

Article

Our Lady at the Seder Table

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Abstract: This paper discusses a unique miniature in a fifteenth-century Ashkenazi Passover Haggadah. The image represents a young woman holding an open book at a spread Seder table at the opening words of the Maggid, the narrative part of the Haggadah. The image of the woman is reminiscent of Christian representations of female patrons, saints, and the Virgin Mary herself. Having demonstrated this similarity, this article attempts to explain it by exploring to what degree the concept of the ‘ideal woman’ was shared in Jewish and Christian cultures. Since the lady in the Haggadah is clearly interacting with a book, the article also surveys textual evidence of female education in medieval Ashkenaz and women’s participation in religious rituals, to examine to what degree portraying the lady this way could reflect the reality of fifteenth-century Ashkenaz. The findings suggest that the authorship of the Haggadah may have deliberately drawn a visual parallel between the lady in the Haggadah and the Virgin Mary in order to challenge the latter’s unique position in Christianity and counterweight her ever-growing cult.

Keywords: Passover Haggadah; Jewish–Christian visual discourse; the Virgin Mary

1. Introducing the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah

I first saw the Rylands Ashkenazi Haggadah (Hebrew MS 7) in the summer of 2011 and it immediately captured my imagination.¹ Our encounter was thought-provoking and I knew straight away that I would have to revisit this manuscript.

Unlike the famous Sephardi Rylands Haggadah, coming from the same Crawford collection, the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah has been rather understudied until recently (Müller et al. 1898, pp. 181–87; Italianer 1927, pp. 220–31; Metzger 1973, p. 17). Then, in 2016, an entire session was devoted to it at the conference “The Other Within” at the John Rylands Library, Manchester.² This article is based on the paper I presented there and will discuss a peculiar iconographical composition of the codex.

As the book plate in the inner back cover shows, the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah was part of the famous Bibliotheca Lindesiana, the library created by Alexander William Lindsay, the 25th Earl of Crawford (1812–1880).³ The Hebrew collection of Lindsay’s library was described by Hebraist and bibliographer Albert (Abraham) Löwy (1816–1908) in the late 19th century, and though his catalogue was never published, I have consulted his handwritten description of the manuscript at the John Rylands Library.⁴ Unfortunately, Löwy did not discuss the provenance of the manuscript, but his description of the illustrations gives a fascinating insight into how its peculiar iconography was understood in the 19th century.

The Haggadah does not have a colophon; therefore, we do not know the exact circumstances of its creation. On palaeographical and stylistic grounds, it can be dated to the 1430s. This dating is supported with further evidence. The Haggadah can be linked to a two-volume Ashkenazi prayer book, the so-called Ulm Mahzor held in the Kaufmann Collection at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MS A 371 and MS A 383).⁵ The two-volume Mahzor and our Haggadah were most probably written by the same person and the Haggadah may have been designed to be part of the Mahzor.⁶ References to recent historical



Citation: Buda, Zsófia. 2024. Our Lady at the Seder Table. *Religions* 15: 144. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020144>

Academic Editors: Sara Offenberg and Vered Tohar

Received: 13 December 2023

Revised: 15 January 2024

Accepted: 17 January 2024

Published: 24 January 2024



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events in the Mahzor point to the 1430s in the region around Regensburg and Augsburg as the date and place of production (Shalev-Eyni 2021, pp. 369–70).⁷

Michal Sternthal's yet unpublished study reveals that the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah was copied by Abraham ben Asher Katzenelnbogen, a rabbinic scholar and pupil of Rabbi Jacob Weil, for himself and his family.⁸ Indeed, a certain Abraham ben Asher is mentioned in the margin of folio 39b ("אברהם בן אשר" = "אברהם בן אשר"; Figure 1), and the name Abraham appearing in the text is decorated several times. The marginal note is linked to a word, *avo*, marked in the main text quoting Psalms 118:19: "Open me the gates of righteousness I will go through them [*avo bam*] and praise the Lord". The marginal note interprets the word *avo* [אבא] as an acronym for Avraham ben Asher [אשר בן אברהם].⁹ The same can be observed in the Ulm Mahzor.¹⁰ Jewish scribes often used this method to indicate their identity (Beit-Arie 2006, p. 145). Indeed, we can consider Abraham ben Asher the scribe of both the Mahzor and the Haggadah (Shalev-Eyni 2021, p. 370).



Figure 1. The word *avo* marked by a hand pointing to the marginal gloss referring to Abraham ben Asher; Manchester, JRL, Hebrew MS 7, folio 39b (<https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-HEBREW-00007/84>, accessed on 1 December 2023).

The Rylands manuscript does not only contain the text of the Passover Haggadah. Most margins are populated with medieval commentaries attributed to leading figures of the Ashkenazi pietistic movement the *Hasidei Ashkenaz* and other famous medieval Talmudists. For instance, we find a reference to rabbis of the Hasidei Ashkenaz on folio 18a: ובני הזקן שמואל 'ורבי חזן אלעזר ורבנא משפחתו בני כל קלוניםמוס רבינו וכן, ביתו בני וכל הגדול אלעזר 'ר רבינו הנהיג וכן עשה ק' י"ב 'ר הרב מרי וגם כן עושין היו ל'וצ חסיד יהודה 'רב ואחיו אברהם רבינו ¹¹ One of the commentaries in the Haggadah is that of the famous Ashkenazi sage Jacob ben Moses Levi Möllin (aka the Maharil, 1360–1427) ([Offenberg 2019](#), p. 112).¹²

In addition to the textual expositions, the main text is enriched with decorative elements and visual commentaries. There are initial-word panels decorated in colours and in gold, marginal commentaries forming *carmina figurata*, and framed and unframed miniatures in the margins and inserted into the body of the text. At the very beginning, at the part called "Sanctify" (*Kadesh*), there is a hunting scene around the initial-word panel "Blessed" (*Barukh*): a deer surrounded by its pursuers with dogs behind him and a hunter just in front of him (folio 1b). The next image is at *Ha Lahma* (This is Bread of Affliction), at the beginning of the narrative part of the Haggadah depicting a Seder table with a solitary young lady holding a book (folio 5a; Figure 2). The main scene is framed with a half floral half architectural border inhabited by animals and human figures. On the verso side of the folio, at "Why is tonight different from all other nights?" (*Ma nishtanah ha-layla ha-zeh mi-kol ha-lelot?*), under the usual depiction of the pouring of the second cup, there is the most peculiar image of the entire codex: a young figure holding up a drapery and above him there is a Gothic arched window (folio 5b). Three of the Four Sons are also depicted: the Wise Son, the Wicked Son, and the Simple Son (folios 9b–10b). Another slightly myste-

rious representation of a flock of naked figures is found at the text, “I let you grow like the plants of the field;” (*Revavah ke-tsemaḥ ha-šadeh natatik*), a citation from Ezekiel (16:7) (folio 14a). The depiction of matzah and *maror* (bitter herbs) is included in a slightly unusual way: each is held up only by a hand (folios 23b and 24b).¹³ Another traditionally illustrated part is “Therefore” (*Lefikakh*) where, as it is often the case, a man is shown lifting up the second cup of wine (folio 25b). The last miniature is at “Pour out your wrath” (*Shefokh ḥamatkha*) depicting the coming of the Messiah (folio 33a).¹⁴



Figure 2. Illustration at the beginning of *Ha Lakhma Anya* (This is the Bread of Affliction); Manchester, JRL, Hebrew MS 7, folio 5a.

In the present article, I will discuss one of the unusual compositions of the Haggadah, namely the illustrations of *Ha Lakhma*, and will demonstrate its iconographical connections to Christian compositions and explore its polemical potential.

2. The Lady of the Haggadah and the Virgin Mary

Ha lahma is one of the most often illustrated parts of Haggadah manuscripts. Perhaps the most widespread composition accompanying *Ha lahma* is the representation of a family seated at the spread Seder table celebrating Passover. In some instances, family members have an open book in front of them on the table as if emphasizing the main purpose of the Seder: retelling the story of the Exodus and teaching it to one's children, as for instance in our Haggadah's contemporary, the Hamburg Miscellany (Figure 3). A solitary female figure holding a book at the Seder table in the Rylands Haggadah is, however, something very unusual and cries for explanation.¹⁵



Figure 3. Illustration at the beginning of *Ha Lahma Anya* (This is the Bread of Affliction), Hamburg Miscellany, around Mainz, 1420s–1430s; Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. hebr. 37, folio 24r.

The beginning of the text of this section of the Haggadah is framed by panels populated with vine branches and an ape-like creature in the inner margin, by animals and hybrids in the upper margin, and by two human figures and a dog in the outer margin. The upper human figure is a bearded man holding an open book, and beneath him is a figure wrapped in a white shawl, probably a woman, bending forward holding a closed book. Beneath the main text, in the lower margin there is a table with a woman and a freestanding rail with a towel next to it. She is holding an open book in her left hand and pointing to the text with her right hand. However, she is not looking down at the text reading, but gazing up either towards the main text or towards the male figure in the outer frame. The posture of her figure and the drapery folds of her robe do not make it clear whether she is standing, sitting, or reclining.

In order to find a feasible interpretation, we have to step outside of the Jewish realm and have a look at the wider cultural context first. In the late fourteenth–early fifteenth century, the motif of a woman reading or holding a book became more and more widespread in Christian art. Female saints, patrons, and the Virgin Mary herself were portrayed in this way. Several articles have been written about the connection between improving female literacy, female book owners, and these representations (Bell 1982; Sheingorn 1993; Driver 1996; Clanchy 2004; Sand 2014). These studies link the origin of this iconographical development on the one hand, to a change in the representations of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary, and on the other hand, to the increasing number of literate women. In early Christian representations, Mary was often depicted spinning or weaving in Annunciation scenes.¹⁶ In Western Christian art, from the fourteenth century onwards, it became more and more important to emphasize Mary's intellectual excellence, and her piety was often expressed not by spinning humbly but by reading pious literature or meditating with an open book in front of her: most often the Book of Isaiah or a Book of Hours (Bell 1982, p. 761; Sheingorn 1993, p. 69; Clanchy 2013, p. 193).¹⁷ On a panel painting of the Annunciation from Salzburg, contemporary with our Haggadah, Mary is shown kneeling at a lectern with an open book on top and turning towards the approaching angel (Figure 4). While on this representation, the book Mary is reading cannot be identified, the Annunciation on a mural in the parish church of Velemér, Hungary (painted by Johannes Aquila in 1378) portrays Mary reading a prayer book open at the hymn 'The Magnificat'. In the same scene in the Très Belles Heures Notre-Dame, Mary is reading the Book of Isaiah, which is open at verse 7:14: "ecce virgo concipiet, et pariet filium, et vocabitur nomen ejus Emmanuel" (BnF, NAL. 3093, f. 1v).

Since Mary embodied the ideal woman and has served as a role model for Christian women, this new way of representing her had an impact on the representation of other female characters. It should not come as a surprise, then, that female book owners wanted to be, or at least wanted to look, just as pious as the Virgin Mary. The portrait of the Duchess de Berry in the margin of her husband's Book of Hours clearly demonstrates this desire to emulate the Virgin.¹⁸ For similar reasons, reading a book has also become an attribute of female saints (Driver 1996, pp. 86–89).¹⁹

On the other hand, the representation of women reading was not only symbolic. Portraying the Virgin, the paragon of female virtue, reading was also reflecting reality. The rise in the number of female readers had an influence not only on the depictions of female patrons but on the iconography of the Virgin Mary herself (Bell 1982, p. 762).



Figure 4. Annunciation to Mary; panel painting, Salzburg 1430–1440; Salzburg, Salzburg Museum. Credit: © Salzburg Museum.

The entire posture of our lady in the Rylands Haggadah recalls Christian depictions of these saints and patrons and especially depictions of the Virgin Mary. The colours of her dress—blue and pink—are the traditional colours of Mary’s clothes. Her hair is long and loose, just like that of the young Mary. On the other side of the table, there are a towel, a basin, and an ewer. In the context of a Passover Haggadah, these objects must primarily refer to the *netilat yadamim*, the ritual of washing of the hands that happens at certain points during Seder. However, they also evoke a Marian ambience, as they often appear in the background of Annunciation images symbolizing Mary’s purity and chastity (Panofsky 1966, pp. 137 and 414 n6; Ainsworth 1998, p. 90).²⁰

What could be the reason for this apparent similarity to Christian representations of female characters? Katrin Kogman-Appel has argued that similarly to Christian depictions, certain images of women in illustrated Jewish manuscripts served as portraits of the patrons. Not portraits in the modern sense of the word, but as she has put it: “reflections of themselves” (Kogman-Appel 2012, pp. 537–38; 2014, p. 123). Could the lady in our Haggadah be such a “reflection” of a real person? Perhaps someone in the family of Rabbi Abraham Katzenelnbogen, who presumably copied the manuscript?²¹ In the absence of hard evidence, we can only speculate about the exact identity of the woman in question. Be that as it may, if the lady was meant to be the representation of a real person, she may have wanted to appear as it was fashionable at the time: a pious lady reading a book, and so the painter of this Jewish manuscript turned to well-known visual models.

2.1. The Ideal Woman

As I have shown, Christian images of women with books and their connection to the Virgin Mary originate from the Christian concept of the ideal woman. If we assume that the depiction of the lady in the Haggadah is rooted in the same visual culture, another question arises. To what extent did fifteenth-century German Jews and Christians share the concept of the ideal woman?

At first glance, the ideal Jewish woman may look very different from her Christian counterpart. For a Jewish woman, the ideal path was becoming a wife and bear children, thereby fulfilling the mitzvah of procreation. In Christian society, on the other hand, the ideal path for a woman was not necessarily marriage. There was also the option of joining a monastic order, and devoting her life to chastity was widely considered the superior way of life to wedlock.²² For instance, Saint Paul, whose influence on that status of women in Christian culture was significant, in his First letter to Corinthians (Chapter 7), is often understood to express a similar opinion when advocating sexual asceticism. He says that because of the temptation, those who cannot exercise self-control should marry. “For it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Corinthians 7:9). This may be interpreted as implying that marriage is only the second-best choice.²³

However, a closer look of the textual evidence (written entirely by men!) reveals certain characteristics that were crucial in both cultures: to balance their alleged shortcomings such as limited intelligence and a tendency to frivolity and licentiousness, women were expected to be submissive and modest. This concept shaped women’s place in society: they had restricted legal rights and were usually confined to the domestic sphere of life. It is increasingly recognised that geographical proximity, social interactions, and economic ties inevitably have resulted in shared cultural elements between coexisting Christian and Jewish societies throughout the ages.²⁴ The perception of womanhood was thus no exception. Consequently, the image of the ideal woman was also similar: modest, quiet, and industrious.

Spinning and working diligently in silence have been associated with the domestic sphere since Antiquity (McMurray Gibson 1990; Gines Taylor 2018). As mentioned above, from early Christian times the Virgin Mary was often depicted spinning or weaving industriously in a domestic environment. Jewish sources paint a similar picture about their virtuous women. In his eulogy for his wife and daughters, Rabbi Elazar of Worms (d. 1238), one of the leading characters of the *Hasidei Ashkenaz*, describing his daughters’ modesty said

the following: “she serves her Creator and spins and sews and embroiders, filled with fear and love of her Maker without fault”. Quoting a Talmudic passage, the fourteenth-century Ashkenazi rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer ben Samuel ha-Levi of Mainz refers to his daughters in his will in a similar tone: they “should not sit idle without labour, for idleness leads to boredom and to licentiousness: they should either spin or cook or sew”.²⁵

2.2. Studying and Praying Jewish Women: *Nashim Hakhamim* and *Nashim Hasidot*

Zooming out to the wider context again, we have seen that from the fourteenth century onwards, this image of the ideal woman sitting in her house spinning quietly was, to a certain degree, complemented with a more intellectual activity: reading. Owning and reading a prayer book or a psalter was a sign of piety, and according to the evidence (wills, inventories, and dedications) in the fourteenth and especially fifteenth century, the number of female book owners increased (Bell 1982, pp. 744–47; Clanchy 2004, p. 108).

What about Jewish women? Does the representation of the lady reading a book reflect the reality of fifteenth-century Ashkenaz? What sort of education did Jewish women receive and what did they read? The tannaitic sage Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus said, “Whoever teaches his daughter Torah is as if he teaches her *tiflut* [promiscuity/frivolity]” (Mishnah Sotah 3:4). The argument was that educating women will increase their wisdom, and consequently their craftiness, and may enable them to deceive their husbands, which will eventually lead to unfaithfulness. Moreover, formal education would mean stepping out of the domestic sphere and interacting with nonfamily members, which could potentially damage the reputation of a young woman. Although Rabbi Eliezer’s view was widely accepted by medieval Jewish sages, and teaching Torah to women was a problematic question, it becomes clear from the sources that these harsh principles were not followed to the letter. Many rabbinical authorities later interpreted Eliezer’s opinion in a more lenient way. According to Maimonides, for instance, Rabbi Eliezer only meant the teaching of the Oral Torah.²⁶ In the circles of the pietistic group called *Haside Ashkenaz*, teaching *halakhah* (Jewish law) to one’s daughter was considered one of the father’s obligations. Otherwise, how would she observe the *mitsvot* (religious commandments) properly? One of the most important Ashkenazi rabbinical authorities of the late fourteenth—early fifteenth century, Rabbi Jacob Möllin (the Maharil), who is mentioned in the manuscript several times, also interpreted the prohibition in a narrow sense: in his opinion the prohibition against teaching Torah only refers to teaching by the father, but the girl is allowed to study Torah by herself. He is also permitted to teach women *halakhah* orally, since they would need to know the *mitsvot* they have to observe (Grossman 2004, pp. 155–73; Maharil [1881] 1974, pp. 81–82, responsum 199).

Clearly, there was not real consensus among medieval rabbinical authorities regarding female education. Textual evidence suggests that, in general, education of girls and young women was very limited and covered only the essentials throughout the medieval Jewish world with some exceptional cases of educated, knowledgeable women who virtually without exception came from families of the intellectual elite (Grossman 2004, pp. 162–65).²⁷ More specifically in Ashkenaz, a significant shift can be detected in the status of women within the Jewish community from the twelfth century onward. This manifested not only in their improved position in the marital relationship and their increasingly important role in economic life and religious practices but also in their growing opportunities to receive some sort of education (Goldin 2011).²⁸

From what has been discussed above, it does not seem unrealistic that a young woman from a learned family in fifteenth-century Ashkenaz would have received some education and would be able to read books either in Hebrew or in the local vernacular.²⁹ This is also supported by further visual evidence: though our representation of a solitary young woman holding the book at the Seder table is unique, from the fifteenth century onwards images of women using books—holding them, pointing to them, or interacting with them—in Ashkenazi Haggadot is not unusual (Kogman-Appel 2012). The prime example of this

is the illustration programme of the First Darmstadt Haggadah (Darmstadt, Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt, Cod. Or. 8, see especially folios 37v [Figure 5] and 48v).

The lady at the Seder table holding an open book with one hand pointing at the text suggests that she is taking an active part in the Seder. Therefore, a further question is as follows: to what degree could Ashkenazi women participate in religious rituals? In the Talmud, when discussing the religious duties, women are often grouped together with servants and children, who are exempt from the obligation to perform numerous positive *mitsvot*.³⁰ Consequently, they were not expected to fully participate in religious life. Medieval rabbinical authorities interpreted the Talmudic positions in various ways. As Avraham Grossman has demonstrated, Ashkenazi authorities were more lenient in allowing women to participate in the synagogue service than their Sephardi colleagues.³¹ Starting in the eleventh century, not least due to their increasing economic role, Jewish women in Ashkenaz were allowed to participate in religious worship more actively than before. Though according to the *halakhah* women were exempt from most time-bound positive commandments, written sources testify that many Ashkenazi rabbis allowed them to recite blessing over time-bound positive commandments. Consequently, there must have been women who actually wanted to fulfil these *mitsvot*. The sources also talk about women participating in the synagogue worship, attending services on a regular basis, singing liturgical poems, reciting lamentations, and so on. According to the Ashkenazi Pietist Rabbi Eleazar of Worms (early 13th century; mentioned in the commentaries of our Haggadah), his wife Dulcia attended the synagogue on a regular basis and even taught other women how to pray. We have similar records from the early fourteenth-century Mainz about women regularly attending the synagogue. Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg even allowed for women to read the Torah during the service under certain conditions (Goldin 2011, pp. 173–74).³²

And what about the home? Ashkenazi women undoubtedly played an important role in religious family ceremonies taking place in the domestic sphere. Running up to and during Passover, they were allowed to search for the *hamets*, and they were required to recline at the Seder table. The former rule was in accordance with the Talmud, but the latter one was a permissive interpretation of the Talmudic opinion. The sages of the Babylonian Talmud said that women who are with their husbands do not have to recline during the Seder meal, unless they are important women, in which case, they do. The reason for this was that women in general are not entirely free due to their being subordinate to their husbands and eating in a reclined position symbolised one's freedom. Still, the majority of the Ashkenazi rabbis held the opinion that all women in their communities fell into the category of "important women" and thus have to recline at Seder: "All of our women are important women, and they need to recline".³³

The young woman depicted in our Haggadah with an open book in her hands takes an active part in the Seder ritual. She may represent a relative of the learned Rabbi Abraham ben Asher Katzenelnbogen, the person to whom the production of the Haggadah is attributed, and who belonged to the intellectual elite, and who did not only copy the text of the Haggadah but surrounded that with commentaries. As we have shown, in an Ashkenazi rabbi's family it is not unimaginable to have a young woman who is able to read the Haggadah and engage in the discussion during Seder.

So far, I have examined three relevant factors that can shed some light on the peculiar representation of the young lady in the Haggadah. First, the developments in Christian attitude toward the ideal woman and its influence on iconography and visual culture. Second, some of the fundamental ideas about the ideal woman shared by medieval Christian and Ashkenazi Jewish society. Third, the relatively lenient Ashkenazi attitude toward the education of women and their participation in the religious sphere both in the synagogue and at home. These factors can at least partially explain this peculiar iconography of the *Ha Lahma* in the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah. However, given the complexity of Jewish–Christian relationships in medieval Ashkenaz, and the immense symbolic power of images in medieval European culture, it would be too easy to accept this as a fully sat-

isfactory explanation. Let us not forget: Jews were not only influenced by, but also in rivalry with, Christian culture, and the visual discourse between them often had a polemical edge.³⁴ They may have shared a common visual language but the same motifs often had entirely different meanings in the two cultures (Buda 2016, pp. 315–34). The phenomenon of inward acculturation, taking a motif from the surrounding culture and incorporating it into one's own culture, should be taken into consideration when analysing the visual similarity between the miniature in the Haggadah and Christian representations of the Virgin Mary.³⁵



Figure 5. Full-page illustration at the beginning of *Shefokh hamatkha* (Pour out your wrath) in the First Darmstadt Haggadah; Heidelberg, 1430; Cod. Or. 8., folio 37v. Credit: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt.

2.3. Jewish Parallels of the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary and the Jews of medieval Europe had a lot to do with each other, and stories about her often feature Jews as Mary's adversaries who reject Christian doctrines regarding her virginity and her status as the mother of God. The anti-Jewish elements of the Marian cult and the outright polemical response it triggered in Jewish literature have been discussed in scholarship (Rubin 1999, pp. 7–27; 2004, pp. 8–9; Bale 2010, pp. 90–117; Ihnat 2016, pp. 1–15). However, there were other, less direct, and more subtle ways in which the Jews responded to the growing importance of the Virgin Mary in Western Christianity. Several studies have been written about the similarity between Mary and the Jewish matriarch Rachel, and Mary and the kabbalistic concept of Shekhinah, and how these characters were reshaped over time to provide a response to the Marian cult (Green 2002, pp. 1–52; Koren 2017, pp. 225–53). Ephraim Shoham-Steiner, in his article about Jewish reactions to the Marian cult, focuses on the figure of Miriam and her similarity to the Virgin in medieval Jewish sources (Shoham-Steiner 2013, pp. 75–91). By reshaping certain Jewish characters like Miriam and emphasising their “Marian” features, such as motherly love, charity, and compassion, Jews hoped to deflect the seductive power of the Marian cult. In late twelfth-century Jewish sources, Miriam became more and more similar to the Virgin Mary and came to be invested with redemptive power, as Shoham-Steiner convincingly argues, to counterbalance Mary. Apart from inward acculturation, says Shoham-Steiner, this “inner empowerment” of Jewish female figures was another possible way to respond to challenges coming from the surrounding society.

In her recent article, Karen Blough discusses the adaptation of the iconography of the enthroned Madonna in the First Darmstadt Haggadah produced in Ulm around 1430, that is, contemporary and geographically in close proximity to the Rylands Haggadah. According to Blough, the subversion of the Christian iconography—depicting the woman holding a book instead of the Christ Child—had a polemical aspect: rejecting the Christian claim that the Old Testament was superseded by the coming of Christ (Blough 2020, p. 10).

It seems to me that the Mary-like lady at the Seder table in the Rylands Haggadah can be interpreted in a similar way. Her visual resemblance to female Christian donors, saints, and ultimately the Virgin Mary was meant to be more than simply a sign of piety and more than a way to portray the woman in question in an idealised and fashionable way. It could have been meant as a statement: this lady is just as great and pious as your most pious women, and particularly as your Virgin Mary. We have our own Virgin Marys! That is, it could be interpreted as an empowerment of a Jewish female figure, in this case not a biblical but a contemporary figure.

2.4. “This Is the Table Which Is in the Presence of God”

Although I described the lady as solitary at the Seder table, there are other human figures on the folio within the border of the composition: a man and a woman.³⁶ Interestingly, both of them facing away from the page, into the same direction the lady at the table is gazing. Are they directing the attention of the reader outside the manuscript? The same section of the Haggadah is illustrated with a similar inhabited border in the First Darmstadt Haggadah (folio 10v; Figure 6a). The two men standing in a gothic vault at the two sides of the initial-word panel are very similar to the bearded man in the Rylands Haggadah (Figure 6b) but they both face towards the text.³⁷



Figure 6. (a) Illustration at the beginning of *Ha Lakhma* in the First Darmstadt Haggadah; Heidelberg, 1430; Cod. Or. 8., folio 10v. Credit: Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt. (b) Illustration at the beginning of *Ha Lakhma Anya* (This is the Bread of Affliction); Manchester, JRL, Hebrew MS 7, folio 5a.

It is worth noticing that if we follow the lady's gaze, it looks as if she was gazing either at the main text or the bearded man in the frame. Not only that, also the posture of the two figures—the lady at the table and the man in the frame—is very similar. This axis between these two figures seems to be a crucial focal point of the composition. Although the lady is the bigger figure, which in visual context usually means that she is the more important, she seems to pay thorough attention to the man and imitate his action. A possible interpretation of the composition is that the young woman as a diligent pupil follows the example of her master. One might take this thought even further: although she is an educated woman, she achieved this status by following the example of a male sage. Interestingly, Abraham Löwy, Crawford's cataloguer, interpreted the connection between these two figures in a somewhat similar way: "The pater familias reads the service in the cartouche on the left side, the daughter of the house (perhaps this is a portrait of the child of the original owner of the MS) has a Passover ritual before her...."

The other figure in the right side of the border holds a book under the left armpit and leans forward slightly. There is no consensus about its gender, but the fact that its legs are entirely covered by its cloak, the lack of any facial hair, and the headgear indicate that this figure is most likely female (Offenberg 2019, p. 119). It is possible that she holds an object in her outstretched right hand, but due to the damage in the paintwork it is not possible to establish what the object is. It is not entirely clear what she is doing or which element of the Seder ritual she is performing here, but her posture—leaning forward with the head bowing down—indicates that she may be praying.³⁸ An in-depth interpretation of these two characters in the frame requires further study. Be that as it may, the fact that there are altogether three human figures in this composition is significant since it correlates to the Mishnaic statement cited in the marginal commentary under the Seder table:³⁹

"This is my God and I enshrine God, my forefathers' God, and I will exalt God.' [Ex. 15:2], which starts in the same way as the verse "This is the table which is in the presence of God" [Ezekiel 41:22]. As our rabbis said in the Mishnah: 'Three who eat together at one

table and speak the words of Torah, it is as if they had eaten at the table of God' as it is written 'And he said to me This is the table which is in the presence of God'".⁴⁰

3. Conclusions

Ashkenazi Jews living among Christians were inevitably exposed to the surrounding visual culture, and the artefacts they created often demonstrate an awareness and understanding of Christian iconography. Taking over elements of the host culture and filling them with new, Jewish meaning, they adapted Christian visual tropes for their own purposes. The figure of a solitary young woman holding a book at the beginning of the main narrative section in the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah is based on Christian representations of female patrons, saints, and the Virgin Mary herself. The similarity can be explained at two levels. First, as we have demonstrated, the concept of the 'ideal woman' was to some degree shared in Jewish and Christian culture of the period. Therefore, similarly to Christian female patrons, depicting the young lady, very likely a family member of the copyist Rabbi Abraham Katzenelnbogen, in this way could have served as an expression of her pious nature. Secondly, the authorship of the Haggadah may have deliberately drawn a visual parallel between the lady in the Haggadah and the Virgin Mary in order to challenge the latter's unique position in Christianity and counterweight her omnipresent cult.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Manchester, The John Rylands Library, Hebrew MS 7. The manuscript is fully digitised and available here: <https://www.digitalcollections.manchester.ac.uk/view/MS-HEBREW-00007/1> (accessed on 22 January 2022).
- ² 'The Other Within'—The Hebrew and Jewish Collections of The John Rylands Library, conference held at The John Rylands Library, Monday 27–Wednesday 29 June 2016.
- ³ The Bibliotheca Lindesiana, see for instance Guppy (1946).
- ⁴ The handwritten notes can be consulted at the John Rylands Library, The University of Manchester. On Albert Löwy, see (Epstein 2004; Rubinstein 2011).
- ⁵ Müller and von Schlosser dated it to the late 15th-early 16th century (Müller et al. 1898, p. 181) while the Metzgers dated it to the 1430s (Metzger and Metzger 1982, p. 305, entry *123).
- ⁶ Ulm Mahzor (Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Kaufmann Collection, MS A 371 and MS A 383; for the digital copy, see https://www.nli.org.il/en/discover/manuscripts/hebrew-manuscripts/viewerpage?vid=MANUSCRIPTS&docid=PNX_MANUSCRIPTS990001916600205171-1 (accessed on 18 April 2023). and https://www.nli.org.il/En/discover/manuscripts/hebrew-manuscripts/viewerpage?vid=MANUSCRIPTS&docid=PNX_MANUSCRIPTS990001916810205171-1 (accessed on 18 April 2023). I had a chance to see Gabrielle Sed-Rajna's notes on the Rylands Ashkenazi Haggadah at the John Rylands Library. See also, Narkiss and Sed-Rajna (1988, card 3). Sed-Rajna only mentions A 383, but a recent study has shown that it is the continuation of MS A 371, another liturgical volume in the Kaufmann Collection (Richler 2002, p. 24); see also Shalev-Eyni (2021). There is an obvious similarity between the palaeographical features and the artistic style of this manuscript and another Ashkenazi liturgical codex, the Hamburg Miscellany (Hamburg, SUB, cod. hebr. 37); see Buda (2012, p. 46).
- ⁷ The rite of Ulm is also mentioned in the manuscript (on folios 142r and 180v). Narkiss and Sed-Rajna have suggested that it may have been produced in Ulm, thus the name 'Ulm Mahzor' (Narkiss and Sed-Rajna 1988).
- ⁸ Michal Sternthal, The Ulm Workshop of Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts in the 15th Century. Lecture delivered in the 16th World Congress of Jewish Studies, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 28 July–1 August 2013; more on Abraham ben Asher Katzenelnbogen, see (Shalev-Eyni 2021, pp. 370–71; Yuval 1988, p. 168 n9; Maimon et al. 1995, III/2, p. 1190 13b: 7). Jacob Weil (the Mahariv, died before 1456), in turn, was an important pupil of Jacob Möllin (the Maharil, died in 1427), who is mentioned in the Haggadah.

- ⁹ The same word *avo* is marked in the Ulm Mahzor quoting Exodus 20:21 (A 383 folio 79v), though the gloss is missing. The name Abraham is also marked on folios 12a, 15b, 29a. There are some acronyms of other names marked: Berman? (commentary in the outer margin of folio 1b), Judah (outer margin, folio 2b), Isaac (main text, folio 46a), and Solomon (main text, folio 46b), see [Italianer \(1927, p. 223\)](#).
- ¹⁰ See, for instance, A 383, folios 3r, 3v, 17r, and A 371, 18r, 30r, 39r, 50v, 55v, and 61v.
- ¹¹ An early modern note on folio 50b interprets this reference to Rabbi Judah ben Kalonymus as the teacher of the scribe of the manuscript and thus dates the manuscript to 1240–1245, and Müller bases his dating of the manuscript on this note (at least the date of production of the text; he dates the illustrations to the late 15th–early 16th century; Müller, Schlosser, and Kaufmann ([Müller et al. 1898](#), pp. 181–82)). This dating is clearly erroneous. The person who mentions Rabbi Judah as his teacher was not the scribe of our Haggadah, but probably a 13th-century commentator who belonged to the circle of the Hasidei Asheknaz. The Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah must be a later copy of the 13th-century manuscript, the scribe of which was a pupil of Rabbi Judah ([Müller et al. 1898](#), pp. 182–83).
- ¹² See for example the note in the outer margin of folio 32a. Parts of the Sefer Minhagim (Book of Customs) by the Maharil is included in the Ulm Mahzor.
- ¹³ Joel ben Simeon's Mahzor according to the Italian rite at the National Library of Israel contains a similar representation but there the matzah has the more usual round shape (Ms. Heb. 8°4450, f. 120v).
- ¹⁴ For an overview of this iconography and its origin, see [Buda \(2012, pp. 150–63\)](#).
- ¹⁵ Sara Offenberg has analysed this miniature in great detail ([Offenberg 2019](#), pp. 112–18). In this article I offer an alternative interpretation that does not aim to challenge but complement Offenberg's analysis. On the representations of women at the seder table, see [Kogman-Appel \(2012, pp. 526–31\)](#).
- ¹⁶ This iconography can be traced back to the story of young Mary's life in eight-century Latin Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and to the second-century Greek Protevangelion of James ([McMurray Gibson 1990](#), pp. 46–47). The scene of Mary weaving or spinning has been interpreted in various ways. In her recent book, Catherine Gines Taylor discussing the origins of this iconography emphasises the significance of the concept of Mary as the paragon of the industrious matron who is in the centre of Christian family life, as opposed to the later interpretation of Mary as an ascetic virgin ([Gines Taylor 2018](#), pp. 1–8).
- ¹⁷ The Virgin Mary reading is mentioned in the early medieval apocryphal book called the Gospel of Pseudo Matthew and the thirteenth-century *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend) by Jacobus Voragine, though never in connection with the Annunciation ([Bell 1982](#), pp. 761–62).
- ¹⁸ Très Belles Heures Notre-Dame, ca.1380, Paris, BnF, Ms. nouv. acq. lat. 3093, f. 1v.
- ¹⁹ See for instance Saint Barbara in a 15th-century Moravian Missale (Missale, Wien, ÖNB, cod. 1775; Moravia 1455–1465); The relationship of this iconography with contemporary reality is more complex than that. According to Bell, the increasing popularity of depictions of women reading was also connected to the female literacy, and went hand in hand with more and more “women using Books of Hours in their home” ([Bell 1982](#), p. 111).
- ²⁰ See for instance Annunciation to Mary, (winged altarpiece, St. Peter, Erzabtzimmer; Salzburg, 1475–1485; <https://realonline.imareal.sbg.ac.at/en/detail/nr-002241> (accessed on 4 February 2016)) also Robert Campin's Merode Triptych, around 1427–1432 and Konrad von Friesach, Annunciation, St Leonhard-Altar, Stadtmuseum Friesach, mid-15th century, Carinthia, Austria.
- ²¹ As we have mentioned, the name Abraham when it appears in the Ashkenazi Rylands Haggadah is marked probably referring to Rabbi Katzenelnbogen. In one occasion, it is marked with a hand holding a circular object (folio 47a). Sara Offenberg has raised the possibility of the object being a wedding ring. Offenberg claims that the production of the manuscript might have been connected to a wedding and the lady at the Seder table would be the bride, and the manuscript could have been an engagement gift from Abraham to his fiancée. Apart from the ring, the prominent size of the female figure in the composition, and her hairstyle characteristic of unmarried women all support this hypothesis ([Offenberg 2019](#), pp. 114–15). A hand holding a similar circular object marking the name Abraham also appears in the Ulm Mahzor (A383 folio 81r). However, in other *loci* of the Mahzor, there are hands holding other objects too: for instance a staff (or a paint brush?) (A371 folio 39r) or a blossoming branch (A383 folio 3r, 5v), or a knife (A383 folio 42a). Further research is needed to explore what these objects could signify and whether the circular object can indeed be interpreted as a ring.
- ²² St Jerome explicitly preferred virginity over wedlock ([St. Jerome 1963](#)).
- ²³ However, see Deming's analysis of Paul on challenging this interpretation ([Deming 2004](#), pp. 210–13). See also 1 Timothy 2:12–14.
- ²⁴ The impact of courtly culture in the Sefer Hasidim has been pointed out by several scholars; see [Harris \(1959, pp. 13–44\)](#).
- ²⁵ Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Ketubot 59b. Abraham Grossmann has pointed out that the status of women in the medieval Jewish context was influenced not only by halakhah, but also by economic realities of the time and the influence of the majority society ([Grossman 2004](#), p. 9).
- ²⁶ Maimondes, *Mishneh Torah*, Talmud Torah 1:13.
- ²⁷ For a comparison of the education of Jewish and Christian women during the Middle Ages, see [Baskin \(1991\)](#).

- 28 As Goldin explains, especially after the atrocities against certain Ashkenazi Jewish communities during First Crusade (1096) and the victorious Christian military campaign in the Holy Land (1099), the Ashkenazi community leaders felt that their survival in Christian society was at risk (both theologically and physically). Tension between Christians and Jews increased and the number of converts from Judaism to Christianity increased. Jewish community leaders therefore attempted to strengthen the social cohesion of their communities. Acknowledging the central role of women in the family, “the backbone society”, they set out to improve their status (Goldin 2011, p. 2). For a more comprehensive survey of the state of research on the education of Jewish women, see (Kogman-Appel 2012, pp. 541–45; Grossman 2004, pp. 154–73).
- 29 Opinions on medieval Jewish women’s knowledge of Hebrew differ, see Kogman-Appel (2012, p. 542 n33).
- 30 Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 20b.
- 31 The latter were concerned that women would not have time having to do the housework and to look after the children (e.g., Rabbi David Abudarham and Rabbi Elijah Capsali of Candia); see Grossman (2004, p. 180).
- 32 Their keenness to perform positive *mitsvot* seemed to some of the rabbis as arrogance; see Baumgarten (2014, pp. 163–64).
- 33 Mordekhai, Pesahim 237b, see Grossman (2004, p. 300, n22).
- 34 (Tartakoff 2015, pp. 730–31), and for further literature see idem 731, n10.
- 35 The term “inward acculturation” was coined by Ivan Markus (Markus 1996, p. 111).
- 36 There is a very close similarity between the man standing within the border of the miniature under a gothic vault and the male figures in the miniature at *Ha Lakhma* in the First Darmstadt Haggadah (folio 10v).
- 37 Another similarity between the two compositions in the presence of hybrids in the upper band of the frame. Note the leonine creature wearing a cloak in the upper left side of both composition.
- 38 Compare, for instance, to the praying figures in the Forli Siddur (London, British Library, Add MS 26968, folios 290r, 301r).
- 39 This is not the only case in this Haggadah, when the marginal commentary linked directly to the adjacent miniature. See, for instance, the commentary in the outer margin of folio 14a: ‘it is taught that each woman gave birth to sextuplets [six children in the same womb] and so that the earth was filled with them.’ The adjacent miniature depicts a meadow full with children. For more on this unique iconography, see Offenber (2019, pp. 120–22).
- 40 מקום של משולחנן אכלו כאילו תורה דברי עליו ואמרו אחד שולחן על שאכלו שלש בפרקים רבתי כדאמ: יי לפני אשר השולחן זה ת”ר וארוממנה אבי אלהי ואנהו אלי זה וכו’ השולחן זה אלי וידבר ש’נאמ. For the complete Mishnaic dictum see Mishnah, Avot 3:3. According to Barry Kenter, images of Seder tables in medieval Haggadot often “serve as a counterweight to the ever-present Christian representations of sacred tables”, and they appropriate the baldachin motif, which in a Christian context signifies sacred space—in order to turn their tables to sacred spaces too (Kenter 2014, pp. 66–67). The question whether the table and the quote from the Mishnah or Ezekiel might carry any polemical hints referring to the Christian communion, and to the Lord’s table requires further research. See also Offenber (2019, pp. 117–18).

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