

1A

BIRDS HEAD HAGGADA (ca. 1300)

Exodus

One of the earliest illustrated haggadot is also among the most enigmatic. As its name indicates, the most compelling feature of this haggada, which was produced *circa* 1300 in Germany (Mainz?), is that most of the figures are depicted with the heads of birds. Many interpretations have been offered for this feature, which can be found in several other Hebrew manuscripts from medieval Ashkenaz (as the German- and French-speaking regions of Europe were known to Jews). Scholars still debate whether this depiction was meant as a way to avoid the second commandment's prohibition on graven images. In any event, the choice in this manuscript specifically of griffins' heads was likely a way to communicate that the Jews are noble and heroic figures. By contrast, the pursuing Egyptians on the right-hand page here not only do not have birds' heads but their faces have also been rubbed out to further dehumanize them. These Egyptians, who are accompanied – in accordance with a midrashic (extrabiblical) account – by Datan and Aviram (shown as griffin-headed Jews even though they worked with the enemy), have also been rendered as contemporary German knights riding under the banner of the Holy Roman Empire. Merging the past with the present was a way to make history vivid and immediate to the contemporary audience, and such a representation would have been a potent reminder to the Jews of medieval Germany, as it is to us, of their precarious status, subject to the whims of the dominant Christian society.



1B BIRDS HEAD HAGGADA, POP-UP VERSION (2006)

Baking Matza

The characteristic feature of the actual Birds Head Haggada inspired this delightful (and fully functional) modern pop-up version published by Koren in 2006, with the original pictures condensed from a two-folio spread into a single page. Here, the figures are engaged in the preparation and baking of matzot (Hebrew plural of matza) – the unleavened bread that the Jews ate during the exodus (as seen in 1A) – which is a central symbol of the seder and the Passover holiday. The images in the Birds Head Haggada once again demonstrate how the creators of the book combined images of past events and present practice to demonstrate the continuity not only of specific rituals but also of the Jewish people as a whole. In the context of fourteenth-century Germany, when Jews were marginalized and often persecuted, such a message would have been of great comfort. More pointedly, the numerous images of preparing, baking, and revealing the matza were likely a response to the blood libel accusations leveled against medieval Jews, charged with the ritual murder of Christian children to obtain blood for the matza. The pictures, in effect, are a poignant defense against such accusations. The whimsical treatment in the pop-up haggada, geared to today's readers who purchase matza without fear for their lives, thus masks what would have been for the original audience a powerful message about Jewish innocence and perseverance under duress.





אפיית מצות



THE BAKING OF MATZOT

1C

BIRDS HEAD HAGGADA (ca. 1300)

Jerusalem

Unlike most of the pages in the Birds Head Haggada, in which the images are placed in the margins around the text, the final page closes the haggada with a dramatic full-page picture. This is Jerusalem, as the caption states, and although it is depicted schematically in the form of a contemporary medieval structure, it is clearly meant to refer to the messianic Jerusalem of the future. The picture gives visual expression to the closing words of the seder that appear on the previous page: “Next year in Jerusalem!” The four griffin-headed figures with their characteristic medieval “Jewish” hats (a common iconographic element to indicate a Jewish male) represent the contemporary audience for whom the haggada was made and, by extension, all Jews. The figures point upward to convey their hopes for the promised redemption symbolized by the rebuilt Jerusalem. Among our earliest illustrated examples, the Birds Head Haggada establishes important precedents for haggadot until today in the way that it uses pictures to communicate the interwoven threads of past, present, future, and the place of the community in the grand scheme of Jewish continuity.



