

Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other

Visual Representation and
Jewish-Christian Dynamics in
the Middle Ages and
Early Modern Period

Edited by
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ANOTHER FLIGHT INTO EGYPT: CONFLUENCE,
COINCIDENCE, THE CROSS-CULTURAL DIALECTICS
OF MESSIANISM AND ICONOGRAPHIC APPROPRIATION
IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Marc Michael Epstein

In creating his learned, engaging and often disturbing *Ficciones*, Jorge Luis Borges explored dilemmas, both existential and exegetical, through the eyes and actions of his protagonists. Pierre Menard, the eponymous hero of "Pierre Menard, the Author of *Don Quixote*," (*Ficciones*, 1962), sets out, like the Knight himself, upon a quest. In Menard's case, the object of the quest is to produce a work which would, in all its details, "coincide—word for word and line for line—" with Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Yet this work of 'coincidence' must be neither a copy, nor a transcription, nor, obviously, a new or different version of the original novel. After giving account of the protagonist's considerable labors, the tale ends with a passage from Menard printed alongside the same passage from Cervantes. Needless to say, the two passages "coincide word for word and line for line." Borges, acting as literary critic, comments that although the two passages² are verbally identical, Menard's version is, "almost infinitely richer." This is more than playful cleverness on Borges' part. He shows us how cunning language can be as it is used and reused in different contexts. What one assumed were the exact same words take on different meanings in the presence of new and different friends and neighbors.

It is easy to see how Borges' paradox participates in the constellation of issues raised by Benjamin's inquiry into "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction," or by the art of Cindy Sherman and Sherrie Levine. But because we are used to such examples emerging from the rather rarefied world of critical theory and conceptual art, we often overlook a primary example of 'coincidence' in a more prosaic context. A coincidence no less striking than that depicted by Borges occurs each time one uses the terms 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament,' when one implies the synonymy of the Hebrew Scriptures with the 'Old Testament,' or when one describes the Hebrew Scriptures as the shared heritage of Jews and Christians.

It is, in fact, commonplace to assume that Jews and Christians share the 'Old Testament,' that they have 'the same' Genesis 'the same' Exodus, 'the same' Isaiah. But it should be obvious to any astute critic that this assumption is marred at best by the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures appear as the Old Testament minimally in tertiary translation. Furthermore, the rearrangement of the books in the canon is the result of unsubtle theological and political intent. The early Christian intellectual community in the Church rearranged the threefold division of the whole of the Hebrew Bible from Torah, Prophets and Writings (Torah, Neviim, Ketuvim = *TaNaKh*) to Torah, Writings and Prophets (OT), in order to advance the new message of the Church. As a result of this switch in the order of the divisions of the *TaNaKh*, the *vade mecum* of the Hebrew Scriptures, Cyrus' stirring and hopeful declaration in the final verses of the book of Chronicles—that the Jewish exiles in Babylonia might, after long exile, return to their land and rebuild their Temple—is literally buried beneath a mountain of text. It is no longer the poignant, evocative harbinger of ultimate redemption that it was for Jews. It loses its place as the crowning moment of homecoming in the Jewish odyssey of exile and return since Abraham was told to leave his country and his homeland. The rousing last words of the bible for the Jews are the following:

Thus said Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord God of heaven given me; and he has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!

These words, which served as the rallying cry for Jewish exiles throughout the centuries, are completely muffled and lost somewhere in the middle of what now has become the 'Old Testament.' Relegated to languish among the 'historical books,' Chronicles, from first to last verse, becomes, to the popular Christian mind, a part of the Old Testament rivaling only the 'begats' of Genesis for the soporific quality of its utterly forgettable narratives.

Since the Prophets now end the Old Testament, the optimistic and positive words of Cyrus are replaced with Malachi's threat of a curse:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord; And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse.

This also serves as the entrée into the typological connection of Elijah with John the Baptist in Matthew, a reading which is the *locus classicus* of what Paul Van Buren has described as the concerted effort by Christians to “read other people’s mail” as if it was their own.¹

Still, even if the reordering of the books engenders a divergence between the character and message of the original Hebrew Scriptures and their reworking as the ‘Old Testament,’ one might argue that the actual words of the text as appropriated by Christians in the Old Testament are identical with those in the Jewish original. This is a fallacy. Whenever *TaNakh* is reproduced as Old Testament relative to the New Testament of the Gospels, it loses its autonomy and is transformed into a book of preliminary dramas that can only be fully understood, and prophetic promises that can only be fulfilled in the Christian community and in the life of the Christian savior.

For instance, everyone who is literate in Western culture (or at least everyone who has heard Handel’s *Messiah*), knows to whom the famous verse in Isaiah (7:14) refers: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and she shall call his name Emmanuel.” Its future-tense reference to an unspecified virgin conceiving make this a ‘prophecy’ (for most Christians), that the son to be born must be inevitably be Jesus—synonymous, as everyone who has ever listened to a Christmas carol knows—with Emmanuel (see Matthew 1:23).

But the author of Isaiah had not heard Handel, he had not listened to Christmas carols. In fact, he was immersed in a context that is all too easily forgotten, particularly after the verse was ‘cut and pasted’ into Matthew’s gospel as a prophecy or prediction of the advent of Jesus. Here is the verse as it appears in the Hebrew Bible, the *TaNakh*: “Look, the young woman is with child and about to give birth to a son. Let her name him Immanu-el (‘God-with-us’).” This message is given as a sign to Ahaz, the reigning King of Judah that he should not be afraid of a military coalition between Syria and Northern Israel that threatens him and his fellow Judaeans. The king’s attention is directed to his pregnant wife, and he is told that before his as yet unborn child “knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,” the land before whose two kings he is in dread will be deserted (7:16). If the King’s wife is now pregnant, and one assumes that a child achieves the age of reason at around five or so, (though your mileage may vary), the prophet is telling

¹ Van Buren (1990).

the king that it is not too long before his enemies will be vanquished. It may be longer than he might have hoped, but he certainly shouldn't despair. Isaiah is doing what prophets in the Hebrew bible are wont to do, not so much predicting some as yet unfulfilled future as holding forth a message of hope in a specific historical context.²

But in spite of this watertight contextuality, Isaiah's words of comfort, as they appeared in most Old Testament versions until very recently, and still appear in the Revised Standard Version, make it absolutely 'clear' that the prophecy refers to none other than Jesus. The post-facto construction of this verse, based on the typological use in Matthew 1:23, prepares us for the 'fact' that Jesus is its subject. It seems to trouble no one that the name to be given the child, 'Emmanuel', is not the name 'Jesus', even in the original Hebrew, and that the following verses refer to two kings who have nothing to do with the story of Jesus. By reading the Jewish prophets as if their message was predictive rather than exhortative, the gospel writers invent—and the earliest Christian thinkers advance—the Christological ideas which become a fixture of Western culture, and thus almost self-evident to us. Virtually no one who has grown up in a society where the version of the Hebrew Scriptures is the Old Testament and not the *TaNakh* can read this passage in Isaiah without making the association with Jesus. We are totally predisposed, against history, nature and logic, to read this verse as connected with Jesus because of our cultural context. The Christian reading has become *the* reading.

Matthew quotes the Isaiah verse, with some minor textual variations, in connection with the dream of Joseph, the husband of Mary, who is puzzled by the pregnancy of his betrothed. He is told that she has conceived by the Holy Spirit, and will bear a son named Jesus: "behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel" (1:23.). The passage in Isaiah, repeated almost verbatim in Matthew, is read out of its original, autonomous context, and becomes secondary to the prediction of Jesus' birth—as a promise in relation to fulfillment. How did this happen? Well, translation was part of the problem: The Hebrew word for 'young

² In general, the Hebrew prophets describe some deplorable deficiency in the God-consciousness or religious practice of the Israelites, usually an apparently hypocritical attention to ritual at the expense of justice, castigate them for their behavior, and then promise that if the behavior continues, God will punish the Israelites, but if they reformulate their priorities, then they will experience untold blessings. The classic example is Isaiah 1.

woman,' *almah*, was translated as if it read *betulah*—'virgin', by the earliest Christian translators, perpetuating and strengthening the typological associations of this verse, making it seem to point directly to Mary, the miraculous virgin who conceives. And the tense of the phrase is a teaser—if it were expressed in the past tense, one could say that the woman in question was once a virgin, but then she bore a son. The future tense makes it sound as if she continues to be a virgin after her impregnation, and we are helped along by Christian doctrine to that conclusion.

Thus, when Isaiah 7:14 is read in the context of *TaNakh*, the connection with Jesus is inconceivable. The young woman and the son are characters closely tied with the situation of King Ahaz and his political difficulties. The Christian association with Jesus makes no sense at all. When Isaiah 7:14 is read in the context of the 'Old Testament,' however, the connection with Jesus is inescapable.

Moses' Return to Egypt—Another Flight into Egypt?

Just as it is tempting to look at the Old Testament and assume that it is identical with the Hebrew Scriptures, it is very easy to look at medieval art and assume that because there are so many apparent similarities, both in terms of style or iconography, among given motifs in Jewish and Christian culture, that Jewish iconography needs to be 'read' in the same way as Christian iconography. Just as we are inured to the Christian reading of scriptural motifs as *the* reading, we tend to think in terms of that reading when we approach Jewish art. But medieval Jewish art necessarily differs from Christian art as much as Isaiah 7:14 differs between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Old Testament, having been created, if not by Jewish artists, certainly for a Jewish market and for a Jewish intellectual and theological context vastly different from (and more often than not at odds with) the context of Christian culture. Just as Matthew appropriates Isaiah and twists him to the purposes of the nascent Christian community, medieval Jewish art appropriates (or more accurately re-appropriates) iconography from Christian culture and reconfigures it—either in the placement of images, the way in which they are juxtaposed, or the subtle variants they contain. That configuration can simply be a re-reading of the motif back into a Jewish context, or it can serve to actively oppose and subvert the Christian *topos* it adopts.

Here is an illumination, which should seem, at first glance, recognizable to anyone who has studied medieval art.³ (Fig. 1) The iconography seems to conform to the standard motif of what art historians and New Testament scholars call *The Holy Family's Flight Into Egypt*: a man leading a donkey onto which he has loaded his young family. The narrative of *The Holy Family's Flight Into Egypt* is found in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel. Herod, having learned from astrologers that a child is to be born who will be the promised Messiah of the Jews, is determined to hunt down Mary's child and destroy him. Joseph is instructed by a messenger of the Lord to take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until God gives him instructions. After Herod's death, a heavenly messenger again appears in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, telling him to get ready, take the child and his mother, and return to the land of Israel; for, "those who were seeking the child's life are dead."⁴ In the standard iconography, Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus flee Bethlehem for Egypt.

Our illumination seems to have originated in Catalonia, during a period of transition from Northern French to Italianate artistic influence, probably around 1320.⁵ But even a cursory glance will indicate that although it bears some superficial similarities to the iconography of the Flight into Egypt,—that turning-point in the life of Jesus—the subject of our illustration is, in fact, another flight into Egypt, a flight which is less well-represented in the history of art, yet is definitely a turning point in the life of Moses. Moses, having fled Egypt after killing an Egyptian, makes his home in Midian. Appearing as an Egyptian, he meets and marries the daughter of a priest of that place. After a few years—the couple having been blessed with two sons—Moses receives the Divine message that "all the men who sought to kill you are dead." Exodus 4:20 continues: "So Moses took his wife and his sons, mounted them on the ass, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the rod of God with him." Obviously, it is this flight into Egypt in the Hebrew Scriptures which provides a typological point of departure and even parts of the 'script' for the account of the New Testament.

³ Golden Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1320 BL Add 27210 f. 10v, b.

⁴ Matthew 2:13–21.

⁵ For the dating and contextualization of the manuscript, I am indebted to Narkiss (1997) although, as it will become apparent, I dispute the author's reasons for asserting the probability that the manuscript was illuminated by Christian artists.

So, yes, this is a medieval illumination. But it is a medieval Jewish one, from a Hebrew manuscript, the so-called Golden Haggadah, now housed in the British Library. Here, on fol. 10v, is a beardless Moses, bearing a spear, leading a donkey bearing Zipporah, his wife, a shawl pulled up over her head, and carrying her two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. He is greeted by his bearded brother Aaron at the left. Narkiss has claimed that "This rendering resembles the traditional iconography of the Flight into Egypt with Mary carrying Christ on a donkey led by Christ's step-brother, the youth James, and accompanied by the bearded Joseph."⁶ However, he offers no examples of illuminations featuring James. This inclusion of Jesus' half-brother is only occasional, rather than common as Narkiss implies ("the traditional iconography").⁷

One of the great lessons of the historiography of Hebrew manuscript illumination in the latter part of this century has been that in light of the pervasive division of labor in manuscript production, we cannot blithely assume that because the language of a Jewish manuscript is Hebrew, it was illuminated by a Jew. This caveat is an extremely important lesson in avoiding ungrounded assumptions. But it raises the question of how we determine if the artists were Jews or Christians and, in this context, assumptions are cast about with abandon.

For several decades Bezalel Narkiss has argued that, in the instance of Sephardic illuminated manuscripts, while the scribes were clearly Jews, the illuminators might well have been Christian. Yet, when one investigates Narkiss' own reasons for this assertion, it turns out that his construction of the illuminator's Christianity is not based on any particular documentary evidence (there is none, *pro* or *con*), but on the fact that, in the case of our manuscript "the high quality of the illuminations of the Golden Haggadah and their stylistic resemblance to royal books of the period, . . . , would imply that the Haggadah was illuminated by a secular Christian craftsman."⁸

On the surface, this assumption is understandable. In a Haggadah in which haloed angels (fol. 10v a) and a Pharaoh bedecked in the

⁶ Narkiss (1997) 57.

⁷ A survey of examples in the Princeton Index of Christian Art reveals only a handful during the period in which contain this detail. While, for instance, James appears in the depiction of the Flight into Egypt in Oxford Ms. Gough Liturg. 2 f. 17, a late 12th century English psalter, he appears neither in Nicholas of Verdun's Klosterneuberg Altar of 1181, nor in the Biblia Pauperum of 1320-1350 (Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts, f. 3 r) which frame it chronologically.

⁸ Narkiss (1997) 66-7.

trappings of a medieval Spanish monarch (fol. 11r, c, for example) compete for our attention with realistic scenes of Pessah preparation in medieval Italianate Spanish interiors, (fol. 15r, d) (Fig. 2)—is it really possible to speak of an indigenously Jewish image? Aren't all these images merely adopted from the art of the majority culture?

But in making this assumption, Narkiss presents us with a problem, which he does not address explicitly, but to which we need to apply ourselves. If this manuscript was produced by a Christian artist, the very fact that this is medieval *Jewish* art is most definitely called into question: why should the iconography necessarily have any peculiarly *Jewish* significance? After all, the Christian artist might simply have illuminated the manuscript in conformity with general stylistic and iconographic convention. Indeed, as Ruth Mellinkoff has recently argued in connection with the animal-headed and otherwise distorted figures in 13th and 14th-century Ashkenazi Hebrew manuscripts, a Christian artist may well have even inserted anti-Jewish motifs into the iconography; according to her, such "antisemitic hate signs", in spite of their blatancy, might have completely eluded the Jewish patrons, accustomed as they were to looking without seeing.⁹ I take issue with this theory, which makes medieval Jews out to be as blind as the Christians alleged them to be.

But I cannot fault Mellinkoff's argument without addressing the foundation upon which it builds, namely, the arguments Narkiss's school has advanced for decades. Walking in the footsteps of Narkiss, historians of Jewish art have tended to label Hebrew manuscripts with unknown illuminators as the work of non-Jews on an aesthetic basis with no documentary evidence for such claims. Such assumptions challenge the very possibility of Jewish art.

The truth is, that in absence of specific documentary evidence of Christian illuminators—contracts, directions written in Latin or the vernacular, problematic emplacements of illuminations—it is equally possible that this illumination was created by a Christian craftsman, or by a Jew with training in the techniques of the royal workshops, or a talent for imitating such work. We cannot know for sure that

⁹ Mellinkoff (1999) throughout, particularly in her conclusion, 58, and see my review essay, Epstein (Forthcoming, *AJS Review*: 2003).

there were such Jews, but neither do we have any evidence that there were not.

In the case of the Golden Haggadah, Narkiss has pointed out that the iconography contains many details that suggest familiarity with midrash or with a Jewish model. Let's be honest with ourselves: if we can posit Christian artists who simply executed Jewish iconography to order, what stops us from postulating Jewish artists who were accomplished in the style of the period? Or, to move to a more complex conceptualization of cultural interplay, what prevents us from imagining Jewish artists who felt comfortable with and expressed themselves with facility in the idiom of the period, as did the patrons of the manuscript?

Historians of Jewish art persist in viewing Christians as 'owning' medieval culture so that Jews must simply emulate it, even as art historical scholarship moves forward without them.¹⁰ They are reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of an independent and often subversive aesthetic and creative impetus on the part of the sophisticated Jews who commissioned, and possibly created the manuscripts they study. And, by and large, they shy away from exploring the possibility of Jewish authorship of the illuminations and the repercussions of that possibility, simply because the manuscripts 'look too good' to have been created by Jews.

The reasons for the attempted historiographical obviation of the possibility of indigenous Jewish creativity in the diaspora are complex and political.¹¹ They are based in tensions between scholarship in Israel and America, Zionist and post-Zionist agendas, and religious and secular outlooks. Crucial as they are, I'd like to leave these ideological and methodological issues for analysis in another context and return to focus on the particular image in question in the hope that we can redress some of the lacks in scholarship by application to its example.

¹⁰ This is the dominant mode of understanding assumed by the Jerusalem school of the history of Jewish art, as exemplified in the publications of the Center for Jewish Art of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. But see also Suckale, R. "Über den Anteil christlicher Maler an der Ausmalung hebräischer Handschriften der Gotik in Bayern", in: *Geschichte und Kultur der Juden in Bayern* (Veröffentlichungen zur Bayerischen Geschichte und Kultur Nr. 17/88), eds. M. Treml and J. Kirmeier (Munich, New York: 1988) 123-134.

¹¹ For a complete discussion of the political motivations for this obviation, see my *Overthrowing the Idols: A Radical Re-Appraisal of Jewish Visual Culture*, currently in press.

Given the lack of direct documentary evidence, and assuming, for the moment, the possibility that there were Jews, trained or self-taught as artists, who, like the manuscripts's patrons, were comfortable with, and expressed themselves with facility in the idiom of the period, there are two main possibilities for identifying the authors of the illumination of Moses and his family returning to Egypt in the Golden Haggadah.¹² The image may have been produced by a Christian commissioned by Jews, or it may have been created by a Jew—a possibility which should not be discounted simply because the illumination is finely wrought. In either case, the artist would have had limited discretion in the production of the illuminations: it should be understood that a manuscript such as the Golden Haggadah represented a substantial economic investment on the part of its patrons, and as such, they would likely have wanted to have control over the process, just as a wealthy entrepreneur building a house would never leave the design entirely at the discretion of the builders or even the architect. Finally, it must be remembered that regardless of the background of the illuminator, his ultimate audience was a Jewish one, and so we must consider not only the origin but the possible reception of the illumination as well. Each of the forgoing authorial possibilities requires a slightly different problematization:

If we are dealing with a Jewish illuminator, we need to ask if this is merely a wholesale adoption of the iconography of the *Flight Into Egypt*, or if it is an adaptation thereof.

¹² There is certainly evidence that Jews trained in the art of illumination, learning in some cases from Christian illuminators. There are instances that indicate that they taught illumination (Mann [2000] 134–136) as well as the rare commission (Hillgarth and Narkiss [1961]), but we still do not have direct, colophon evidence of Jewish illuminators of the manuscripts which constitute the bulk of “medieval Jewish art.” There are several references, for instance, in *Sefer Hasidim*, forbidding use of books written or bound by Christian clerics: Yehudah HeHassid. *Sefer Hasidim*. Parma MS. Edited by J. Wistinetski (Frankfurt a.M.: 1924) par. 279, 280; palimpsests of Christian texts (par. 429), and even the shelving of bible manuscripts written by Christians on the same shelf as texts written by Jews (par. 429). There is also an admonition that one should not affix/tie/bind/bind together the “‘tabla’ot’ of [Christian] priests’ books with Israelite [i.e. Jewish] books.” (par. 429: “Tablaot shel sfarim komerim, lo yakshiram lesifrei Yisrael.”) “Tabla’ot” here most likely “boards” (book covers), since recycled Christian book bindings were often made up of discarded Christian writings pasted together. I am unaware of (though I would dearly like to find) any references to manuscript illumination (as opposed to text writing or binding) by gentiles for Jews.

If it is an adaptation, we ought to seek out how the illuminator or patron has re-inscribed the iconography, so apparently similar to the Christian prototype, to serve his own reading of history.

If one wishes to maintain that it was not Jews at all who actually produced the manuscript, but the Christian artist they commissioned, one must ask why, given the limited number of scenes possible to depict, did the Jewish patrons choose to request this particular, seemingly minor scene?

And finally, even if we are dealing with Christian illuminators producing this manuscript entirely at their own discretion, it is necessary to investigate how a Jewish audience, looking at such a scene in 1320 might have 'read' it.

We should begin by examining several notable differences between this illustration and the traditional iconography for the *Flight into Egypt*. These differences lead one to posit two possible intellectual contexts for this illumination; polemic and typological, with the understanding that those genres tend to overlap.

The first and most transparent departure from the standard iconography of the *Flight into Egypt* is the fact that there are two babies in this picture. This may be seen, *ab initio*, as a polemic against the singularity of Jesus. Though two babies are obviously called for in the narrative context of Exodus 4:20, their prominent display in exactly the traditional position of Baby Jesus serves to make it abundantly clear to the viewer that this is another *Flight into Egypt*, and that it is not about Jesus. It affords the opportunity to highlight the fact that Zipporah, Moses' wife, while clearly not a virgin, is yet no less modest and unprepossessing than is Mary, mother of Jesus.

The two children also introduce the theme of the fruitfulness of the line of Moses as opposed to the barrenness of the line of Jesus. While the portrayal of Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God, never corrupted by woman, was a fine model for Christian clerics, it was uncomfortable and even repugnant for Jews, for whom family life and biological persistence was paramount.¹³ There is an emphasis in the midrashic tradition, particularly in the Exodus stories, on the fertility and continuity of the Jewish 'family line.'¹⁴

¹³ See Berger (1979) §42, Eng. 69–70, Heb. 29–30; see also §209 (Eng. 205, Heb. 144).

¹⁴ See *Midrash Tanhuma* and *Yalkut Shimoni* on Exodus 1:7, where each pregnancy during the Egyptian enslavement is said to have been preternaturally fertile,

Continuing the theme of fruitfulness, Moses is depicted as beardless and young, in deliberate juxtaposition to his brother Aaron, who is a bearded, dignified old man, and in contradistinction to Joseph, the husband of Mary.¹⁵ The characterization of Joseph can range from the relatively neutral, yet consistently mature, bearded man in this period¹⁶ to increasingly frequent depictions in a slightly later period as a bitter and rejected old man in the background,¹⁷ a dried up, impotent old codger,¹⁸ or a fat, drunken knave.¹⁹ In the naturalistic art of the late Gothic, he was often made the butt of visual jokes about infertility.²⁰ Joseph is, furthermore, the type of the Synagogue, cuckolded by God in favor of the Church.²¹ In the Golden Haggadah scene of Moses's family travelling to Egypt, there seems to be an active concern to distinguish Moses from Joseph by making him a young man in the center of the action, rather than an old man on the periphery, or the butt of a theological joke.

The placement of a tree directly behind the head of Moses may be significant. Throughout the Golden Haggadah, there are a number of trees, some with obvious narrative significance, such as the burning bush (Fig. 1). Other trees seem to serve decorative func-

producing six children at a time. RaMBaN (R. Moses b. Nahman, Nahmanides) points out that while one of Moses's sons, Gershom, had been born at the time of this narrative, the other, Eliezer, was born on the way to Egypt or back in Egypt. The artist makes an interesting assertion about the fertility of Moses and the integrity of family here by showing both children in this illumination. See RaMBaN-Chavel (1973), 51–3.

¹⁵ On Joseph, see the extensive bibliography in Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: signs of otherness in northern European art of the late Middle Ages* (Berkeley: 1993), I:267 n. 146–148. Mellinkoff contrasts the dignified with the comic/denigrating images of Joseph, but fails to present a coherent typology of the historical development of his characterization. Though a shift from the undignified characterization to a more dignified one has been dated by Peter Burke to the 17th century, the shift from a relatively neutral to a negative characterization remains unexplained and is a desideratum for further research.

¹⁶ See the various examples adduced in Schreckenberg (New York: 1996) figs VI:I:a 1, 2, 6, 11–14, 18, 22, 25, 27, 29, 30 and 32.

¹⁷ *Nativity*, Chevalier Hours, Boucicaut Master, France, c. 1420's. London, BL MS. Add. 16977 fol. 57r.

¹⁸ Bernaert Van Orley, *Holy Family*, Panel Painting, c. 1510. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum.

¹⁹ Melchior Broederlam, *Presentation of Christ and Flight into Egypt*, Winged Altarpiece, c. 1400. Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

²⁰ Master of Frankfurt, *Flight Into Egypt*, Panel Painting, 1503–1506. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie.

²¹ Master of the St. Ursula Legend, *Ecclesia and Synagoga*, Panel Painting, Flemish, before 1482. Bruges, Groeningemuseum.

tions. The direct connection of this tree with the figure of Moses may indicate that it has some symbolic valence, as such trees often do in Hebrew manuscripts. A scene of a Jewish bridal procession, from an Italian *Mahzor* of the late 15th century, for instance, depicts a man shooting a bird in a beautiful espaliered tree situated directly above the head of the bride.²² Conforming to the symbolic language of the secular love and marriage poetry and art of the manuscript's place and date, this tree is clearly a reference to the bride's fertility, just as the hunted bird refers to the capture of her virginity.²³

Christian typology proclaimed Jesus to be the crowning blossom of the root of Jesse. To the Christian mind Jesus was the ultimate flowering of the Divine promise, a metaphor rendered visually in the image of the Crucifix as the Tree of Life. But Jews saw the flowering of that promise in their own children; they continued to long for a Messiah yet to come, from among their progeny. In their eyes, the wood of the cross upon which Jesus met his death was not the Tree of Life, but a barren branch. For them, Jesus represented not Isaiah's "shoot from the stock of Jesse" (11:1), but Deuteronomy's "stock sprouting poison weed and wormwood" (29:18). Jews did not accept the allegorical leap of Christian theology which made Jesus fertile because he was the generator of salvation, for them, he was ultimately barren—as the denouement of history, he produces no physical offspring. Moses is the active continuator of the Israelite line. To paraphrase a certain mythic bumper-sticker, "Jesus saves, but Moses invests!" Moses' legacy—his family tree, and his Torah—are a fruitful Tree of Life, not a barren cross. Hence Moses is depicted as young and handsome, and the tree that springs from directly behind his head is green and flourishing.²⁴

In the place of his traditional rod, and also in place of the traveling staff carried by Joseph, Moses carries a spear, which functions on both the polemic and the typological level. Amos Funkenstein

²² London, British Library ms Harley 5686, fol. 27v. Reproduced in Metzger and Metzger, *La Vie Juive au Moyen Age illustrée par les manuscrits hébraïques enluminés du XIII^e au XVI^e siècle* (Fribourg: 1982) fig. 343.

²³ Falconing in particular seems to have been associated with love. See Friedman (1989) 157–186, wherein literature is also discussed.

²⁴ There is also a tree above Joseph's head in Dürer's *Flight into Egypt*, a detail of *The Seven Sorrows of the Virgin* Altarpiece, oil on panel c. 1496–97, Alte Pinakothek, Munich. But this tree, growing out of a crag in the rock, is a symbol of Jesus' miraculous advent in spite of Joseph's infertility, just as the unicorn above Mary's head symbolically testifies to her virginity.

has alerted us to the ways in which Spanish Jews could read biblical history typologically in their texts.²⁵ The iconography in the Golden Haggadah seems to function in the same way: here, Moses' return to Egypt to redeem his people serves as an internal Jewish typology of redemption. Moses, abandoning his Egyptian identity as he leaves Midian, is a type for the Jews, who abandon their identity as slaves as they leave Egypt. Thus, he bears a spear at his personal exodus, foreshadowing the great national exodus: "and the People of Israel left Egypt armed" (*hamushim*). This is visually emphasised (and inscribed) in the 14th-century Rylands Haggadah, where the Israelites are figured as armed and armoured footsoldiers (Fig. 3).²⁶ The same iconography can also function polemically, if we understand Moses to be presented in contradistinction to Joseph, Mary's husband, who is a symbol of the Synagogue. It must be remembered that a standard attribute of the Synagogue is a broken spear. One need only think of the cathedral sculptures of the 13th century. In the Golden Haggadah, Moses' spear is unbroken, standing perhaps a symbol of what one might term *Synagoga militans* and an expression of the confidence that the Torah of Moses will remain a viable weapon against Christianity.²⁷

The fact that a dog accompanies Moses and his family is also interesting. The *pshat*—the contextual interpretation—of this detail, when taken in the context of the illumination of Moses' encounter with God before the burning bush (the preceding illustration in the iconographic narrative of the Golden Haggadah) is that this is the 'Ben Amram family dog'. Yet, the appearance of dogs, like that of trees, in a Haggadah may be fraught with multifarious valences.

I have elsewhere discussed the hare-hunt as a symbol of the oppression of Israel by the nations of the world.²⁸ In the mid-14th century Sarajevo Haggadah, for example, it appears in conjunction with the phrase, "And the Egyptians pressured us."²⁹ (Fig. 4) Simultaneously

²⁵ Funkenstein (1993) 98–100.

²⁶ Exodus 13:18, per *Shemot Rabbah* XX:19, and quoted by Rashi ad loc. Rylands Haggadah, Catalonia, c. 1350, John Rylands Library Heb. 6 f. 18v and 19r: see *The Rylands Haggadah. A Medieval Sephardi Masterpiece in Facsimile* ed. R. Loewe (London: 1988) fol. 18v–19r.

²⁷ On the concept of *lex militans* (my term), here extrapolated into *synagoga militans*, see Epstein (1997) 39–69.

²⁸ Epstein (1997) 16–38.

²⁹ Sarajevo Haggadah, c. 1320 Sarajevo, National Library Heb. ms 1, part 2 fol. 13v. The illumination and text sections are paginated separately. See the facsimile edition *The Sarajevo Haggadah* (Belgrade, Sarajevo: 1983) part 2 fol. 13v.

more veiled and more explicit is a depiction in the mid-fourteenth century Barcelona Haggadah of a hare being served a drink by a dog (Fig. 5). This illustration seems like a typical example of *mundus inversus* iconography. It appears as an upper marginal illustration for the text "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." The lower margin depicts the Israelites slaving in Egypt, and the implication here is, "We *were* slaves, but one day the Egyptian dogs will serve us!" The dog is here clearly a symbol for the Egyptians.³⁰ A dog which appears prominently in the foreground of the illustration of the Exodus in a 15th century Spanish Haggadah has its mouth open with no tongue, evidently to represent the fulfillment of God's promise to the Israelites that "There shall be a loud cry in the Land of Egypt . . . but not a dog shall whet his tongue" at any of them. (Exodus 11:6-7).³¹ Even in the biblical text, where the silence of the dogs appears in apposition to the loud cry of Egypt, the dogs are the mirror image of the Egyptians themselves, since both are miraculously prevented from hindering the Israelites.

Thus, the dogs often shown accompanying Pharaoh and the Egyptian nobles in Haggadah illumination may not be merely "corroborative detail" in the service of "artistic verisimilitude".³² These dogs symbolically represent 'Egypt,' in iconographic parallel to the midrashic use of the expression "Pharaoh and *Mizrayim* (Egypt, e.g. 'the Egyptians')".³³ Since dogs are associated with the enemies of Israel in Hebrew manuscripts, it should not surprise us to find dogs associated with the enemies of Jesus in Christian manuscripts, particularly with Jews.

As surely as one finds dogs accompanying Pharaoh in Hebrew manuscripts, one finds them accompanying Pilate or Jesus' Jewish enemies in Christian art, especially commonly in the late Middle Ages. Luke's shepherds "abiding in the fields" are invariably accompanied by dogs in very central positions, which one could take for local color, were it not for those instances where the dog is so prominent and so disturbing that it cannot be read as a positive or even

³⁰ Barcelona Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1350, BL 14761 f. 30v. See Epstein (1997) color plate IV.

³¹ Kaufmann Haggadah (Budapest: 1957) Illumination section, p. 74.

³² For ex. Rylands Haggadah, Catalonia, c. 1350 JRL. Heb. 6 f. 15r, a and 15v, a. See *The Rylands Haggadah. A Medieval Sephardi Masterpiece in Facsimile* ed. R. Loewe (London: 1988) fol. 15r and 15v.

³³ Cf. e.g. RaShi on Exodus 17:5, RaMbaN on Genesis 44:1, *BaMidbar Rabbah* 10:2 *Midrash Tehillim* 2:2.

a neutral symbol. A black dog with a spiked collar baying at the angels in the Rohan Hours (France, 1419–1427) is a symbol of the Jewish dogs, who, like the Jewish shepherds, are witness to the message of Jesus' birth, but clearly do not comprehend its implications as fully as the Gentile Magi do.³⁴

Returning to the dog watching the burning bush, one may, perhaps, read it as a type for the Egyptians who will witness God's wonders in Egypt, but fail to understand the message. And the dog accompanying Moses' "Holy Family" as they leave Midian may typologically foreshadow the silence of the "Egyptian dogs" at the moment of the Exodus from Egypt, or even the "mixed multitude" which accompanied the Israelites at that time.

The "exceptional donkey" and coded Messianism

All these details are important in understanding the transformation which an iconographic formula is likely to undergo in its move between Christian and Jewish manuscripts. But the signal issue here, in this particular scene in the Golden Haggadah, is the larger one: why such an apparently incidental scene was chosen for depiction at all, in light of the limited space available to the artist. The answer is that this scene is by no means incidental.

In his commentary on Exodus 4:20, the French exegete RaShI (Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes) uses the narrative of the return of Moses' family to Egypt to illuminate a course of sacred history which is both linear and cyclical.³⁵ He takes as his exegetical point of departure the word 'the ass (*ha-hamor*).' RaShI's commentary imparts an emphasis to the direct article through which he 'reveals' an understanding of the place of this particular donkey in history and in eschatology:

³⁴ On the association between dogs and Jews, see the discussion of dog-headed 'unbelievers' in Pentecost illustrations in Freedman (1981) 61–4. See also Marrow, J., "Circumdedderunt me canes multi", Christ's tormentors in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance", *Art Bulletin*, 59:2 (1977) 167–181.

³⁵ RaShI-Chavel (1982) 185. This interpretation is not cited by Spanish commentators, but it is adopted from *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer* 30:1, which would have been well-known to a contemporary Spanish Jewish audience.

The ass: That is; the [exceptional] ass which Abraham saddled on his way to the binding of Isaac, and the one upon which in the future the King Messiah shall be revealed, as it says: "... Humble, riding on an ass." (Zechariah 9:9).

RaShI here uses an aggadic connection present in the early medieval *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer*, which established the identity of the three donkeys; this classic reference would have been familiar across the whole Jewish world. But RaShI ingeniously links it with a seemingly simple explication of the humble definite article—the letter *heh*—showing how that grammatical particle literally transfigures the plebeian donkey and is transfigured by it. The donkey is transmuted by the letter *heh*, as surely as Abram is transformed to Abraham by the addition of the divine letter *heh*. It becomes a symbol of profound historical and eschatological significance, standing at the very center of the process of Jewish redemption. Tangibly and affectingly, Moses' movement toward his preordained role as redeemer of the people of Israel is linked with the movement of Abraham, the first Jew, toward his decisive role in the drama of the near-slaughter and rescue of his son. At the other end of history, the donkey accompanying Moses on his mission of salvation parallels the slow, but inevitable progress of the Messiah toward the gates of Jerusalem for the ultimate redemption. This advance is constantly in danger of being forestalled; by Abraham's potential lack of faith, by Moses' self-doubt, by humankind's evildoing or indifference. But it is the donkey, the very same donkey, which moves, slowly, determinedly, with plodding perseverance, inexorably through history, toward personal, national, and finally, universal deliverance.³⁶

³⁶ The donkey in our illumination looks rather like a horse. It is evident that the artist knew how to depict a donkey because he does so rather more convincingly on f. 12v, b where the shaggy donkey scratches his nose with his hind leg in a naturalistic manner. The elongated ears of the beast in our illumination are the only clue that it is a donkey. The elegant curve of the neck, the smooth, rather than ragged fur, the refined muzzle, the size, the stature and the tail, all invest it with a grace and dignity which surpasses the average donkey. Although it is labelled a donkey, it is clear that the artist intends to show it as what RaShI calls '*hamor hameyuhad*'—the exceptional donkey—to further the exegetical point and to distinguish it from the mere ass ridden by the protagonists of the Christian Flight into Egypt. The donkey does appear in later illuminated and printed Haggadot, usually as the mount of the Messiah. (Cf. Washington Haggadah, Ashkenaz, 1478. (Washington D.C., Library of Congress, Haggadah, 1478 [Scribe: Yoel b. Shimon]) fol. 19v, and the printed Haggadot from Mantua, 1560 [*Shfokh Hamatka*], Venice 1609 [*Adir Hu*],

It is with a certain irony that RaShI quotes the *Pirkei De Rabbi Eliezer's* Midrash about the donkey. One had only to be in the streets of Troyes, RaShI's home town, or in any other Christian city, on Palm Sunday to witness pageants featuring Jesus, in effigy, riding on an ass into the Church.³⁷ For RaShI, the Christian interpretation of Zechariah's "poor man, riding on an ass" must have seemed as wooden as the effigies themselves. RaShI's donkey is a Jewish donkey, symbolic of progress rather than culmination; on the road to redemption, but always linked with redemptive history.

This certainly would not have eluded the illuminator, were he a Jew, or his audience, in any case. There is a similar irony in this appropriation of the iconography of a monumental juncture in the course of Christian history to depict what we now understand to be a monumental juncture in Jewish history. The image makes a statement about the interconnectedness of Jewish history and its inevitable progress toward redemption. To the Jewish viewer, this donkey is RaShI's donkey, moving through a living continuum of which he or she is a part.

Conclusion

The final, and most compelling stratum of the illumination is its reflexivity. Whether illuminated by a Jew or a Christian, it unquestionably reflects a Christian motif, and its presence in a Jewish book requires pondering. And this is not just any Jewish book: it is a book about redemption, past, as well as future; a living book in which Jews in the Middle Ages saw their own reflection, for the Haggadah instructs us that "in every generation, one is required to view oneself as if one had personally come out of Egypt."

Of course, this illumination might have been produced by a Christian artist working entirely at his own discretion and bringing in Christian motifs simply because they were what he knew and they "sort of fit." It might have been produced by a Jewish artist slav-

and Amsterdam 1662 [*Shfokh Hamatkha*], among others.) Its appearance is no doubt also sanctioned by the fact that it links Abraham, Moses and the Messiah, the three important redemptive figures mentioned or alluded to in the text of the Haggadah.

³⁷ For a number of images roughly contemporary with the Golden Haggadah see Schreckenberg (New York: 1996) 132-141.

ishly copying scenes from the life of Jesus without knowing it, or thinking about what he was doing. It might have been produced for a patron who just didn't understand, didn't get it, didn't care, someone who simply wanted (and certainly got) an extravagantly lavish and beautiful book.

But what if it was not? In commissioning, depicting or viewing such a central scene from the Jewish sacred story in the guise of a similar, yet ultimately very different scene from Christian history, the patron, the illuminator, and his viewers may be playing out their own reflexive replication of Moses' own flight into Egypt. When Moses comes to Midian, he is well-nigh indistinguishable from the Egyptians among whom he was raised. His speech, his appearance, his manner, his carriage manages to deceive Yitro's daughters, who report to their father that "an Egyptian man saved us." Yet we, the readers of the biblical text, know the whole story—we know that this is 'our' Moses.

Given the style of this manuscript, it is likely that its patron, its scribe, its illuminator, and its audience, Catalonian Jews of the 1320's, were indistinguishable in many aspects of their external appearance and material culture from their Castilian Christian neighbors—Like Moses. . . . Like Zipporah.—Like the book . . . Like the illumination itself.—The illumination seems to play with this: in all its stylistic externals, it appears not as a Hebrew (that is, a Jewish), but as an Egyptian (that is, a Christian) image. Only the details have been changed. But if one scrutinizes it closely, this image turns out to be vastly different from its apparent analogues, like Joseph revealing himself to his brothers. And what emerges, as in the case of Moses returning from Midian, is something really very Jewish at heart. Perhaps the illuminator is saying something similar about his patrons and audience. Perhaps he is saying something similar about himself as well.

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Figures

1. Golden Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1320 British Library Add 27210 fol. 10v
2. Golden Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1320 British Library Add 27210 fol. 15r
3. Rylands Haggadah, Catalonia, c. 1350 John Rylands Library Heb. 6 fol. 18v
4. Sarajevo Haggadah, Aragon, c. 1320 Sarajevo, National Library Heb. ms 1, part 2 fol. 13v
5. Barcelona Haggadah, Barcelona, c. 1350, British Library 14761 f. 30v



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



מִן הָאָרֶץ



בְּנֵי שֵׁשׁ וַיִּשִׁימוּ עָלָיו שְׂרֵימָסִים
לְמַעַן עֲנֹתוּ בְּסִמְלֹתָם וַיִּכְנֹעַ
מִסִּבְנוֹת לְפָרְעֵה אֶת פִּיתוּם

וְאֶת רַעְמָסִים



Figure 4



Figure 5