

**JEWISH ART AND CULTURAL EXCHANGE:  
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper deals with cultural exchange, an issue crucial for the study of medieval Jewish art. It aims to propose a more precise definition of Jewish pictorial art than that of a minority operating within different majority cultures by discussing different theoretical concepts. The paper presents historical-anthropological models of interpretation, on the one hand, and theoretical formulations derived from literary studies, on the other. These concepts are examined in several art-historical test cases from the field of Jewish art in which the issue of cultural exchange is particularly crucial. Conclusions drawn from these test cases may shed light on the applicability of such models in the context of visual culture.

In the year 1008 a richly illuminated Hebrew Bible was produced in Fustat in Egypt (**Fig. 1**).<sup>1</sup> A brief look at the decoration is enough to convince the viewer that the design of this Bible owes a great debt to Islamic art. The same is true of the so-called Farhi Bible, written and decorated between 1366 and 1382 most likely in the southeast of France (**Fig. 2**), which can be compared to the design of an Islamic manuscript made in the fourteenth century in the Maghreb or in Granada (**Fig. 3**).<sup>2</sup> A few decades earlier, around 1320, the Golden Haggadah, one of the most lavish of surviving medieval Hebrew manuscripts, was written and illuminated, scholars believe, in Barcelona (**Fig. 4**).<sup>3</sup> An extensive pictorial narrative following biblical history in chronological order precedes the text of the Haggadah. The iconography, style, and technique echo those of Christian Gothic art (**Fig. 5**) in every respect and to such an extent that several scholars assume that it may have been executed in a Christian workshop.<sup>4</sup> Looking at an Ashkenazic prayer book from approximately the same period, produced in Worms and now kept in Leipzig,<sup>5</sup> we find –perhaps to our surprise– an image (**Fig. 6**) that at first sight seems like a variation of the Coronation of the Virgin seated to the right of Jesus, one of the most common themes in the architectural sculpture of cathedrals since the twelfth century (**Fig. 7**). In another Ashkenazic prayerbook, commonly known as the Worms Mahzor but originating in Würzburg (1272),<sup>6</sup> we find the wicked Haman being hanged (**Fig. 8**) on what looks decidedly like a Tree of Jesse, very familiar from stained glass windows of Gothic cathedrals and from numerous examples in other media as well (**Fig. 9**).

These few instances are representative of the most dominant characteristic of Jewish visual art of late antiquity and the Middle Ages—cultural exchange as a major catalyst. The murals in the third-century synagogue of Dura Europos echo Persian, Mesopotamian, and Greco-Roman art; the mosaics of synagogues from the fourth to the seventh centuries are embedded in

early Byzantine art; medieval synagogues in Iberia reflect the aesthetic preferences of medieval Islamic architecture and architectural decoration, and those of Central Europe are indebted to secular building types current in Christian society. An overview of Jewish art offers abundant evidence that in developing their visual culture, the Jews were, as traditional surveys usually put it, heavily influenced by the art of non-Jewish environments.<sup>7</sup> For most of these surveys, the mere fact that Jews lived as minorities within hosting cultures seemed a sufficient explanation for this phenomenon. Everyone who studies Jewish art encounters the issue of non-Jewish influence, and when I first started to research Hebrew illuminated manuscripts this was a natural issue. In 2001 I published a first attempt to construct some sort of contextual framework that would take these borrowings beyond the notion of mere influence and might correlate the dynamics of cultural exchange with the degree of religiously motivated hostility.<sup>8</sup> During my research on Sephardic Bibles and Passover Haggadot, I finally realized that these influences could acquire a great deal of meaning in the various efforts of Jewish patrons to define themselves within the somewhat tense climate of Sephardic Jewish culture, on the one hand, and vis-à-vis Christian culture on the other.<sup>9</sup> This research resulted in descriptions of certain circumstances –mostly of a cultural nature– that enabled me to explain specific cases of non-Jewish influence. From the outset of the present discussion I would like to suggest that, instead of looking at productions of Jewish art as manifestations of non-Jewish, or alien, influence, they should be discussed in terms of Jewish artists and patrons sharing the visual cultures of their surroundings and partaking in them. This does not mean that Jews accepted these cultures uncritically in their entirety or that they made random choices leading to meaningless eclecticism; rather, they coped with them in a great variety of ways determined by a whole range of circumstances indicative of different levels of acculturation.

Cultural exchange has occupied the minds of numerous scholars in recent decades and some of them have attempted to create theoretical frameworks. The purpose of this short paper is to introduce some of these and to discuss their suitability in an attempt to come to terms with the phenomenon of Jewish artistic citations from the visual culture of non-Jewish environments. When I first thought of examining such models, I did so in terms of comparison, with the aim of choosing the one most suitable to explain the dynamics of Jewish visual culture in its relation to the non-Jewish environment. Having now studied these theories in depth, I realize that they complement one another and make most sense when integrated into a single concept applicable to most phenomena of what traditional scholarship described as “artistic influence.”

Acculturation is a phenomenon first studied by anthropologists who were interested in the transmission of cultural elements between different societies and the absorption processes of minorities in modern Western societies. Studies of acculturation processes gained relevance in the 1950s as a critical alternative to earlier diffusionist schools. Diffusion was now considered to contribute to acculturation but was no longer believed to be the sole factor in the transmission of cultural elements. During the 1960s and 1970s, the concept of acculturation was introduced into the field of history by scholars of medieval Spain<sup>10</sup> and discussed in depth by Thomas F. Glick in his observations on Christian and Jewish minorities in al-Andalus as well as Muslim and Jewish minorities in the Christian kingdoms. This led to a theoretical framework for the phenomenon of cultural exchange of which scholars of medieval Iberian culture had long been aware.<sup>11</sup>

Acculturation occurs whenever two cultures come into contact. Different circumstances result in different patterns and degrees of acculturation, and Glick describes several such processes in great detail.<sup>12</sup> He addresses two misapprehensions that had dominated earlier scholarship of cultural contacts, especially in Iberia. First he differentiates between acculturation

and assimilation, defining the former as a cultural process of the transmission of cultural elements from one culture to the other. Assimilation, by contrast, is seen as a social process going hand in hand with the integration of a minority in the majority's social system as members of the minority partake in the majority's social institutions. Mutual cultural fertilization is not necessarily a result of assimilation, nor will it necessarily lead to it. Acculturation can occur without tending to social proximity and assimilation; it is, however, determined by the degree of economic integration, defined in 1991 by Mark Meyerson as a process of normalization of daily economic interactions providing a social context for cultural exchange.<sup>13</sup> The Jews' acculturation process in al-Andalus reached a peak at the end of the tenth century when they became an integral part of Arabic culture. In Glick's view, not only did the Jews take an active part in Islamic culture, but this cultural interaction also played a creative role, strengthening the distinct characteristics of Jewish culture in al-Andalus<sup>14</sup> and creating a symbiosis between the two cultures.

Another misapprehension addressed by Glick was the notion that when ethnic groups are in conflict with each other there is no possibility of cultural exchange, since cultural interaction will not take place. He discussed this point in observing Muslim-Christian relationships on the peninsula. Despite the political and military conflict between Christian Spain and al-Andalus, cultural exchange did occur in various spheres and circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Whereas the situation of Muslim and Christian Iberia reflects political tension that involved armed conflict, the situation of the Jews in medieval Christian Europe can certainly be defined as that of "ethnic groups in conflict" at those times when it involved religiously motivated hostility, physical persecution, and attempts at forced conversion. Glick's argument that conflict does not block acculturation can thus be considered also in the context of Jews living within Christian societies.

A somewhat similar concept is applied to Jewish culture of post-Crusade Central Europe by Ivan Marcus.<sup>16</sup> His starting point is another misapprehension: the assumption that Ashkenazi Jewry was culturally isolated, especially when compared to Sephardic Jewry. He presents a concept of “inward” acculturation, typical of premodern Europe, and “outward”—modern—acculturation. Inward acculturation is the integration of cultural elements into Judaism, whereas outward acculturation implies borrowing elements that ultimately dilute collective Jewish identity and result in secularization. This distinction somewhat echoes Glick’s distinction between acculturation and assimilation. Like Glick, Marcus points out that it is the degree of acculturation that matters. However, acculturation implied an awareness of central Christian themes and values on the part of rabbinic thinkers. This awareness had a determining impact on the path that Jewish tradition would take “as a counterweight or social polemical response.”<sup>17</sup> Acculturation would thus be a central means in the process of self-definition through familiarity with the Other.

Cultural transmission is, naturally, also a subject of great interest to scholars of literature. Like other fields, literary studies were revolutionized during the 1970s and 1980s and new approaches were sought. One of these is the inter-culture research associated with the work of Itamar Even-Zohar, focusing on processes and procedures that determine the establishment of culture repertoires—“the aggregate of options utilized by a group of people, and by the individual members of the group, for the organization of life.” This implies also the study of what happens when cultural goods are transmitted from one group to another while cultural repertoires are being affected. A range of variable factors is taken into account: the size of the groups; the fact that there are passive and active aspects to the “organization of life,” with passive making sense of the world, and active making decisions toward changes; and the

circumstances under which the making of the culture repertoire takes place. There are two procedures for the making of culture repertoires: invention and import. Even-Zohar argues that “there is a permanent, quiet...flow of import at any moment in the history of groups.” What follows is a process of transfer, defined as the integration of imported goods, and “the consequences generated by this integration.” Not all the imported goods undergo a process of transfer and the question is what determines whether an imported good is integrated or not. How do the needs for certain cultural goods develop? Even-Zohar talks about “willingness to consume new goods” and resistance to the integration of imported elements, factors that continually fluctuate in the course of history. Whereas the degree of the two factors—willingness and resistance—is of primary importance, the nature of contacts occurring between members of the groups also has a determining weight. Such contacts can produce the awareness that another group has cultural goods to offer that might positively affect one’s own organization of life. Even-Zohar focuses on the mechanisms that create the needs as a precondition for the integration of cultural goods; he is less concerned, however, with the question of what causes resistance, such as feelings of alienness, certain political situations, or religiously motivated hostility. Finally, and most important, Even-Zohar considers the people engaged in the making of culture repertoires; when transfer is involved he refers to them as “agents of transfer.”<sup>18</sup> In a 2005 paper on intellectuals in antiquity he discusses the intelligentsia and its potential role as “a decisive factor in shaping the life of communities,” as “custodians of the repertoire” and thus as agents of transfer. Among these he counts “agents of cult and belief.” We may apply this notion to the situation of medieval Jewish art in its expression of messages and values formulated by rabbinic scholars, as well as to scribes and artists—Even-Zohar’s “more technical workers in the professions of reading, writing, and deciphering ideas, texts and messages.” Here we may add

the weight of cultivated and wealthy patrons who were not necessarily rabbinic scholars (even though in some cases they were).<sup>19</sup>

All these authors ask to what degree and in what form cultural exchange has shaped recipient cultures, or rather the cultural repertoire of the recipient culture. All agree that there is no such thing as “cultural bedrock,” and that the term “cultural repertoire” implies that culture is an ever-changing phenomenon. Even-Zohar and one of his students, the late Rina Drory, Glick, and Marcus talk about different types of cultural elements and address different sets of circumstances. Glick discusses technology, artisanry, and science; Drory analyzed literature; and Marcus describes a ritual. They deal with different historical circumstances. In al-Andalus and the Christian kingdoms in the north of Iberia, two divergent but geographically adjacent cultures existed in political conflict. At the same time, minorities were living within dominant host cultures: Christians and Jews in al-Andalus; *mudéjares* and Jews in the Christian kingdoms; and Jews in the German lands. In the case of Iberia the fact that there were three interacting cultures made a great difference and might have involved a deliberate decision to prefer elements of one culture to those of another. The varying and changing minority-majority situations were further affected by different levels of religiously motivated hostility. As my focus here is on Jewish art, I shall concern myself with minorities as recipient cultures; however, as Glick discusses in great detail, a minority culture often acts as a donor culture, and the theoretical framework is applicable also in this direction. The discussion of a minority culture within a dominant host culture also poses questions about integration and assimilation, which are touched upon by Glick and Marcus. All these affect the nature of the transfer of cultural elements.

The concepts introduced here use different terms, have different foci, and deal with different types of cultural elements; however, they do not really contradict one another. They



can, in fact, be integrated into a more general model and applied to any case of cultural contact, once they are approached in more general terms.

As we have seen, there is common agreement that there is no “cultural bedrock,” but that culture, or “cultural repertoires,” are dynamic and ever-changing. When two (or three) cultures come into contact, an import of cultural elements begins in a variety of fields. This import does not end up in simple passive diffusion; at some point a process of transfer of some of the imported cultural elements begins, a transfer that will affect the cultural repertoire of the recipient culture. When a transfer of imported cultural elements is about to occur the recipient culture will manifest either willingness or resistance.

A case where acceptance changed to resistance, however, can be found in the sixth century, caused by a transformation in the meaning of a cultural element. Until ca. 550, Jews used figural art in various contexts of synagogue decoration. Models of figural art were borrowed from Roman and later from Christian art. A transfer of cultural elements (in the form of figural motifs) had thus occurred. Around 550, Jews suddenly ceased to use such models and Jewish art began to be exclusively aniconic, refraining from any kind of figural expression. Charles Barber and others have argued that this happened in reaction to the development of Christian icon veneration.<sup>20</sup> Figural motifs not associated with the cult of icons had been found suitable to be transferred into Jewish culture; when such motifs changed their meaning and became objects of cult, resistance was manifest. I have argued elsewhere that this resistance held fast until the thirteenth century when the Jewish perception of Christianity as an idolatrous religion underwent modification; figural motifs again changed in meaning and were found suitable for use and thus transferred.<sup>21</sup>

The transfer of cultural elements is a process that involves active decision making and depends on motivation determined by political, cultural, and social circumstances. The political circumstances can be defined by posing a range of questions. In what political setting does contact between two cultures occur? Between two cultures in adjacent geographical areas or political units; in peace; in political tension; in armed conflict? Does contact occur in a situation of one or more minority culture(s) acting within a politically dominant majority? The latter is relevant for the discussion of Jewish art and further questions emerge. For example, to what degree is the donor culture open toward an integration of the minority? To what degree is the minority willing to be integrated in the dominant culture? These issues depend on the legal system of the dominant society as well as on the levels of mutual religiously motivated hostility. All this has a significant impact on the motivation to transfer imported cultural elements, the degree of transfer, and its nature. It is not only the basic willingness to perform a transfer that counts, but the understanding of the possible reasons that lead to it, the possible advantages, disadvantages, and outcomes that such a transfer may imply.

Analyzing the social circumstances of any process of transfer of cultural elements leads us in many directions. First of all, certain economic needs—different in character from the cultural needs to be discussed below—can have a strong influence on the nature of the transfer of cultural elements. The social circumstances of cultural transfer are touched on by both Glick and Even-Zohar. The latter introduces the above-mentioned notion of cultural agents. For example, the nature of cultural transfer is often determined by the interests of cultural elites. In certain situations this can also mean intellectual elites with opposing cultural values. Even-Zohar's intelligentsia is a heterogeneous group composed of people from different social strata: scholars, religious leaders, scribes, artists, and artisans. This group also includes individuals who critically

challenge institutionalized cultural repertoires and values; Even-Zohar mentions the Hebrew prophets of the biblical period in this context.<sup>22</sup> Sephardic anti-rationalists and Ashkenazi pietists seem to have played similar roles in Jewish medieval culture. The consideration of scribes, artists, and artisans as cultural agents leads us back to economic needs. People of certain professions often migrated from one culture to another seeking work, realizing that they could meet their economic needs in another society.<sup>23</sup>

According to Glick, social stratification is crucial in processes of cultural transfer. This means that the transfer of cultural elements can occur within a specific social stratum shared by both cultures when the social roles assumed by members of a particular stratum are stronger than the ethnic role they play as members of their culture as a whole. A transfer of cultural elements can thus occur between artisans—or manuscript illuminators—of different cultures, where their professional identity can be stronger than their cultural or religious differences. The issue of social differentiation can be of special relevance in the discussion of visual culture. Whereas in science and literature the intelligentsia undoubtedly plays the determining role, in manuscript illumination or synagogue decoration several agents are involved: patrons who pay for the project and artists who perform the work. Do they play the part of agents who determine the degree of willingness and resistance, grasp the cultural and political circumstances and come to terms with them, define practical or cultural needs, and are aware of what is necessary for self-definition? Is the decoration of a synagogue or the design of an illuminated manuscript simply a matter of skills and techniques and thus a result of cultural transfer among artists from different cultures, or a matter of taste and fashion resulting in a transfer within the social stratum of wealthy patrons? If the decoration of a synagogue or the design of an illuminated manuscript plays a role in the scenario of a particular group's self-definition, the intelligentsia would seem to

appear on the stage. It is at this level, it seems, where needs—both practical and cultural—are recognized and crucial decisions made, decisions that are affected by the degree of assimilation anxiety, fear of alienness, religiously motivated hostility, or awareness that a cultural element could be exploited polemically. However, much as we would wish for a clear definition of cultural agents as a social stratum—of scholars, for example—there is really no such thing, especially not in Jewish society. Patrons of works of art can be scholars, but they can also be scribes and illuminators. The Farhi Bible is such a case. It was signed by one Elisha ben Abraham Benvenisti Crescas, who explained that he had made the Bible for his own use. Scholars agree that “making” this Bible implies that he wrote *and* decorated it. In short, Elisha Benvenisti played all three roles together.

Finally, cultural circumstances also play a determining role. The motivation to perform a transfer of imported cultural elements depends on certain needs, not necessarily or solely of an economic nature. Familiarity with the cultural repertoire of the donor culture creates awareness of cultural desires and demands. Their nature is crucial for the form that the process of transfer will take. Practical needs determine the cause of actions in the fields of technology and artisanry. Cultural needs are perceptible in science, literature, and the development of rituals. A cultural need can emerge from tastes and fashions, but it can also be determined by the means a minority culture seeks self-definition. Self-definition can lead to the adoption of the donor culture’s cultural elements to a degree that results in cultural symbiosis. It can, however, also be guided by the fear of assimilation, the fear of losing self-definition, and the anxiety that the adoption of alien features may have a negative effect on one’s own cultural repertoire. This may lead to resistance. If religiously motivated hostility on the part of the dominant culture appears as a determining factor in the way a minority defines itself, the transfer of cultural elements can either

be checked by resistance, or take the route Marcus describes as leading to the adaptation of cultural elements for the sake of polemics. This again depends on the meaning that certain cultural elements have acquired in both the donor and the recipient culture.<sup>24</sup>

Analysis of the political, social, and cultural circumstances of each case of cultural interaction and the resulting transfer of cultural elements results in a specific network of circumstances in a particular combination that differs from case to case. An import of technological expertise from a dominant political entity to a politically weak entity, even if the two are in conflict, can lead to a transfer if the cultural elites of the recipient culture recognize the practical needs that this expertise can satisfy. An import of knowledge from a majority culture into a minority culture can occur through contacts between scholars encouraged by a legal system that makes these contacts possible. If we assume that within the social stratum of scholars on both sides—beyond the ethnic roles they play—common scholarly interests can create and answer cultural needs, this will determine the degree of willingness to perform the transfer of scholarly knowledge and the way this transfer will manifest.

We can now go on to the test cases introduced in my opening paragraph to see if we can apply in each case this integrated concept of observing the political, social, and cultural circumstances in any given process of transfer once an import of cultural elements has taken place.

In the case of the St. Petersburg Bible (**Fig. 1**), we have an interesting set of circumstances that affect not only the exchange of a certain formal repertoire or of painting techniques, but that also echo cultural contacts in fields going beyond the practice of artistic workshops. The political situation is that of a large Jewish minority under Islamic dominance. Islamic rule applied the legal system of *dhimmi*, with a certain degree of religious tolerance that

was, on the whole, apt to encourage cultural contact. Jewish cultural agents—patrons, scribes, and painters—became acquainted with the formal repertoire of Islamic art, and did not resist integrating it into their own culture. A transfer of cultural elements began and Jewish scribes and/or artists adopted this formal repertoire. At this point, a certain dynamic was initiated that involved a much broader cultural exchange. The adoption of an Islamic repertoire of forms seems to have stimulated the development of an art form that was to become one of the most typical characteristics of medieval Jewish art, namely the use of lines of small script as contours of an artistic design, referred to in scholarship as micrography.<sup>25</sup> In most cases, the text used in this type of decoration was that of the *massorah gedolah*, a linguistic commentary on the Bible traditionally added along the upper and lower margins of biblical manuscripts. This text was composed by scholars in Palestine in the eighth and ninth centuries and was in itself the result of an exchange with Islamic culture in the fields of philology, grammar, and linguistics. In short, one type of cultural exchange created a certain text that then stimulated the development of a new art form in the course of another type of cultural exchange: the transfer of an Islamic artistic repertoire to Jewish workshops. The social network of cultural agents in this process was that of scholars, patrons, and scribes. The cultural circumstances were first determined by a particular legal system that encouraged or at least enabled cultural contacts, which led to the adoption of Arabic philology, Islamic artistic styles, and the evolution of a new art form.

In the late fourteenth century, Elisha Benvenisti Crescas (**Fig. 2**) similarly adopted an Islamic formal repertoire (**Fig. 3**). However, the circumstances in which he acted were entirely different from those of Samuel ben Jacob, the scribe of the St. Petersburg Bible. Elisha did not simply follow a fashion or use models that he knew as part of his cultural environment. A member of a cultural elite, he worked within the political framework of a Christian state in the

south of France that had never possessed a significant Islamic population. In terms of Jewish culture this area belonged to the Sephardic cultural landscape. Whereas the Iberian Christian kingdoms often hosted *mudéjar* communities, this was not the case in southern France and the northern part of Catalonia. Elisha's familiarity with Islamic culture was thus not the by-product of social or geographical proximity to a *mudéjar* community, but rather had to do with the fact that he was born into a Sephardic elite that had maintained a cultural symbiosis with Islamic culture for centuries. Although he lived in a Christian environment, he gave a clear preference to Islamic culture, and we can observe a high degree of resistance on the part of Elisha to adopt designs associated with Christian art. These are consigned to the corners, in the form of fleshy Gothic scrollwork growing out of the Islamic-style carpet pages, and seemingly a bit out of place. His particular circumstances enabled Elisha to make a choice. But our analysis of the particular set of circumstances of the making of the Farhi Bible should not stop with the observation that he had a choice between a transfer from Islamic or Christian artistic repertoires. Rather, we can make another interesting observation: Elisha went as far as Granada or the Maghreb to look for models. The design he used in his carpet pages shares the up-to-date Islamic style typical of fourteenth-century *mudéjar* and Nasrid art. He made a point of demonstrating that he was an active participant in contemporary Islamic culture and not merely drawing on the heritage of the historical Jewish-Arabic symbiosis. As I have argued elsewhere, the motivation for this choice had to do with the means of self-definition of the Sephardic elite within Jewish Iberian culture of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. In their attempt to define themselves as a subgroup of Sephardic society this elite recognized a certain cultural need. The need was answered by the transfer of cultural elements of contemporary Islamic art, showing that this elite sought ways to assure the continuation of this symbiotic culture in a world that had increasingly

detached itself from the values of the Jewish-Arabic symbiosis, namely rationalist philosophy, science, and rationalist Bible exegesis. This cultural behavior is typical not only for Elisha Benvenisti and his Farhi Bible, but by and large for a whole group of Sephardic Bibles reflecting a Jewish-Islamic dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

The designers of the Golden Haggadah (**Fig. 4**) acted in very similar political circumstances but made different choices. Their social and cultural circumstances were, it appears, quite different from those of Elisha Benvenisti. Unlike the latter they selected pictorial motifs of biblical subject matter commonly occurring in the art of their Christian environment (**Fig. 5**). However, as in the case of the St. Petersburg and especially the Farhi Bible, we cannot simply point out an “influence” in order to describe and understand this Jewish biblical iconography produced in Iberia, but rather a complex process of adaptation of these motifs in attempts to render them suitable for the Jewish audience. The adopted Christian motifs were altered in accordance with Jewish exegesis of the Bible as practiced in scholarly circles of the time. These circles opposed the cultural values of the Sephardic elite to which Elisha Benvenisti must have belonged and promoted traditional methods of midrashic exegesis, an approach reflected in numerous ways in the iconography of the Sephardic Haggadot.<sup>27</sup> This procedure was followed in a group of Haggadot of the same period, indicating that the designers of the Golden Haggadah did not act in cultural isolation. What we have here are political circumstances similar to those of the Farhi Bible; we are also dealing with the interests of a cultural elite different, however, from Elisha’s. This elite preferred to cope with a Jewish-Christian cultural exchange. Even though it was problematic in view of the religious tension between the two societies, it suited the cultural needs of this elite better than an exchange with Islam. The need of this elite was determined by the tendency to promote a narrative type of midrashic exegesis in an attempt



at self-definition in the face of two confrontations: the Christian majority and the Sephardic elite representing the values of the Jewish-Arabic symbiosis.

Borrowing from Christian sources could yield different kinds of results. The couple shown in the Leipzig Mahzor (**Fig. 6**) represent an allegory of the love between God and Israel. The scene accompanies a liturgical poem that was recited in medieval Jewish communities on the Sabbath before Passover. The opening line cites the Song of Songs (4:8): “Come with me from Lebanon, my bride.” The Leipzig image is fashioned after one of the most dominant Christian motifs of the time, the Coronation of the Virgin as Maria Ecclesia, following a Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs (**Fig. 7**).<sup>28</sup> The political circumstances are those of Ashkenazi Jewry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a lengthy period marked by the increasing tension and persecution that followed the outbreak of violence during the First Crusade in 1096. As Jeremy Cohen argues, the Jewish-Christian climate had further deteriorated since the early thirteenth century due to the anti-Jewish activity of the mendicants.<sup>29</sup> In consequence, the cultural climate of Ashkenazi Jews was determined by numerous efforts to overcome pressure to convert to Christianity, often instigated by migrant mendicant preachers. Jewish scholars met this situation by composing several polemical treatises, the purpose of which was to fortify their fellow Jews against conversion pressure. Polemics, however, were not restricted to treatises with a declared agenda but also entered the realm of biblical exegesis, which was increasingly facing Christological claims.<sup>30</sup> The interpretation of the Song of Songs is one example of this phenomenon. Jewish exegetes discussed the Song of Songs within a history of bondage and exile, and claimed that God’s love for Israel, his bride, persisted in spite of the fact that the political situation of Ashkenazic Jews could be interpreted as abandonment. Israel was the true bride in the Song of Songs and the adoption of the Christian iconographic motif—

the Virgin bride as Ecclesia—and its translation can be understood against the background of this polemical dialogue between Jewish and Christian scholars of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>31</sup> The cultural agents are the polemicists behind the designer of the image, who may have been aware of the effect Christian art might have on Jews. The image here is an answer to these challenges to Jewish self-definition.

The use of a tree motif in the Worms Mahzor associated in Christian art with Jesse, Jesus, and salvation, turning it into the tree on which the archetypal persecutor of Israel is hanged (**Fig. 8**), reveals a much stronger polemical undertone. Again, the selection of the model was not simply a result of the availability of a suitable model. It was guided by a polemical dialogue that recruited one of the most dominant Christian symbols of the time (**Fig. 9**), and led to a presentation of the Redeemer—shown crucified at the top of the Tree of Jesse—as the persecutor of Jews, Haman, hanged on top of the Jewish tree. Haman represents Jesus, whose followers have brought persecution and bloodshed upon medieval Jews. The political and cultural circumstances are those of the Leipzig Mahzor, but the polemic is expressed much more bluntly. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the image in the Worms Mahzor was produced at a time of acute anxiety of a possible renewed Crusade (which did not materialize). By the 1260s and 1270s, Jews were all too well aware that Crusades meant physical danger. The message goes beyond the need for self-definition and the academic polemical claim to correctness in the theological context; here the message says clearly that Christianity is the source of Jewish misery and that its followers eventually will be punished.<sup>32</sup>

Historians of Hebrew illuminated manuscripts, synagogue architecture, mosaic pavements, and wall paintings have long realized that Jewish art owed a great debt to the artistic repertoires of

the non-Jewish environments. Numerous research projects pointing out such links commonly understood them in terms of influence, perhaps a tendency to eclecticism, or the borrowing of aesthetically preferred pictorial models. The foregoing discussion of concepts of cultural transfer developed in other disciplines aims at a different mode of understanding Jewish art. Medieval Jews in the Islamic lands, in Iberia, and in central Europe shared the visual cultures of their environments. Participating in the surrounding visual culture, however, did not simply mean adopting attractive pictures deemed suitable in a Jewish context or borrowed due to a misunderstanding of the original meaning. Rather, sharing Islamic or Christian visual culture implied an understanding of the visual codes used in the different societies. Moreover, it implied that Jews be eloquent—so to speak—in the visual language of the environment. However, not every borrowed motif can be explained simply by the fact that Jews shared the visual cultures of their environment. Rather, each borrowed motif needs to be analyzed in depth to reveal a specific network of political, social, and cultural circumstances, in which the scholars, illuminators, patrons, scribes, architects, mosaicists, and sculptors—the cultural agents—acted to produce the artistic witnesses of medieval Jewry.

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<sup>1</sup> For a facsimile edition, see David N. Freedman, ed., *The Leningrad Codex. A Facsimile Edition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998); for a discussion of the decoration, see Bezalel Narkiss, *Illuminations from Hebrew Bibles of Leningrad* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1992), 50-53; Katrin Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art Between Islam and Christianity: The Decoration of Hebrew Bibles in Spain* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 46.

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- <sup>2</sup> For background on the Farhi Bible, see, Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art*, 150–54, with reference to further literature and catalogue descriptions.
- <sup>3</sup> This manuscript was published by Bezalel Narkiss, *The Golden Haggadah* (London: The British Library, 1997), with references to earlier works.
- <sup>4</sup> Narkiss, *Golden Haggadah*, 50–54.
- <sup>5</sup> For details, see Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *Le mahzor enluminé. Les voies de formation d'un programme iconographique* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1983), 16, 69–71, with references to earlier literature.
- <sup>6</sup> For a digital reproduction with further guidance to bibliography, see <http://www.jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/worms/>.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, Bezalel Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1984), 17 (Hebrew version of an earlier English edition, Jerusalem 1969).
- <sup>8</sup> "Jewish Art and Non-Jewish Culture: The Dynamics of Artistic Borrowing in Hebrew Manuscript Illumination," *Jewish History* 15 (2001), 187-234.
- <sup>9</sup> Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art*, chap. 6; eadem, *Illuminated Haggadot From Medieval Spain: Biblical Imagery and the Passover Holiday* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), part II.
- <sup>10</sup> An early example was Julio Caro Baroja, *Los moriscos del reino del Granada* (Madrid: ISTMO, 1957).
- <sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Glick and Oriol Pi-Sunyer, "Acculturation as an Explanatory Concept in Spanish History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2 (1969), 136–54; Thomas F. Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 2d rev. ed. Leiden: E. J. Brill 2005), esp. chapter 5; Glick critically approaches Americo

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Castro's earlier notion of *convivencia*, an attempt to define a distinct Spanish culture determined by the cultural interactions between the three cultures, "castes," as he called them, Americo Castro, *The Structure of Spanish History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). The term *convivencia* as used toward a definition of the relationships between the different cultures in Iberia has often been criticized and here is not the place to discuss this in detail. Although Glick adopts the term *convivencia* as such, his subtle concept of acculturation does not imply the touch of oversimplification that has occasionally been attached to it; see, for example his short contribution "Convivencia: An Introductory Note," in *Convivencia. Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain*, edited by Jerrilyn D. Dodds, Thomas F. Glick, and Vivian B. Mann (New York: Georges Braziller, 1992), 1–10. The notion of Sephardic Jews interacting with the cultures in their surroundings thus appears quite early, resulting in the misconception that Ashkenazi Jewry was culturally isolated; this was challenged for example by Ivan Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood. Jewish Acculturation in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 9–13.

<sup>12</sup> Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, chapter 5.

<sup>13</sup> Mark D. Meyerson, *The Muslims of Valencia in the Age of Fernando and Isabel: Between Coexistence and Crusade* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 99–101.

<sup>14</sup> Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 196–97.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–86.

<sup>16</sup> Marcus, *Rituals of Childhood*, chapter 1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

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<sup>18</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar has produced a rich corpus of writing on these matters; the basic terms discussed here are laid out in “The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Role of Transfer,” *Target* 9, no. 1 (1997), 373–81; I am indebted to Gad Freudenthal for discussing these issues with me.

<sup>19</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “Intellectuals in Antiquity,” paper delivered at the International Conference “Kulturkontakt und Innovation: Einfluß der Hyksos auf das Neue Reich,” Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, 5–7 June 2003, available in the unpublished electronic version of Even-Zohar, Itamar, *Papers in Culture Research* (2005), 203–208:  
<http://www.tau.ac.il/~itamarez/works/books/EZ-CR-2005.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Barber, “The Truth in Painting. Iconoclasm and Identity in Early-Medieval Art,” *Speculum* 72, no. 4 (1997), 1023.

<sup>21</sup> Katrin Kogman-Appel, “Christianity, Idolatry, and the Question of Jewish Figural Painting in the Middle Ages,” *Speculum*, 84, no. 1 (2009), 73-107.

<sup>22</sup> Even-Zohar, “Intellectuals in Antiquity.”

<sup>23</sup> Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain*, 251.

<sup>24</sup> For interesting cases of exchanges of ideas for the sake of polemics among Jewish and Christian scholars see the works of Harvey Hames: *The Art of Conversion: Christianity and Kabbalah in the Thirteenth Century* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000); idem, *Like Angels on Jacob’s Ladder. Abraham Abulafia, the Franciscans, and Joachimism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

<sup>25</sup> Literature on micrography can be given here only selectively, see, for example, Stanley Ferber, “Micrography: A Jewish Art Form,” *Journal of Jewish Art*, 3–4 (1977), 12–24; Thérèse Metzger, “La masora ornamentale et le décor calligraphique dans les manuscrits hébreux

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espagnols au moyen âge,” in *La paléographie hébraïque médiévale (Actes du colloque international sur la paléographie hébreu médiévale, Paris, 11–13 septembre 1972)*, ed. Jean Glenisson, Colette Sirat (Paris: Centre nationale de la recherche scientifique, 1974), 86–116; Leila Avrin, “The Mocatta Haggadah and Other Works by the Master of the Catalan Mahzor,” in *Hebrew Studies: Papers Presented at a Colloquium on Resources for Hebraica in Europe, British Library Occasional Papers 13* (London, 1991), 139–48.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed description of this situation, see Kogman-Appel, *Jewish Book Art*, chapter 6.

<sup>27</sup> This process was described in detail in Kogman-Appel, *Haggadot*, 135–65.

<sup>28</sup> As can be found, for example, in Honorius Augustodunensis, *Sigellium beatae Mariae*, PL 172, 485–518; for a discussion see Jeremy Cohen, “*Synagoga Conversa*: Honorius Augustodunensis, the Song of Songs, and Christianity’s ‘Eschatological Jew,’” *Speculum* 79, no. 2 (2004), 309–40.

<sup>29</sup> Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

<sup>30</sup> The literature on polemics is vast, and can be given here only in selection; see, for example, Daniel Lasker’s recent edition of his earlier *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (Oxford and Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007). For a useful overview on polemical exegesis of the Bible, see Günter Stemberger, “Elements of Biblical Interpretation in Medieval Jewish-Christian Disputation,” *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. The History of its Interpretation*, vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages*, pt. 2: *The Middle Ages*, ed. Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 579–90.

<sup>31</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Sara Offenberg, “Expressions of Meeting the Challenges of the Christian Milieu in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature,” PhD dissertation (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University of the Negev, 2008, in preparation), chapter 1.

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<sup>32</sup> For more details and literature on the Tree of Jesse, see Katrin Kogman-Appel, “The Tree of Death and the Tree of Life: The Hanging of Haman in Medieval Jewish Manuscript Painting,” in *Between the Picture and the Word. Manuscript Studies from the Index of Christian Art*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 187–209.