

REVIEW

Katrin Kogman-Appel

*Illuminated Haggadot from Medieval Spain:
Biblical Imagery and the Passover Holiday*

(University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 295 pp. plus plates

Reviewed by Steven J. McMichael, OFM Conv, University of Saint Thomas

For scholars interested in medieval Jewish and Christian relations in the Middle Ages, the book *Illuminated Haggadot from Medieval Spain: Biblical Imagery and the Passover Holiday* is a fascinating and enlightening read. Scholars who work on medieval polemical treatises derive their knowledge of Christian-Jewish interaction from the texts they read and evaluate. Their task is to not only to analyze and interpret what these words mean in their religious and social worlds, but also to try to understand why these texts arose in their own time and how they reflect on Christian-Jewish interaction in a specific time period. The focus of this work under review is on the art that appears in texts that were so central to Jewish life in the middle ages: the *haggadot* or the Passover *seder* liturgies. From an analysis of these works of spiritual art and ritual the author helps us understand in a more complete way not only the inner life of Jews during this time period, but also how Jews were reacting to Christian visual presentations of biblical passages that they both shared: Genesis and Exodus. These *haggadot*, which emerged as a separate text in the thirteenth century, hold a primary key for a deeper understanding for medieval Jewish life and Jewish-Christian interaction based on the passages that appear in these Passover liturgies.

Concerning medieval art, we have known for some time now how images, especially derived from biblical typology, helped shape Christian attitudes toward Jews. Scholars such as Sarah Lipton, Ruth Mellinkoff, and Heinz Schreckenberg have shown how images such as Cain slaying Abel and *Ecclesia/Synagoga* help shape the attitudes and policies toward Jews in the Middle Ages. Art joined with polemical literature created a powerful arsenal for Christians in their attacks against Jews during this time period. We have known for a long time how Jews have reacted to the Christian attack through their own polemical responses to Christian texts. More recent studies, especially the book now under review, have begun to focus on how Jews reacted in their own way to Christians through the medium of art.

Kogman-Appel's book examines the illuminations in the *Sarajevo Haggadah* and six other *haggadah* manuscripts in light of what the biblical cycles tell us about how medieval Jews visualized the biblical cycles of Genesis and especially Exodus. Her focus is to show how these cycles "attest acculturation and dialogue, polemics with Christianity and cultural struggles within Sephardic Jewry in a particular historical setting." (p. 3) We learn much about Jewish book production and how books functioned in the middle ages. She addresses issues of patronage and the audience of these *haggadot*, highlighting the cultural background of these texts. She shows us the complex background to these works by developing a theory of art production based not only on pictorial models but also on memory, which has received significant attention recently in medieval studies, and its role in this production.

Kogman-Appel's contribution to the scholarship of medieval Judaism is manifold. She introduces the reader to the complexity of Jewish Sephardic cultural life in the Crown of Aragon in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Especially important is her focus on the interaction between Jews in Aragon and Jews in Italy and Capetian France. She also shows the reader how the main characters of medieval Jewish life, especially Nahmanides and his students, interpreted Genesis and Exodus so as not only to try to maintain a truly Jewish approach to these texts but as a way to defend themselves against Christian conversionary interpretations of them.

With regard to Jewish-Christian interaction in the Middle Ages, the book demonstrates how images were borrowed and adapted from earlier Jewish and Christian models, an adaptation that tells us about the how these biblical stories from Genesis and Exodus were remembered and produced into visual form by the Sephardic Jews. Most important for those interested in Jewish-Christian relations is how certain images were transformed from a Christian environment and its Christological focus to one which reinforced a Jewish approach to these texts. These images were intended to confirm and strengthen Jewish faith in a time and place in which Christianity was the dominant religion. Kogman-Appel offers a thorough presentation on such figures of the Hebrew Scriptures as Abraham's greeting of the three angels and the binding of Isaac to show how Jewish artists incorporated these same scenes into the *haggadot* without including the Christological elements that were central to the Christian models.

This book, therefore, opens the reader to a fascinating view of the role of the book in medieval Jewish life. We learn about different types of Jewish literature (*haggadot*, *mahzorim*, *piyyutim*, etc.) and about the role played by early rabbinic writings and midrash in the history of biblical interpretation and in these visual images. We also learn about biblical exegesis in the Middle Ages and the roles of rationalism, allegory, typology, and the kabbalah in approaching the sacred text. The truly illuminating lessons about medieval Jewish art, life, and culture along with a deepened understanding of Jewish-Christian interaction in the Middle Ages make an extremely valuable contribution in this publication.