Joel ben Simeon Looking at the Margins of Society•

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The fifteenth century knew one of the most intriguing figures in the history of Hebrew manuscript painting: Joel ben Simeon, who sometimes used the surname 'Feibush'. Joel signed several manuscripts as scribe, but what is unusual is that he also left signatures, that note explicitly that he *illustrated* books that he had a part in producing. Clearly, he must have been a man of well-defined professional identity. Moreover, he left a sufficient trace for modern scholars to attempt a reconstruction of his professional biography, which can rarely be done for medieval craftsmen, most of whom remain anonymous to the modern reader and viewer.[1]

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1 Joel's biography has been reconstructed step by step in several publications since 1937, Fooner, 'Joel ben Simeon'; Landsberger, 'The Washington Haggadah'; Cahn, 'Illuminated Haggadah'; Gutmann, 'Thirteen Manuscripts'; Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts*, p. 61–63; *idem*, 'The Art of the Washington Haggadah'; Bet-Arié, 'Joel ben Simeon's Manuscripts'; Edmunds, 'London *Haggadah*'; Zirlin, 'Early Works'; eadem, 'Joel Meets Johannes'.

In 1454, while residing in Italy, Joel noted in the colophon of a haggadah, now in New York,[2] that he was from Cologne, so he must have been but a small child when he experienced the expulsion of the Jews from that town in October 1424. In the colophon of a prayer book dated 1449, now in Parma,[3] he noted that he originated from Bonn. It is thus possible that after the expulsion from Cologne he spent some time in nearby Bonn, and that it was there that he took his first steps into the profession.[4] Two haggadot scribed by him survive from that period;[5] from the colophons we know that he wrote both of them,[6] and we assume that he also executed the drawings. Unfortunately, most of the pages in both of these manuscripts were badly cropped, so our knowledge of his artistic work from this period is limited.[7]

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2 New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS Mic. 8279, fol. 59r.

3 Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS 3144, fol. 188r; Richler, *Biblioteca Palatina*, p. 259, cat. no, 1037. Joel ben Simeon was not the only scribe involved in the production of this manuscript; he wrote fols. 79–188.

4 Scholars have been suggesting some stations on the way to Italy: in the colophon of the First Nuremberg Haggadah a place is mentioned that has not yet been identified properly; some understood it as Brünn, Moravia, *Darmstädter Pessach-Haggadah*, p. 208; Zirlin, 'Early Works', pp. 13–16, rejects that assumption and suggests rather that Joel may have spent some time in Swabia or in the Upper Rhine region. This assumption is made solely on stylistic grounds from an analysis of Joel's early work. As the material from these years is extremely scarce, which makes conclusions about his style almost impossible, and since no firm evidence of any other kind exists, this must, in my opinion, remain an open question.

5 New York, Jewish Theologial Seminary, MS Mic. 4481; Jerusalem, Israel Museum, MS 181/60.

6 On fol. 28v of the Haggadah in Jerusalem ("First Nuremberg Haggadah"), and fol. 23v of the one in New York, see n 5.

7 For a detailed discussion of this phase in Joel ben Simeon's career, see Zirlin, 'Early Works'.

Around the middle of the century, Joel moved to northern Italy, where he would spend most of his professional life.[8] Only a few of his Italian colophons mention places, and it is quite clear that he did not settle anywhere for long, but rather continued to move from city to city seeking a livelihood. From the sharp change in style observable in his subsequent work, it seems plausible that he must have had some artistic training after he arrived in Italy. From that period on his figures are securely drawn, realistically proportioned, and display delicate facial traits. They are dressed in the fashion of early modern Italy, wearing short colourful coats or long luxurious mantles, elaborate headgear, and berets or pointed hats. His approach to perspective reflects the trend in Italian art, even though issues of perspective never played the same role as they did in Italian (manuscript) painting. A love for realistic detail can be observed in his work from that period on. Among his early Italian books from the 1450s, we find a haggadah, now in Parma (fig. 1),[9] and another one, known as the Rothschild Haggadah, which is now housed in Jerusalem (fig. 3).[10] In both haggadot the shift to a rather elegant figure style is notable in comparison to the cruder earlier work produced prior to 1450 in southern Germany. Later Joel would return to Germany at least twice and take part in

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8 It is possible, that he was for the second time in his life expelled from the town where he lived; since the precise date of the expulsion of the Jews from Bonn is not known, this is not certain. In 1452, at the latest, he can be traced in Italy signing a mahzor in Cremona, Turin, Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria, MS A. III. 14 (damaged in a fire in 1904).

9 This manuscript has not been fully published; several of its images were discussed in Metzger, *La Haggada enluminée*; see also Richler, *Biblioteca Palatina*, p. 293, cat. no. 1120.

10 After WW II this manuscript, also known as the "Murphy Haggadah", was kept in the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University and first made public by Cahn, 'Illuminated Haggadah'; it was acquired by the National Library of Israel (cod. 4º6130) and is available on the internet at http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/heb6130/index_eng.html (accessed May 2013).

the making of some manuscripts, of which two are still extant: the London Haggadah (fig. 2) in c. 1460[11] and the Washington Haggadah (fig. 4) in 1478.[12] Between these periods and after 1478 he was back to Italy, where he died, apparently around 1492.

A man of versatile skills, active in an age of significant changes in the book production and trade, and moving between different cultures, Joel ben Simeon must have seen a great deal during the course of his life. A close up on some of his work offers insights into the conditions in which a professional of the book trade lived and navigated between the cultures, relocating constantly in order to be able to make a living. There is no information about his economic circumstances. The work he left, however, teaches us a great deal about the cultural circumstances of his professional existence.

Even though expelled from German towns at a young age, he must still have had some sense of the tremendous changes that marked fifteenth-century German society.[13] No doubt he was aware of Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and may have actually seen some printed books. An early fifteenth-century native of the Rhineland, he

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11 For a facsimile edition, see Goldstein, *Ashkenazi Haggadah.*

12 For facsimile editions see *Washington Haggadah* (1991); and *Washington Haggadah* (2011).

13 An extended period of economic depression, this was also a time of far-reaching social change and the emergence of an educated and relatively wealthy middle class, see, e.g.. Cuvillier, 'Economic Change', with references to earlier literature; Cuvillier's observations indicate a middle class of about 45 percent of the population, whose financial capacities, however, varied significantly from the almost poor to those whose means were similar to those of the upper classes. It is this middle stratum that had an impact on the book market of the 15th c., preparing the ground for the economic success of the printing press; on late medieval and early modern German society, see also the various contributions collected in *Germany,* esp. by Tom Scott, Rolf Kießling, Merry Wiesner, Christopher R. Friedrichs, and Thomas Brady.

belonged to a persecuted minority in a region where the political and economic situation of the Jews had been gradually deteriorating since the twelfth century. When he immigrated to Italy like many of his coreligionists at that time he must have sensed a difference in the cultural atmosphere, gotten a taste of early modern humanism and changing artistic styles, and witnessed the dynamics of close Jewish-Christian relations that a German Jew could hardly imagine.[14]

Joel ben Simeon's work is interesting from several points of view. No doubt he was highly instrumental in the cultural exchange among the Jewish communities on both sides of the Alps. He was a creative designer of an innovative repertoire of iconographic motifs related to the haggadah,[15] but the present paper discusses one aspect of his work from a different point of view. Though not a realistic painter in the full sense of early modern Italian art, something in the way Joel portrayed certain figures betrays a keen and lively eye directed at the society in which he lived. His observation of people cuts through several social strata, and in what follows I take a closer look at how he viewed figures on the margins of late medieval society. Hence, in the current context of this collection his work is interesting from two different points of view: firstly, the relative wealth of surviving manuscripts from his hand teaches us more about the life of a late medieval Jewish scribe-illuminator than any other surviving corpus. By that I do not merely refer to the dominant dates of his biography, but rather to those elements in his story that shed light on his living conditions: frequent

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[14] For some background on Jewish culture in early modern Italy, see Bonfil, *Jewish Life*; for recent discussions of Jewish society in the early modern period in general, see Bell, *Jews in the Early Modern World*; Ruderman, *Early Modern Jewry*.

[15] For more background on these aspects, see Narkiss, 'The Art of the Washington Haggadah'; Kogman-Appel in *The Washington Haggadah.*

relocations; the cultural flexibility he demonstrates; the diversity of patrons; his awareness of the recent trends in the trade. Secondly, his observations of the visual aspects of society from the margins to the upper classes opens a window into those elements of life and life style that otherwise are known to us only from written sources. The following paragraphs focus on a specific area of social life, that of misery and vagabondage.

Among other uses the haggadah is the text by which every Jewish father fulfils the precept of telling his son the story of the departure from Egypt.[16] After a midrash on different verses of Exodus the text includes questions by four different sons and suitable answers to each of them. Each of the sons defines a certain type of personality within society: the wise, the wicked, the simple, and the son "who does not know to ask." The four are, in fact, defined by their relation to the Jewish faith, its precepts, and its traditions: knowledgeable and observant; turning away from Judaism; eager to learn, but not very capable; negligent and uncaring.[17] Both the Sefardi and the Ashkenazi

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16 Ex 13:8.

17 The four are described in that way in numerous medieval sources, see, e.g., Rashi on Ex 13; *Siddur Rashi* par. 392; *Midrash Sekhel Tov* on Ex 12; *Sefer Shibbole Haleqet*, *Seder Pesach*, par. 218; *Sefer Kolbo* par. 51, where the fourth son is defined in particularly clear terms as negligent and blasphemous; *Sefer Abudarham*, *Seder Haggadah Uferusheha*, indicating that the difference between the fourth son and the wicked son is that the latter sins while possessing wisdom, whereas the former acts out of ignorance. If not otherwise indicated, my references to Hebrew sources are based on *The Global Jewish Database*, version 18 (Bar Ilan University Responsa Project). All these sources refer to the fourth son as a negligent Jew, whereas the wicked one is understood as having turned away from Judaism, and thus being identified as gentile. This is also how the common imagery defines him, either as a knight or as a fancily dressed dandy, see Metzger, *La Haggadah enluminée*, pp. 149–56.

tradition of haggadah illustration image the third and the fourth sons as men whose ignorance is underscored visually in different ways.[18]

In most of his haggadot, Joel depicted this ignorance by picturing a jester. He might even have been the inventor of this iconography, but in any case it is quite clear that his work was instrumental in making it very popular in later generations.[19] Occasionally, however, Joel employed a different type of image for either the third or the fourth son, showing him as a miserable, poorly dressed vagabond. In the Parma Haggadah, the simple son wears a short, worn-out, and ragged hooded costume indicating that he is homeless and wandering (fig. 1). The club and the bald head link this figure to depictions of the blasphemous fool who illustrates Psalm 52(53):2 in Latin Psalter manuscripts: 'the wicked (in the sense of blasphemous) has said in his heart: there is no God'. Originally, this *insipiens*, as the blasphemous was referred to in Latin, was shown with the typical attributes of a mentally impaired individual: bald, in ragged clothes often revealing much of his body, and carrying a club. His body language usually suggests irrational behaviour and his facial expression reflects a lack of intelligence. In the fourteenth century, however, and even more so in the fifteenth, the jester was chosen as an iconographic representation for blasphemy. Joel must thus have been familiar with both *insipiens* traditions and used variations of them to image both the simple son and the negligent one.

The Parma vagabond is also physically impaired and suffers from goitres, a disease that was closely linked to dwarfism and hunchback. In the London Haggadah (fig. 2) the fourth son combines several of these iconographic features. He wears a

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[18] For an overview of iconographic types, see Metzger, *La Haggada enluminée*, pp. 138–70.

[19] For further details, see Kogman-Appel in *The Washington Haggadah*, pp. 93–96.

jester's costume that is ragged and torn; his facial expression makes him appear particularly stupid, his grinning face looking in the mirror. As the Parma vagabond, the London jester also suffers from goitres. In both the Rothschild and the Washington Haggadot, a similar goitrous figure, barefoot in a torn hooded costume, is roasting the Passover lamb (figs. 3 and 4). In the Rothschild Haggadah the image is of a whole lamb and thus refers to the biblical sacrifice, whereas the parallel in the Washington Haggadah shows only a large piece of meat – the ribs of a lamb – and thus merely represents the meat for the meal. As it illustrates the *piyyut* "*dayyenu,"* it is a reminder that it is time to get the meal ready for the table. In both images the ragged vagabond is seated on the ground, one hand turning the spit with the lamb over the fire – no doubt a lengthy and tiresome process – his other hand holding a glass of wine, a bottle standing next to him for refilling the glass. In the Washington Haggadah he appears next to two elegantly dressed women busying themselves with the preparation of the Passover meal, who peek somewhat arrogantly toward his part of the page. Perhaps, as the gesture of one of the women suggests, they are offering him some food or broth.

The text of the haggadah opens with the following words: "Here is the bread of distress which our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Let anyone who is hungry come and eat. Let anyone who wishes come and participate in the Passover. Today we are here; next year, in the Land of Israel. Today we are slaves; next year, we shall be free men."[20] Joel's figures bear several features that indicate that, apart from depicting the third or the fourth son, they were also meant to represent those "who are hungry," those

[20] The translation is based on Stern in *The Washington Haggadah*.

who are invited to come and eat.[21] The ragged, homeless vagabond was perhaps asked to take on the tiresome job of turning the spit.

The fact that four of Joel's figures, the London jester, the Parma vagabond, and the two men roasting the meat in the Rothschild and the Washington Haggadot all are pictured as suffering from goitres, clearly indicated in the neck area, calls for some attention. The recurrence of this motif suggests that it was not simply a realistic detail, but rather that it also served as an iconographic sign of poverty and a vagabond life on the margins of society.

A goitre, which is an enlargement of the thyroid gland usually appearing as a heavy swelling of the neck, is a symptom of the iodine-deficient drinking water and salt typical in alpine areas far from the sea. The disease of the goitre is thus specifically associated with alpine populations and was widespread in those areas until the goitre prophylaxis – addition of iodine to the drinking water and iodisation of salt – was introduced in the 1920s.[22] The goitres affected primarily several regions in Switzerland, the Aosta Valley in northeastern Italy, the French Alps, Carinthia, Styria, Bavaria, and some parts of the Apennine Mountains, including Lombardy, Tuscany, and the Monti Sabini in southern Italy. The disease was observed by the Roman authors Vitruvius, Juvenal, Ulpian, among others, whose writings indicate that they were aware of its occurrence in certain alpine areas.[23] Medieval physicians mentioned the goitres and

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21 I owe this idea to Ephraim Shoham-Steiner.

22 Franz Merke suggested that the iodine deficiency and the appearance of goiters in certain alpine areas have to do with glaciation in the Quaternary and the resulting geological conditions, Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism,* pp. 32–45.

23 Mountainous areas in coastal regions were apparently less affected by the endemic disease as the diet of their inhabitants included fish, which is rich in iodine, Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism*, pp. 99–100.

ways to treat it as early as the twelfth century, and several of them knew about the regionally determined appearance of the disease.[24]

In non-medical sources from the early thirteenth century, on the other hand, we find the goitrous listed among the monstrous races. The first to list goitrous women with the monstrous races were Jacques de Vitry (1160–1240), a widely travelled scholar who had accompanied the Fifth Crusade (1218–1221) and composed a treatise entitled *Historia orientalis et occidentalis* while residing in Egypt, and his student Thomas de Cantimpré. These encyclopaedic texts contain a list of the fabulous monsters of the East to which they added those suffering from goitre and cretinism (a related disease likewise caused by iodine deficiency).[25] Lists of the monstrous races of the East, groups of fabulous creatures with strange physical features and odd, immoral behaviour believed to be living at the edges of the world, are known from as early as the fifth century BCE.[26] In the Middle Ages such lists were included in the letters of Prester John from the twelfth century,[27] in the different versions of the Alexander story,[28] and in a variety of texts belonging to the late medieval genre of travel literature, such as the

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[24] See, esp. authors from the school of Salerno in the 12th c.; Brunus Longoburgensis or Theoderic of Lucca in the 13th c.; for a detailed discussion of medieval medical sources, see Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism,* pp. 111–32. Iodine was discovered in 1811 and it was only in the 1920s that physicians became aware that iodine deficiency causes goitres.

[25] Jacques de Vitry, *Historia orientalis et occidentalis* 92; for an English translation of the section about the goitrous, see Merke, *Endemic Goitres and Cretinism*, p. 134, with some amendments for accuracy. It is interesting that Jacques de Vitry mentions the two syndromes together, even though the pathological links between the two were discovered only in the 18th century; on the discovery see Droin, 'Endemic Goiter', p. 311; for Thomas de Cantimpré, see *Monstruosis hominibus,* in: *Liber de natura rerum*.

[26] Friedmann, *Monstrous Races*, chap. 1.

[27] *Prester John*.

[28] Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, pp. 5–25.

Travels of Sir John Mandeville.[29] The fictitious letters of Prester John, the legendary priest-king, who was believed to rule a utopian Christian empire in the East, instructed his addressees, Manuel I Comnenus of Byzantium and Frederick I Barbarossa, as to the different creatures living in his country. In the Alexander romances the king encountered the monstrous races on his travels.[30]

Before we return to Joel ben Simeon's drawings and the question of what they might signify, we should first give some thought to medieval attitudes toward monsters and other appearances perceived as abnormal. These attitudes raise the question to what extent Jews were familiar with traditions of the monstrous races. There was, finally, also a quite rich iconographic tradition of goitrous figures in both late medieval and early modern art. Joel may have been familiar with both the medieval attitudes toward monsters and the different iconographic traditions. A closer look at these factors will enable us to read these images beyond their basic meaning as one of the sons or the roaster of the lamb and see how Joel perceived figures on the margins of the social landscape in which he lived.

In the medieval mind monsters were – in Debra Strickland's words – to express "largely abstract ideas about moral degeneracy, perversity, godlessness, demonic allegiance, and a whole host of other characteristics regularly attributed to the various enemies of Christendom." In her book about monsters in medieval art she points out the complex associations that linked fantastic monsters of the East and the living realistic

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[29] *Sir John Mandeville*. These stories are a collection of mostly fictitious travel traditions, which also incorporate the accounts of Prester John.

[30] For an excellent recent overview of these traditions, see Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, chap. 1; on the Alexander traditions, see Cary, 'Alexander the Great', who observed that in the 12th c. there occurred a shift in the perceptions of Alexander towards the negative.

enemies of Christendom.[31] On the other hand, John Block Friedman observed that in medieval European writing the monstrous races of the East were not necessarily always considered supernatural or bestial and were sometimes perceived as realistically existing, even though exotic and abnormal.[32] Those listed in the letters of Prester John are, as a matter of fact, defined there as Christians.[33] Likewise some of the races in Thomas de Cantimpré's account are Christians.[34]

Christian theology evidenced a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the monstrous races. On the one hand, they were part of the divine Creation, even though the role they played in the created world was unclear. It was, for example, Jacques de Vitry's work that demonstrated a surprising degree of "cultural relativism" in claiming that, "just as we consider Pygmies to be dwarfs, so they consider us giants... in the land of the giants, … we would be considered dwarfs by them."[35] This observation puts the inclusion of the goitrous, whom Jacques de Vitry located in "certain regions and chiefly in outermost Burgundy, near the Alps," into the list into a somewhat different light.[36] By "outermost Burgundy, near the Alps" he meant the Great Bernard region between modern Switzerland and Italy. On the other hand, in the minds of many they did engender suspicions, anxieties, and hostility, were considered symbols of disobedient

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31 Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, p. 8.

32 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, introduction.

33 Ibid., pp. 60–61.

34 Ibid., p. 171.

35 *Historia orientalis et occidentalis* 92; for the English citation, see Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, p. 164. This relativistic observation may have its roots in the account given by the twelve reconnaissance emissaries sent by Moses from the Israelite encampment in the wilderness to explore the land promised by God and their reflections on the size of the giants living in the Land of Canaan (Numbers 13:33)

36 *Historia orientalis et occidentalis* 92

and sinful conduct, and described as descendants of Cain.[37] Christian thinkers were concerned with the question if monsters and abnormal infants should be baptised, and the question whether they are considered human or not appears in high and late medieval thought time and again.[38] In this discourse, too, the borderline between fabulous monsters in remote corners of the earth and infants born with abnormal features is not at all clear-cut.[39] From the thirteenth century on, more scholars happened to be travelling to the East, only to realize that no monstrous races actually existed in these remote locales.[40]

Several manuscripts of Thomas de Cantimpré's text were illustrated.[41] They show goitrous women, "cretins," and hunchbacks mentioned in the adjacent text (fig. 5). Joel ben Simeon's figure in the Parma Haggadah (fig. 2) shares some of its features not only with the *insipiens*, but also with the cretins as depicted in one of these manuscripts: the short garment, the stick, and the stooped back have something in common with Thomas' cretins. Moreover, Thomas goes beyond Jacques de Vitry's observations and claims that these physical features are linked to certain types of behaviour. In the Old French version of his text, he notes that goitres seem to be a typical affliction of women

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37 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, chap. 5.

38 Ibid; medieval Jewish sources share similar concerns and discuss the role people with deformities play in God's creation and to what extent deformities are a sign of sin, for some details, see Shoham-Steiner, *On the Margins of Minority*, pp. 137–49; the Ashkenazi halakhist Jacob ben Moses Halevi Molin ("*Maharil*", d. 1427) considers the question whether the parents of a deaf-mute child fulfilled the precept of procreation, see Jacob Molin, *Responsa* 196; I am grateful to Ephraim Shoham-Steiner for pointing out this reference to me.

39 Friedman, *Monstrous Races*, p. 9.

40 On this aspect in more detail, see Bartlett, *The Natural and the Supernatural*, pp. 91–110.

41 These illustration cycles were discussed in Gatewood, 'Natural History Encyclopedia'.

because they talk more than men do; these women are considered monsters. Those who have swollen necks together with hunchbacks are "savage like lions."[42]

Thomas' work was extremely popular throughout Europe during the late Middle Ages. Numerous illuminated copies were produced up through the fifteenth century and his observations were repeated by other authors and chroniclers well into the early modern period. One example, Jacob van Maerlant's *Der naturen bloeme*,[43] shows a goitrous man with a fool's club and a bald head (fig. 6), again, somewhat recalling not only the iconography of the *insipiens*, but also both the fool in the London codex (fig. 2) and the vagabond in the Parma Haggadah (fig. 1). We have seen that in medieval iconography the fool's club and the bald-head are, indeed, associated not only with lack of intelligence and knowledge, but also with blasphemy. In the copy of *Der naturen bloeme*, finally, these characteristics were associated with suffering from the goitres. These miniatures, produced in the Netherlands, where the disease was unknown, were not drawn from nature, but communicated some sort of stereotype about goitrous individuals, apparently because of the close association between goitres and cretinism.[44] In some sources from the late Middle Ages, finally, the disease is understood as a punishment for sin.[45]

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42 Bnf, cod. fr. 15106; Merke, *Endemic Goitres and Cretinism*, pp. 136–37.

43 The Hague, Koninklijke Bibliothek, cod. XVI.

44 In fourteenth-century Italian literature the idea that goitres go together with stupidity recurs in a novel by Franco Sacchetti, where a court jester fools a group of goitrous men promising a remedy, taking their money, and running off. Sacchetti's leitmotif in the story is not the deceitful jester, but the stupid goitrous, see Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism*, pp. 255–56, relying on a translation into German, Floerke, *Das Äskulapische Dekameron*.

45 For an example, see the Stretlingen Chronicle from Switzerland, c. 1450, *Die Stretlinger Chronik*; discussed in Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism*, pp. 256–57.

Different from the fabulous monsters of the East, with whom they were listed, those alpine Europeans who suffered from goitres were actually encountered by travellers, pilgrims, and migrants, in particular those who travelled through "outermost Burgundy" on their way from the Upper Rhine region, via modern Switzerland into Italy. There, we have seen, goitres were more widespread than anywhere else. These realistically encountered goitrous in the Alps were neither fantastic monsters believed to inhabit remote worlds nor were they non-Christian enemies. Counting them together with the monstrous races, then, put them at a borderline between the foreign and the familiar, between the monstrous and the marginal, between the fabulous and the realistic. How those suffering from this abnormal distortion of the body perceived themselves and how they were approached in society was recently given some thought by G. Droin, who points at the "painful traces" the pathology of the goitre left "in the collective imagination of the Alpine people."[46] In the minds of the readers of the above-mentioned encyclopaedias these individuals were linked in one way or another with the monstrous races, with all the ambiguity this definition implied in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This would remain a common perception until the late fifteenth and the early sixteenth century when the notion of the monstrous races began to disappear from encyclopaedic works and chronicles.[47]

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[46] Droin, 'Endemic Goiter', p. 307.

[47] For example, the *Book of Nature* by Conrad of Megenberg, a work indebted to Jacques de Vitry and Thomas de Cantimpré, appeared in print in 1475, see Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism*, p. 139, fig. 42; on Conrad's work, see also Spyra, *Buch der Natur*; and Hayer, *Konrad von Megenberg.* Around the same time, however, the attitudes of doctors of medicine gained more and more influence on the popular perception of the goitres, whereas their description as monsters appear less and less frequently. Chronicles of the 16th c. describe the goitres shortly and realistically without any reference to the monstrous races;

In all likelihood Joel ben Simeon had never seen a goitre in the Middle Rhine region where he had grown up, but there is a good chance that he passed through the Great Bernard when he moved from southern Germany to northern Italy. There and during his residency in Lombardy,[48] he must have seen people who suffered from the disease. How did he perceive them? Did he have any notion of the disease? Did he see them as patients? As monsters? Did he pity them? Was he repulsed or did he feel threatened? The repertoire of possible emotional and/or cultural reactions of a literate, educated and acculturated Jew of the mid-fifteenth century, who also happened to be familiar with the visual arts, to encounters with goitrous individuals, could have been quite varied. His perception of the disease and its social and cultural implications may, in fact, have been nourished and influenced him from three different directions: observations from real life, familiarity with traditions of the monstrous races, and iconographic traditions.

Medieval Jews were familiar with the traditions of the monstrous races, particularly those related to the cultural landscapes where there was a high degree of acculturation of the Jews to the gentile environment. The letters of Prester John and the medieval Alexander story were known in Jewish circles, and there were several Hebrew translations. Three Prester John letters came down to us in Hebrew,[49] and six different versions of the Hebrew Alexander story were known. One of the latter, which was

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examples are Sebastian Münster, who wrote a treatise in 1530 and Johannes Strumpf, in 1548, both Swiss, Merke, *Endemic Goitres and Cretinism*, pp. 176–77.

48 Evidence for residency in Lombardy comes from the colophon in the Turino Mahzor from 1452–1453; the colophon, though damaged by the fire, was published by Berliner, 'Von den Handschriften Italiens', p. 129.

49 Ullendorff and Beckingham, *The Hebrew Letters*.

interpolated into the *Sefer Yosifon*,[50] was associated with a late antique Jewish legend about Alexander's visit to Jerusalem. A description of that visit appeared first in the writings of Josephus Flavius and later in several midrashic sources.[51] The other Hebrew texts of the Alexander story circulated as several independent texts[52] and two fragments,[53] and Eli Yassif recently analysed them in regard to the mentality they reflect as witnesses of Jewish acculturation. On the one hand, the Jews shared the literary tastes common in their environments, but, on the other, and unlike the Christians, who saw in Alexander a prototype of Crusader culture, the Jews identified with the legendary ruler's victims.[54]

None of the Hebrew lists of the monstrous races of the East includes any reference to the people with the swollen necks from Burgundy. One version of the Alexander story mentions "women with long beards which reached down to their breasts,"[55] a species that is also included in Thomas de Cantimpré's encyclopaedia, located in the "woods of India."[56] The Hebrew version is assumed to be based on an Arabic translation and to be roughly contemporary with Jacques de Vitry. The bearded women are part of a whole list of monstrous manly women, who threaten to confuse the natural

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50 *Sefer Yosifon*, p. 470–77.

51 For details, see Yassif, 'The Hebrew Traditions ', pp. 360–64.

52 Van Bekkum, *A Hebrew Alexander Romance*; idem, *Bibliothèque Nationale*; Reich, *Tales of Alexander*.

53 For these see recently Yassif, 'Hebrew Traditions', p. 356, n. 10.

54 Yassif, 'Hebrew Traditions'. Yassif's approach is significantly different from that of Meir Bar-Ilan, who suggested that this literary genre is typical for Italian Jews: Bar-Ilan, 'Prester John'.

55 Van Bekkum, pp. 136–37.

56 See above, 00; for the bearded women, see Valenciennes, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 320, fol. 45r.

order of the world.[57] Whether Jacques de Vitry and the Hebrew Alexander version are in any way related is not for me to decide, but the similarity in wording is interesting and may indicate that in one way or another – perhaps orally – Jews were also familiar with descriptions of the goitres as part of the narratives about the monstrous races. As Yassif points out, the bearded women were definitely considered monstrous creatures.

The close link between the goitrous people of Burgundy and the monstrous races, on the one hand, and the similar wording used in the description of the goitrous and the bearded women, on the other, indicate that in the minds of the encyclopaedists and their readers the two may have had some features in common. Moreover, it suggests that both distortions – the imagined and the real – were associated with monstrosity. A late version of such an encyclopaedia, published by Conrad of Megenberg in 1475, contains an image of the monsters from the "woods of India," including a naked woman with a large goitre together with a bearded woman.[58] This depiction implies that the bearded women of India were sometimes associated with the goitrous of Burgundy, so it might have been those associations that influenced the Hebrew renderings. It is noteworthy that Johannes Bämler, who is known to have collaborated with Joel ben Simeon in the production of the London Haggadah in Ulm in c. 1460, was the owner of the print shop where Conrad's book was published.[59]

That connection does not prove that Joel was familiar with the goitrous as a monstrous race, but it does create an additional theoretical channel of information for such a tradition. In workshops for book production Jewish illuminators and copyists like Joel met with Christians on a day-to-day professional basis; they shared a professional

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57 Yassif, 'Hebrew traditions', pp. 395–97.

58 See above n. 47.

59 On incunabula of Conrad's work, see Hayer, *Konrad von Megenberg*, 8.

vocabulary essential to their artisanship. Their trade became the stage for cultural exchanges mutual influence and intercultural dialogue that enabled ideas concepts norms and professional matters like iconographic novelties to exchange hands regardless of the religious divide. In theory, even though somewhat speculatively, Joel may have seen a copy of Conrad's work in Bämler's workshop. The book was printed six times prior to 1500, so it must have been extremely popular. Whatever the precise relationship between these Jewish and Christian traditions may have been, we should bear in mind that many cultural concepts were subject to oral communication, often more than they were based on written texts. Thus there is good reason to assume that Joel, whose artistic profession allowed him to be, so to speak, "at home" in both Jewish and Christian culture on both sides of the Alps, had some notion of these traditions.

Apart from common knowledge about goitres there was, finally, also an iconographic tradition harking back to the early thirteenth century that Joel could look back on. Since the beginnings of this tradition and apparently in correspondence with the general perception that goitrous people were stupid and monstrous, the depiction of goitres was linked with grotesque expressions, attributes of foolishness, and signs of misery.[60]

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[60] The earliest known depiction of a man with a goitre appears in the early thirteenth century in the so-called Reun model book, produced in Styria, another area where goitres were particularly widespread, published in Droin, 'Endemic Goiter', p. 312; other examples are found in Psalters from areas ripe with goitres, see, for example, Graz, Universitätsbibliothek, cod. 387, reproduced in Merke, *Endemic Goitre and Cretinism*, fig. 85. Several of the *insipiens* images show the fool eating a loaf; the goitre in the Graz example may have been a development of this apparently misunderstood iconography. The images of the *insipiens* of Psalm 52 (53), often seen in medieval manuscripts in inhabited initials of Psalters, probably had a strong influence on Joel, as both types, the ignorant fool and the jester, figure prominently in his iconography of the simple and the ignorant.

Representations of goitres in art became more common in the fifteenth century. Franz Merke, who examined an exhaustive catalogue of representations of the goitrous, noted that they are all bound to regions where goitres were found. There are basically two contexts in which images of goitrous people figure: either as an iconographic sign of a wicked and evil personality or, in contrast, as a by-product of early modern realism, at times perhaps with the intention of invoking sympathy for the poor and the sick. The former group is particularly dominant in the northern parts of the Alps, in the Upper Rhine region, Austria, Bavaria, and in Switzerland. Here numerous pictures of the Flagellation or other scenes of the Passion can be found where some of the torturers and the soldiers are shown with goitres in an attempt to emphasize their ugliness and wickedness (fig. 7). Likewise goitrous individuals can often be found in fifteenth-century Upper Rhenish illustrated chronicles, especially from Switzerland, on the side of the enemy and the wicked (fig. 8).[61] These representations had their roots in the earlier, medieval tradition that linked the goitres with the monstrous races and, in particular, those views that perceived of the disease as a punishment for sinful acts. It is interesting to note, however, that the goitre as sign of wickedness appears exclusively in those areas where the disease was found and never turned into a universally accepted iconographic characteristic.[62]

We have seen that the medieval notion of monstrosity was not clear-cut and that as early as the thirteenth century Jacques de Vitry expressed some degree of "cultural

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61 For details and more reproductions, see Merke, *Endemic Goitres and Cretinism*, pp. 277–80.

62 No reference to goiters is given, e.g., in Mellinkoff, *Outcasts*, dealing extensively with the different types of physical distortion that were common in late medieval Christian iconography.

relativism" in referring to the monstrous races.[63] Sometime later, yet other attitudes did even more to sharpen the blurred border between the monstrous races and realistic deformations. Early modern realistic representations of the goitre of the kind that had nothing to do with wickedness are particularly common in Italy.[64] Many of these portraits show women, apparently because the disease was found more frequently among women than among men. Hence, when realism played a role in determining whether a figure was depicted as goitrous or not, statistics definitely played a part.[65] Some of these figures, such as a noble woman from Bergamo (fig. 9), clearly belonged to the upper classes. Indeed, in Italy representations of goitrous individuals that were to be counted among the wicked are quite rare.[66]

A great deal of difference in mentality can be observed in these groups. First there is the visual characterization of the wicked as goitrous, growing out of the notion of the monstrous races of the East with all its ambiguity. That attitude prevailed to the north of the Alps beginning in the thirteenth century and began to disappear toward the end of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth. The goitres as a typical feature of realistic representation speak of a different mind-set and they seem to deliver a message of misery or poverty and may have been intended to arouse feelings of pity in the viewer.

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63 See also the discussion by Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, pp. 56–69 on otherness in relation to marvellous wonders.

64 On depictions of goitres in Italian art of the 16th and 17th c., see Giampalmo and Fulchieri, 'An Investigation of Endemic Goitre'; Giampalmo, 'Testimonianze di patologia'; idem, 'Orme testimonianze di patologia'; idem, 'II gozzo'; Vescia and Basso, 'Goiters in the Renaissance'; Droin, 'Endemic Goiter'; Ferriss, 'The Many Reasons'.

65 Ferriss, 'The Many Reasons', p. 387.

66 An example is a seventeenth-century painting by Dionigi Bussola in the Capella del Sacro Monte di Varese, showing one of the executioners at the crucifixion with a goiter Droin, 'Endemic Goiter', p. 314.

The transition between these two mentalities was not sudden and they could also overlap. Since the late fifteenth century realistic images of goitrous not intended to emphasize wickedness appear in imagery also to the north of the Alps.[67]

Joel ben Simeon lived his life between these two different states of mind. On the one hand, he had acquired some sense of realistic observation of the environment,[68] whereas, on the other, the inclusion of the goitres in his artistic repertoire is not a mere symptom of realism typical of early modern art. It also functions as an iconographic sign in the medieval sense, and as such it might have implied a whole range of potential meanings. The question is, then, what Joel took from this rich repertoire of medieval and early modern meanings attached to goitres: the association with the monstrous races; the notion of stupidity; the connotation with sinfulness and wickedness; the encounter with real sufferers from the goitres; or the pity and sympathy that some of the early modern depictions were intended to elicit?

Joel's figures of the goitrous are not evil, nor are they grotesque. They are poor and miserable, ignorant and perhaps stupid; they live on the margins of society; as hungry vagabonds they are, indeed, likely to have been intended to represent those poor needy souls know in the haggadah vocabulary by the Aramaic words *dikhfin* and *ditsrikh* used in the *ha lahma aniya* declaration that opens the festive reading of the

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67 An example would be Hans Holbein the Elder's *Annunciation to the Shepherds* in Munich, where one of the shepherds is shown with a goitre to indicate low social status rather than wickedness; from the same workshop, however, we find a goitrous torturer in a depiction of the Flagellation reminiscent of the earlier tradition of wicked goitrous; Ferris, 'The Many Reasons', pp. 389–90, fig. 7.

68 For more examples of Joel observing the environment realistically, see Kogman-Appel in *The Washington Haggadah.*

haggada prior to the meal. They are invited to partake in the *seder* meal.[69] Most likely Joel knew that the disease of the goitre was associated with stupidity, but it is quite clear that he did not share the southern German tradition of wicked goitrous involved in Christian Passion scenes. Perhaps he did not even know of it. If he had been aware of it he might have chosen another imagery to represent the hungry guest. It makes more sense to assume that he had become familiar with Italian realistic imagery. He may have encountered images of goitrous figures in Italy, but, by the same token, he probably also saw real people suffering from the disease during his travels in the regions between his native Rhineland and northern Italy. In his personality and life experiences Joel represents aspects of both mentalities, looking at the goitrous as imbecile and foolish and using the disease as an iconographic sign, but he never went so far as to perceive those affected by it as monstrous and evil. To the same degree, however, he also approached the disease as an anecdotic detail that enabled him to add a realistic emphasis to his sketches of an unfortunate class of individuals in society.

[69] A slightly later image in an Italian Haggadah, Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, MS Parm 3143, Richler, *Biblioteca Palatina*, p. 293, cat. no. 1118, fol. 11v shows a similar poor vagabond (without a goitre) sitting humbly on the ground, roasting the lamb, while being caressed by a woman. Here, it seems, the misery of the invited poor is being expressed by an iconography of care taking. For a print of the image, see Metzger, *La Haggadah*, fig. 212.