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MARC MICHAEL EPSTEIN, *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. xi, 324; 151 color figures. \$65. ISBN: 9780300156669. doi:10.1017/S0038713413002091

The study of Hebrew manuscripts has advanced rapidly over the past two decades, a period in which sustained scholarship on fundamental questions of dating, regional variation, production, and patronage laid the groundwork for more interpretive, interdisciplinary, and intellectually adventurous thinking about the role and significance of these manuscripts within their medieval communities. And nowhere have these new lines of inquiry been more exciting than in the study of medieval haggadot, the private, often lavishly decorated manuscripts for Passover whose production boomed during the fourteenth century following the emergence of the haggadah as a book independent from the comprehensive prayer book known as the *maḥzor*. The unusually rich decoration of many medieval haggadot, which could include extensive prefatory narrative cycles as well as symbolic and narrative images throughout the text, lends itself especially well to the study of how individual manuscript design both was shaped by, and contributed to, the manuscripts' active use in their equally individualized households and communities.

Marc Michael Epstein brings these questions to bear in his engagingly written, imaginative, and potentially transformative study, which examines how four medieval haggadot, one produced in Germany and the other three in Iberia, were designed to engage the reader and viewer in the performance of the Passover seder by facilitating the active remembering and retelling of the holiday's central metanarrative, the Exodus from Egypt. In this sense, Epstein argues, they display an originality and artistic agency too often overlooked in the study of medieval Jewish haggadah decoration, in which the traditional pursuit of visual and textual models has obscured recognition of the active and deeply thoughtful role such imagery could play in the performance of the Passover seder and the articulation of Jewish identity within this context.

To get at these books' performative role requires more than a little imagination, for as with most medieval books, relatively little is known about their individual production, date, or early ownership and use. Epstein freely acknowledges, and indeed embraces, the uncertainty left by these historical gaps: rather than limiting his argumentation to what the scholarship actually knows—or thinks it knows—he adopts a self-described method of “conscientious speculation” (8) that draws on his considerable knowledge of the manuscripts' cultural and theological background and his unusually close examination of how their imagery “works” in its settings. Key to this work, he suggests, is a general respect for the autonomy and intentionality of the manuscript's “authorship”—that conglomerate of patron, scribe, artist, and perhaps other advisers—as well as the recognition of the “midrashic mentalité” (12) that would have been habitual among its users, both of which could trigger multiple and changing understandings of the imagery in each successive performance of the seder.

In truth, this approach is only a little more daring than the analysis most medievalist art historians undertake when faced with similarly fragmentary evidence; Epstein is simply more frank about it, and his boldness is well balanced by careful attention to those facts that can be gleaned from the manuscripts and very close, subtle appraisal of the visual evidence within them. The result is a lively, inspiring, and indeed quite well grounded invitation to consider how these manuscripts aimed to engage the imagination of a medieval Passover celebrant who is charged, above all, to “view himself as if he had come out of Egypt” (1).

The Medieval Haggadah is structured essentially as a trio of case studies, which examine four haggadot from the early to mid-fourteenth century. This period coincides not only with the birth of the haggadah as illustrated book, but also with an increasing general engagement with the visual in Jewish culture and religious life throughout western Europe. The decision to consider works from both Ashkenazic and Sephardic traditions within this single investigative frame is unusual: many scholars would have seen the cultural frameworks of these manuscripts as too different from each other to facilitate such a synthetic study. In doing so, Epstein shares in the healthy recent tendency in Jewish studies to challenge this perceived cultural divide. In this case, it pays off immediately in fostering recognition of the broad ritual and interpretive practices that linked all the haggadot as agents of the collective memory, performance, and self-reflection that inhere in the Passover text and seder.

The book's first section examines how Jewish self-identity is constructed in the Birds' Head Haggadah (Jerusalem, Israel Museum, MS 180/57), a work attributed to south Germany ca. 1300 and thus the earliest known independent illuminated haggadah. Arguably it is also the most puzzling, its bustling bas-de-page and marginal scenes populated by human figures with birdlike or sometimes blank faces who enact the performance of the seder and certain scenes from the Exodus narrative. While both types of figures traditionally have been explained as linked to halakic laws against human representation,

Epstein argues for a hierarchical reading in which the human figures with avian heads, reminiscent of another medieval hybrid, the griffin, serve to represent Jews of all kinds, while blank faces are used for non-Jewish figures like Egyptian soldiers. This dichotomy would thus endow the Jewish figures with the griffin's traditional implications of swiftness and nobility, while the literal and ignoble erasure of the non-Jewish figures' faces both signals their alterity and diminishes their power. Epstein finds more subtle visual hierarchies among the Jewish figures themselves, noting how the deployment of hats, beards, and other markers (here understood in a positive light as signs of admirable and pious Jews) divides patriarchs like Moses and Aaron from Jewish turncoats like Datan and Aviram. An especially nuanced example of this is the depiction of Joseph enslaved in Egypt as a hatless, beardless figure, a compromised Jew whose status might well have resonated among fourteenth-century German Jews who faced similar tensions between assimilation and identity while living as subject peoples in an alien land.

Three further chapters in this section explore how questions of identity shaped the larger organization of the haggadah: they interpret the manuscripts' puzzlingly a-sequential narrative imagery as clustered intentionally around specific themes of typology, redemption, and protest, as well as presenting multiple aspects of the Passover observance in meta-historical overlap, from the historical Passover in Egypt, through its biblical and contemporary manifestations, to the Passover to be celebrated upon the Jews' anticipated return to the Promised Land. Especially intriguing here is the argument that a series of images depicting the preparation and distribution of the matzah constituted a challenge to a very contemporary concern, the centrality of the Eucharist in Christian culture, and a rebuttal of Christian accusations of Jewish hostility toward it. This reading, like many in the manuscripts studied here, may not have been self-evident to every reader of the manuscript, since it must have required substantial awareness of Christian theological tenets, Christian beliefs about Jews, and the Christian visual images to which Epstein discerns a response in several haggadah illustrations. Yet for those for whom it was evident, it seems a plausible response that speaks to the potential of Passover imagery to focus and articulate—sometimes quite subversively—the most pressing concerns of its community.

Identity is central also to the somewhat shorter section on the Golden Haggadah (London, British Library, Add. MS 27210), a work attributed to Catalunya circa 1320 and often, though perhaps not as often as is implied here, presented as highly dependent on Christian stylistic models and perhaps produced by Christian artists. Epstein challenges this tradition, arguing quite rightly that the question of whether the producer of the images was personally Christian or Jewish matters far less than the strongly independent and indisputably Jewish worldview presented on its pages. Building on more recent work on the manuscript by Katrin Kogman-Appel and others, he finds its worldview to share the complexity, even the “hypertextuality” (150) of the Passover text itself, and indeed of the images in other haggadot like the Birds' Head Haggadah.

Epstein traces this complexity not just in the many midrashic elements that emerge in the book's prefatory images from Genesis and Exodus, but in the nuanced interrelationships among images on the page and among motifs across pages, which invite a nonlinear reading paralleling the nonlinear structure of the Passover seder. These seem conducive to the search for broad themes, such as divine justice and redemption, that might be drawn from it in a midrashic mentalité. One such theme is the unusual preponderance of women, which exceeds both the number required in the manuscript and that found in other haggadah imagery, in a manner that heightens the narrative's emphasis on themes of loss, suffering, and redemption, especially of children, in ways that demand thinking beyond the haggadah text and at times beyond the biblical narrative itself. The recognition of this dimension of the manuscript is exciting in the potential it offers to illuminate the

significance of women and children in both actual and conceptualized Jewish communities, perhaps less so as a foundation for Epstein's self-admittedly speculative, and perhaps slightly too automatic, suggestion that a haggadah that emphasizes "feminine" themes might point to a female patron. This aside, the encouragement that these chapters offer to dig into the multiple valences embedded in this haggadah's glittering narratives is very welcome indeed.

The book's shortest and final case study examines the close relationship between the Rylands Haggadah (Manchester, John Rylands Library, MS Heb. 6) and its so-called Brother, the British Library's Or. 1404, taking direct aim at the recension theory that for so long clouded understanding of medieval manuscripts generally and still lingers in the study of the haggadot. Accepting established scholarship that positions Or. 1404, the Brother Haggadah, as the earlier of the two, Epstein scrutinizes the subtle differences between copy and model as evidence of the second artist's active transformation of the imagery to present what is, in effect, a distinctly different version of the Passover metanarrative. Changes in the number and gender of participants in certain scenes, in the details of confrontations between the Israelites and Egyptians, or in the complexity and drama of certain scenes (most evident in the intensified violence of the ten plagues) suggest a contrast between a contemplative, homiletic Or. 1404 and a more violent and dramatic Rylands manuscript. While many of the individual iconographic differences noted here have been observed at least in passing by other scholars, none seems to have stopped to ponder what these differences could have meant either to those who produced the manuscripts or to those who viewed and used them. Epstein's proposal to pause and consider these changes as deliberate, meaningful expressions of a particular understanding of the Passover narrative, while perhaps the most subjective phase in his campaign of "conscientious speculation" (8), takes the very risks that are needed to pursue the deliberate, individualized agency of these manuscripts in the enactment of Passover.

Standing almost as an epilogue to the three case studies is a final chapter titled "Iconography in Dialogue," which addresses more directly the question of Jewish motifs that seem to be borrowed from Christian visual culture. Acknowledging the many instances in which such borrowings seem incontrovertible—for example, pietà-like depictions of grieving mothers with their children—Epstein seeks to understand the goals and means that underlay these transactions. His conclusion, that the adoption of these motifs draws semiotic force from its knowing and strategic recasting of "Christian" iconography for a Jewish cause, at times assumes a subtler knowledge of both Jewish and Christian exegesis and imagery on the part of the manuscripts' producers than may have been the case. Yet the assumption it aims to correct—that such motifs were simply thrown into the picture because Jewish art had nothing of its own to offer—is surely far less accurate.

As a total work, *The Medieval Haggadah* opens a breathtaking window into the creativity, complexity, and dynamism of medieval haggadot and stakes a powerful claim for their agency in both the enactment of Passover and the expression of specifically Jewish self-identity. While this argument draws at times on a depth of biblical scholarship reminiscent of the medieval rabbis' own, its main lines are made accessible by the book's very clear structure and lively, conversational tone (including several charming and entirely germane references to Epstein's study of the manuscripts with his children). It is supported to great advantage also by the book's lavish scale and illustration: produced in an 8½" × 11" format, it is illustrated entirely in color, with handsome gatherings of up to a dozen full-page illustrations from the manuscripts in question before each section and a generous salting of details and comparative illustrations throughout the text. Particularly opportune is the juxtaposition of related full-page images from the Rylands and Brother

haggadot, which facilitates the close formal comparisons so critical to Epstein's arguments in this section.

The Medieval Haggadah is a success on many levels. Its close, thoughtful readings of the individual manuscripts within an assertively Jewish frame argue persuasively, if at times quite daringly, for the dynamic, intentional way in which the decoration of medieval haggadot supported one of the most elemental of Jewish rituals; its juxtaposition of Ashkenazic and Sephardic examples reveals their metacultural features without obscuring what is unique to each manuscript and its individual context; and Epstein's close, contextually nuanced, and imaginative reading offers a model from which manuscript studies as a field can only benefit. Above all, this book stakes a claim for the originality and inventiveness of Jewish visual culture as *sui generis* and, in doing so, maps out a bold trajectory for future study in the field.

PAMELA A. PATTON, Southern Methodist University