FROM AMSTERDAM TO BOMBAY, BAGHDAD, AND CASABLANCA: THE INFLUENCE OF THE AMSTERDAM HAGGADAH ON HAGGADAH ILLUSTRATION AMONG THE JEWS IN INDIA AND THE LANDS OF ISLAM

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From Illuminated Manuscripts to Printed Illustrated Haggadot

The Passover Haggadah is the most widely illustrated book in Jewish history. When the first illustrated Haggadot appeared in Europe in the late thirteenth century, the idea to dedicate efforts and money to produce a costly illuminated parchment volume for the Seder night was hardly accidental. At the time, the illuminated manuscript flourished in European society, emerging as the main visual vehicle for expressing theological and other themes through the medium of painting. Wealthy Jewish patrons who wished to follow the cultural trends of their time faced a serious problem. On the one hand, the medieval Jewish tradition placed a high value on the written word and the book—producing a relatively large number of manuscripts. On the other hand, the artistic enhancement of sacred texts or the visual, in general, never received the special place awarded it in Christian society.\(^1\) While Bibles represented the most widely-disseminated illustrated book among the general society,\(^2\) Bible manuscripts received little, or at least far less, artistic

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\(^2\) The primary reason for this popularity naturally stems from the fact that “The Bible, particularly the New Testament, was the principal religious text of the Christian Middle Ages in Europe and the source of many different compilations of passages for various liturgical purposes”; see R. G. Galkins, *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y. 1986), p. 16. Galkins arranged his book according to the type, use, and contents of manuscripts selected for illumination, and the different compilations of biblical texts occupy six of the book’s ten chapters.
attention among the Jews. Even the Jews of medieval Spain, who largely looked favorably on the practice of decorating sacred books, generally avoided the illumination of their Bibles with figurative representations depicting biblical stories.

Read at home in the intimate family circle, the Haggadah was found to be the most appropriate book to fill this gap. The illustrations of the Haggadot fulfilled the Passover commandment to tell (ve-higgadeta) the story and miracles of the Exodus from Egypt to all family members, children in particular. Some medieval Spanish Haggadot begin their cycle of biblical miniatures with the story of the Creation—just like contemporary Christian Bibles; actually the largest concentration of biblical episodes in a Hebrew book at the time is to be found in them.

3 I speak here of Bibles decorated with figurative or narrative biblical episodes (as Bibles with non-figurative decorations flourished early on, see below). The largest number of such Bibles emanate from thirteenth-fourteenth-century Ashkenaz (France and Germany), though the human figures in most of them are shown with distorted features; see Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, p. 31 and pls. 23–25, 29, 31, 32, 37; Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, p. 22 and pls. 18–21. For a large selection of biblical images in medieval Hebrew codices (Bibles and other types of texts), see G. Sed-Rajna, The Hebraic Bible in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts (Tel Aviv 1987).

4 Most noteworthy are the words of the Catalan Jewish scholar Profiat Duran (c. 1360–c. 1414): “The matter is also appropriate and required, I mean to beautify the Books of God, and purposefully to attend to their beauty, adornment, and loveliness. For just as God desired to beautify the place of His Temple with gold, silver, precious stones, and material delights, so too it is appropriate [to beautify] His sacred books…” (Duran, Sefer Ma’aseh Efod [Jerusalem 1970], p. 19; English translation according to Bland, 86). And cf. note 6, below.

5 Two noted exceptions, with modest marginal biblical episodes, are the so-called Cervera Bible (Cervera 1300—Lisbon, Nat. Lib. Ms. 72), and the Kennicott Bible (La Coruña 1476; Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Kennicott 1), which are closely related to each other. See Narkiss, Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts, pls. 6 and 17; Gutmann, Hebrew Manuscript Painting, pl. 10. The large majority of Hebrew Bibles from Spain are decorated with the cultic implements of the Tabernacle (or Temple), and many other non-figurative decorations; see K. Kogman-Appel, Jewish Book Art between Islam and Christianity: The Decoration of Hebrew Bibles in Medieval Spain (Leiden 2004).

6 In this context, it is appropriate to quote again the recommendation of Profiat Duran, who, dealing with the best ways to study and memorize the stories of the Scripture in the classroom, wrote: “The contemplation and study of pleasing forms, beautiful images, and drawings broadens and stimulates the mind and strengthens its faculties” (Duran, Sefer Ma’aseh Efod, 19; English translation according to Gutmann, 9).