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Misogyny or playful banter? **Eli Abt** untangles the meanings behind the images portrayed in a new facsimile of a remarkable medieval Haggadah

I have vivid recollections of one particular Limmud session at Warwick University in December 2012.

PowerPoint had broken down in a crowded and expectant room, but the presenter was sitting unfazed on the floor chatting with those around him while waiting patiently for repairs.

When the Limmud technical team finally admitted IT defeat, he stood up and proceeded to hold the rapt attention of his audience for a full hour's encyclopaedic and witty exposition on the nature of Jewish art without notes and not a single illustrative image. Needless to say, after that tour de force there was standing room only at all his other sessions.

Marc Michael Epstein, Religion and Visual Culture Chair at Vassar College, has since become well known for his erudite, beautifully conceived, lavishly illustrated and elegantly written books on the medieval Haggadah read on Seder night at Passover and other Hebrew illuminated manuscripts of the time.

To be clear, that description encompasses documents prepared on vellum, written in an expert hand by a sofer or scribe, and sumptuously decorated with images in often rare and costly colours as well as real gold by the artists, both Jewish and non-Jewish, who laboured in the workshops of Europe 700 years ago on this appealing art form.

Epstein has succeeded, arguably more than any other scholar, in not only giving this aspect of Jewish creativity its well-deserved place of importance in wider contemporary academic study, but presenting it to the world at large in all its fascinating diversity. His *Skies of Parchment/Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts* is the definitive work on the subject.

Epstein has now edited and collaborated with other scholars on a magnificent facsimile edition published by Thames & Hudson of the British Library's Brother Haggadah. It's so-called because of its relationship with the equally celebrated Rylands Haggadah in Manchester University's John Rylands Library. Sadly, the publisher's handsome 1988 facsimile edition of this manuscript is now out of print.

Scholars agree that both works were probably produced by the same early 14th-century Barcelona workshop, in all likelihood for Jewish courtier patrons at the

Crown of Aragon who had the ample means to afford them.

Further light is thrown on the Brother's provenance by an intriguing contribution from New York scholar Eliezer Laine, who traces that Haggadah's connections with his own eminent Shealtiel family, hence its other name: the Shealtiel Haggadah. The Shealtiels claim descent from members of the last Royal House of Judah exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar II in 586 BCE.

As pointed out by Epstein, the Brother preceded the Rylands and is actually the 'mother' in this duo of Haggadot. He shows in a fascinating analysis how the triumphalist iconography of the earlier Brother, revelling in every Egyptian misfortune described in the Exodus account, was toned down in its Rylands counterpart, reflecting either differing views of the story, or responding to later outside influences.

The Brother's vibrant and richly coloured images – such as Pharaoh and his cavalry (see right page) – hark back to the intensity of Byzantine art. They are clearly striking in relation to the more nuanced Rylands versions of the same subjects, which are more akin to the French illuminations fashionable then.

One of my own favourite Brother pages has always been folio 18a, headed "Maror Zeh" ("This is the bitter herb"), our reminder of the bitterness of Egyptian enslavement, which Epstein's commentary sadly deals with all too briefly.

Its centre piece, similar to that in the Rylands, is a gigantic green plant held by two men. But what is it? It doesn't look like the traditional horseradish or romaine lettuce used at the Seder table, nor does it appear to be the Talmud's endive or dandelion, nor even the Sephardi green onion or parsley. It does, however, look suspiciously like an artichoke.

The Arabic ardhi shawki delicacy hailing from medieval Spain would certainly have been familiar to Catalonian Jews. However, at first sight it's far removed from any bitter herb.

In fact, the bitterness probably lies not in the familiar fleshy plant itself, but in the large "choke" of florets sprouting at the top that become more inedible with age.

It's these florets the woman in the panel under it (see below) appears to be presenting in a goblet to her husband while he points his finger at her in what appears to be a misogynistic gesture. Is he suggesting she's the bitter herb in his life?

What's more, the gesture is repeated a century later in two other beautifully illustrated Haggadot: Joel ben Simeon's Washington in the Library of Congress and the Israel Museum's Rothschild Miscellany. Interestingly, Epstein wonders aloud in his Brother commentary whether what appears at first sight to amount to sexism

might not be the husband's more subversive invitation to his wife to taste the bitter herb before he does.

Either way let's not recoil in horror from this startling image because appearances deceive. The Israel Museum's Floersheim Haggadah of 1502 has the wife pointing at her husband, and other Ashkenazi Haggadot show them pointing at each other. The serious side of the seder celebration apart, let's not forget it's a home event

featuring family banter such as the time-honoured negotiations for returning the hidden Afikoman matzah to the table.

Let's also remember the darker context. The late Professor Yom Tov Assis showed brilliantly in his book *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry* that royal preferment did not always succeed in protecting Jews from unrelenting Franciscan and Dominican-led attacks, such as the killings and imprisonments that occurred in 1367.

That life-affirming books such as the Brother Haggadah could emerge from such difficult circumstances speaks volumes for the steadfastness and creativity of Catalonian communities. ■



"Is the man suggesting his wife is the bitter herb in his life?"

Architect and musician Eli Abt comments on the Jewish arts. eli@abtarchplan.co.uk. **The Brother Haggadah: A Medieval Sephardi Masterpiece in Facsimile**, contributors Marc Michael Epstein, Raphael Loewe, Jeremy Schonfield, Eliezer Laine and Ilana Tahan. Thames & Hudson, £75.



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