

Marc Michael Epstein. *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. xi + 324 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-15666-9.



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Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Those familiar with Marc Michael Epstein from the lecture circuit—both scholarly and popular—know him as an entertaining and facile speaker. These qualities are on display in Epstein’s recent book—*The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative and Religious Imagination*—even his art-historically gifted children appear here as they do in his lectures—but readers expecting a “synagogue circuit” text will be sorely disappointed. This is a serious book, with careful observations, robust opinions, and footnotes forged by years of reading and thinking about Jewish medieval imagery, manuscript illumination, and its historiography. Indeed, publication of Epstein’s book offers more proof that Jewish art history, so long in its infancy, has finally come of age.

As suggested by the title, the unifying thread in Epstein’s study is the haggadah, its place in Jewish ritual and imaginative life, and the choices made by its medieval patrons/artists while crafting its programs of illumination. Epstein makes no effort to trace the development of Jewish manuscript illumination or to center his study in one

particular geographical area. The four manuscripts Epstein investigates (the Bird’s Head Haggadah, the Golden Haggadah, the Rylands Haggadah, and the “Brother” Haggadah) come both from Ashkenaz (the first), and Sepharad, (the following three). This is a work of interpretation; each manuscript forms the centerpiece of thematic essays prompted by careful study of its particular iconographic features within the larger umbrella of Jewish art-making and haggadah illumination.

Two particularly sensitive and self-aware chapters frame the scholarly meat of this book, making the work relevant to scholars beyond the field of Jewish manuscript studies. In his introduction, Epstein makes two important points that bear repeating here. First, in reference to his earlier book *Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature* (1997), he recognizes that “medieval Jews owned their artistic culture in depth and at the core” (p. 5). Second, as he introduces his current work on the illuminated haggadot, he states, “I will cultivate humility in the

face of iconography that seems to be erroneous or misplaced” (p. 8). That these insights are sustained throughout the work should be recognized whether or not one accepts Epstein’s particular iconographic readings. In the conclusion, Epstein follows up by characterizing his own place in an evolving scholarly dialogue regarding medieval Jewish art in relation to its surrounding visual culture. In place of the polemical and reactive template which underlies much previous writing about medieval Jewish iconography, Epstein’s current perspective imagines “a much more ‘open’ Middle Ages, with a stream of essentially common culture drawn upon by both Jews and Christians” (p. 268).

Epstein begins his work with a long section on the Birds’ Head Haggadah (Jerusalem, Israel Museum MS 180/57). By far the most resolved portion of the book, Epstein’s analysis, which is divided in six thematic chapters, reflects his long relationship with the German manuscript, particularly the puzzle presented by its enigmatic rendering of human heads (Jewish) as what have been generally characterized as birds. Not only does he present a well-argued interpretation of the birds’ heads, he also plausibly constructs a hierarchical reading of figures within the haggadah’s Exodus narrative. Subsequent themes in the section argue for iconographic connections to the volatile religious environment in the manuscript’s proposed birthplace (Mainz, c. 1300).

The second section of the book concerns what may possibly be the most well known and deluxe Hebrew illuminated manuscript—the so-called Golden Haggadah (BL Add. MS 27210). The haggadah text of this manuscript is preceded by a cycle of eight illuminated folia which, in contrast to their close stylistic resemblance to French Gothic psalter illumination, contain numerous midrashic references. In chapter 7, “Silence is Golden,” Epstein treats the iconography as a “cohesive, intelligently structured, and well-planned entity” (p. 151), which relies on formal connections that co-

exist with, but also break, the chronological narrative in order to stress particular theological themes. Although the themes are appropriate and well explained, Epstein’s chiasmic readings of the visual narrative, pointed out by arrows on illustrations, are not entirely convincing. Furthermore, one wonders whether some of the iconographic threads he locates, particularly one concerning causeless enmity among Jews, could have been backed up by reference to contemporary events in Barcelona’s kahal.

More convincing, indeed intriguing, is Epstein’s following chapter, “Women Hidden in Plain Sight.” Building on the unusual prominence of women in the haggadah’s narrative cycle (forty-six prominent depictions), the conspicuous involvement of women in its ritual scenes of Passover preparation, as well as the arresting and enigmatic image of Miriam’s Dance that bridges the two, he crafts a forceful interpretation of the Golden Haggadah’s iconography which suggests that the manuscript may have been made for a woman. This hypothesis is supported by a rereading of the manuscript’s seventeenth-century colophon which understands the manuscript as having been given by Rosa Gallico to her new husband—Rosa being one of a long line of women owners descended from the “Rachel” whom Epstein finds reference to in the manuscript’s iconographic oddities. Impossible to prove in this case, but compelling, the connection of women to illuminated haggadot will, I hope, be supported shortly by my own research on another Iberian example: BL MS Or. 2737.

The third section of Epstein’s book takes on the relationship between two closely connected manuscripts—the Rylands and “Brother” haggadahs—whose illuminations closely follow the biblical text, with minimal rabbinic intervention. Epstein’s careful analysis of the pair—BL MS Or. 1404 is now generally believed to have been the model for the Rylands—reveals important and hitherto overlooked transformations in the

iconography that have implications for the overall creation and reception of the manuscripts. Particularly interesting is Epstein's recognition of the ways in which the two manuscripts differ in their depictions of the collectivity of the Israelites, but he also investigates how each cycle treats questions of gender, violence, and power. In the book's final chapter, Epstein expands his discussion of the "sibling" manuscripts, in particular their treatment of Moses, Zipporah, and their children, to a larger consideration of the processes by which Jewish artists and patrons confront and transform Christian iconography.

In its emphasis on the relationship of Judaism with the essential purpose of the haggadah--what Epstein terms "the metanarrative of sippur yezi'at Mizrayim" (the narration of the Exodus from Egypt), this book could easily have succumbed to a "pan Jewish" viewpoint which overlooks technical and specific questions of art-historical import. Instead, Epstein manages, with the often scanty historical material available to him, to place each manuscript in a context in which verifiable choices are made and understood. It must be said, however, that rabbinic material is heavily favored over local history, of which, in the case of Sepharad, we sometimes have considerable documentary evidence.

Yale University Press has been generous to readers of Epstein's volume, which is lavishly illustrated with full-color plates in separate sections for each manuscript studied as well as numerous colored details inserted in the text itself. But no more generous than its author, who states the following in his introduction: "I write with complete awareness that what will result from my readings are neither the only nor the 'correct' interpretations" (p. 11). In *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative and Religious Imagination*, Epstein has provided rich interpretations that will surely stimulate debate, admiration, and possibly even acceptance among his readers.

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