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Marc Michael Epstein. *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative and Religious Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2011. Pp. 344; 151 color illus.

Professor Marc Michael Epstein's book *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative and Religious Imagination* is the profoundly interesting result of many years of assiduous scholarly research and considerable intellectual commitment. It is an in-depth, compelling exploration of four stunningly illuminated Passover liturgies that were created in fourteenth-century Europe: namely, the Birds' Head Haggadah from Askenaz (Germany), the earliest-known illuminated Haggadah in existence; and three Haggadot from Spain—the Golden, the Rylands, and its sibling, the so-called Brother Haggadah. This hardback monograph contains three major studies which are accompanied by a very generous number of life-size, high-quality colored images and plates. An ample introduction, copious notes, an index, and a select bibliography complete the volume. As one begins reading through it, gradually immersing oneself in its contents, one soon realizes that this is not a book for the fainthearted, but is a challenging and thought-provoking piece of writing. It is impossible to do full justice to a book of such scope and drive in a short review. This appraisal will therefore focus on some of the most interesting and salient aspects of the work.

In his well-structured introduction, which is fundamental to the understanding of the main body of the volume, Epstein outlines the topic and research methods of his work, noting alongside these some significant developments in the study of Jewish-Christian relations and medieval manuscript illumination over the past two decades. One learns that the analytical methods employed in the present work "owe much" (6) to the postmodern approaches to the history of art which have evolved since the 1980s, such as those found in the works of Richard Brilliant, Michael Camille, Suzanne Lewis, and Joseph Koerner, to name just a few. Moreover, the book skips over the recension and lost models theories that prevailed in the pre-1980 period, drawing instead on new studies of Jewish visual culture and on conclusions from the author's earlier work *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature*.

Epstein's novel methodology is reflected in the three key premises which underpin his research and to which he adheres unfailingly throughout the book: (a) an assumption that the sequence of images in the four Haggadot investigated is "coherent and intentional," and a conscious attempt to understand the authorship's reasoning and perception in cases where the iconography appears to be flawed or misplaced; (b) the creation of "possible constellations" (8) of likely and viable meanings rather than clear-cut, definite solutions to iconographic problems; and

(c) awareness of the significance of medieval midrashic mentality when trying to read the meaning of the iconography.

Referring to advances in the field of Jewish visual culture, Epstein observes that recent research has demonstrated that far from being slaves to the Christian culture around them and mere imitators of the general mores and trends, medieval Jews were active contributors to the Christian civilization, which they "co-owned" (4). They developed their own visual art which reflected their identity, beliefs, and values, and their own outlook on the burning issues of the day. He additionally points out that the study of medieval manuscript illumination has taken a new turn as researchers have increasingly centered their attention on the patronage, production, and reception of medieval manuscripts against the background of contemporary intellectual developments.

But how does the patronage-production-reception process apply to the Haggadot under consideration here? Epstein keenly elucidates. Each Haggadah represents a "unique intellectual microcontext" (6) created by the relationship between the written text, the continuous narrative of the Israelite slaves' Exodus from Egypt, and the images therein. This uniqueness is the outcome of a distinct "authorship": namely, the collaboration between Jewish patrons who funded and conceived the manuscripts (at times aided by rabbinic advisers) and the artists and designers (Jews or Christians) who were engaged to execute the commission. Each authorship had a particular "agenda" (i.e., a set of ideological, theological, philosophical, political, and social ideas and concepts concerning the Jews' relationship with God, with their own coreligionists, and with their Christian neighbors), which it conveyed through its interpretations of the scriptural narratives.

The actual course of the manuscript's production involved several layers of "intention and perception" (7). Accordingly, at the planning stage the authorship first selected narrative aspects that best fitted in with the concepts it wished to put across, and then decided on how to express these ideas visually. The designers and artists transmitted, via the iconography they created, their own interpretation of the assignment. Finally, the imagery and its inherent, distinct messages were received and reinterpreted by diverse audiences over the course of time. The audiences have included owners and users, researchers who studied the manuscripts, and individuals who had the opportunity to view them when exhibited.

In his insightful study of the Birds' Head Haggadah Epstein sheds new light on the illustrations and addresses a series of iconographic issues that earlier scholars have either misconstrued or completely overlooked. He additionally considers the sociopolitical and theological climate at the time of the manuscript's creation and its likely impact on authorship and iconography. Finally he gauges from the texts and glosses—incorporated initially and added in subsequently—how the manuscript was received by its authorship and later audiences.

Probably created in Mainz around 1300 and presently held in the Israel Museum's collection, this is the earliest manuscript in which, strikingly, most of the human figures—male, female, old and young—are depicted with the heads of birds and having animal ears. In his search for meaningful answers to this most unusual and enigmatic feature, Epstein firstly surveys the state of research on facial distortion and zoocephalism (the representation of humans with animal heads) in medieval Jewish illumination, concurrently disputing the validity of theories proposed by scholars such as Bezalel Narkiss, Heinrich Strauss, and Ruth Melinkoff. For instance, the latter argued that animal-headed imagery in Jewish manuscripts was created by "anti-semitic" Christian illuminators, and that the patrons, being accustomed to the anti-Jewish images around them, accepted these offensive pictures without objection. Epstein asserts that with regard to the Birds' Head Haggadah such claims are utterly futile and inappropriate as nothing is known about the authorship's intent and the original commission, and also because those claims imply that the manuscript's creators were meek, simple, and easy to fool. These scholars used "comparative methodologies" (50) based on evidence obtained from parallels with other cultures and influences. In contrast, Epstein's own way of dealing with the zoocephalic aspects in the Birds' Head Haggadah is to probe the rich internal evidence found in its illustrations. This approach allows him to draw comparisons between the bird-headed figures and the featureless human heads found in the manuscript, a possibility which he claims has hitherto remained unexplored.

Epstein tackles this new line of enquiry systematically and persuasively. He builds up interlinked clusters of plausible explanations taking into account possible authorial choices and, in the process, manages to demonstrate that far from being naive and unrefined, the creators of this Haggadah were imaginative and sophisticated. The following is merely a brief "montage" of his comprehensive and intelligent analysis.

Drawing on various literary sources, Epstein contends that avoiding the portrayal of the human face was most likely a conscious decision by the patrons of this Haggadah in response to halakhic prohibitions in contemporary responsa. As a result, human faces in the manuscript have either been replaced with birds' heads or have had their facial features be completely erased. The figures endowed with heads of birds seem to represent the Jews, those with blank faces the Egyptians (i.e., the non-Jews). Angels, celestial bodies, and planets equally have featureless human heads, but why? And what might have determined the type of bird the creators chose? A hybrid of lion, eagle, and human, the griffin appears to have been the creature of preference. According to rabbinic sources, images with "leonine, aquiline and human components" (56) were used in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle and the Temple, since they represented three creatures of the divine chariot described in the prophet Ezekiel's vision. Griffins might hence symbolize

the closeness of the Jewish people to the divine. It is also possible that the creators' choice hides a political message, with the eagle symbolizing the Jews' allegiance to the German emperor, while the lion symbolized the Jews' association with the tribe of Judah—and hence a mark of their identity. Or maybe the griffins simply stand for the Jews of Mainz whom the writer of an elegy commemorating the martyrs of the First Crusade described as "swifter than eagles and stronger than lions" (57). Epstein's view is that "the use of the griffins' heads emphasizes that it is ultimately not a physical distinction that makes a Jew a Jew. The qualities represented by the griffins' heads are spiritual and national rather than individual" (60).

While the griffin-headed Jews are connected with holiness and possess noble attributes, it is highly likely that by portraying the non-Jews with blank faces, the authorship wished to illustrate their utter powerlessness. Medieval rabbinic sources emphasized the powerlessness of angels and celestial bodies, and their total submission to God's will in order to prevent Jews from worshipping them. The technique of disempowering celestial bodies by destroying their faces was apparently recommended in rabbinic literature. Painting the celestial bodies featureless could have been the authorship's reaction to these stipulations. In rabbinic sources non-Jews are known as idol worshippers, and the celestial bodies as objects of their idolatry. Psalm 115:8 and the Haggadah text specify that: "May all who trust in . . . [idolatrous powers] become like them" (61). Accordingly, the blanking out of facial features could be interpreted as the authorship's wish to disable the idolaters and the objects of their worship and immobilize their powers.

The medieval Jewish hat known in Latin as *pileus cornutus* (horned hat) (65), which some of the griffin-headed protagonists are seen wearing in the manuscript, is the subject of the next stage of this compelling investigation. Epstein shows how the use of this pictorial element generated an extraordinary socioreligious hierarchy that differentiated between the male Jews portrayed in the Birds' Head Haggadah. But more than that, he considers this to be a significant example of the reconceptualization of a borrowed iconographic motif. Despite being regarded as a sign of infamy in the majority culture, the Jewish hat motif was consciously adopted by the authorship and transformed into an explicit symbol of distinction and redemption. Epstein remarks that the phenomenon of adoption and adaptation would have been most difficult to realize when iconography was borrowed in order to articulate ideas and issues central to the dispute between Judaism and Christianity, adding that "adoption and adaptation . . . characterizes the major dilemma of Jewish visual culture in the Middle Ages" (73).

It is in his painstaking examination of the narrative sequence of the illustrations that Epstein gives the manuscript's creators the strongest vote of confidence yet: "I believe the arrangement of the illustrations represents the singular genius of its particular authorship. I find the relationship the authorship had with the

narrative motifs it selected to be the most compelling aspect of the manuscript's construction, regardless of their ultimate origin" (77). He firmly refutes the notion of a linear and literal iconography which latter-day researchers took for granted, leading them to allege that some of the illustrations in the manuscript were out of place or copied mistakenly. His view is that far from being problematic, the iconography was seemingly misunderstood by these scholars.

Epstein explores the historical events, Christian doctrine, and eucharistic polemics around 1300 in Ashkenaz and Mainz in order determine how these factors might have shaped the authorship's agenda and, ultimately, its decisions regarding the iconography. Seen from the creators' perspective, he observes that the rich and complex pictorial configuration imparts a whole range of socio-religious and theological attitudes and sentiments. These include, for example, the relationships between Jews and their own coreligionists and those between Jews and their gentile neighbors, the halalkhically imposed distinction between the Jewish and Christian realms, and the Jews' fear and anxiety when faced with recurring violence following accusations of ritual murder, blood libel, and host desecrations. The imaginative organization of the illustrations additionally exposes the Jewish people's longing for the reassurance of God's eternal love and salvation, and of his divine intervention in times of danger and hardship. Epstein's perceptive examination of the Five Passovers and the Paschal sacrifice images exposes what he considers to be the pervading theme in the Birds' Head Haggadah: the perpetual historic relevance and redemptive power of the Passover seder, which surpasses that of the Eucharist. Two extremely significant conclusions emerge from this section of the book, namely that the iconography is in itself commentary and that it is not subservient to the scriptural narrative.

The final part of the study deals with the themes of subversion and revenge in the Birds' Head Haggadah and examines how the manuscript was received by some of its audiences. Epstein suggests that "the very configuration of the manuscript . . . is subversive" (115) and that although the iconography is not explicitly seditious (there are no plague scenes for instance), it nevertheless contains subtle dreams of revenge, as, for example, in the scene showing Pharaoh as the Holy Roman emperor and his entourage drowning in the Sea of Reeds. Conversely, the desire for retribution is articulated overtly in a rare and controversial midrashic passage that was included in the manuscript at the time of its creation. In it the angels present themselves as substitutes for the children of Israel, invoking God to allow them to defend his honor and themselves and to inflict punishment on Egypt. God refuses, asserting that he and he alone would wreak vengeance on the oppressor. Epstein posits that the exchange between the angels and God would have struck a chord with medieval Jews whose own secret yearning was to avenge themselves on their Christian persecutors. Their dream is nevertheless shattered

when God intervenes. God stands in for the rabbinic authority, who in all likelihood would have urged self-control and restraint in all circumstances.

Epstein fittingly observes that the marginal glosses that firmly ban the recitation of the midrash ("We do not say this" and "Until here an error" [117]) indicate that although the authorship accepted it, a later owner found it objectionable. The fact that this startling passage, which had clearly caused offence to someone in the past, has to this day remained intact testifies that not all former audiences found it outrageous.

Copied and illuminated in Catalonia between 1320 and 1330, and now a treasured possession of the British Library, the elegantly wrought Golden Haggadah forms the subject of Epstein's second study. The manuscript contains fourteen consecutive pages of splendid miniatures depicting episodes from the books of Genesis and Exodus. The style of illumination employed is invariably high gothic. Epstein's rekindled interest in this timeless masterpiece stems largely from what he regards as unconvincing assumptions and assertions pertaining to its illuminations. The previous generation of art historians enthused excessively about the resemblance of this Haggadah to contemporary Christian royal manuscripts, and claimed persistently that the magnificence and superior quality of its exquisite illuminations could only be the work of Christian artists, thus ruling out any possible Jewish involvement in the planning and execution of the miniatures. Due to apparent similarities with contemporary Christian iconography, some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that the manuscript as a whole was shaped by conventions in the Christian visual culture. While more recent studies have attributed the use of midrashic elements in the Golden Haggadah's iconography to a learned Jewish authorship, Epstein argues that until now there have been no attempts to actually interpret what these elements meant to the manuscript's creators and audiences. The latter therefore constitutes one of the principal goals of his investigation.

Because nothing is known about the manuscript's original commission, any evidence about the authorship, its intent, and its agenda must be gleaned from the rich pictorial matter. In order to examine it, Epstein devises an original, groundbreaking method which enables him to read the images in various directions—vertically, horizontally, and chiasmatically (i.e., diagonally), across an open bifolium and even across an entire sequence of illustrations. Whereas the conventional progression of the biblical images (which follows the scriptural narrative) offers only their literal meanings, chiasmatic readings can impart the moral, political, and theological ideas the authorship wished to emphasize.

A telling example of chiasmatic reading interpretation in the Golden Haggadah is provided when three scenes—which in the iconographic configuration are distant from each other—are visually brought together. The scenes referred to are: the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers, that showing King Nimrod throwing Abraham in the fiery furnace, and finally the one featuring Pharaoh casting the Hebrew

infants into the Nile. According to Epstein, these three episodes are connected by a common theme: the attempted annihilation of newborns and young people. Epstein points out that rabbinic sources do not explicitly link the vicious act of Joseph's brothers with the evil deeds of Nimrod and Pharaoh; however, he sees in this visual connection "an independent exegetical move on the part of the authorship of the Golden Haggadah" (162). The moral message the authorship wished to convey here is that senseless hatred between brothers can be as destructive as maltreatment at the hands of callous enemies.

Epstein's thorough examination of the plague images in the Golden Haggadah is particularly significant because the dramatic encounters taking place between the Israelites and the Egyptians afford "a glimpse of, if not the 'objective reality,' at least the subjective attitude of the authorship toward the lived, contemporary relationship between Jews and gentiles at the time and place of the manuscript's composition" (171). In his view the plague scenes invariably convey the authorship's sense of dignity, reserve, and diplomatic correctness, especially when depicting Pharaoh's demise and the Egyptians' suffering. Emotions are played down and minimized. No vengeful or mocking sentiments nor moral judgments are expressed here. The Israelites' deliverance is muted and static. Both Israelites and Egyptians are portrayed as elegant, well-mannered, and well-dressed aristocrats, interacting as equals at court. The overall impression is one of emotional detachment, formality, and mutual respect.

The last chapter of this study is undoubtedly the most engaging, and that for two main reasons. Firstly, because it tackles the importance of women in the Golden Haggadah, and secondly, because it addresses issues of provenance. Cognizant of the research work undertaken on the manuscript to date, Epstein detects a vital facet "that has gone unremarked" (178): namely, the large number of images of women in this Haggadah—forty-six to be more exact, more than in any other of the extant Spanish Haggadot. In his opinion, scholarship has failed to pay due attention to the prominence of women and their potential significance in this luxuriant and complex medieval manuscript, and he is keen to redress this oversight. His assumption is that authorial choices determined the number of female depictions that the Golden Haggadah was meant to contain. To find out what may have been the grounds for the authorship's decision, Epstein embarks on a systematic analysis of each female character appearing in it, in the course of which he sets up a highly imaginative typology of necessary, corroborative, and incidental figures. His analysis yields significant observations concerning the authorship's intent, the following being the most notable:

1. The decision to include Genesis would have been a deliberate choice so as to include more women.
2. Peripheral or incidental female figures were added to the manuscript because of the creators' desire to involve and thus emphasize women.
3. There is a visual emphasis on women with children.

4. Females being rescued from death and women grieving at the loss of children are also highlighted.

Epstein's erudite clarification of the dedication inscription added to the manuscript in 1602, on the occasion of Rosa Gallico's wedding to Elia Rava, is a refreshing contribution to research, more so because it brings into focus the possible provenance of the Golden Haggadah. The likelihood is that it may have been illuminated for a woman who was a remote ancestor of Rosa Gallico, and that it was passed down the generations through the female line of the family. Relying on the internal iconographic evidence and more specifically on the images portraying women mourning a child's death, Epstein ventures into speculating that the manuscript was originally created for a woman who had suffered the death of a child. And given the triple appearance of the biblical Rachel in the illuminations, her name could have been Rachel. Although these are conjectures, they are perfectly sensible and credible, and aid our understanding of female patronage in the Middle Ages. What in Epstein's own words is "undeniable" (192) is that the Golden Haggadah was once the property of a woman.

The third and final study in Epstein's book focuses on the Rylands and Brother Haggadot, both of which originated in Catalonia between 1330 and 1340.

The former is presently held in the John Rylands Library in Manchester, UK, the latter forms part of the British Library collection. Early scholars have treated these two Haggadot as siblings on account of their similar iconography, allegedly based on a lost model. Of late, a number of researchers have persuasively claimed that the Brother Haggadah in fact served as a model for the Rylands Haggadah, emphasizing also the likeness in their iconography.

In his perceptive analysis Epstein seeks to demonstrate that contrary to long-held beliefs, the similarities between the two haggadot are in effect fewer than the differences. He is also eager to find out whether, as argued by some researchers, the paintings in these works are indeed devoid of any exegetical content. In his customary methodical manner Epstein sets to evaluate the iconography relating to the Exodus narrative in each manuscript, then draws parallels between them.

As expected, his findings point to major iconographical differences that are mainly due to authorial approaches and choices. Although mindful of textual accuracy, each authorship seemingly has an underlying agenda. When portraying crowd scenes, the authorship of the Brother Haggadah (henceforth the model manuscript) is keen on symbolic numeration of the People of Israel. For example, the laboring Israelites are depicted in groups of twelve in order to highlight the fact that they are descendants of the Twelve Tribes of Israel and therefore engaged in covenantal continuity. This evidently constitutes an exegetical assertion on the part of its authorship. The creators of the Rylands Haggadah are, on the other hand, unconcerned with such details, but they are keen to ensure strict adherence to the biblical text.

Epstein observes that in order to highlight an important ideological point each authorship "violates its own conventions regarding literalism and symbolism on certain occasions" (243). A pertinent example of this approach is when the labeller of the model manuscript, who normally uses the term *bnei Yisra'el* (the People of Israel) when captioning the miniatures, chooses to label the image depicting the Exodus from Egypt with a verse containing the term *ha-'am* (the people). Epstein contends that the verse "So the people [ha-'am] took their dough before it is leavened" (Exodus 12:34) was chosen in favor of "Now the Israelites (bnei Yisra'el) went up armed" (Exodus 13:18) because of its non-vengeful message (243). Conversely, the Rylands Haggadah's creators opted for the latter verse to label the Exodus illustration precisely because it is militaristic.

Epstein's analytical skills are best illustrated in the sections dealing with the plague scenes, the downfall of the Egyptians, and the Israelites' salvation. The differences here are blatant. The Brother Haggadah displays restraint, downplays the Egyptians' suffering, and leaves out most of the instances showing the Israelites' deliverance. The Rylands Haggdah diverges from its model revealing a vengeful, aggressive, and mocking stance.

The final chapter of this study is a masterly exploration of the iconography of Moses's flight into Egypt as depicted in the two Haggadot and also in the Golden Haggadah. The main point of the argument is to find out how and to what end motifs clearly based in the New Testament have penetrated Jewish illumination, and to demonstrate how the creators of Jewish manuscripts appropriated iconographic elements from the surrounding culture to make statements about monumental Jewish events.

Epstein's book is an outstanding and valuable contribution to the study of Jewish visual culture and will undoubtedly be of enormous interest to researchers and students of the subject. An inquisitive scholar and incisive analyst, Epstein leaves no stone unturned in his tireless search for plausible explanations to details in Jewish iconography that have been long regarded as mere emulations of similar elements in Christian visual art, and to pictorial aspects that have been overlooked. His knowledge of midrashic and rabbinic sources is impressive and he is well acquainted with the existing literature on Jewish manuscript art which he uses wisely to build up his own arguments. His research methodology is fresh and inspiring, his style didactic and friendly. Epstein's charming vignettes on the astute comments made by his children in connection with the Haggadot are particularly memorable.

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