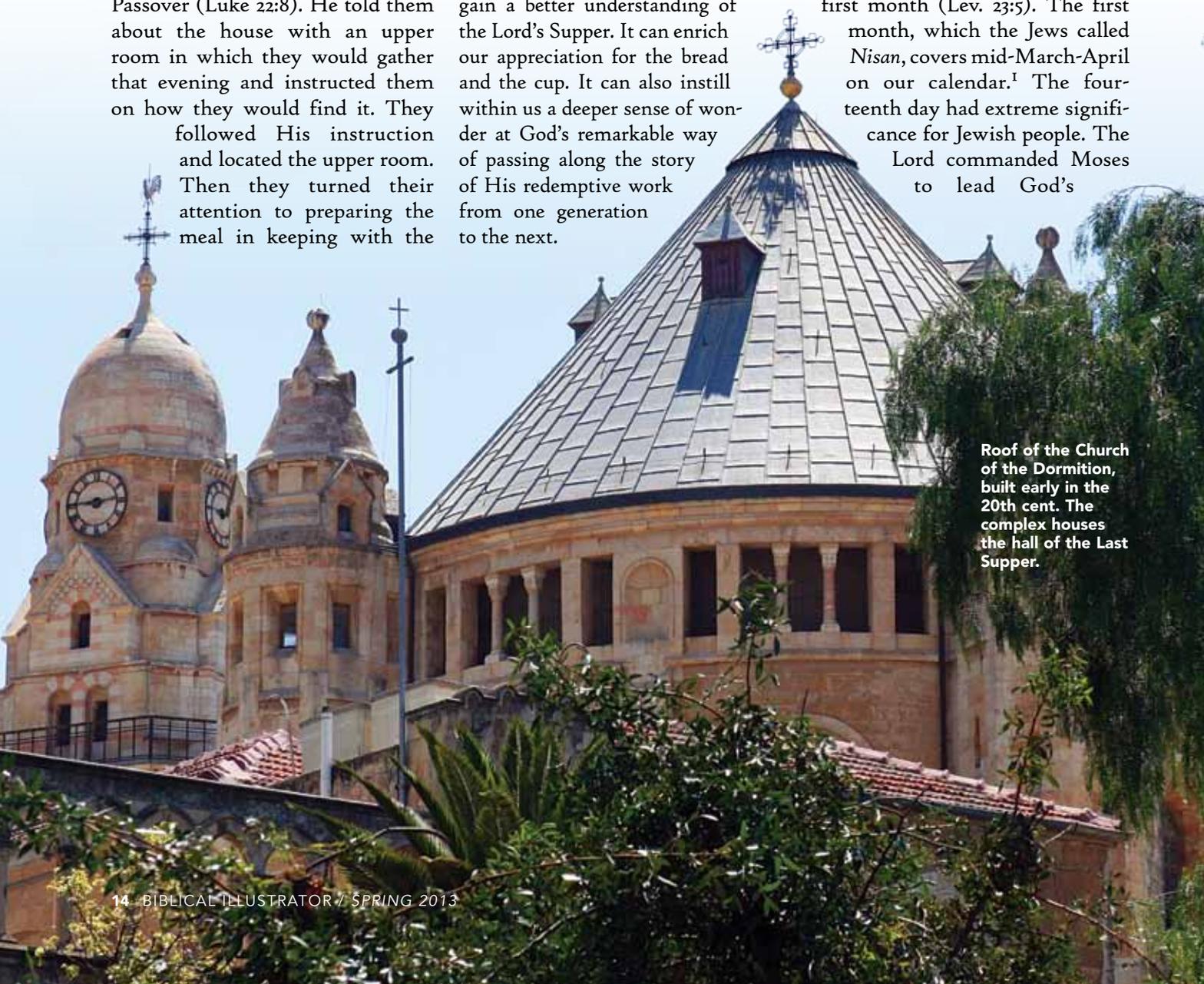
**O**N DAY BEFORE HIS crucifixion, Jesus instructed Peter and John to go into Jerusalem and prepare for Passover (Luke 22:8). He told them about the house with an upper room in which they would gather that evening and instructed them on how they would find it. They followed His instruction and located the upper room. Then they turned their attention to preparing the meal in keeping with the

customs of Jewish people in the first century.

What were the customs associated with preparing for Passover in Jesus' day? Of course, the answer to that important question can help us to gain a better understanding of the Lord's Supper. It can enrich our appreciation for the bread and the cup. It can also instill within us a deeper sense of wonder at God's remarkable way of passing along the story of His redemptive work from one generation to the next.

## Preparing the Place

In Jesus' day, Jewish people celebrated Passover according to the Lord's instruction in the Old Testament. That's why they ate the Passover meal on the fourteenth day of the first month (Lev. 23:5). The first month, which the Jews called *Nisan*, covers mid-March-April on our calendar.<sup>1</sup> The fourteenth day had extreme significance for Jewish people. The Lord commanded Moses to lead God's



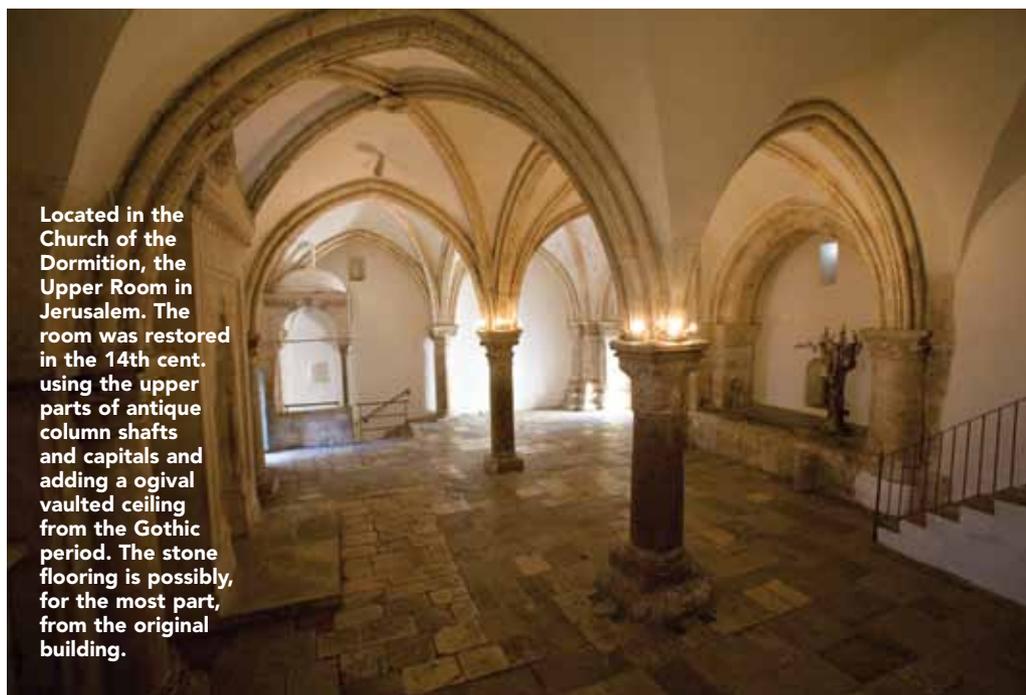
Roof of the Church of the Dormition, built early in the 20th cent. The complex houses the hall of the Last Supper.

# UPPER

people to celebrate the first Passover meal on that exact day (Ex. 12:6).

The name of the meal forged a powerful connection between the people of Israel and the night when the Lord passed over His people in Egypt and spared the firstborn males in their houses (v. 29). In order to help His people remember what He had done to deliver Israel from Egypt, the Lord commanded His people to observe Passover each year. He also ordered them to eat unleavened bread for seven days after Passover, which He referred to as the Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv. 14-20).

At the time of their exodus from Egypt, the people of Israel observed Passover in their homes (v. 7). Once Solomon constructed the temple, however, Jerusalem became the central location for Passover.<sup>2</sup> Instead of a household observance, Passover became a pilgrimage festival. By the time of Jesus' ministry, Jewish people from everywhere made their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover and the Week of Unleavened Bread.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, bulging crowds squeezed into Jerusalem every year for the celebration. Many historians have speculated that up to 200,000 Israelites made the pilgrimage to the holy city each year for Passover. However, one ancient historian estimated that as many as 2.7 million Jewish people streamed into Jerusalem for the festival. This estimate did not include the large



Located in the Church of the Dormition, the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The room was restored in the 14th cent. using the upper parts of antique column shafts and capitals and adding a ogival vaulted ceiling from the Gothic period. The stone flooring is possibly, for the most part, from the original building.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/68/39)

number of other visitors to Jerusalem during the festival—Jewish people who were ceremonially unclean and Gentiles.<sup>4</sup>

Imagine the difficulty associated with trying to find a house or a room in which one could observe Passover. Extended families used every bit of available space when gathering for the meal. Accordingly, the upper room of a house would have provided Jesus and His disciples the space they needed for the Passover meal.

Jerusalem continued to be the focal point for Passover for almost four decades after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The Romans

destroyed the city and demolished the temple in A.D. 70. With the temple torn down, Jewish people no longer celebrated Passover in Jerusalem. Instead, they returned to the model of the first Passover and observed the celebration in their homes.

## Preparing the Food

Once the disciples secured the room in Jerusalem for Passover, they had to handle preparations for the meal itself. The most important details included making sure the lamb had been slaughtered properly and roasted. They also gave attention to preparing the other dishes associated with the meal.<sup>5</sup>

The lamb served as the centerpiece of Passover. Israelite families who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem would have to purchase their lamb by the tenth day of the first month, four days before Passover. The lamb had to be unblemished and not more than one year old.

In addition to securing the lamb, families worked to remove all of the leaven from the house, a task to be completed on the night before the meal itself. The father or other head of the family would lead in the search and removal of leaven. Early in the morning of the day of

Passover, the leaven had to be taken away and burned.

Later that day, starting about 3:00 in the afternoon and continuing until dusk, fathers or other family leaders would take the family's lamb to the temple. Under the supervision of the priests, the family representative would slaughter the lamb and catch the blood in a basin. The priest then tossed the blood at the base of the altar. Then the family representative would skin the lamb and remove the fat and kidneys so they could be placed on the altar and burned. At that point he would wrap the lamb in the skin, place it over his shoulder, and carry it to the place where the family would share the meal together. There, the lamb would be roasted outside over an open fire until it was ready to eat.

Preparation also included attention to other details. Items such as jars of water, bitter herbs, unleavened bread, a fruit-and-nut paste, and a raw vegetable dipped in tart dressing had to be gathered and prepared. Also, wine had to be secured. In addition, the room had to be arranged with floor cushions so everyone could recline at the table.

Timing was critical in the preparation of the Passover meal. The roasted lamb and all of the items had to be prepared by 6:00 p.m. That's when the family would recline at the table and the meal would begin.<sup>6</sup>

### The Story of Redemption

Passover was much more than a meal consumed by a family during a festival. It was an opportunity to remember the story of God's redemption. Each prepared item played a significant role in helping God's people to remember what He had done for them. For instance, the Passover lamb reminded them of the faith of their ancestors, who painted their doorposts with the blood of sacrificial lambs, thus sparing them the visit of the death angel. The bitter herbs helped them to remember the bitterness of their slavery in Egypt, and the unleavened bread brought to mind their hasty departure from Egypt. The nut-and-fruit paste helped them to recollect the clay their ancestors used to make bricks for Pharaoh in Egypt, and the cups of wine reminded them of God's promises in Exodus 6:6-8.

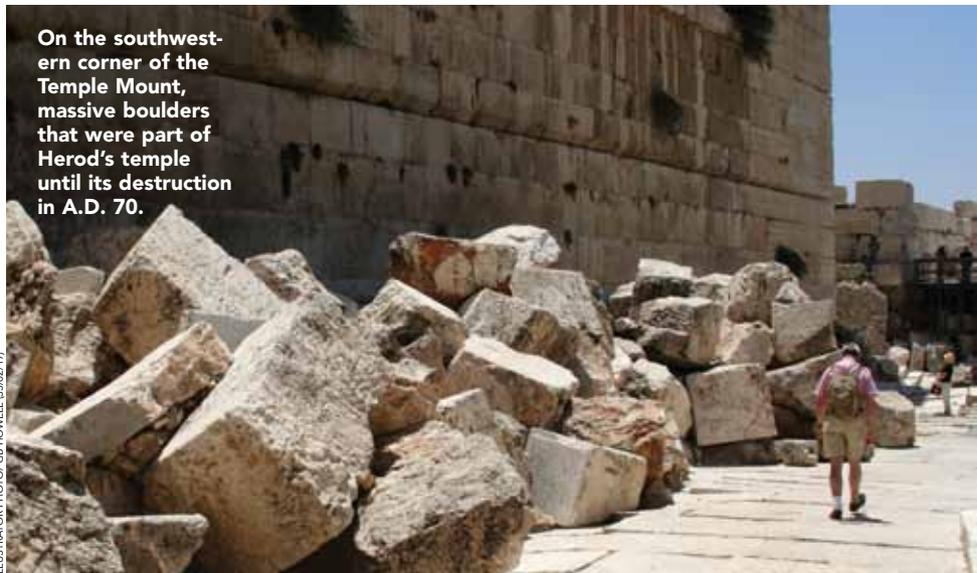
#### THE PROPHET'S CUP

Reserved for a Passover celebration, a gold-plated cup for the prophet Elijah; dated to the mid-1800s A.D. Jews expect Elijah to return at Passover and to announce the coming of the Messiah: "Look, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome Day of the LORD comes" (Mal. 4:5, HCSB).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/GB HOWELL/NORTH CAROLINA MUSEUM OF ART/ RALEIGH (66/0560)

On the southwestern corner of the Temple Mount, massive boulders that were part of Herod's temple until its destruction in A.D. 70.



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Beginning with this photo and continuing clockwise: Freshly slaughtered beef and lamb hanging in a meat shop in the old section of Jerusalem.

Horseradish root, which is one of the bitter herbs of Passover.

Worshipers dip a raw vegetable, typically parsley, into dressing before eating.

Wine is a regular part of the Passover meal.

Unleavened bread.



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InterVarsity Press, 1993), 248.

4. Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews* 6.9.3 in *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 749.

5. Robert Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 538.

6. Wilson, "Passover," 677; Keener, *Bible Background Commentary*, 249.

7. Stein, *Luke*, 540.

At a pivotal juncture in the long meal, the father or other family leader would begin to reflect on the night of Passover. Someone at the table, usually the youngest son, would be prepared to ask about the significance of that night. The leader would reply by retelling the story of the exodus of God's people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Preparing for Passover in Jesus' day required Jewish people to attend

to a number of critical details. All of these assorted details blended together well to retell the story of God's redemptive plan for His people. **B**

1. Simon J. DeVries, "Calendars" in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 222.

2. Marvin R. Wilson, "Passover" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 676-77.

3. Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL:

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