

THE HAGGADAH OF MANTUA (1560)

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The scholarly investigation of the peculiar Passover Haggadah, simply referred to as Haggadah, which has in the most intimate sense become a book of folk tales, can probably be considered concluded regarding its most essential aspects. The individual parts have largely been traced back to their sources: the deviations from the original have been identified in their temporal and cultural contingencies. The formation of the wondrous wreath of folk customs winding through the Seder eve was deduced from historic memories and symbolic-allegoric notions. Even though many a detail has not yet been completely clarified, even though controversies remain regarding the infiltration of more modern additions and their sources such as the beloved Chad Gadya, Adir Hu, and the childlike-profound numbers game Echad Ani Yodea, literary-historical research has nevertheless completed its main work on the Haggadah. Today, we have an overview of the broad field after M. Steinschneider has presented his *Catalogus Bodlejanus*, this almost inexhaustible treasure trove for Jewish studies, expanding de Rossi's and Wolf's groundwork, and sketched out the bibliographic itemization of Haggadoth ownership, and after S. Wiener has recently presented the entire known material in chronological order in his *Bibliographie der Osterhaggadah 1500-1900* before the Petersburg Academy. This also opens the possibility to move beyond purely literary-historical facts and advance to time-related psychological insights and a mainly esthetic appreciation of the work. And it is precisely this esthetic investigation of our writings that is so lacking. Only this can turn our literary treasures into a vivid part of our people's works: especially the Haggadah, this garden, so eminently fantastical.



Ornamental letter
Mantua Haggadah



Hare hunt
Mantua Haggadah

All Jewish art of the Diaspora is rooted in the Haggadah. What our sages experienced in dreamy hours, their silent hopes and the dark worries of the hours, the spirited round dance of phantasy that has so charmingly and softly enveloped the tough issues of the world and the even tougher thoughts—this has become the Haggadah. And if one wishes to advance from the Haggadist's own life to the Jewish people's suffering and drifting soul, then one will search for those Haggadoth that have become the common good of the people. However, we do not own anything that has become a common good in a higher and more comprehensive sense than the Passover Haggadah.

This was not a holy book. Not a book in which—not even in the fantastical perceptions of the masses—the deity revealed itself. Rather, it was the revelation of the people's soul. And herein lies the deep secret of its retroactive power over the nation. It was treasured by *everyone* in the community of Israel; with its myths and sayings and songs, it removed the pain from everyone's chest and sank frissons of pleasure derived from the hope for a golden future into the bleeding heart. It was the kind of book that manifested this rare appeal able to captivate children and adults, women and men, the needy and the wealthy, scholars and simple people alike. Everybody recognized themselves in it; everybody was lifted by it—a book at the same time of the

most individual imprint and yet, thoroughly national.

Thus, also this favorite book of the Jews, which has already early on detached itself from the old prayer books and has led a life of its own, attracted time and again the forcefully suppressed artistic drive of Jewish masters. And so much more intensely than the other popular books of our literature! Through the works of Dav. Heinr. Müller, J.v. Schlosser, and David Kaufmann who was cruelly wrested also from Jewish art history much too soon, light—sure enough, initially just flickering torchlight—has been carried into the dark shafts and the delusion was pierced that Jews were lacking any artistic talent—through divine commandment and innate ineptitude. Publication of the monumental splendid volume *Die Haggadah von Sarajevo* (Vienna 1898), for which these three above-mentioned authors have joined up, has opened up new territory for our national art history. After all, these are not just “a few turns of the shovel” as the authors modestly state: this is a cadastral survey of the area and an excavation and foundation on a large scope. After all, the Sarajevo Haggadah, the oldest and most beautiful illuminated manuscript from the early 14th century—which is available to us entirely reproduced in a volume of plates—has brought about a comparison with the other manuscript Haggadoth, from which a large number of characteristic images and pages are presented to us. If until now information was limited to the plain notice “with illustrations,” then here, a detailed description was provided with critical comparisons and parallels that equally speak of love and attest to a keen artistic sense.

Thoroughly discussed were six Spanish manuscripts from the property of the British Museum and the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres in London, one French, property of the collector Albert Wolf in Dresden, five German from the property of D. Kaufmann, of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (two copies!), of the National Library in Paris, and of the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, and two Italian manuscripts from the property of Kaufmann and Edmund von Rothschild. However, with these fourteen illustrated Haggadah manuscripts alone, the riches are not yet exhausted. The Jewish Encyclopedia (vol. VI) mentions 25 old illustrated manuscripts that have survived all vicissitudes. But for the time being, it is not yet possible to obtain an overview as copies hidden in private ownership and minor collections are not accessible to research. After all, until well into the modern era, Haggadah-writing and –illustration continued to thrive. In the 18th century, we still find masters in this field at work, and the achievements of Aron Schreiber Herrlingen of Gewitsch (Moravia) were famed and sought-after in all lands.



Kiddush
Mantua Haggadah

Of course, with the invention of the printing press, manuscript Haggadoth gradually disappear from among the population. They become a decoration only at Seder tables in the homes of the affluent and the art lovers. Except that also in prints, Haggadah illustrations remain a favorite task of Jewish masters. Even though here, too, the stream of artistic individuality is petering out with a certain stable monotonous

stereotype remaining, it is still of great interest to return to the early prints. In these old woodblock prints and in the copperplate engravings, which are appearing in the 17th century, there is still quite a lot of individuality. Research has not yet advanced that far. Barring J. von Schlosser's hasty yet momentous comments, all that remains is the work of Jewish bibliographers who have, to a certain extent, completed the history of typography—certainly the absolutely essential groundwork!—but have little interest in the art historical aspect nor have they anything to contribute to an esthetic consideration and appreciation. Here, everything still needs to be done: the relationships among prints and manuscript illustrations regarding topic selection and technique must be clarified; the interdependence of individual prints as well as the explanation for deviations. Most importantly, the influence of the advance in book-printing technology and of the artistic development in general: the Jewish typesetters, printers, and xylographers have taken advantage of all this progress in their work.

So far, it has not been determined with certainty when the first prints were produced. However, it is likely that they appeared already before 1500, in Italy to wit.

From the illustrated Haggadoth known to us—according to Wiener, 194 among 895 prints—the first originated in Prague in 1526. Drawing on this edition, which clearly displays the characters of German Early Renaissance, are also the Italian illustrated prints. No copy of the Mantua Haggadah of 1550, which is mentioned by the older bibliographers, has emerged so far.

It originated in the printing shop of Joseph Shalit¹, byname Ashkenazi, of Padua. It was decorated with pictures and accompanied by a commentary by Shalit that has become popular.

While, however, this work seems to have met its fate, the Haggadah of 1560/61 has survived in several copies to this day. Zedner and Steinschneider list it, and in Wiener's register, it is mentioned on the thirteenth place by year of publication. Zunz still mentions it in a study about "Printers and Printing Houses in Mantua (1476-1662)" among those works whose printers are partially not indicated, partially unknown to him. It was published in the years when Meir Sofer ben Ephraim of Padua had forged business ties with the former technical director of the Foa printing house in Sabionetta, Jacob Cohen ben Naftali of Gazolo [sic! Actually: Gazzuolo]. But the detailed note at the end—the "colophon"—with its mosaic poem of quotes indicates as printer: Yitzchak Bassan, son of Shmuel, shammes in the temple of the wealthy Yitzchak of Porto, now Mantua. The work was completed on Tuesday, 24th of Tishrei 1561. It is a quarto volume of 64 pages that only provide the original Haggadah text. Only the song Adir Hu, of which already the Prague edition (1526) presents two verses in translation², returns in German language in this Italian print as well: "*Allmächtiger Gott, bau dein Tempel schiro (bald). Also schir in unsern Tagen. Schiro, ja, schiro.*" (Almighty, may He soon build His house, speedily, speedily and in our time, soon.)

Still missing in the text are Chad Gadya and Echad Ani Yodea as they do in the later editions of Salonica, Cremona, Constantinople, Venice, Ristowitz [sic! In the original: Ristowitz] as well.³ Then again, a longer liturgical comment is included from the Talmud about matzoth and maror before the mealtime prayer. Otherwise, the text is not—as far as I can see—any different from the usual version, except that for the defiant curse on our oppressors: Sh'foch hamatcha al hagoyim, this part is missing: *Ki achal et Ya'akov ... "Since they have devoured Jacob and desolated his home."*

More than three centuries look at us from this book. One can tell by beholding the Haggadah—which was provided to me by the judicious collector J.H. Wagner—that it was not sitting as inert treasure in stifling rooms for books. This was a book from life, and it has fulfilled the purpose the printer has intended

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¹For more details, see Zunz, *Zur Geschichte und Literatur*, Berlin 1845, p. 251.

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²Steinschneider in the postscript to L. Landshuth, *Hagada* (Berlin 5616).

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³*Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, vol. III (1889), p. 234 note

in his concluding song: “it awakes young boys from their sleep, and for the old, it is beneficial so that their tongue is as the scribe’s swift stylus. Since with a man’s stylus it has been clarified, and the reader “runs” in it to serve the One before whom one pours out one’s prayer and with whom is loyalty and power.”

And indeed: the person who has cut the letters with an “iron and leaden stylus” has made sure that even the old man is able to “run” and read the book swiftly; our gorgeous square script, still the most beautiful and pithy of all scripts, appears in mighty and sweeping types, not yet in this uniform, steady, and monotonous cut the machine produces. This is a delightful pleasure to follow letter after letter: each has—as part of the whole—its individual shape and its own life although the initial letter always remains highlighted: massive crossbars and rhombically swelling vertical bars. Especially the heads and tails of the individual letters are of delightful variety. The period of the scribes’ art is still too close, and the letter cutter is in most cases a former sofer. The old scribe’s whims are still astir and find their expression, particularly in the initial letters. These stilted, squeezed, lofty, curved, fantastical, burlesque, and bizarre signs still bear numerous personal signs of their creator and allow casting a deep glance into the dark motions of the master’s soul with their ups and downs. Our Bassan, too, lets his whims run wild. One moment he fills the letters with all sorts of animals, the next with delicate flourish and serious ornaments or else he integrates them into elaborate ornamental meshwork.

Some letters exert such force of their own that the hand loosens its reins. I mention here the German “H” as in “Herrn” [Mister] on letter envelopes. In the case of the old Jewish scribes, the ה and the ח were of particular allure. And there was tradition in this allure. In the Sarajevo Haggadah we find the ח as a tail of a fablelike bird dragon with elongated beak, the ה with dragon heads (or are these heads of giraffes?) from whose mouths sprout thorny branches. Our master completely organically integrates two faces into the letter, whereby this main character ה, which keeps reappearing in the entire book, never disappears. There is, after all, no less style in the individual signs than in the work’s entire composition.



Ornamental letter
Mantua Haggadah



Decorative margin
Sarajevo Haggadah, around 1300

Only now, after a period of dereliction of the craft and of the wage earners’ careless routine, do we regain appreciation for the book’s beauty. Only today do we understand that any work lends itself to decoration by the simplest means of line arrangements—once, the book printer used to be an artist, and each page was evidence of the artist’s talent. The Mantua Haggadah is a downright masterpiece of this naïve yet subtle arrangement in space. One moment large initial letters invigorate the picture, the next large words, which have moved with plenty of bright area to the center or the side of the page layout. The width of the print space changes frequently. The line length is not constant since the old printers did not have any intermediary filling for the word intervals. But this is compensated through added ornaments (small floral ornaments) so that certain groups of lines (at times corresponding) are of equal length. The final word of a paragraph is moved to the center, which makes for a vigorous conclusion especially in view of the few words

in the individual lines. Then again, there is a terraced arrangement of individual pairs of lines or a downward tapering of the typeset. Yet, the arrangements are never forced, always dainty and rhythmical, so that each page forms in its physiognomy a self-contained artistic unit; and yet, the consolidation into a book creates complete and copious harmony.

The artistic effect is magnified by margins surrounding the pages. But here too, the ambition to let the greatest possible variety have free rein within the uniformity of the whole pervades once again. The artist has four semi-bordures at his disposal, which are themselves composed of individual elements: broad lateral decoration and longitudinal margins, of which one is significantly narrower. They represent festoons of fruit in which putti are climbing up or are seated making music.

The leitmotif in the arrangement is such: the putti of the lateral elements are looking down, those in the margins of the right page partially turned toward each other and those on the left page fleeing from each other. The artist keeps deviating from this basic pattern. The frames of the right and left pages are getting exchanged. One moment the lateral elements are missing and are replaced by text or illustrations, or else we find just one lateral element moved to the center, at times also to the center of the page end where special decorative elements are used only a few times. Oftentimes, the framing is closed by an image. In numerous places, the margins are interrupted by slender drawings. But some pages have set themselves completely free of the framing corset, which results in striking breaks—and yet, this variety coalesces into a work with a coherent character of its own.



**The drowning of Israelite boys
Mantua Haggadah**

Of course, the design vocabulary of the Italian Late Renaissance, which finds clear expression in the wreaths and their enlivenment with angels, is again discernible in the copious imagery. Especially the title page with its twisted columns, modeled after the old St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The individual illustrations are more or less reminiscent of the old German woodcut, which found its way into the Mantua Haggadah indirectly via the Prague edition of 1526 and later ones. The Prague Haggadah plays also a decisive part in the choice of motifs. The wealth of manuscripts and the illuminators' individual depictions gradually ossify into more fixed forms. From the Biblical tradition, all sections until the Egyptian period are omitted. And precisely the creation story provided the old manuscript illuminators with so many opportunities to record their fantastical-cosmological notions. Remaining are from the historical images: the Jews' labor in the land of bondage, the Exodus, the demise of the enemy, and from the domestic Passover scenes: the Four Sons asking questions, the baking of the matzah, the prayer leader with the cup, etc.

In their technical execution, the illustrations in the Mantua Haggadah are rather uneven. Exceedingly delicately executed, precisely drawn ones alternate with crude and, especially regarding perspective, really backward drawings so that one must conclude that the artist was animated by various models and that older ones were perhaps carried over already as cut, but definitely without any further rework. The arrangement of the images is determined by the text, at times illustratively accompanying just one single word and not the content of a sentence. Typical is, for instance, that in the place where it says: "...and he brought us out not by angel's hand..." there is in the margin an angel with a brandished sword. Notable is also the small picture displaying a river with three ships; one ship glides with swelling sails on the water, seated in the other is a huddled-up Jew who is rowed by a dashing gondolier to the other shore—reminiscent in its overall

composition of a Venetian motif, it serves to elucidate the following part: “Joshua said to the people: your ancestors lived on the other side of the river.” A man pointing to the crescent moon illustrates the commandment that one should not start teaching the children about the Exodus already at the start of the month of Nissan. A very peculiar image for which there is no analogon in the manuscript illustrations, which, however, can be found in earlier German prints and has been retained for a long time, represented a naked voluptuous woman with fluttering, wafting hair—the personification of Israel following most closely the words of the Haggadah: “I have made you increase like the growth of the field. And you grew larger and older and came to excellent beauty: your breasts were formed, and your hair lush—how naked and bare you are.”

Several small pictures refer to the ceremonies. One shows the prayer leader with the king’s crown of freedom and the cup; another one, the paterfamilias who dips into the (somewhat larger than life) goblet while reciting the Ten Plagues; or two men holding the matzah and the maror herb in their hands. On two different pictures, the Passover meal is depicted: in a large household before serving the meal and in a small family at the start of the celebration. This latter drawing is a truly excellent artistic achievement full of gorgeous ingenuousness.



**The murder of the Israelite boys (according to the Midrash).
Mantua Haggadah**

In a triptych-like setup, kitchen, parlor, and street are depicted, and with some skill, the depiction of characteristics of the individuals’ physiognomy is attempted: the girl with a dull and snug chuckle almost lovingly caressing the cooking pot; the family members in the stiff, solemn posture of “gentlemen,” and outside, the stranger with the pleased smile for having finally found a hospitable place. “All who are hungry come and eat with us; all who are needy come and celebrate Passover!” Despite all this pedantic-schematic clumsiness, the wayfarer is a delightful achievement of the artistic realism that was asserting itself at the time. Please note the intimate diligence with which the pants, ripped at the knees and frayed at the hem, with which this wretched-threadbare jacket are drawn.

Of particular interest is also the depiction of the hare hunt; and one could most justifiably ask here: How does the hunt get into the Haggadah? We already find this motif in the oldest manuscript Haggadoth where it ultimately represents the adoption of an early Christian church decoration. According to v. Schlosser, the hunting scene was exceedingly popular in ancient art and symbolically interpreted. In the Haggadah, it has the meaning of the figurative representation of the acrostic YKNHZ (=Yayin, Kiddush, Ner, Havdalah, Zman). The German-speaking Jews pronounced it yaknhaz [German for “hunt the hare”], and thus the hare-hunt image was created.

Obviously, the Four Sons, who are depicted in later prints, are not missing either (whereby the wicked one is depicted as mercenary, but always as warrior). In the Mantua edition, they still appear in four separate illustrations on the margin. The representative of the Chacham [sage] is Rabbi Akiva who is sitting deeply absorbed in thoughts. Whether one may identify Michelangelo’s Moses as model for this figure with the medieval Jewish hat—as J. v. Schlosser suggests—seems to me rather doubtful even though many a sign regarding posture and guise points to it. In the guise of a jumping boy (whose movement is, by the way, felicitously depicted) with a windmill-like toy under his left arm, I wish to see the one who does not know how to ask. The plume of feathers in his hair and the stick on which he is riding are meant as an allusion to

his untamed friskiness.

Yet, also for those who are not yet literate, the images of the Jews' Exodus from Egypt are able to provide an account of our feast. In two still rather primitive pictures, we find our ancestors in dire serfdom as they build the cities of Pitham [sic! Actually: Pithom] and Ramses. The individual activities are diligently depicted: digging and brick kneading and firing and dragging upward onto the walls.



From: Mantua Haggadah

Also Pharaoh's cruel command to annihilate the Jewish boys finds its artistic expression in two pictures. Here Bassan had, without question, two different models, of which one illustrates in clumsy manner how the children are hurled into the water by their wailing mothers, while the other one illustrates a Midrash in the form of a triptych with skill and in a highly artistic manner: that the children were torn from their mothers and stabbed to death by the warriors and that Pharaoh bathed in the blood of the murdered. But then the oppressed walk out of bondage in rank and file, men and women, children and camels, and Moses, who walks in front of them in appropriate distance, turns to them with the solemn address of a leader. But while this drawing is rather clumsy, the chasing Egyptians are skillfully drawn. At the center, the king in his palanquin and around him on rearing horses the mounted warriors in iron armor and helmet. To compensate for the anachronism of clothing and armament, several spearheads with their bows drawn shoot atrociously barbed arrows at a dark cloud that is drifting ahead of them hereby concealing the image of the fugitives. The latter have arrived at the sea and stand at the shore looking helplessly and anxiously at their leader. Only an ox, standing to the right of Moses, is looking confidently into the future. Moses is placed at the center of this eventful and skillful drawing that felicitously uses old ecclesiastical motifs. Moses, a cap on his head—half Jewish hat, half tiara—appears in the reassuring, consolatory-blessing posture adopted by bishops already in the most ancient images of the saints. Yet, Aaron reveals his artistic origin even more clearly with his raised crozier.

Naturally, the representation of the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea is not missing either. It displays the greatest similarity with our present stereotypes. The decorative page of the curse on our oppressors was not preserved in today's Haggadah prints. The Prague edition of 1526 features a particularly elaborate page (cf. *Ost und West* 1904, no. 3) showing on top Adam and Eve, below Judith with the head of Holofernes, and Samson with his wild hair and the city gate, below two ragged men holding the coat of arms of Prague. In the Mantua print, this page is kept much simpler, but concluding from the types and the line arrangement, it is designed after the Prague model. Here, the decorative margin was omitted, only to the left there is the wreath of fruits with climbing putti. Then again the שפוך is designed particularly elaborately. It grows on a basis of oak branches and is entwined by an abundant, delicately worked black-and-white wreath of shrubs, on the side stylized acanthus leaves from which decorative tassels of fruits are suspended.

Additional figurative representations that are not part of the actual Passover story are (as throughout this edition) omitted. Yet, the Messiah riding on his donkey—according to a Midrash, it is Balaam's donkey—has remained. And behind him is probably Elijah who announces the arrival of the Messiah with his shofar.

Elijah is the loyal friend and adviser of suffering and hopeful Israel. He will also bring us salvation. And thus, he is in our midst when we celebrate the Passover memory that has become the present as if we ourselves had left Mizraim, and he listens to our singing when we supplicate for the reconstruction of our

national Temple—in our days!

The Sarajevo Haggadah concludes its historic cycle of illuminations with the image of the future Temple, and the artist of the Mantua print, Yitzhak Bassan, begs in the final prayer of his work: “As God has kept his trusted pledge and has redeemed us already three times, may He thus accelerate His work now with the fourth redemption so that His people be freed from the burden of golus [galuth; exile] and all its miseries, and may He forgive sin and wrongdoing and wantonness and dry the tears on their cheeks and turn their sorrow into joy.”