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Pictorial Messages in Mediaeval Illuminated Hebrew Books: Some Methodological Considerations

Abstract: The three-way relationship between patrons, artists, and viewers poses some crucial methodological questions that have been considered repeatedly and intensely in the recent art-historical discourse on illuminated manuscripts. If we are to decipher meanings or explicit messages of images correctly, we ought to attend first to the question of who would have determined these meanings and messages and who would have designed the overall appearance of the images and their specific features. An artistic mind aware of the full potential of the impact the visual has on any given viewer's perception, perhaps? Or a patron with a particular theological or political agenda? To whom would such messages have been addressed? Would the potential addressees only have been erudite viewers or might they have been uneducated individuals as well? Art can function as an active message bearer on the one hand or as a more passive reflector of social and cultural circumstances on the other. This paper discusses several test cases and views them in the light of recent methodological considerations in the field. It revisits a few themes that I have discussed on various occasions in the past and attempts to put them into a methodological framework that centers around two core issues: first, the three-way relationship between the patron, the artist (or rather, the illuminator), and the viewer; and second, the hierarchy of the textual and the visual when it comes to integrating works of art in the complex fabric of cultural and social life.

For some years now, scholarship in the field of mediaeval art in general and book illumination in particular has been concerned with the three-way relationship between patrons, artists, and 'viewers,' the last being the consumers of art objects, so to speak. If we are to decipher the meanings or explicit messages of images, we should know who would have determined these meanings and messages within this triangle and who would have designed the overall appearance of these images and their specific features. Was it an artistic mind aware of the full potential of the impact the visual has on any given viewer's perception? A patron with a particular theological or political agenda? To whom would such messages have been addressed? Would the potential addressees be only erudite viewers or might they have been uneducated individuals as well?

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Patronage and patrons' agendas have influenced any number of projects in art history since the late 1970s. An early example of this trend was a collective volume about patronage in English mediaeval art by Macready and Thompson.[1] In more recent years, questions of patronage have also begun to interest scholars of Hebrew manuscripts.[2] Any pictorial rendering of a religious myth or an idea can function either as an active message-bearer or as a more passive reflector of social and cultural circumstances. Recent scholarship has regarded the patron not only as the paying commissioner (often perhaps with a political agenda), but as an agent with a crucial function in both the making of an artwork and its life within the community that views it.[3]

In what follows, I shall briefly revisit a few topics that I have discussed on various occasions in the past and attempt to put them into a methodological framework that centers around two core issues: first, the three-way relationship between the patron, the artist (or rather, the illuminator), and the viewer; and second, the hierarchy of the textual and the visual when it comes to integrating works of art in the complex fabrics of cultural and social life. I summarize my examples very briefly and focus on their relevance to these points. Even though these issues relate to art-historical methods in general in relation to a broader cultural framework, I make a special case for book art, which has suffered from a painful detachment from its immediate material context for too long: the book. I discuss books and their broader cultural and social contexts with a focus on the role they played in mediaeval societies. The following paragraphs are designed to provide a general sketch of the *status quaestionis* of the study of book art in relation to patronage within the mediaeval Jewish context, but points out *desiderata* and open questions as well.

First of all, we should address the question of how far we may assume that what we now call mediaeval 'art' (a term that can only be detached from modern and postmodern connotations of art with difficulty)[4] could or could not have functioned as a message-bearer. The historiography of mediaeval art has occasionally been subject to criticism, especially in recent discourse, when claims have been made that iconographic research is overly occupied with dealing with art's communicative qualities by means of messages in an almost verbal sense. This critical direction was also pursued recently in relation to mediaeval Haggadot.[5] Traditional art history, however, leaves more questions open than that of the obviously ambiguous boundaries between text and image: Whose messages

1 Macready/Thompson 1986.

2 Kogman-Appel 2006, chap. 7.

3 Caskey 2006.

4 See, for example, Hughes 2006.

5 Epstein 2010, introduction.

are we dealing with? To whom were and are these messages addressed? These are questions with which art historians are very familiar one way or another.

The notion of art as a means of communication at levels that not only have to do with the transmission of an eloquently formulated message has dominated art-historical research since the 1960s. Around the same time, book history took its own turn toward a broader interpretation of the place the book and its use occupied in society, a point I shall return to later on.[6] Other open questions concern patronage. What exactly was a patron? An individual who commissioned a work of art and paid for it? Or, rather, a person who also determined the appearance of a work of art? Both? What role did patrons play in determining imageries?[7] In other words, what were the mediaeval artist's competences? These are not necessarily new questions, but the means of approaching them are constantly changing and developing. Once art historians began to rethink the conventional methodologies of their traditional discipline and noted that deciphering 'meaning in the visual arts', to cite the title of the famous manifesto by Erwin Panofsky,[8] is a means rather than a goal, reflections on the role of art as a message-bearer took on new directions.

Let us approach my first example with this potential, yet ambiguously defined, capacity of mediaeval art to be a message-bearer in mind. The first Hebrew illuminated book to arouse the interest of modern art historians was a small Haggada that was put up for sale in Sarajevo in the 1890s. The book had been in the possession of one of the families in the Sephardicc community of that city. In need of money, the family sought a buyer for the precious volume. The *Sarajevo Haggada*, as it has since been known, soon made it into the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it is still kept today. Within only a few years, it became the subject of a major publication that attempted to put it within a broader context of both Spanish mediaeval art and Hebrew manuscript illumination.[9]

Like many other illuminated Haggadot from Iberia, the *Sarajevo Haggada* is replete with a full biblical image cycle spanning from Creation to the Israelites' journey through the desert. The Sarajevo cycle is in fact the most extensive one of the entire group. It opens with a double page with eight panels depicting Creation as a continuous narrative (Figs 1 and 2). As I have shown elsewhere together with Shulamit Laderman,[10] at first sight, it echoes numerous Christian parallels. More importantly, it also diverges from those parallels in some significant ways.

6 Finkelstein/McCleery 2005, introduction.
7 Caskey 2006, 196–198.
8 Panofsky 1955.
9 Von Schlosser/Müller 1898; Roth 1963.
10 Kogman-Appel/Laderman 2004; Kogman-Appel 2006, 197–208.

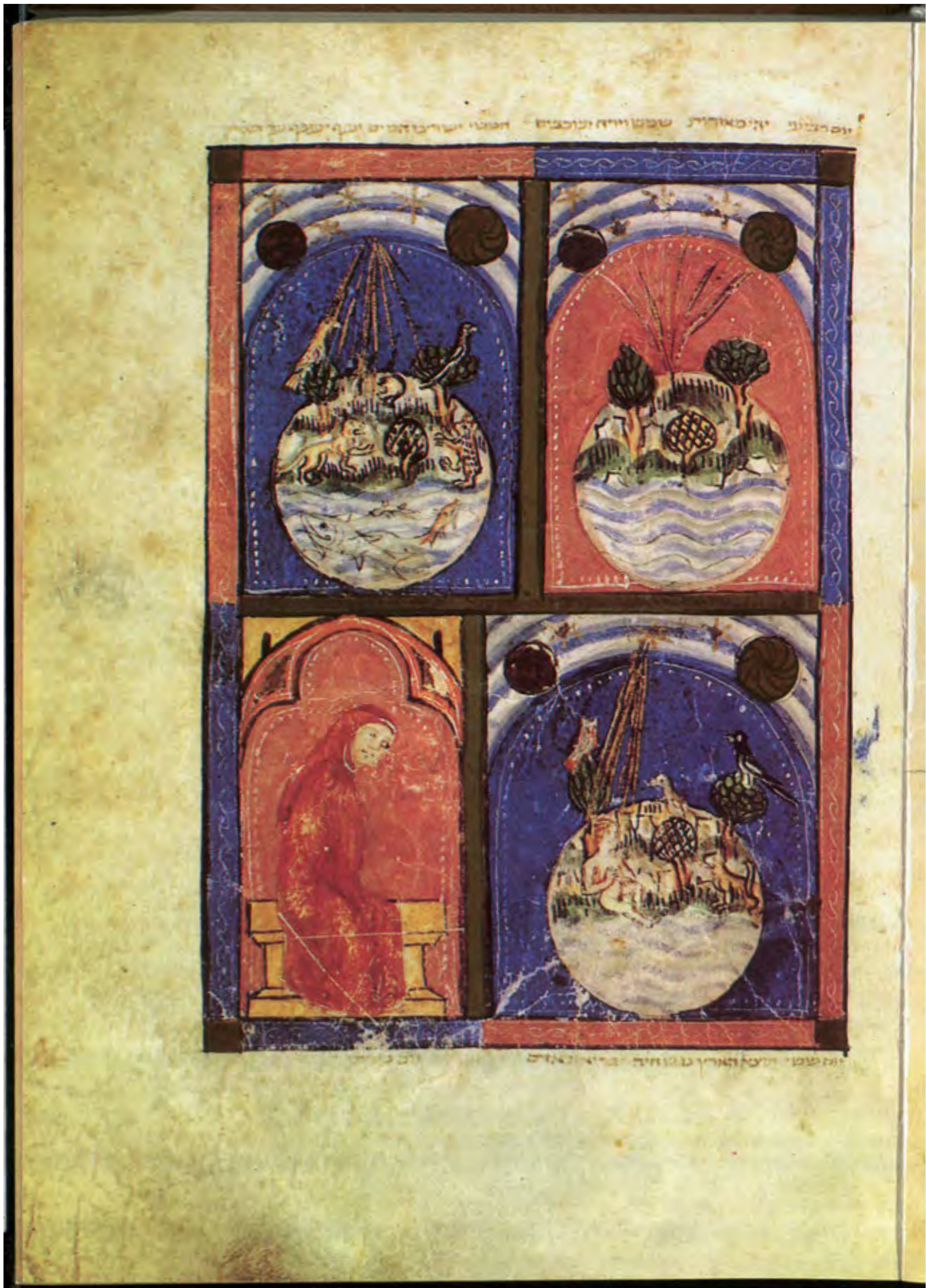

Fig. 1: *Sarajevo Haggada*, Sarajevo, Bosnian National Museum, Crown of Aragon, 14th century, fol. 2r, Creation. Photograph: after Roth 1963.

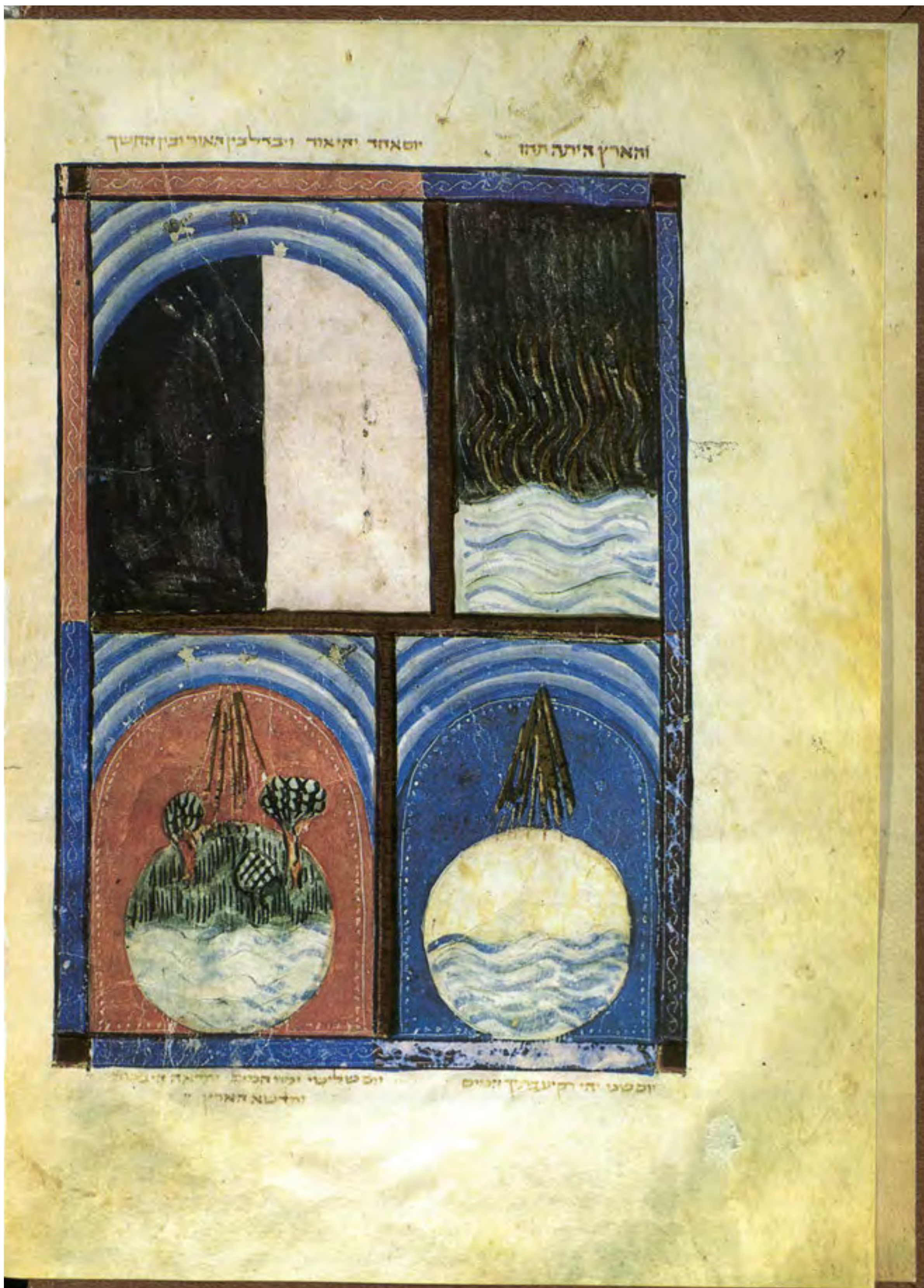

Fig. 2: *Sarajevo Haggada,* Sarajevo, Bosnian National Museum, Crown of Aragon, 14th century, fol. 1v, Creation. Photograph: after Roth 1963.

The tendency in mediaeval Jewish art was to avoid the Creation theme, apparently because of the dominant appearance of the anthropomorphic Logos in countless Christian cycles ever since the early Middle Ages. In view of this deliberate avoidance, the Sarajevo series stands out as a daring enterprise. The cycle does not begin the sequence with the initial act of Creation, as the Christian parallels commonly do. Rather, the Sarajevo series starts with a depiction of the *tohu*, which is commonly referred to in translation as 'chaos' or 'void'.[11] In contrast to the shapelessness of the primeval substance, all the other images are marked with a recurring frame: a rectangle with a rounded top. This framing device echoes a symbolic shape, well known in Jewish art since Antiquity, which usually stands for the Ark of Covenant.[12] The shape geometricizes the boxlike ark together with the *kapporet*, the lid, and the cherubs hovering above it. This motif follows a Midrashic legend about God instructing Moses to build the desert Tabernacle after the model of the created Earth.[13] According to an interpretation by Nachmanides (Moshe ben Naḥman, d. 1270), one of Iberia's most important Bible exegetes, the initial act of Creation was the calling into being of the shapeless *tohu*, the primeval substance from which the rest of the Earth and its creatures were made.[14]

Methodologically speaking, reading this image through the filter of Midrash and Nachmanides' exegesis implies consulting religious thinkers, 'theologians', and introducing them into dialogue with a pictorial whose full meaning was not clear when we first looked at it. Long a central art-historical tool, this method, which is primarily associated with the scholarship of Aby Warburg and Erwin Panofsky, was one of the main targets of critique voiced in the 'New Art History' discourse of the last four decades.[15] In parallel, the 'visual turn' of the recent and current discourse in the historical sciences is aimed at severing the traditional close relationship between religious thought and art history, implying that the visual should be approached primarily on its own terms. In Jeffrey Hamburger's words:

> Whereas theology once claimed supremacy over all the arts, today she no longer serves even as the handmaiden of iconography. In art history, if not always the humanities as a whole,

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11 King James Bible, Gen. 1:1.

12 Revel-Neher 1984.

13 For details, see Kogman-Appel/Laderman 2004, 95–105; on the broader meaning of the shape, see Laderman 2013, 88–98.

14 Moshe ben Nahman, Chavel (ed.) 1971, 17–20.

15 Bann 1996.

> the 'visual turn' champions the visual at the expense of the discursive, despite the resilience of methods, rooted in structuralism and semiotics, that insist on reading images as 'texts'.[16]

However, Hamburger also observes:

> In all their variety theology and exegesis have provided (and will continue to provide) an essential point of reference for writing on medieval art, especially when it comes to the identification and interpretation of the subject matter of medieval images. Many of the most complex monuments of medieval art [...] directly engage theological issues.[17]

Hamburger wrote these words in a book that seeks to reframe 'the relationship between thinking and seeing, perceptions and the imagination...'.[18] Among other considerations, he points out that mediaeval images, though created in one theological context, remained open to reinterpretation by other viewers and consumers who lived outside of that particular context. He notes that 'if [...] one reads commentaries less for what they say than for how they say it, exegesis and theology can once again shed light on the ways, means and methods of mediaeval images'.[19] Further, Christopher G. Hughes points to the fact that mediaeval scholars were well aware of the exegetical potential of pictorial renderings of ideas. In a survey paper about art and exegesis, he offers a few examples of how mediaeval theologians referred to the visual within exegetical frameworks, especially in the 12th century. One of these theologians, in fact, was a patron: Rudiger of Klosterneuburg, who commissioned the altar piece delivered by Nicholas of Verdun in 1181. An inscription on the altar elucidates the connection between the visual and the exegetical as Rudiger saw it.[20]

Our example from the *Sarajevo Haggada* eloquently demonstrates how the visual can underscore exegetical notions. When we consider the choice of a forcefully *visible* geometric shape to depict the *exegetical* notion of created shape, the symbolic value that that shape acquired over the centuries, and the undulating, wavy lines that seem to push the frame of the very first image, it is clear that nothing can emphasize shape and shapelessness as well as the visual means employed here. There is certainly a level of visualization that goes far beyond what a text can do in addressing the senses.

16 Hamburger 2006, 3.
17 Hamburger 2006, 4.
18 Hamburger 2006, 3.
19 Hamburger 2006, 5.
20 Hughes 2006.

Nonetheless, thus far, our reading would be a straightforward application of Panofsky's method. However, Nachmanides' exegesis came into being within a very specific context. Its purpose was simply to provide an explanation of the biblical narrative of Creation. The very first paragraph of his exegetical commentary to the Pentateuch makes his intention clear: 'The simple correct explanation of the verse is as follows: "In the beginning God created the heavens", means He brought forth their matter from nothing'.[21] Nachmanides used that explanation as part of his fierce struggle against allegorism, which in his view questioned the principle of *creatio ex nihilo* and argued in favor of an eternal world. The emphasis on the primeval act of Creation, the *tohu*, was the way he chose to make that point. Hence, this was not simply an issue of theological discourse; it was a matter of ideology, of cultural identity, and went far beyond a proper understanding of the Book of Genesis. The polemic over allegorism is but one aspect of the controversy over Maimonides' teaching and, hence, was part of a much broader scheme that questioned the philosophical method as such and a whole set of values that were associated with traditional sephardicc culture.[22] 'The visual language' in Hamburger's words, again, 'relates to the rhetoric of theological argument'.[23]

This is not the end of the story of this particular image, though: some seventy years after Nachmanides wrote his commentary, a patron wished to commission an illuminated manuscript and chose to employ a certain visual language in an effort to make the same point in a period during which this very culture struggle had entered yet another phase, one which would last for most of the 14th century.[24] Sephardic Haggadot do not have any colophons, but we might thus have found a way to identify the anonymous, unknown patron, at least culturally, if not as a fully defined historical person. With the painting style of the *Sarajevo Haggada* pointing to a location north of the Iberian Peninsula, this patron would most likely have been a wealthy subject of the Crown of Aragon; he would have taken an interest in the scholarship of Nachmanides and his disciples; he would either have been a scholar himself, a late representative of this school, or been close to a mentor or preacher who taught the Nachmanidean worldview.

There are yet more questions: is the image simply a reflection of this or that patron's mindset, or did it turn into a means of communicating a specific leaning within the framework of a culture struggle? Did the patron mean to actively

21 Moshe ben Nahman, Chavel (ed.) 1971, 17.

22 See Silver 1965 for the most exhaustive treatment of the controversy and Ben-Shalom 2000 and Berger 2001 for more recent discussions.

23 Hamburger 2006, 5.

24 Ben-Shalom 2000.

promote a particular message to an audience, or was that simply what he knew about Creation? Who created the visual means of employing the Tabernacle/ Temple symbol as the shape of the created world? The artist? How was the theology communicated to the artist? Was the patron a scholar who knew the theology first hand? Or did he simply have some notion of it already, perhaps from a sermon that communicated that message? Or did the artist learn of it from a sermon, and was he the one who suggested that particular visual solution to the patron? The decision to portray the imagery of Creation in a culture that hitherto had almost vocally distanced itself from that imagery (for various reasons) seems to be a particularly meaningful one. Was it the artist's decision? Or the patron's choice?

Another case in point leads us to the Ashkenazi realm, to an image from the *Leipzig Maḥzor*, produced in the early 14th century for the community of Worms (Fig. 3). The manuscript is now kept in the University Library in Leipzig (Ms. Voller 1002/I–II).[25] The image in the lower margin of the relevant page illustrates the adjacent *piyyuṭ*, a hymn to an unshaken belief in God: *Etan Hikir Emunatkha* ('Firm in Your Belief'). The word *etan* ('firm') is also a name, however, and as such is linked with the figure of a biblical poet whom rabbinic tradition associated with Abraham as the model of steadfast belief. The image does, indeed, offer an exemplary narrative of firm belief and steadfastness, a narrative that is based on one of the most popular Midrashic motifs of all time: Abraham willingly and for the sake of his recently discovered belief in the one God went down into the furnace of Nimrod, the Chaldean king.[26]

Studying this midrash would thus be the first step toward understanding what is shown in the depiction. Revisiting this image within its early 14th-century Ashkenazi context, however, one cannot help but put it into dialogue with the phenomenon of martyrdom, both active and passive. Martyrdom, death for the sake of 'sanctifying the name of God' (*qiddush ha-shem*), was a dominant motif in Ashkenazic society from at least 1096, when there were several cases of active martyrdom during the persecutions associated with the First Crusade: Facing violence and the threat of forced baptism, several Jews from the Rhineland took their own lives and the lives of their families. These events were chronicled in three different Hebrew accounts authored around the middle of the 12th century and critically edited and translated into German by Eva Haverkamp.[27] By the late 13th century, martyrdom — both passive and (particularly) active — had been

25 Katz 1964; Kogman-Appel 2012a.

26 For a discussion of the relevant sources, see Kogman-Appel 2012a, 118–121.

27 Haverkamp 2005.

Fig. 3: Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek, Ms. Voller 1102/II, *Maḥzor*, Worms *c.* 1310, fol. 164v, Yom Kippur, evening prayer: Abraham and Nimrod. © Leipzig, Universitätsbibliothek.

stylized into a religious and educational ideal.[28] As much as this ideal seems to have been dominant, recent scholarship has been able to pinpoint some critical voices against active martyrdom.[29] Religious ideals often create role models, and it appears that the story of Abraham in the furnace in fact functioned as a paradigm of passive martyrdom, whereas Abraham in the story of the Binding of Isaac was often seen as a role model for active martyrdom.[30] Thus we might consider the image of Abraham at Nimrod's court in the *Leipzig Maḥzor* as a message that promoted passive martyrdom in an environment that stylized the ideal of active martyrdom.

Whose message was it? As I have argued elsewhere, the *Leipzig Maḥzor*, which actually originated in Worms, is a powerful account of communal life, communal cohesion, and communal identity in one of the most important mediaeval communities of Ashkenaz.[31] Was there a communal leadership that took upon itself the task of guiding the community through a difficult period during which it was challenging the notion of sanctification of the Name of God as one of the principal ideals of Ashkenazi religious culture? Books, at least from a modern point of view, are commonly thought of as personal objects. In the Middle Ages, however, the use of books in the sense of private, silent reading hardly existed. Lavish books, even if privately owned, were often of a public nature. This was particularly true for Ashkenazi *maḥzorim*, which, although privately commissioned and owned, were used within the framework of communities. Kept in their owners' homes, communal *maḥzorim* were carried by the synagogue attendant into the public space of the synagogue on the eve of each holiday, where they were used by the prayer leader. Thus, these books could well have played a role in communicating messages to a broader audience, which went far beyond the modern notion of a book as a personal object.

The public use of these books is especially noteworthy, as synagogal art was primarily ornamental and its role as a message-bearer was thus extremely limited. If we compare the tympanum of the Gothic Altneushul synagogue in Prague from *c.* 1280 (Fig. 4) with that of any given church portal, we will realize just how meager the synagogue's function as a message-bearer must have been in comparison with any given Gothic church with all its rich decoration. This sheds an interesting light on the notion of book art within the Jewish context, which

28 Cohen 2006; Shepkaru 2006, both listing the vast earlier literature; Goldin 2008.
29 Malkiel 2008, 99–102; Gross 2004; Yuval 2006, 159.
30 Shepkaru 2006, 174–177; Goldin 2008, chap. 13.
31 Kogman-Appel 2012a.

Fig. 4: Prague Altneushul, *c.* 1280, entrance tympanon. Photograph: author.

would, in part, differ from the Christian context, as the Jewish book functioned as a message-bearer for a communal audience.

What does all this say about patronage? Research into patronage is not new. In the early days of the art-historical discipline, it functioned as an alternative to the traditional stylistic and iconographic methods. No student of Gothic art (at least since the work of Emile Mâle) has ever talked about the evolution of Gothic art without thinking seriously about Abbot Suger's role in its development.[32] Moreover, the financial resources and consequent power of certain Renaissance patrons, both ecclesiastical and secular, have been of interest to art historians for a long time. Apart from works that originated as the result of royal or papal commissions, serious consideration of patronage as a parameter in the interpretation of subject matter only began more recently when art historians started to revisit their traditional methods. What did patronage mean apart from signing

32 Mâle 1941; Panofsky 1946; Gerson 1986; Rudolph 1990.

a contract and paying the bills? How did it affect the content of any given work of art? As Jill Caskey argues, this aspect of art-historical research was primarily influenced by the Annales School. Furthermore, it is a field that requires interdisciplinary scholarship far beyond theology. Indeed, if we try to deal with patronage in an age of 'visual turn', it certainly cannot be done through visual analysis alone. As Caskey explains:

> Recently, studies of patronage have characterized art as constitutive of social, political, economic, and other ideas; they have engaged a host of disciplines (such as literary, religious, gender, and other histories) and with them attendant subject formations, foundational texts, and theoretical models.[33]

What should be of interest is not simply the identities of patrons, their historical presence, or their financial resources and power, but rather their motives, which often shine through mediaeval works of art. Rulers — kings and queens — had motives that can be grasped easily. Having manifestations of their status created by the most prominent artists of the day was a very natural motive. This was certainly true for popes, bishops, and abbots, and specifically for Abbot Suger, the patron par excellence in mediaeval art history, powerful in his own right, but certainly also an agent of the royal powers of his time. It is obvious, and yet scholars are still struggling to come to terms with this prototype of mediaeval patronage. Was the patron providing the financial means for a work of art as a donor, or was he the agent responsible for the actual appearance of the works of art he made possible? Even though no patrons' names have come down to us, such questions can and should be posed for the *Sarajevo Haggada* and the *Leipzig Maḥzor* as much as they should be asked in relation to the Abbey of St. Denis or the Sistine Chapel.

As Caskey suggests, it might be helpful to speak of 'agency' in addition to patronage, a more flexible notion that would represent a power or the powers standing behind any object's subject matter. Referred to by Beat Brenk as *concepteur*, such a notion could and should be differentiated from the financial aspect of patronage.[34] Is Brenk's notion of *concepteur* the same as Marc Epstein's 'authorship' — the similarly amorphous notion that refers to the individuals who were responsible for the imagery of the *Birds' Head Haggada*, the subject of a recent book by Epstein? By 'authorship' he means:

33 Caskey 2006.
34 Brenk 1994; Caskey 2006.

> [...] a collaboration between Jewish patrons who sponsored and conceptualized the manuscript (in some cases, it seems, with the aid of rabbinic advisers), and artists (Jewish or non-Jewish) who executed the commission.[35]

This definition not only borrows its central term, 'authorship', from the world of texts, but it also creates a rigid separation among the different roles. How about a 'rabbinic adviser' overlapping with the sponsoring patron, or an illuminator producing a book for his own use? How about illuminators working for the free market, as became more and more common from the late 14th century? Some years ago, in a deliberate attempt to blur such boundaries, I suggested referring to the individuals who were responsible for the specific content of any given book's imagery as 'designers'. By that I meant to imply that anybody involved in the making of a book, be they scribes, artists, or patrons, would have a say in determining not just the content that was translated from textual concepts (or could be easily retranslated into textual concepts), but the overall appearance of a decorated book.[36]

With all the difficulty involved in finding the right words — and I am not intimating that the notion of 'designership' does not have its flaws — what these various terms connote is that the conception of a work of art was not solely the artist's. On the other hand, none of these terms really clarifies how active or passive a patron might have been. All these notions, whether we are dealing with *concepteurs*, authors, designers, or agents, suggest ambiguity in regard to the relationship among these different factors. What is important here is that the particular nature of the patron–artist relationship differed from case to case. Even if our terminological choices are driven by carefully analysed concepts, we still struggle when it comes to two very basic points: Who was the patron, and what did he mean to communicate to the artist? Moreover, what did each of them mean to say to the viewer? The fact that these relationships differed in each case turns all of these terms into artificial constructs, and it often seems that they have to be defined and redefined over and over again.

Book art also reflected and reacted to certain social circumstances. Needless to say, those circumstances also related to patronage, ownership, and audiences, and the traditional notion of 'historical contextualization' cannot always help one to come to grips with them. Images that speak of social circumstances again raise questions about the message they might or might not have borne, about who conveyed those messages and who received them. As the above discussion

35 Epstein 2011, 6.
36 Kogman-Appel 2006.

of the *Sarajevo Haggada* suggests, the illustrated Haggada is a dominant component in late mediaeval Jewish book history. The first illustrated Haggadot began to appear as separate books in the last few decades of the 13th century in Iberia and Central Europe. As I have noted above, Haggadot usually do not contain colophons, hence the dating and the localization of these manuscripts tend to rely on stylistic evidence and contextual circumstances. The earliest extant examples are a Castilian Haggada, now in the British Library (Ms. Or. 2737), from *c.* 1280,[37] and the *Birds' Head Haggada* in the Israel Museum (Ms. 180/57), in all likelihood produced in the Middle Rhine region around 1300.[38]

One of the pictorials that appears most frequently in these and later Haggadot depicts the *Seder* ceremony, where the entire family is shown around a richly set table, about to partake of the ritual meal. The recitation of the Haggada as part of the ritual is visualized by the depiction of open books in front of the participants. During most of the 14th century, only men were shown with books, whereas from the end of that century, Ashkenazi Haggada illustrations of the *Seder* table often included women with open books lying in front of them as well. There are no Sephardic illuminated Haggadot extant from this period, so there is no indication whether such iconography, which might point to certain changes in gender-related reading practices, was limited to the Ashkenazi realm or also developed in Iberia.

In a recent paper, I argued that by the mid-15th century, images of women with open books in front of them became frequent enough in Haggada illustration for us to be able to speak of a specific iconographic convention (Fig. 5). I aimed at framing these images within the social norms of the time regarding reading among women and their education as they shine through the written evidence. Hence my conclusions were drawn at that specific meeting point between an iconographic convention and textual evidence.[39] None of these conclusions is a particularly 'art-historical' one in the narrow sense of however we define that discipline. More importantly, perhaps, other observations can be drawn on the general methodological level, as they concern the question of how written evidence of certain cultural phenomena can interact with visual references in research into cultural history. In other words, it has become clear that visual material can also function as a historical source, but in conjunction with textual material. It is, in fact, the interaction of the textual and the visual material that makes a fuller historical evaluation possible. On a more specific level, for example, the images of

37 Narkiss/Cohen-Mushlin/Tcherikover 1982, 45–51; Kogman-Appel 2004, 94–95; Harris 2014.

38 See Epstein 2011, chap. 1.

39 Kogman-Appel 2012b.

Fig. 5: Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Ms. 180/15, Franconia, *c.* 1465, fol. 22r, *seder* table. Photograph: Israel Museum, with permission.

open books in front of women seated around the *Seder* table offer insights into the lives of upper-class Jewish women and their levels of education.

More generally speaking, however, the questions are not just how many women could read and whether there were differences among the different Jewish societies in this respect or whether we can mark any clear divisions concerning such matters in geo-cultural terms. Even though it is scanty, the source material — both textual and visual — nevertheless shows that at some point women's education began to turn into a more broadly accepted norm. The images not only reflect that apparent norm, but also seem to model it. They indicate that literacy for ritual purposes would have been expected of a young woman who would become the wife of a respectable husband, so she could actively participate in home and synagogue rituals. This would, of course, undermine any possible simplistic view such as the text of these manuscripts being directed at men, whereas

the imagery was aimed at illiterate women; apparently, the imagery was aimed at both genders alike.

One of the most intriguing figures of late mediaeval Jewish book culture was Joel ben Simeon. Born around 1420 to 1425, apparently a native of Cologne in the Rhineland, Joel was trained as a scribe and would later refer to himself as a '*scribener*'. At some point around the middle of the 15th century, he moved to Italy, where he received artistic training.[40] Throughout his long career — he may have been professionally active until 1490[41] — he was involved in the production of numerous manuscripts, more than twenty of which are still extant; it was actually only very recently that two more works were discovered.[42]

Joel ben Simeon was truly an 'all-rounder' of the 15th-century book trade. He was a scribe and an illuminator who traveled wherever clientele awaited him. Like other Jewish miniaturists, he was active at the intersection of different cultures, the Jewish and the Christian. A native of the German Lands and an immigrant to Italy, he was also familiar with both Italian and German book culture. Finally, he also worked during a particularly interesting stage in the transition from the mediaeval to the early modern period. He saw the printing press come into being and was undoubtedly aware of the social changes wrought by the new medium that affected his trade. Hence the relationship between Joel and his patrons must have been very different from some of the examples I noted above. Considering the overall character of his work and, in general, practices common in the trade at the time, in all likelihood he produced books to be sold on the market, rather than works commissioned by particularly opinionated patrons. Students of the book history of this period are well aware of this progression from the patron-centered mediaeval manuscript to the early modern book made for a wider market.[43] There are, indeed, many elements in Joel's visual language that point to a shift in that complex artist-patron-viewer triangle with its ever-changing nature.

Joel was a keen observer of society, who portrayed a whole range of social figures. Depictions of the Four Sons of the Haggada posing their questions, who are thought to represent certain archetypes of society, are typical of his approach, and it seems that Joel made a major contribution to the evolution of this realistic imagery. One of the sons 'does not know how to ask'. Joel often depicted him as a jester, which urges us to look more deeply into the meaning of the images of jesters and the roles they played in mediaeval society. Fools and jesters were

40 For an exhaustive bibliography, see Kogman-Appel/Stern 2011, 115–120.

41 Cohen/Schmelzer 1984.

42 Walfish 2015, 19–20; Kogman-Appel 2014, 32.

43 For some examples, see Chartier 1994, chap. 1; Kock/Schlusemann 1997.

Fig. 6: London, British Library, Ms. Add. 14762, *Haggada*, Ulm (?), *c.* 1460, fol. 9v, lower right corner, The Fourth Son. Photograph: British Library, with permission.

Fig. 7: Washington, Library of Congress, Ms. heb. 1, Haggada, Germany, 1478, fol. 14v, The Preparation of the Passover Meal. Photograph: Library of Congress, with permission.

a regular part of mediaeval and early modern life. They figure prominently in the iconography of illuminated manuscripts and other visual arts.[44] European monarchs employed court jesters for entertainment. During the Middle Ages, these jokers wore bright, multicolored costumes that stood out visually wherever they appeared. Jesters were either natural fools, being made fun of and, hence, entertaining the folk, or smart and witty outsiders employed to amuse the upper classes and members of the court. Members of this latter group were often ironic and critical, and they enjoyed some freedom of speech. Unconventional in their behavior, they were not part of any traditional system of hierarchies and norms.

It was the foolish jester rather than the witty jester that Joel must have had in mind when he designed the iconography of the son 'who does not know how to ask'. An example can be found in the *London Haggada*, a manuscript that was copied around 1460 in southern Germany and illuminated by Joel (Fig. 6). Perceived as a person lacking wisdom and the ability to acquire knowledge, the popular figure of the jester easily lent itself as a prototype for this character. Joel seems to have been well aware of all the attributes attached to the foolish jester: blasphemous behavior and dubious morality, stupidity, and over-occupation with oneself.

44 Otto 2001.

The hood with donkey's ears, for example, is linked to this characterisation. In a mediaeval German song, a donkey wished to appear in the disguise of a lion, but its large ears gave it away. Like the fool, the donkey represented blasphemy, lack of knowledge, and immoral conduct. Another common attribute was a mirror, a *Spiegel* in German, perhaps the root of the name of one of German folklore's most popular jesters, Till Eulenspiegel. Overly fond of himself, the fool looks in the mirror, a mark of pride and blasphemy. Jesters often suffered from an obvious physical impairment, which symbolized — also as some sort of mirror — the less obvious intellectual impairment of society or of the members of the court. Hunchbacks and dwarfs played a central role in public entertainment, and in the *London Haggada* the jester suffers from goiter. This figure thus seems to combine several ambivalent features that mediaeval society associated with the follish jester.

A goiter was a frequently employed iconographic tool in Joel's work. In two other Haggadot, he illustrated goitrous figures turning a spit with a piece of meat for the Passover meal (Fig. 7). They were perhaps hired to earn a few coins for this job. During the late mediaeval and early modern periods, the imagery of the goitrous figure was quite complex, and it is interesting to try to follow Joel ben Simeon in his decision to participate in that iconographic tradition. Goiter was an endemic condition in alpine areas, common there until the 1920s. In the Middle Ages, it was also occasionally conceived as a disease associated with the wicked. In Christian art, especially north of the Alps, Jesus' tormentors or other wicked individuals were portrayed with goiters. Those suffering from the condition were often stereotyped as enemies.[45] Sometimes the goitrous were associated with the monstrous races of the East and grouped together with the unnatural and the fabulous at the far edges of the known world.[46]

On the other hand, in 15th-century northern Italy, where goiter was particularly common, as in the Lombard region, for example, the imagery, which by then had become realistic, might have meant something quite different: it might have borne a message of empathy for the sick or have simply been a feature of an individual's particular physical appearance. Within this context, the goiter became part of Joel's very personal motivic repertoire; it is not part of any Jewish iconographic tradition, however.[47]

These imageries of the wicked tormentor of Jesus on the one hand and realistic portraits of patrons from the Lombard region on the other are reminiscent

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45 Merke 1984.

46 For more background on the monstrous races, see Friedmann 1981.

47 Kogman-Appel 2015.

of somewhat different mentalities. The notion of the wicked, goitrous individual based on accounts of the monstrous races was relatively prevalent in the area to the north of the Alps, where the condition was not particularly common, well into the 16th century. It is only natural that it could have been associated with the jester there, but the goiter as a typical feature of realistic representation, which appears prominently in Italy and may have been alluded to in the youth who is turning the spit, speaks of a different mindset. Easily associated with the realistic style, these goitrous individuals were based on real-life cases in areas where the condition was part of a pathology shared by many. They seem to deliver a message of empathy and misery, or occasionally but not necessarily of poverty, and may have been intended to arouse feelings of pity in the viewer, not hostility.

Joel ben Simeon was cognizant of these two different states of mind. He had grown up in the Rhineland, where goiters were very seldom seen, so it was only upon his move to Italy that he acquired an awareness of the condition as a real human feature in that environment. Once he achieved some measure of a realistic style, his drawings of goitrous individuals from everyday life became part of an Italian tradition. On the other hand, the inclusion of the goitrous in his artistic repertoire also functions as an iconographic sign of the northern tradition that occasionally included such sufferers in the list of the monstrous races. Apparently, he did not associate them with any malicious features, however. Whatever he really meant to represent, Joel's special status as an artist who lived and worked at the intersections between periods and cultures suggests that this was not any fancy patron's notion, nor an idea of any amorphous authorship or agency. Rather, the fact that this image speaks so eloquently of the manifold backgrounds that he shared indicates that it was Joel speaking directly to his viewers. Moreover, an analysis of his visual language certainly allows us to make that point clearly.

These examples lead to another aspect of the notion of 'visual turn'. Images in general and manuscript illustrations in particular are primary sources of cultural history. But to what end? In many ways, the methodological ground that I am walking on in analysing the images of the goitrous figures in Joel ben Simeon's iconographic repertoire and books in the hands of women reflects an aspect of what Sara Lipton described recently as the 'visual turn' in history.[48] Or is it the other way around? Do the historical contexts help us to understand the art, its messages, its meaning? Does the historical information create a context for a more thorough reading of the art? Or is the art a primary source employed to come to grips with history? If we think of history not in political terms, but as social

48 Lipton 2012.

and particularly as cultural history, does this distinction matter at all? Does a look at the social ambience of Ashkenazi Jews in northern Italy provide a key to understanding Joel ben Simeon? Or is Joel's art a key to better coming to terms with the social and cultural history of Ashkenazi Jews in Italy? Should this not all be considered part of a broader cultural history?

The visual turn in history, then, deals with hierarchies – hierarchies of the textual versus the visual, and vice versa. Lipton argues that an understanding of the visual language of a period can, indeed, change the historical perception of that period, and she offers the example of Late Antiquity and the notion of cultural decline during the waning years of the Roman Empire. The changes in artistic style away from Greco-Roman realism toward abstraction had long been 'judged' as obvious signs of cultural decline and decay. Stiff, abstract figures with large, staring eyes were once held to be signs of a loss of craftsmanship. However, more recent scholarship has shown that 'the large eyes, static stance, and otherworldly upward gaze of such men ... [should be thought] to signal a major cultural shift, a new sense of intimacy between the divine and the earthly'.[49] This was recognized some decades ago,[50] but since then, Lipton argues, this understanding has also influenced the way historians approach the late antique period.

The actual existence of mediaeval Jewish art, finally, is another such case in point, as it certainly counterbalances any traditional assumptions of Jewish culture as fundamentally antivisual. But has the fact of the existence of mediaeval Jewish art really affected the way Jewish cultural history is written these days? What we need, then, is a higher level of integration among the disciplines to give us a fuller picture of what art meant in mediaeval mentalities and what we can learn from art about those mentalities.

When the New Art History discourse began to enter the literature some 30 years ago, iconography was soon marked as a particularly conservative branch of art history. However, a shift in the analysis of imagery toward a contextualizing approach can shed some interesting light on Jewish book culture. When not limited to a linear text–image relationship, the iconographic discourse can, among other considerations, tell us a great deal about the dynamic and ever-changing interactions among patrons, scribes, artists, and consumers. The complex interplay between images reframed as message-bearers communicating with contemporary viewers and images employed as historical sources beyond their immediate message is an aspect of cultural research that traditional iconography did not and could not address. A 'social turn' in art history together with

49 Lipton 2012, 229.
50 Kitzinger 1977.

a 'visual turn' in history can thus be aligned toward an integrative revisiting of Jewish culture in general and Jewish book culture in particular. As the present limited discussion demonstrates, once looked at from points of view that do not simply imply a mere interpretation of the visual as text or a linear understanding of mediaeval art by means of texts, the visual can, indeed, be integrated into a more complete system of multidisciplinary culture research.

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