

The Bared Breast in Medieval Ashkenazi Illumination: Cultural Connotations in a Heterogeneous Society

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Hermann, the abbot of the Premonstratensian cloister in Scheda, formerly Judah ben David Halevi, was born in Cologne at the beginning of the twelfth century to a Jewish family that made its living from money-lending. He was baptized when he was 20 years old, and a few decades later, around the middle of the twelfth century, he composed a little work concerning his own conversion, in which he describes his journey from Judaism to Christianity. As a young man he was attracted to the Christian faith through his contact with Eckbert, the bishop of Münster, who was a client of his family. Hermann claims that the Jews were worried about his tendencies and therefore urged him to marry. The devil, who mated the woman to him, and the Jews were content with the results, but his Christian friends accused him of following his lusts instead of uniting with the spiritual truth of Christianity.[1] This twelfth-century treatise, possibly a piece of fiction written as a polemical work,[2] reflects the long-standing historical Jewish-Christian debate on sexuality.[3]

From the early beginnings of Christianity, marriage was regarded as the only reasonable solution for those who were unable to live up to the virtue of chastity.[4] With the reform movement of the eleventh century, a further emphasis was placed on abstinence, which finally led to the strict prohibition of marriage for priests, deacons, and monks, as defined in the First Lateran Council (1123). As a result, both secular and regular clergy, as well as some lay people, took upon themselves sexual abstinence as a central part of their identity.[5] Nevertheless, marriage was far more

common, and that same period, which was also the time of Hermann of Scheda, saw an increasing elevation of the status of marriage, which was finally defined as a sacrament. Procreation was one of the central legitimations for marital sex, and was further emphasized at the time of the demographic crises of the later Middle Ages.[6] But even then, Christianity still revered virginity and abstinence as the ultimate way of life, an ideal virtue that was foreign to Judaism.

The early Jewish sages exalted marriage as the sole form of social life, and left no room for asceticism. Various declarations stress this point; such as is found in Yebamoth (63a): “Any man who has no wife is no proper man; for it is said ‘male and female created He them and called their name Adam’ [Genesis 5:2].” Since “adam” in Hebrew is “man” or “human being,” this verse means that only when the male and the female are united are they called man. Intercourse was regarded as an integral and positive part of the marital union. This was valid even when the purpose of procreation was not relevant. Basing themselves on Exodus (21: 10),[7] the rabbis defined the conjugal rights of a wife as one of the three obligations imposed on every husband. The position of a husband vowing to have no intercourse with his wife was condemned.[8]

The positive attitude towards intercourse as well as the recognition of women’s sexual wants affected the Jewish perception of female sexuality and motivated related practices,[9] contributing to the development of barriers between Jews and their Christian surroundings. And yet, despite the fundamental differences, the diffusion of outlooks prevalent in the general society had a continuous effect on the Jewish minority. As in other European countries, Jews lived as minority groups in various urban localities throughout the Holy Roman Empire. In earlier generations, the scholarly literature tended to consider their existence in these centers as circumscribed and isolated and its cultural development as immanent, a result of the continuous tension between the societies that on occasion led to blood libels and allegations of desecration of the host. But in the last few decades, such clear boundaries between the Jewish minority and the Christian majority have been extensively challenged and the pervasive relations between the two societies have been gradually emphasized.[10] The examination of extreme edges, matters on which each religion maintained a completely different outlook, may expose the complexity characterizing the relations between the societies; sexuality is such an evocative case. The image of a naked woman exposing her breasts may exemplify the phenomenon. This article will analyze the image in various sacred contexts in three different manuscripts, all of them intended for ritual use, and illuminated for or by German Jews during the fifteenth century. Together with the images we will look

at the people involved in their design, as well as the patrons, men and women, for whom these books were intended.

The Ritual and Ideological Perspective

Our first example is from the Hamburg Miscellany, a collection including a prayer book for the whole year, dirges, a calendar starting with the year 1428, and a book of customs by the thirteenth-century Rabbi Abraham Hladiq with the addition of explanatory notes attributed to the Maharil (Jacob b. Moses Moelin, c. 1365 – 1427, one of the most prominent scholars of the time, who established a yeshiva in Mainz). The manuscript was copied and compiled around 1427-1434 in the Middle Rhine region, probably in Mainz, which is often mentioned in notes referring to local customs throughout the texts. The scribe, Issac b. Simhah Gansmann, a student of the Maharil,^[11] also planned most of the illustrations by leaving a space within the text column.^[12] Special attention was given to a *piyyut* (liturgical poem) for the first Sabbath of Hanukah.^[13] The poem was written in the middle of the eleventh century by the southern French poet Joseph ben Solomon of Carcassonne, and soon became part of the Ashkenazi rite.^[14] The text is accompanied by many illustrations which offer a visual commentary on most of the *piyyut*'s sections and testify to the designer's deep understanding of the enigmatic language of the verses. Such an understanding required a comprehensive acquaintance with midrashic and other Jewish sources, and thus indicates a scholarly profile as befits the figure of the scribe.

The first part of the poem describes the religious decrees opposed to the principles of the Jewish faith, which, according to the book of Maccabees, the Greeks imposed on the Jews during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE. Certain individuals refuse to obey the decree and are tortured and killed. The martyrs of the first episode are two anonymous women, who risk their lives in order to circumcise their sons. The two are caught and cruelly punished:

Two women circumcised their sons
Because of that they were hung by their breasts
Babies and mothers were thrown from a tower.

In the illustration (fig. 1) the two women are depicted on either side of a tree, to whose top a rope ties their breasts. On the left is a tower from which one of the mothers is being cast while the second mother and the two children lie dead at its foot.

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Hanging by the breasts on a tree is not described in the book of Maccabees, but has a direct parallel in the mid-tenth-century *Sefer Josippon*, the southern Italian historiographical treatise that provided a main source for the first part of the poem.[15] The mauling of female breasts was a fairly prevalent image, identifiable also in Christian martyr stories. Such legends, revived and flourishing in the poet's time, commemorated young and beautiful virgin maidens of noble family, who at the time when Christianity was still a forbidden religion in the Roman Empire, were determined to dedicate their lives to Christ, and refused to marry or lose their virginity. One of the most remarkable women among them was Saint Agatha of Sicily.[16] After she refused to marry Quintianus, the Roman prefect, she stood trial in front of him. Despite the torture she endured, including the amputation of a breast, Agatha refused to renounce her virginity, and she died a martyr's death (fig. 2).[17] Abuse of the female chest was typically portrayed in the legends of other virgin martyrs as well.[18] In fact, in both the textual and the later visual sources, the motif of torturing female breasts always appears in the context of virgin martyrs.



Fig. 1. Martyrdom of two women who circumcised their sons, Hamburg Miscellany, Mainz (?), ca. 1428–1434. Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 37, fol. 79r, detail (© Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg)

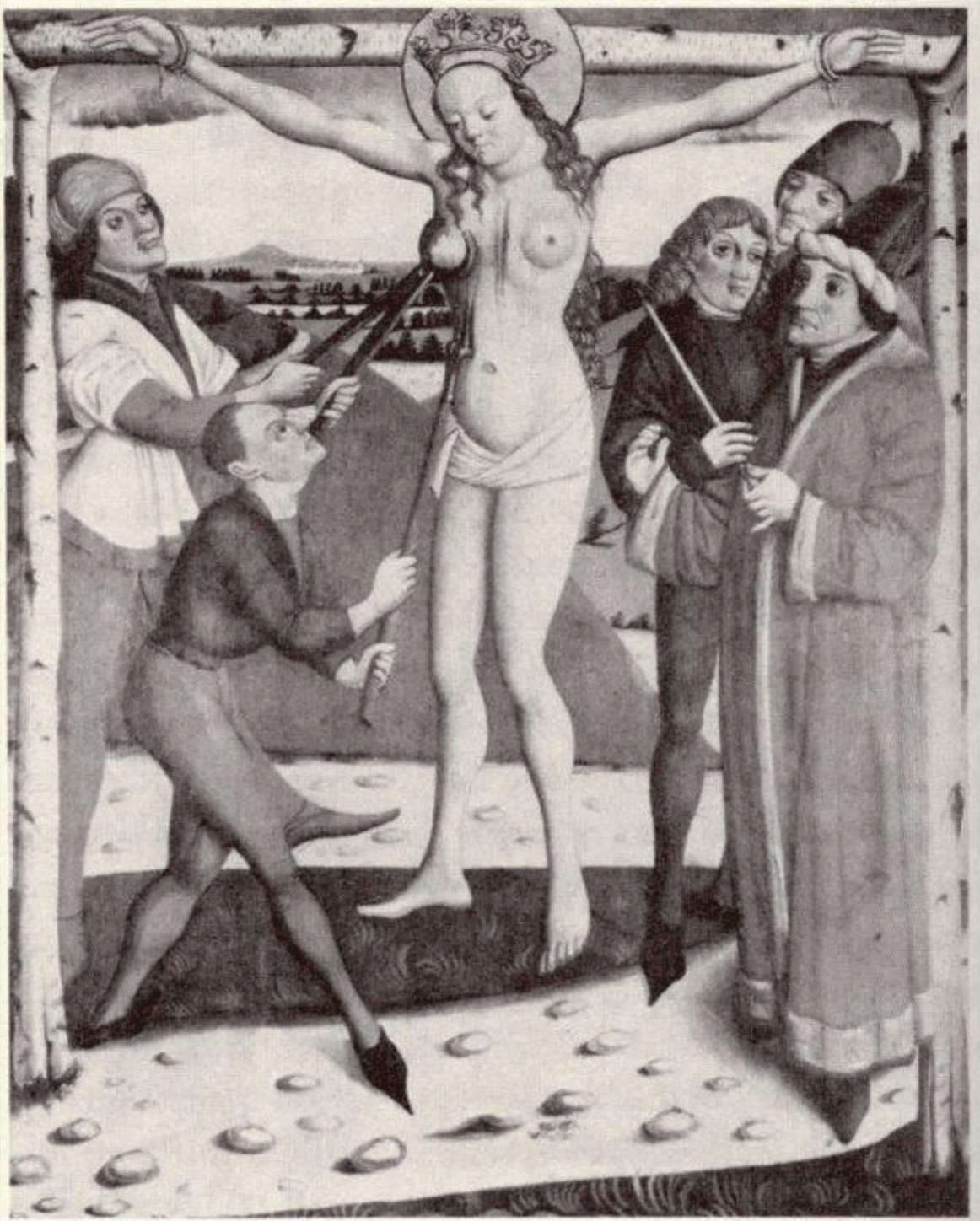


Fig. 2. Martyrdom of St. Agatha, panel, Swiss School, 1473.

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Representations of tortured breasts have been interpreted in the literature in different ways.[19] Caroline Bynum has exposed the theological background of these depictions. She has shown how, since the twelfth century, female spirituality was practiced by self-mutilation in imitation of the suffering of Christ,[20] whose humanity was associated with female flesh.[21] Martha Easton has drawn attention to the visual similarity between the martyrdom of St. Agatha, with her outstretched arms, and the Crucifixion of Christ. She has further argued that the removal of Agatha's breasts not only constitutes identification with Christ himself, but also blurs the femininity of Agatha and almost turns her into a male.[22] The separation of Agatha's breasts from her body is defined by Easton as a process of masculinization, enabling women a state of spiritual grace.[23] A further aspect is related to the essence of the sacrifice made by female Christian martyrs, namely the protection of eternal virginity. As argued by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell, in contrast to male martyrs, to whose death the subject of virginity usually remained unrelated, the major achievement of the female martyrs was their defense of their perpetual virginity.[24] As the ideal of the female martyr focuses on female sexuality and its denial, it is not surprising that the torture is inflicted on a part of the body that symbolizes the possibility of childbirth, which in turn reflects the loss of virginity.[25] During the later Middle Ages, the time of our illustrated copy, images portraying the mutilation of the breasts of female martyrs became quite common in Christian art, which probably influenced the Jewish illustrator of the poem to focus on the torture of the bare-breasted women and to relegate the women and children being flung from the tower to a smaller representation at the side. The affinity of the Jewish illustration to the Christian surroundings is striking. Jews shared with their Christian contemporaries not only the visual language, but also an ideal of martyrdom that it represented. And yet in the Jewish context, the focus moves from the ideal of virginity to the ideal of motherhood, emphasized by the torture of the breasts, the source of nourishment. The Jewish women who sacrifice themselves are not virgins like their Christian counterparts; rather they are married women, mothers of children who insist on marking their infants as part of the Jewish people by circumcising them.[26]

The difference between the Jewish and the Christian perceptions becomes more salient in the second part of the same poem, where a shift takes place in the nature of the events described and the ideal they represent. The verses go on to recount another of Antiochus's decrees, reported first in the *Scholion*,[27] then developed in the eighth century *She'iltot de Rab Ahai Gaon* (Babylon/ Palestine),[28] and making an emphatic appearance in later Jewish legends[29] that were probably composed

on European soil. These sources were detached from the tale in the Book of Maccabees, and focused on deeds pertaining to female sexuality.

The first decree in the second part of the *piyyut* is known to us from the eighth-century *She'iltot*.^[30] It forbids monthly immersion, a ritual which should be performed seven days after the menstrual cycle has concluded and which enables sexual reunion with the husband, excluded once menstruation began. Divine intervention enabled circumvention of the ban on immersion. God sees the sufferings of the People of Israel, obliged to abstain from their unpurified wives, and builds a private ritual bath in the basement of each house, where the rite can be performed without danger:^[31]

The purity of ritual immersions he [Antiochus] prevented
Sacred men hastened to part from their wives
You [the Lord] saw their burden and multiplied the miracle
You prepared for all of them ritual baths [lit. pools of water].

The illustration accompanying the text of the miracle shows a naked woman immersing herself in the ritual bath; her breasts are bared (fig. 3). In the upper panel her husband awaits her return, lying naked in bed and holding a lighted candle, a possible phallic or marital symbol, which in this context may have also served to light the way of his wife from the darkened ritual bath to his bed.^[32]

The motif of monthly ritual bathing was foreign not only to the ancient Greek and Roman authorities, but also to the surrounding Christian world of the eleventh-century poet and the fifteenth-century illuminator. Although Judaism and Christianity shared a common belief in the power of purification by ritual water, in each religion this belief took a different direction. Whereas in Christianity baptism was a single spiritual act shared by men and women and valid for life, Jewish immersion was imposed only on women and was performed as a repeated monthly rite sanctifying a physical aspect of life—sexual relations within the marital bond. The Jewish laws of purification indeed limited marital activity, but, within this restriction, sexual relations were elevated and made holy through the monthly immersion in the ritual bath.^[33]



Fig. 3. Miracle of the ritual bath, Hamburg Miscellany, Mainz (?), ca. 1428–1434. Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 37, fol. 79v, detail (© Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg)

As the poem continues, female sexuality is strengthened and gains power, going beyond the boundaries of conjugal life. This is associated with another decree, *jus primae noctis*, first mentioned in the context of Antiochus's decrees in the *Scholion*,

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written in a time when this legendary law was already well known.[34] According to this legendary rule, every virgin, on her marriage night, was first to be given to the local prefect before she was allowed to be with her husband. Secret marriage was necessary until a dramatic event occurred, which caused this decree to be nullified. This is the story of the sister of Judah the Maccabee, whose marriage, due to her high social status, could not be concealed from the authorities. In an act of defiance, the sister refuses to be given to the governor. The event takes place at the wedding feast. The bride, who wishes to shock her brothers and incite them to fight for her honor, “took off all her adornments/ and poured wine for the guests,” an act of an unequivocally sexual, prostitution-like nature, expressed in Judah’s furious reaction to his sister’s wanton behavior:[35]

The brother’s anger at his sister grew heavy:
Noble men were gathered to give her pleasure
How did you stand in front of them as a naked whore?

The sister, however, is not deterred by her brother’s words and answers him

How are you going to torment me in deception
To make me lie naked this night with an uncircumcised and impure man?

Judah realizes his mistake, and his fury turns into a surge of protectiveness of his sister’s honor. He sets off with his brothers to prevent her defilement, killing the governor and defeating his armies.

In the image illustrating the wedding banquet, the breasts again may play a certain role (fig. 4). The participants are seated at a table arranged for a noble feast; one servant pours wine into a golden goblet and another serves a dish. The bride is one of the two women seated on the left. The well-dressed woman on the extreme left is more prominent. Whether she is the bride or one of the respectable guests is unclear. She raises a hand to her face in grief, possibly expressing the bride’s reluctance to marry the prefect, or, alternatively, in shame, illustrating the verse of the *piyyut* which describes the guests who “hid their face from looking at her beauty.” The other woman in the illumination is partially hidden between the elegant woman on the left and another, male, participant. She appears with half-bared breasts. The low-cut dress she wears, exposing the upper part of the breasts, first became fashionable at the court of France in the early fifteenth century, and despite

the severe criticism it raised, it spread to other classes and areas. Moralists continuously protested against the deep décolletage, which was compared to the gates of Hell and associated with whoredom.[36] Since then, no parallel has been found for this daring mode in other illustrations of the miscellany or any Ashkenazi example of the time; its inclusion here seems not to be innocent and befits the sexual connotation of the verses.



Fig. 4. Wedding feast of Johanan's daughter, *Hamburg Miscellany*, Mainz (?), ca. 1428-1434. Hamburg, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 37, fol. 80r, detail (© Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg)

Judah, who stands at the head of the table, turns and points beyond the panel, as if suggesting the progress of the events. The illustrator, who responded to most of the

verses of his text, abstained from showing Judah killing the prefect and defeating the Greek armies. He thus reflects the attitude of the poet, making Judah and his brothers minor characters within the tale. And yet, while in the verses the main hero is a woman using her body and sexuality, the illuminator obscured the sexually provocative act of taking off the clothes, and preferred to hide the half-bare-breasted woman, whose identity is not certain, behind other figures seated in the foreground of his composition. It seems that for the illuminator, martyrdom (in the case of the two women who circumcised their sons), and ritual (in the case of the miracle of the ritual bath) were regarded as proper contexts for the depiction of complete female nudity, but a provocative stripping was not perceived as appropriate for full visualization. In this case, the illuminator, at least to a certain degree, suppressed the direct sexual tone of the liturgical poem.

The outcome of the war is determined, however, in the bedroom. As an epilogue, the poet borrowed the story of Judith stealing into Holofernes's camp, seducing him, cutting off his head, and bringing an end to his tyrannical rule.[37] Three miniatures are dedicated to this section; in the first she stands before the warlord;[38] her breasts are accentuated (fig. 5). Although no nakedness is mentioned, Judith uses her sexuality to seduce the ruler and commits his execution within an intimate frame. In the liturgical poem, as well as the eighth-century *She'iltot*, the sexual aspect is stressed, but channeled into concepts of ritual purification and the sanctity of the marriage union. While in the original story the heroine receives Holofernes's permission to leave the camp every night for three days to bathe and pray for the sake of her people (Judith 12:7-9), in the later Jewish sources the motif of bathing is reinterpreted as purification related to the menstrual cycle and marital relations. Holofernes proposes marriage to Judith, an offer that does not appear in the Book of Judith. She consents, but presents a condition: "Now I am menstruating and in the evening I shall immerse and do the will of the king." [39] The association between marriage and immersion not only places Judith's sexuality within the context of menstrual purification, but also echoes the decree against immersion which opened the second section of the *piyyut*. Thanks to her agreement with Holofernes, Judith is able to leave the camp with his head without being harmed, and thus to complete her mission of saving her people.



Fig. 5. Judith before Holofernes, *Hamburg Miscellany*, Mainz (?), ca. 1428–1434. Hamburg, Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 37, fol. 80v, detail (© Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg)

The set of illustrations of the Hanukkah poem in the Hamburg Miscellany reflects both the meeting points of the Jewish and Christian attitudes and the sharp split into different directions. As in the Christian tradition, the poem and illustrations extol

the torture of the Jewish martyrs and equate the women's figures with body and sexuality. Image types prevalent in the Christian environment are used to convey the message. But contrary to the glorification of the ideal of virginity which characterizes the Christian female martyrs, the poem presents female sexuality as a driving force moving the wheels of history toward the awaited salvation. To overcome the historical critical distress, female sexuality had to overflow from the intimate space of marital life into the unruly public domain; unlike the poet, here the illuminator suppressed its expressions. Finally, through the sanctimony of ritual immersion, female sexuality is restored to its proper place and depicted as a Jewish ideal.

The Everyday Aspect

The ideas reflected in the illustrated poem of the Hamburg Miscellany had an actual dominant aspect in everyday Ashkenazi urban existence in the form of a ritual bath (*mikveh*), usually located next to the synagogue and intended first and foremost for the immersion of women. In the Rhineland, such ritual baths were excavated in Worms, Speyer and Cologne, all of them built in the twelfth century.[40] This every-day practice, reflecting different views towards sexuality, no doubt heightened the barriers between Jews and their Christian neighbors. But even such prominent boundaries did not succeed in obscuring Ashkenazi Jews' affinity with their Christian surroundings. Away from the broad historical process, the eternal ideal and the ritual context, the perception of the sexuality of the Jewish woman was much closer to that applied to her Christian neighbor. An example containing bare breasts and even the power of water takes us out of the Hamburg Miscellany, written and illuminated by a Jewish scholar possibly for himself, into the Darmstadt Haggadah, a sumptuous ritual manuscript illuminated in the same period and region.[41] Unlike the liturgical poem for Hannukah, which was recited by the cantor during the morning service of the Sabbath of Hannukah in the synagogue, the haggadah for Passover is a ritual text recited at home, together with all the family members. In the fifteenth century, the haggadah had become the book most often illustrated among Ashkenazi Jews and a common part of the ritual family event. In the case of the Darmstadt Haggadah, a marginal commentary is attached to the haggadah text, a collection of traditions from the rabbinic school of the Rhineland, which appear to have been composed and collected in the School of Eleazar of Worms (d. 1230).[42] The scribe, Israel ben Meir of Heidelberg, made a colophon with his name written in a display script along a whole page (fol. 56v), but neither the artist nor the patron are mentioned.

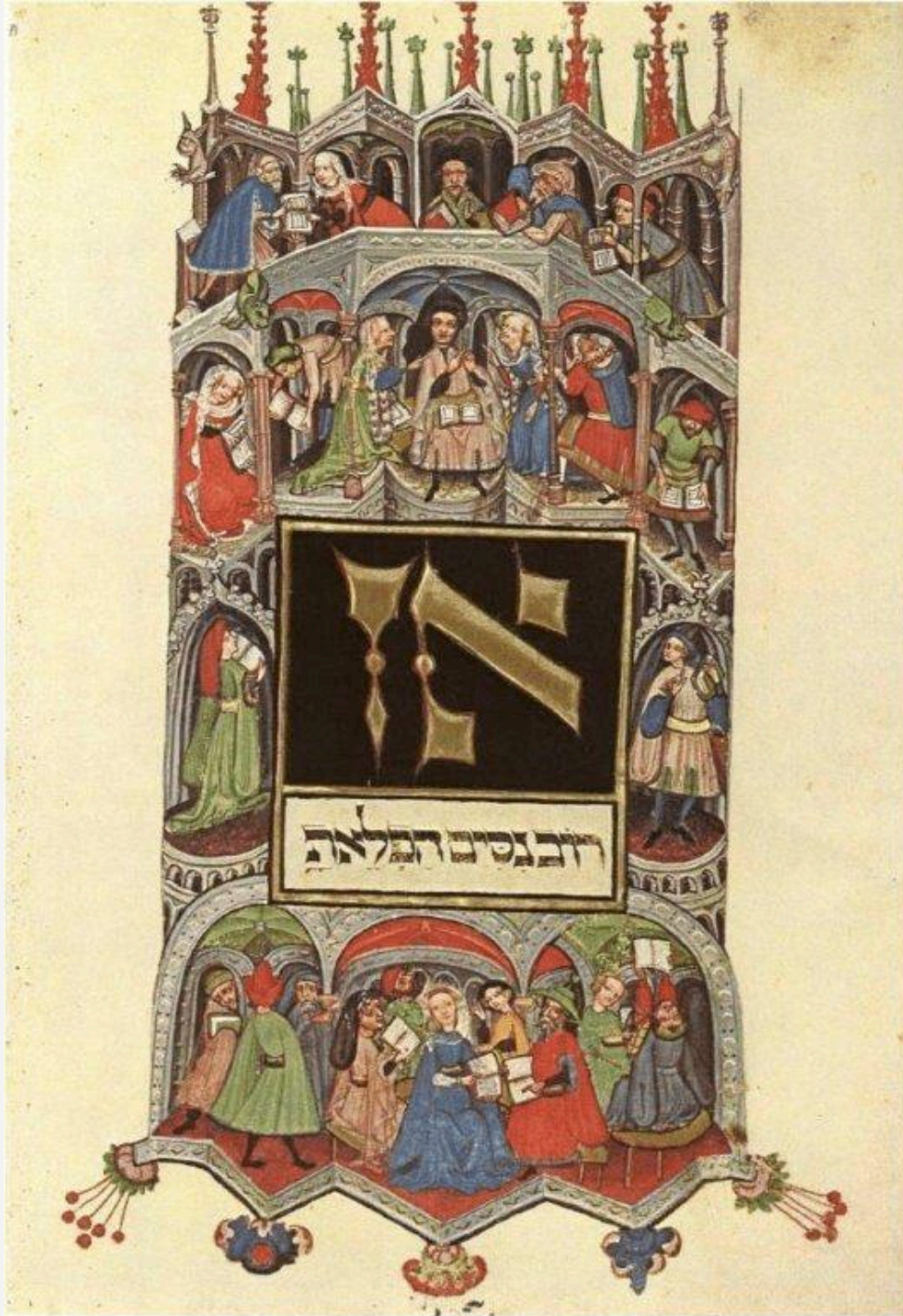


Fig. 6. Women and men studying together with open books, *Darmstadt Haggadah*, Middle Rhine, 2nd quarter of 15th c. Darmstadt, Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Cod. Or. 8, fol. 48v (© Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt)

The Darmstadt Haggadah was most probably intended for a woman; the prominent place given to women in the illustrations throughout the manuscript leads to this conclusion (fig. 6).[43] The book itself, together with the act of studying attached to it, appears to be the main theme of the illustrations.[44] In this context studying is connected with the declaration appearing in the text, according to which “those who linger over the telling of the Exodus from Egypt are worthy of praise.” The extensive commentary written along the margins of the Darmstadt Haggadah, interpreting the text and the customs attached to it, fits well into the context of studying, which is the focus of the illustrations: the participants, men and women alike, celebrating the event, enthusiastically dedicated to the ritual recitation of the haggadah and the study of its meaning. The most elaborated images represent the act of studying in an ideal way, in which women appear as equal companions or, in one instance even as the central figure surrounded by men (fig. 6, lower part). While such equality was usually far from social reality, in the context of Passover celebrated within the family at home it was closer to the truth. Its unique elaboration here was possibly intended to flatter the patroness for whom this manuscript may have been designated.[45]

The anonymous patroness of the Darmstadt Haggadah, a dignified educated woman with her book, absorbed in the study of the haggadah as an equal companion, has a counterpart. Two unusual full-page miniatures facing each other, probably by another illuminator, were designed on an additional bifolio at the end of the manuscript. These depict purely secular themes on a plain background, as was customary in secular art. The first miniature depicts a hunting scene.[46] The other shows the myth of the Fountain of Youth, whose miraculous water has the power to transform old age into newly rejuvenated youth (fig. 7). The theme, referred to in the Alexander Romance and in narratives based on classical work, usually figures on luxury objects, murals, and tapestries.[47] In the Darmstadt Haggadah, as in other examples, the fountain is designed as an elaborate Gothic baptismal font with a staircase at each side, leading to the source of water flowing through two animal-headed gutter-like apertures. The reception of the Fountain of Youth myth in the Middle Ages was probably related to the basic perception of ritual immersion as an act of rebirth, a belief shared by Judaism and Christianity, but which, as we have seen, each religion interpreted in a different direction.[48] Since the profane myth of the Fountain of Youth was not charged with a clear religious intention, it could be adopted in its original meaning also by Jews.



Fig. 7. Fountain of Youth, *Darmstadt Haggadah*, Middle Rhine, 2nd quarter of 15th c. Darmstadt, Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Cod. Or. 8, fol. 58r (© Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt)

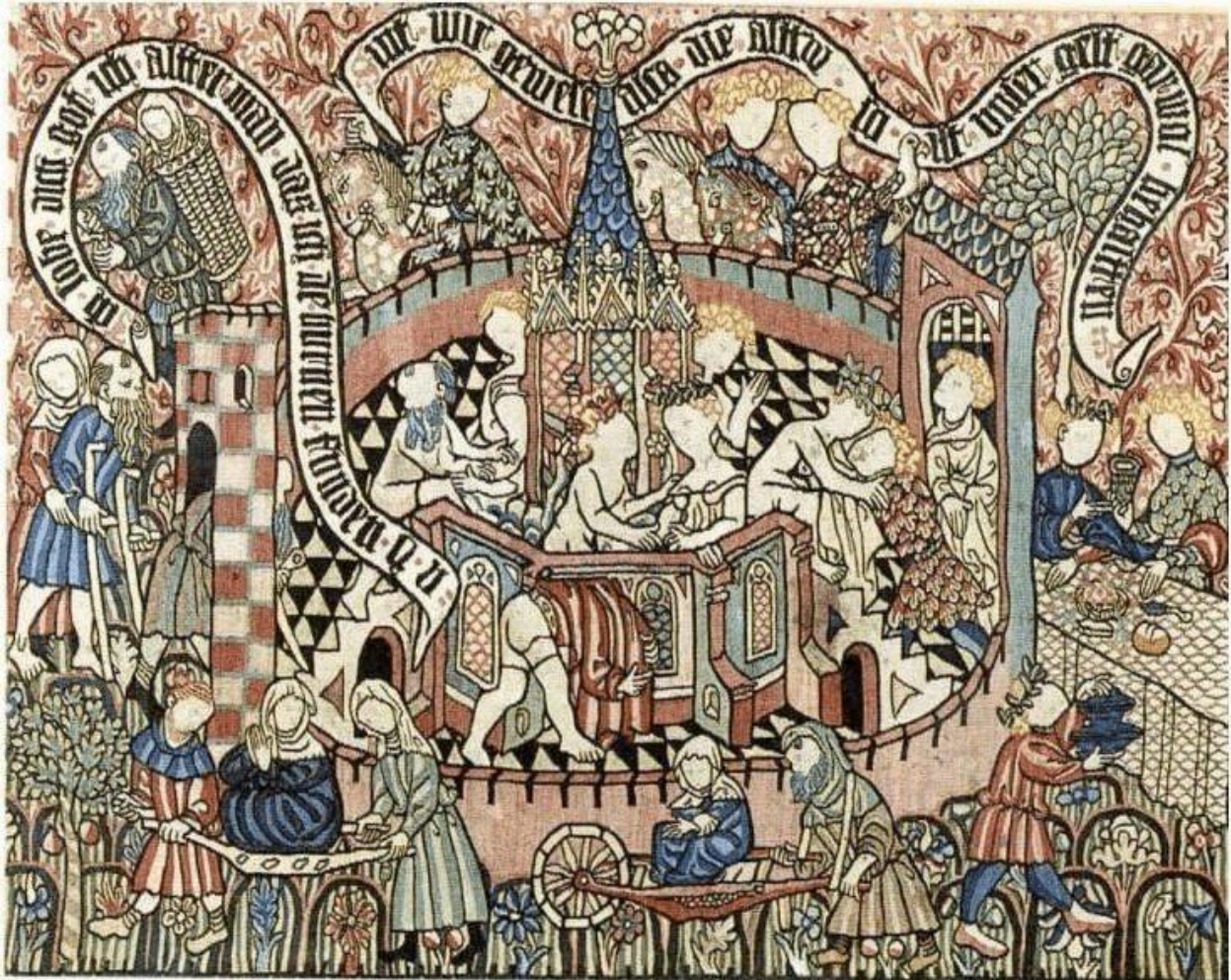


Fig. 8. Fountain of Youth, tapestry, Strasbourg, ca. 1430–1440. Colmar, Musée d'Unterlinden (© Musée Unterlinden Colmar)

Scenes of the Fountain of Youth usually show elderly couples marching towards the target, taking off their garments at the foot of the fountain, and climbing heavily up the steps leading to the source of water. There men and women, instantaneously transformed into young and fresh lovers, fondle in the fountain. In a tapestry made in Strasbourg at about the same time (early 1430s), two inscriptions on banderoles seem to be spoken by men (fig. 8).[49] One, next to an old man, expresses gratitude: “Ich lobe dich Gott, ich altter Man, das ich dē Burnen funden h(a)n.”[50] while the other, which is placed next to a young rider pointing to the elderly couple in front of him, reflects a more realistic attitude and refers to his fortune, a means by which an old man could attain a young bride: “Sind wir gewese also die Altten, so ist unser Geld gar wol behalten.”[51] Marriage to a young bride also had a dangerous potential: the bride’s adultery, a theme perhaps stressed in the Darmstadt

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illumination (fig. 7). Here the main figure is a naked young woman with bared breasts, who kneels in the basin, bending to hold a man, probably her husband, who is lying in the water. The intimate situation is invaded by a second, alien, man watching the naked woman from behind a column (figs. 7 and 9).[52] Through the male gaze,[53] the power of the Fountain of Youth turns into the threatening power of the young naked woman. The miraculous water of the Fountain has the power to restore sexual desire and ability in elderly married couples, but the intimate process takes place in the public domain, open to voyeurs looking for erotic excitement. Voyeurism was associated with another popular *topos* concerning bathing—the public bathhouse, which was shared by men and women.[54] Such baths, also an essential part of the fifteenth-century urban reality, had the reputation of being sites of sexual activity, in which voyeurism was just the first stage.[55]



Fig. 9. Fountain of Youth, *Darmstadt Haggadah*, Middle Rhine, 2nd quarter of 15th c. Darmstadt, Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Cod. Or. 8, fol. 58r, detail (© Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek Darmstadt)

The naked woman attracting the eye of an unknown man in the Haggadah is totally unlike the dignified, well-dressed women represented in the previous miniatures (fig. 6). Beyond the ideal of equality between the sexes reflected in the illustrations to the main text, the concluding, detached, image reveals another hierarchy conducted by the male gaze and the threatening power of female sexuality. This final figure reflects social conventions, shared by Christians and Jews living together in a specific time and place, which considered female sexuality as a tempting and threatening power to be controlled. The male gaze in the Darmstadt Haggadah may therefore evoke a moral message against adultery, a message relevant for young wives, whether Jewish or Christian. Alongside this moral aspect, the miniature of the Fountain of Youth in the Haggadah may have also been intended as a source of erotic amusement, an aspect that found its way into some Christian ritual manuscripts as well.[56]

In the Darmstadt Haggadah, perceptions connecting female sexuality and nudity with temptation and eroticism are limited to the end of the book, and can be defined as a profane appendix to the sacred book. They appear without direct relation to the feast, detached from the ritual text by the colophon that follows and a blank page, and are painted in a different manner from those components illuminating the text. But in the late medieval Jewish context, such ideas could have been an integral part of illustrations to sacred texts. An example is another haggadah, illuminated by the celebrated wandering scribe and illuminator, Joel ben Simeon. Joel was born around 1420 in Cologne, in the middle Rhine valley.[57] In 1424, when he was about four years old, the Jews were expelled from Cologne and the family went to the nearby small city of Bonn. The Rhine region was the region where Joel trained as a scribe and illuminator, but he soon became a wandering scribe and illuminator, eventually reaching Italy, where he worked for local Italian Jews or Ashkenazi immigrants. He returned to his homeland several times and copied and illuminated books for German-Jewish patrons. Joel's work remained basically German, but the culture and aesthetic values that he discovered beyond the Alps influenced his outlook and manner of illumination.[58]

It is possible that in Italy Joel came across ancient Greco-Roman statues of Venus, which had already attracted the attention of high-medieval travelers[59] and aroused renewed interest in the Renaissance.[60] These statues depict the naked goddess rising from bathing, a towel often lies beside her; the Capitoline Venus is a well-known instance.[61] Similar statues, or drawings of them, may have caused Joel to depict a naked woman standing on a pedestal in the Murphy Haggadah of about 1455;[62] a towel covers her shoulders, exposing her bared breasts (fig. 10). This image

illustrates the haggadah text based on the early midrash, reciting a verse from Ezekiel that describes the redemption of the people of Israel in Egypt through the metaphor of an abandoned girl. When she becomes a mature woman showing the signs of sexual development, she is taken by the Lord to be his wife:

You grew up and became tall and arrived at full womanhood; thy breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare (Ezekiel 16:7).[63]

In the Murphy Haggadah, the final words of the verse “you were naked and bare” are written in a *Spruchband* held by the figure and floating above her.

Illustrations of the passage “you were naked and bare” by means of a naked figure are known in earlier fifteenth-century haggadot.[64]) In these, however, the illuminators obscured the gender of the naked figure and deliberately neutralized the prominent feminine sexuality of the verse. It was probably Joel ben Simeon who, in the Murphy Haggadah, first introduced an unequivocal feminine sexuality which reflects more closely Ezekiel's metaphor: a naked woman with prominent bared breasts. The pedestal on which the woman stands gives her the appearance of a statue of Venus,[65] the Goddess of Love, alluding in this context to the nuptial meaning of the metaphor. Her firm breasts illustrate the phrase “thy breasts are fashioned,” whereas the towel around her body recalls the motif of bathing, which is not included in Ezekiel's verse but is often associated with the figure of Venus in literature and art.[66] Her assertive posture and the *Spruchband* recall the iconography of *Frau Minne*, the aggressive German version of Venus, whose religious implications in the context of the Passion are dominant (fig. 11).[67] Joel, who knew both the German and Italian cultures, combined the Italian goddess and the German personification to embody the biblical metaphor of Israel as a girl who has reached marriageable age. Yet he gave her a simple human aspect which differs from the exalted character of the two divinities. Joel's naked figure wears a necklace and a head covering, both typical of human females in his work.[68] Moreover, Joel exchanged the simple towel falling over a vase next to the goddess or dropping diagonally from her hand or one shoulder to cover the loins for a colorful towel draped elegantly over both shoulders in a way typical of a human female drying herself after bathing (fig. 10). This item, foreign to the naked divinity, expropriates the eternal character of the goddess or personification. The result still alludes to Venus and Minne, but at the same time represents a human female, who does not suppose



Fig. 10. “You were naked and bare” (Ezekiel 16:7), *Murphy Haggadah*, Northern Italy, ca. 1455. Jerusalem, The Jewish National and University Library, Ms. Heb. 4°6130, fol. 10r (© The Jewish National and University Library Jerusalem)



Fig. 11. Frau Minne, woodcut, Germany, 1479. Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (© Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin)

to show her nakedness in front of everybody, including the readers of the Haggadah, the family members celebrating the sacred rite.[69] Joel suggests a subversive visual interpretation of the biblical metaphor of Israel quoted in the haggadah text. Was he alluding to the embarrassing continuation of Ezekiel's prophecy, which is not quoted in the haggadah text and was usually ignored in post biblical sources? These verses describe how Israel, the abandoned girl adopted by the Lord as a married wife, is turned into a whore, a sinful adulterous woman:

But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer by" (Ezekiel 16: 15)

Sarit Shalev-Eyni, "The Bared Breast in Medieval Ashkenazi Illumination: Cultural Connotations in a Heterogeneous Society," *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 5 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.61302/QNDD2270>.

Or was Joel expressing his attitude towards women, a perception crystallized during his wanderings in different cultural areas and suited to the view of his contemporaries, Christian and Jewish alike? The result is an erotic image inspired by the ritual text, but going far beyond it, reflecting the interest of Joel (and his patrons) in the naked female body.

The images of the naked women discussed here present differing perceptions of female sexuality among Jewish illuminators and patrons, various figures in the fifteenth-century Ashkenazi communities: the scholar-designer of the Hamburg miscellany, the wandering illuminator and scribe Joel ben Simeon, or the prosperous patroness of the Darmstadt Haggadah. All of them, each in his or her own way, were exposed to the Christian surroundings of their time. The attitude of a fifteenth-century Ashkenazi person towards female sexuality was based on the positive Jewish concept of sexuality within the marital condition and the rejection of asceticism. Ritual practices related to sexual relations, as well as the ideology protesting the Christian ideal of abstinence, were dominant factors in laying out clear boundaries between Jews and their surroundings. And yet, even these ritual and ideological barriers could not prevent the diffusion of the values of the general Christian society within the Jewish communities. The meeting points of the two cultures, as they are vividly reflected in the visual domain, are diverse. Christian images, such as those related to the abusing of the breasts of female martyrs and the ideal of martyrdom could have been adopted by Jews with a distinct ideological adjustment to the Jewish context. Often, as in this case, the adopted notion stressed not only the similarities between the religions, but also the opposing ideals; here motherhood versus virginity. Other, profane, elements, such as the Fountain of Youth, which did not carry a specific or obligatory religious meaning, could be adopted as they stood. Otherwise similar motifs were adapted to a new Jewish context, carrying a message of female sexuality relevant for both societies, as in the case of the Venus-like metaphor. Beyond the religious differences, Jews and Christians living together in a specific time and place shared a similar mentality, a prevalent aspect of which was the perception of female sexuality as a dangerous power of temptation and source of adultery but also of enjoyable eroticism. These images exemplify how the mentality of a specific geo-cultural area in a particular time has the power to blur the ritual and ideological boundaries between minority and majority and at some points even cause their total collapse. The Jewish perception of female sexuality indeed differed from that prevalent in the Christian majority society, but at the same time, it was also an integral part of it.

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- 2** For the complexity of this work, see Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Conversion of Herman the Jew: Autobiography, History, and Fiction in the Twelfth Century*, trans. Alex J. Novikoff (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 12-42, with additional bibliography.
- 3** Cf. Cohen, *Living Letters*, 293-94.
- 4** See I Corinthians 7, 1-14 and 25-34.
- 5** Ruth Mazo Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe: Doing Unto Others* (London: Routledge, 2005), 43-52.
- 6** Karras, 66-70. For the concept of procreation, see Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase – Fill the Earth and Master It: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989). For the variety of Christian attitudes towards marital sex, see James A. Brundage, *Law, Sex, and Christian Society in Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and his, *Sex, Law, and Marriage in the Middle Ages* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1993).
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- 22** Martha Easton, "Saint Agatha and the Sanctification of Sexual Violence," *Studies in Iconography*, 16 (1994), 83-118, at 102. See also Martha Easton, "Images Gross and Sensible: Violence and Memory in Medieval Art," in *Memory and Commemoration in Medieval Culture*, ed. Elma Brenner, Meredith Cohen, and Mary Franklin-Brown (Farnham, Surrey, UK; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013), 33-54; Martha Easton, "Pain, Torture and Death in the Huntington Library *Legenda aurea*," in *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women, and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (London: Routledge, 2002), 49-64, esp. 50-52.
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- 27** The *Scholion* is a commentary on *Tractate Ta'anit* written in the Tanaite or Amoraic period. For the text, see Vered Noam, *Megillat Ta'anit: Versions-Interpretation-History* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi Press, 2003), 90-92 and related sources, 229-231.
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- 31** The miracle of the ritual baths is paralleled in one of the late *midrashim* for Hanukkah (Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, VI: 2).
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- 46** The miniature is characterized by a certain pastoral air. The hunter is mounted on a noble beast, reminiscent of the chivalric tradition of illustrated copies of the Minne song cycles, and the scene is set in a beautiful garden surrounded by a fence with a padlocked wooden gate; a tall tree with fruit and birds is in the center. The closed garden (*hortus clausus*) was a common theme in profane art and literature, based on a verse of the Song of Songs (4: 12). Hunting, a typical leisure occupation usually restricted to the nobility, spread to other wealthy strata in the German-speaking lands. Because they were symbols of noble activity, pastoral hunt scenes were sometimes depicted on artifacts as a sign of status, a custom adopted by prosperous Jews; an earlier purely secular parallel appears in the murals of the house “*Zum Brunnenhof*” in Zurich, the property of a Jewish family of money lenders, Minne and her two sons, Moshe and Mordechai Gumprecht. See Dölf Wild and Ronald Böhmer, “Die spätmittelalterlichen Wandmalereien im Haus *Zum Brunnenhof* in Zürich und ihre jüdischen Auftraggeber,” *Zürcher Denkmalpflege* (1995-1996), 1-20. For profane themes in Hebrew liturgical manuscripts, see Sarit Shalev-Eyni, *Jews among Christians: Hebrew Book Illumination from Lake Constance* (London and Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 85-103.
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- 48** For the Christian background, see *ibid.*, 9-12
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- 49** Colmar, Musée d'Unterlinden; *ibid.*, 88-90, No. IV. 2
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- 50** “I pray dear God that I the old man have found the Fountain of Love,” trans. in Michael Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love: Objects and Subjects of Desire* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 83.
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- 51** “Since we shall become old so then shall we keep our Gold,” trans. in Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, 83, 85.
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- 52** Compare to the two figures behind the two columns in the tapestry from Strasbourg (fig. 8). This was probably a source for our artist, who represented only one such figure and designed a direct connection between the intruder and the central naked woman.
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- 53** On the male gaze, see Caviness, *Visualizing Women in the Middle Ages*, 17-44; Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*.
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- 54** Wolfthal, *In and Out*, 121-28.
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- 55** Wolfthal, *In and Out*, 124-25. For the association of the male gaze and sexual arousal in the context of bathing, see also the fifteenth-century biblical iconographies of Bathsheba and Susanna, also discussed in Wolfthal, *In and Out*, 145-46.
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- interpretations, see Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 83-87 and fig. 44; Long, "Survival and Reception," 55-57.
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- 62** Jerusalem, JNUL, MS Heb. 4° 6130, fol. 10r. For the manuscript, see Annabelle and Walter Cahn, "An Illuminated Haggadah of the Fifteenth Century," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 41 (1967): 167-81; Narkiss, "Art of the Washington Haggadah," 34, no. 8.
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- 63** The verse is quoted to explain the miraculous procreation of the Israelites in Egypt "There he became a greater nation, powerful and numerous" (Ezekiel 26:5). The next verse of the prophecy reads: "Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love and I spread my skirt over thee and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee . . .".
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- 68 See, e.g., a woman holding a *mazzah* in the Maraviglia Tefillah from 1469; London, BL, MS Add. 26957, fol. 45r; Narkiss, "The Art of the Washington Haggadah," fig. 4.
- 69 Adding items of human attire that expropriate the divine nature of the Venus-like figure is a phenomenon also known in Christian art of the fifteenth century. One example is an oil painting on panel, the so-called *Love Charm* by an anonymous painter of the Rhine region (Leipzig, Museum der bildenden Kunst). See Brigitte Lymant, "Entflammen und Löschen: Zur Ikonographie des Liebeszaubers von Meister des Bonner Diptychons," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 57, no. 1 (1994): 111-22. Here a naked woman recalling the personification of Minne lights the flames of love over a bleeding heart in a chest. The sandals worn by the naked woman, as well as the domestic setting, in which the scene takes place, expropriate the divine nature of the figure and stress the aspect of lust and desire, which is directly referred to by the dark man standing at the door and gazing at the naked figure from the back. On the power of the gaze in this picture as well as the witch-like character of the figure, see Camille, *The Medieval Art of Love*, 117-19. The naked woman with sandals in a domestic setting also appears in a copy after Jan van Eyck. There, in a context more similar to our example, she holds a small towel or napkin to cover her loins and raises her other hand from a basin placed on a chest next to her. Bernhard Ridderbos refers to the moral message of the painting and the negative meaning of the figure as Bathsheba and *Luxuria* ("Objects and Questions," 68-71). See also the painting of *Luxuria* by Hans Memling, where the naked figure wears sandals and holds a mirror (see, Ridderbos, "Objects and Questions," 71). Another similar example is the miniature of the nude bather in the Flemish Book of Hours, which is defined by Wolfthal not only as a reference to sin, but also as "an invitation to erotic enjoyment," Wolfthal, *In and Out*, 153; cf. her "Sin or Sexual Pleasure," 286-89.