

EARLY MEDIEVAL
Bible Illumination and
the Ashburnham
Pentateuch



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I

A PAINTED PRIMER



Scripture is like a river, both broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.

— *Gregory the Great*¹

The Ashburnham Pentateuch (Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. nouv. acq. 2334) has provoked difficult questions about the nature of late antique biblical illustration, it has challenged long-held art historical methodologies, it has stymied the work of paleographers, and it has defied scholarly attempts to place it in a cultural context. Although it was the subject of a descriptive monograph at an early date,² the subsequent failures to agree on its place of origin and the assumption that it was a provincial and peculiar product have tended to push the Ashburnham Pentateuch into the margins of early medieval book illumination studies. Yet no scholar who examines the manuscript denies the exceptional qualities of its illuminations, even though relatively little is published about its iconography. This study, then, by allowing the illustrations to “speak,” endeavors to place this enigmatic manuscript in the foreground where it belongs, rather than

relegating it to the shadows because of doubts concerning its origin and iconography.

In the Ashburnham Pentateuch, the retelling of a story is often through pictures that require the viewer to take directives from the pictorial cues provided in the illustrations.³ Although it may be a fanciful analogy, the illuminations, filled with a variety of characters who often gesticulate wildly against fantastic architectural backdrops, remind me of theater in which the audience is cued to the developing story line by the innuendos of mood and plot created on the stage. It behooves the audience, then, to pay careful attention to all aspects of the play: setting, costumes, gestures, and stage props.

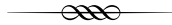
The number of illustrations, the complexity of detail, the sophistication of the iconography, and the clarity provided by the *tituli* suggest that the idiosyncrasies of the manuscript illustrations are intentional, giving the creators of the manuscript far greater artistic and intellectual license than had previously been granted to them. Finally, the cumulative weight of evidence suggests that the codex was intended for an audience whose responsibility was to teach; specifically, the clergy whose mission it was to instruct the clergy so desperately needed to fill the ecclesiastical ranks. Where these clergy members were is something this book aims to establish.

One of the consistent problems that sidelined the manuscript is the piecemeal approach to the script and the illustrations, often the one exclusive from the other. Paleographic studies do not mention, or mention only in passing, the eighteen pages of illustrations and the magnificently decorated chapter lists; on the other hand, few art historians have tackled the thorny problem of the

script, preferring to examine a few of the pages or motifs in isolation from the script and codicological concerns. In this book, I have attempted to rectify these approaches by considering a wider range of illustrated pages, although the sheer number and density of the illustrations preclude a scene-by-scene analysis. By choosing a number of representative pages, I offer a new way of viewing these complex and lively illustrations. The study of codicological and script evidence is also given its due, although it is not the primary focus of the book. Throughout this study various centers of production in Spain, Southern France, and Italy are considered, although the weight of the accumulated evidence tends to point toward Italy.

The research into the Ashburnham Pentateuch has greater repercussions beyond the search for origin, audience, and the investigation of pictorial significance. Gregory the Great's dictum, that art is to remind the "illiterate" [*idiotis*] of biblical heroes and stories,⁴ has been the focus of much attention in recent art historical writing.⁵ Gregory's two letters contain, outlined in a few lines situated in a specific time and place, the essence of Church teaching that defined the role art was to play in early medieval art. Much of the modern scholarly work has been profitable for our understanding not only of what role Gregory, his precursors, and his followers envisaged for pictures in the explication of biblical and saintly narratives, but also of his estimation of the power of images to transform their viewers. What has been lacking, however, is a comprehensive study that investigates how a contemporary series of pictures was created that implements Gregory's theory of an art that truly teaches. The Ashburnham Pentateuch provides such

an example of Gregory's dictum; indeed, it is much more sophisticated in its visual exegesis than he ever envisaged for the walls of churches. Although Gregory was addressing the destruction of wall paintings by Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, who believed these public works of art had caused his congregation to fall into idolatry, the manuscript presents a series of illustrations that address, albeit in a more private and sophisticated format, the concerns of a clergy responsible for clarifying scripture and Church history. Through the unfolding of history in a pictorial format, the clergy could learn correct teaching.



Scholarship

Two questions have dominated the Ashburnham Pentateuch scholarly dialogue: the place of origin and the influence of Jewish literature and art in the manuscript's iconography. The question of origin is addressed at length in Chapter 6 because it dovetails with the issue of audience and patronage. The question of Jewish literature and art is dealt with here because it is interwoven with the issue of methodology.

Josef Strzygowski was the first scholar to put forth the theory that the Ashburnham Pentateuch was copied from a third-century manuscript made by Jewish Christians from Alexandria or, more generally, the Near East.⁶ In an insightful critique of Strzygowski's work, Margaret Olin has highlighted that Strzygowski was contemptuous of the manuscript's illuminations. His perception that

the paintings were crude and anticlassical led him to suggest that they must have been unduly influenced by the art of the Semitic East.⁷ Despite the anti-Semitism underlying Strzygowski's work, scholars, dominated by Austrian and Israeli schools, have taken up his thesis and argued that iconographical idiosyncrasies, especially in the Genesis scenes, seem to derive from Jewish sources, leading them to view the Ashburnham Pentateuch as a key witness, along with the synagogue paintings at Dura Europos and in the Roman catacombs,⁸ to the existence of late antique Jewish books with narrative picture cycles. According to this school of thought, the Ashburnham Pentateuch is one piece in a larger theory that late antique, illustrated Jewish books influenced early Christian iconography,⁹ particularly in manuscripts and Roman catacomb paintings.¹⁰ Proponents argue that the scarcity of detail in the biblical narrative compelled artists to turn to other sources for pictorial information and that Jewish literature and art filled the vacuum. Recently, however, important new archeological examinations of the Jewish catacombs in Rome raise critical questions. Without exception, the surviving examples of Jewish catacomb paintings depict ritual objects; narrative scenes that draw from either the *Tenakh* or later rabbinical literature are notably absent.¹¹ If the hypothetical, now-lost, Jewish manuscripts with narrative illustrations were circulating in Rome in the third and fourth centuries, they had a curious influence on Christian funerary art while leaving no trace on Jewish funerary art in Rome. Is this a plausible scenario? A genre of Jewish art that left no imprint on Jewish funerary art while making inroads into Christian art – both funerary and book art – stretches, I believe, art historical and archaeological credibility.

At times the scholarly dialogue has become polemical. Serious charges have been leveled against scholars who placed the Ashburnham Pentateuch within a “purely” Christian context. Kurt Schubert, for example, has scathingly attacked Franz Rickert, reproaching him and “Christian archeologists” for not understanding the Jewish literary and pictorial tradition, which Schubert believes lies behind the Ashburnham Pentateuch.¹² Ursula Schubert and Gabrielle Sed-Rajna have suggested that some of the scenes in the manuscript, such as the Oppression of the Hebrews and the Reading of the Covenant at Mount Sinai, would not have been of interest to Christians and therefore indicate a Jewish audience in the prototype.¹³ The assumption seems to be that the creators of the manuscript slavishly followed a prototype even though it was no longer relevant to their needs and interests. Obviously the themes were of interest to at least one Christian audience as the Ashburnham Pentateuch, despite one’s beliefs about its prototypes, is unmistakably a Christian manuscript. Also, it is difficult, and perhaps foolhardy, for modern scholars to assess, with any certainty, which passages of scripture were *not* of interest to early medieval Christians.

The Ashburnham Pentateuch has suffered considerably in modern scholarship because attention has been given to selected details in order to support a larger theoretical enterprise rather than arriving at a comprehensive understanding of the whole. There are several problems and assumptions that have skewed the manner in which the illustrations are viewed. The isolation of a single motif within a rich and diverse series of pictures is highly problematic. In searching for the lost *Vorlage* [prototype], scholars have

tended to isolate motifs and to justify their appearance in the Ashburnham Pentateuch by use of either a Jewish prototype or the influence of Jewish literature. If a Jewish pictorial tradition influenced the creators of the manuscript, then one would expect more than one or two motifs to appear. The literary sources, for the most part from the *Midrash*,¹⁴ were mined for verbal descriptions corresponding to the illustrative details that cannot be explained by pictorial conventions or the scriptural text. The theory assumes that early Christian artists naturally turned to their roots in Jewish art for models, so that they incorporated motifs from Jewish into Christian art, often without fully understanding the original intention of the Jewish source. Thus, when a particular illustration adds elements that are not described in the Biblical text, one can sometimes find a textual source for the motif in Jewish literature. But does this prove the existence of Jewish artistic prototypes, or does it indicate the interest of Christian authors in Jewish authors?

The art historians who utilize the Jewish legends place far too much confidence in their literary sources, more confidence than do their counterparts in textual studies, who recognize the difficulty, and perhaps futility, of identifying the sources as either Jewish or Christian. The rabbinical literature is at times sporadic, individualistic, and nonbinding so that one homiletic saying may not represent a wider Judaic tradition.¹⁵ A tradition must be established to determine that indeed a certain motif found widespread popularity and would have then entered the vocabulary of Jewish and Christian art. A complication that has not been adequately addressed by this group of scholars is that Jewish legends were widely read, studied, and adapted by Christian readers, making it

substantially likely that the means of transmission was through the lens of Christian literature rather than a direct Jewish interpolation through Jewish art.¹⁶ To date, only a handful of iconographical instances of Jewish influence have been found in the Ashburnham Pentateuch, a manuscript that contains over 100 scenes; of this handful, most cannot be said with any certainty to derive exclusively from Jewish art and literature.¹⁷ The notion of an extensive body of narrative Jewish art in the late antique period is an attractive one, because it fits into the larger picture of intellectual exchanges between Jewish and Christian scholars; however, the lines are often drawn too rigidly. The brushstrokes of Jewish influence have overshadowed the nuances of the artist making a creative contribution to the illustrations that spoke to a Christian audience.

The dearth of narrative Jewish art does not allow for an adequate framework of comparanda. The late sixth-century manuscript is typically compared with the third-century synagogue paintings at Dura Europos and thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Jewish manuscripts, the earliest surviving illustrated manuscripts because no late antique or early medieval example exists. To reconstruct a Jewish, late antique prototype from fourteenth-century manuscripts and the Ashburnham Pentateuch with any confidence, scholars would have to embrace fully the methodology of Kurt Weitzmann,¹⁸ a methodology that has received harsh criticism in recent scholarship.¹⁹ The theory of pictorial recensions, which attempts to reconstruct lost prototypes from later works of art in a manner similar to early textual criticism, has not been successfully applied to the Ashburnham Pentateuch.²⁰

Ursula Schubert, who stretches Weitzmann's theory to its fullest extent, attempts to demonstrate a late antique prototype by comparing Exodus scenes (Figs. 1 and 2) to those scenes in the Aelfric Paraphrase (London, Brit. Lib. Cotton Claudius B. MS lat. iv), a Christian manuscript from the eleventh century, the fourteenth-century Golden Haggadah (London, Brit. Lib. Add. MS lat. 27210), the Barcelona Haggadah (London, Brit. Lib. Add. MS lat. 14761), and the Hispano-Moorish Haggadah (London, Brit. Lib. Or. MS lat. 2737).²¹ Although she acknowledges iconographical peculiarities in each manuscript, she insists that they share common motifs, such as the making of straw and bricks. In fact, the scenes are far more dissimilar than similar. Her comparison of the Oppression of the Hebrews in the Ashburnham Pentateuch (folios 56r and 58r) and the Golden Haggadah (folio 111r) elucidates the problem (Figs. 2–4). Schubert is careful to demonstrate that the Ashburnham Pentateuch is dissimilar to other Christian manuscripts, such as an eleventh-century Byzantine Octateuch (Vatican, Bibl. Apost., Vat. gr. 747, folio 78v), the ninth-century Stuttgart Psalter (Stuttgart, Würt. Landes. Stuttgart, Bib. Fol. 23, folio 97v), and the eleventh-century Aelfric Paraphrase (London, Brit. Lib. Cotton Claudius B.IV, folio 79v) from Anglo-Saxon England; thus, once she has established its “non-Christian” pedigree, she can turn to Jewish manuscripts. The Ashburnham Pentateuch and the Golden Haggadah both show the first oppression and the second, crueller oppression, which offer “[T]he most striking iconographic parallels”: an Egyptian overseer at the top of a tower, the mixing of clay and the mixing of straw, and a man carrying a bundle of straw.

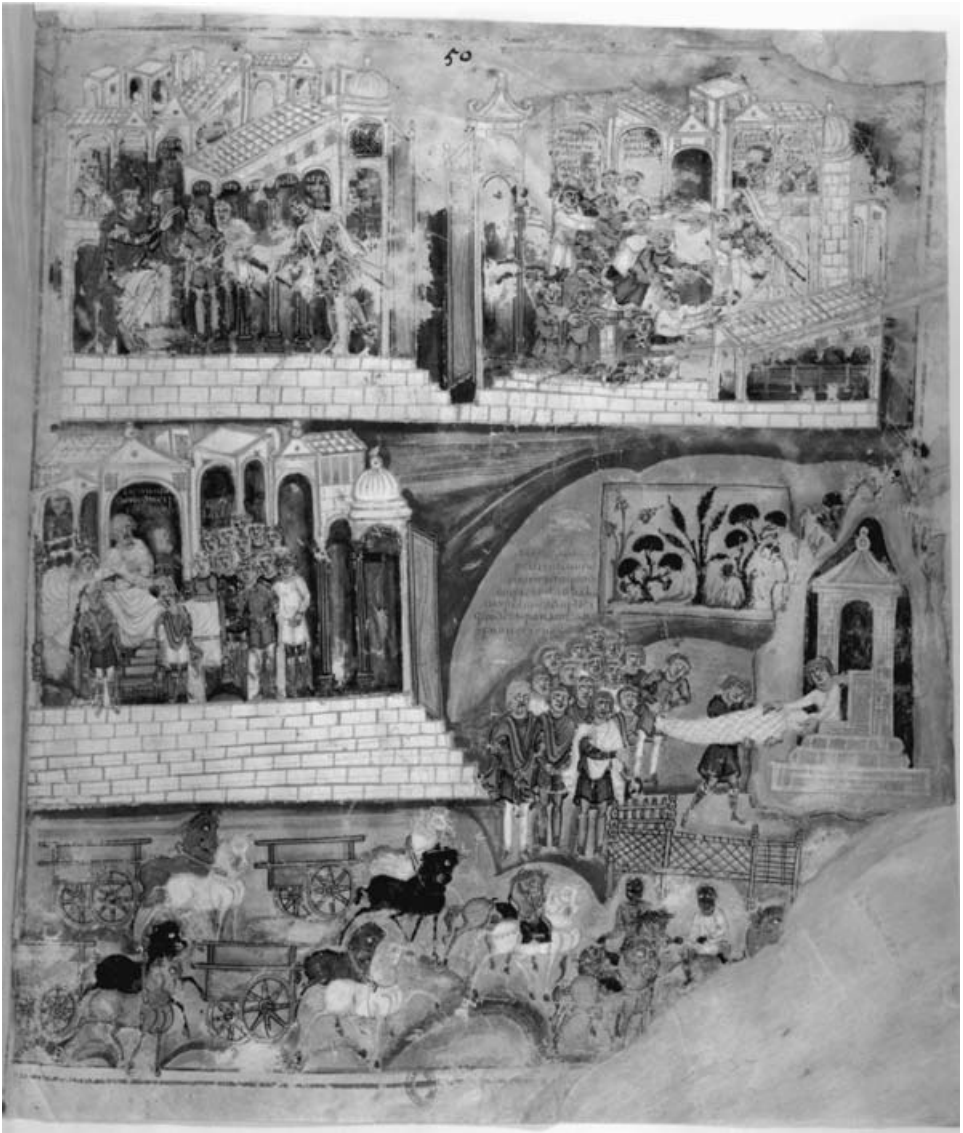


FIGURE 1. Jacob's Blessing and Death, Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. nouv. acq. 2334, folio 50r. (Photo: Bibl. nat. de France)

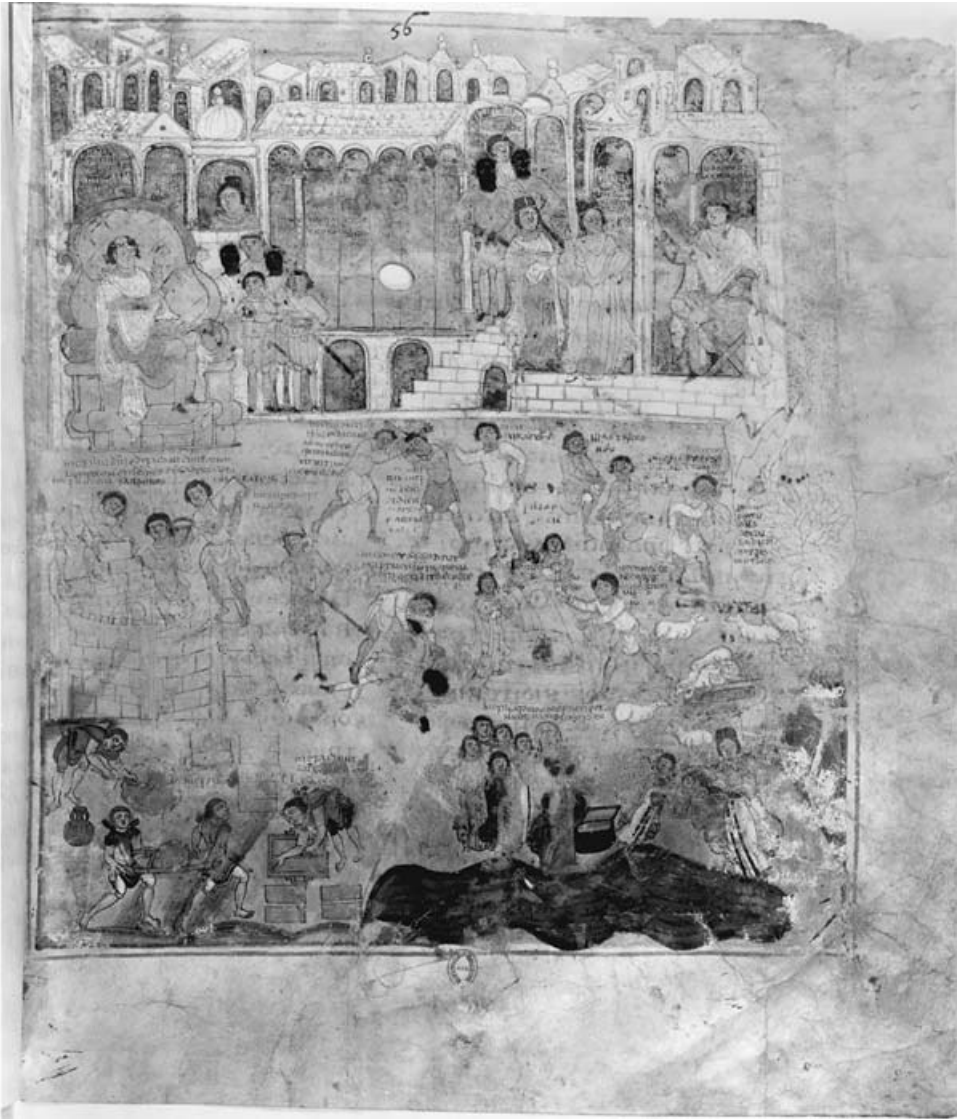


FIGURE 2. Oppression of the Israelites, Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. nouv. acq. 2334, folio 56r. (Photo: Bibl. nat. de France)

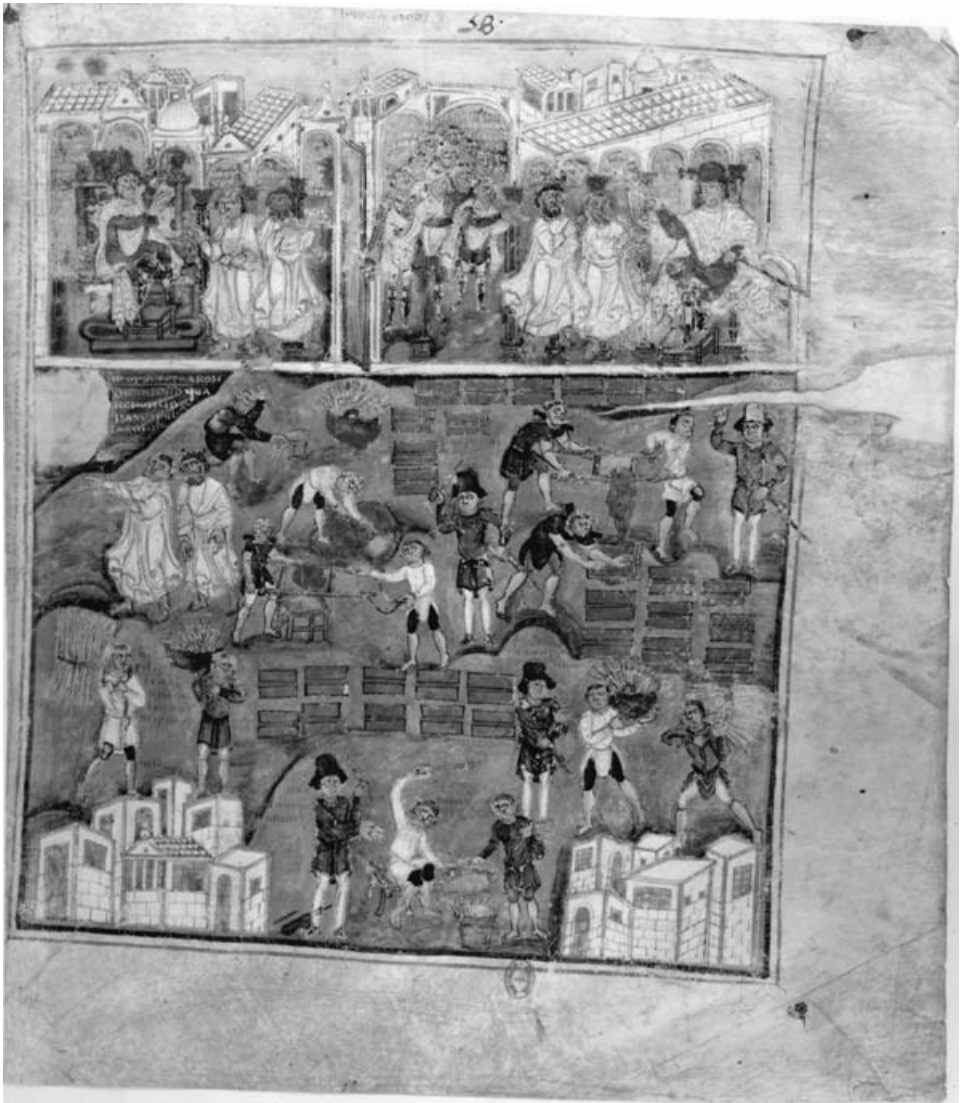


FIGURE 3. Increased Oppression, Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. nouv. acq. 2334, folio 58r. (Photo: Bibl. nat. de France)

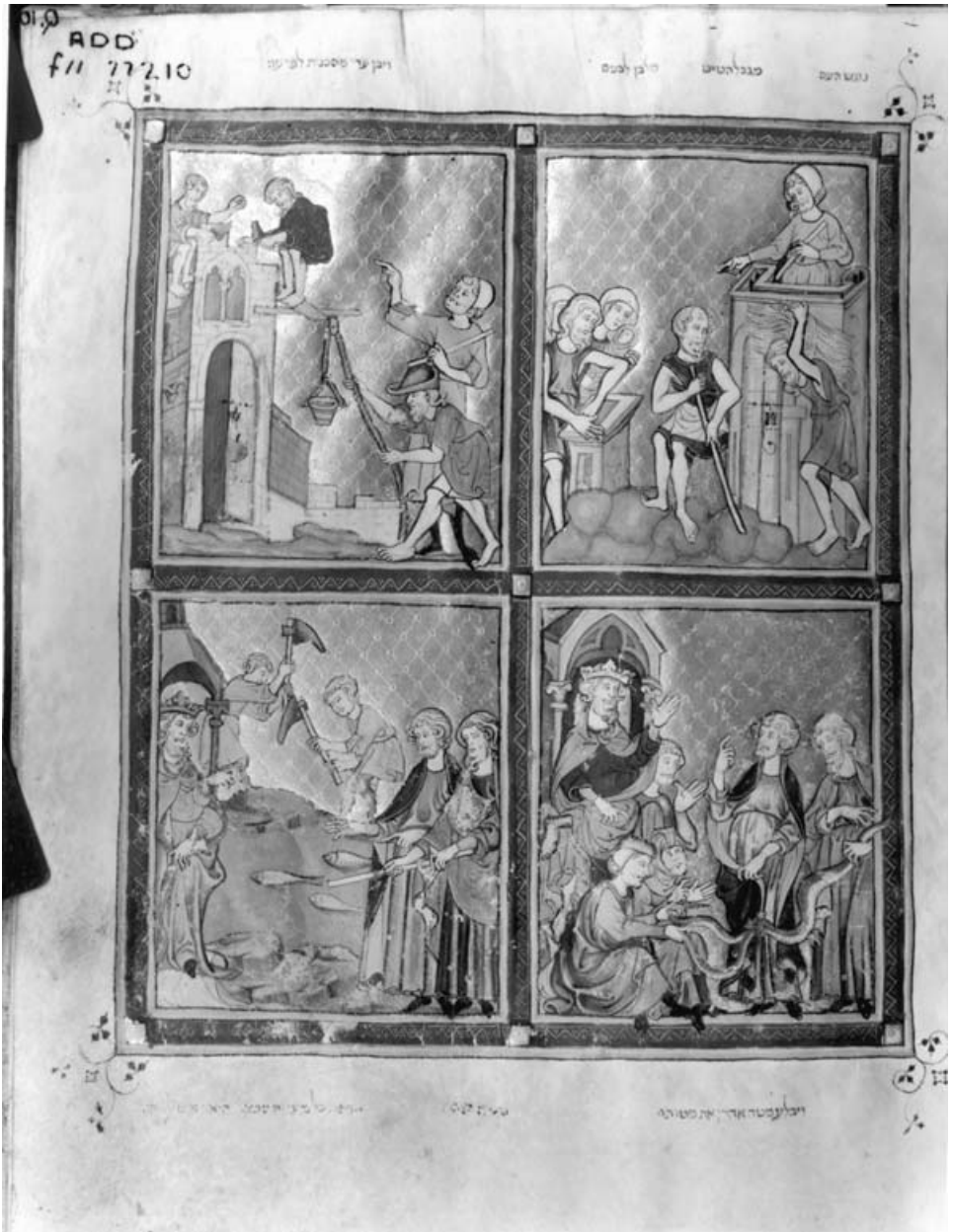


FIGURE 4. Building the Treasure Cities, Golden Haggadah, London, Brit. Lib., Add. 27210, folio 11r. (By permission of the British Library)

A more careful examination shows that the taskmaster in the Pentateuch stands to the right of the city in the first oppression and is shown twice in the second oppression, but in neither page is the taskmaster in a city tower as shown in the Golden Haggadah. In the Ashburnham Pentateuch, the mixing of clay is shown twice as part of an elaborate scene of brickmaking. In both pages, a young man bends over to mix the clay with a short-handled hoe. In the Haggadah, the clay mixer is an older man, indicated by his beard and receding hairline, who stands and stirs the clay with a long stick. The straw gatherer is also quite different in the two manuscripts. On folio 58r in the Ashburnham Pentateuch two young men carry straw bundles slung over their backs by a rope: One strolls in from the left and one strides in from the right. The Haggadah depicts an older man bent over from the weight of his burden, which he awkwardly carries with his arms above his head. The two manuscripts also show a different method of transporting the bricks to the top of the walls. The Haggadah depicts a pulley and bucket, whereas the Pentateuch shows a ladder with a young man carrying a brick on his back.²² The only unambiguous connection between the two manuscripts is that they both illustrate the first and second oppressions. Thus Schubert's construction of a prototype is based less on convincing visual evidence and more on the confidence of the author in her theory. One late fourteenth-century manuscript, the Padua Bible (London, Brit. Lib. Add. MS lat. 15277, folio 1r) actually provides a better visual parallel to the first oppression (Fig. 5), if one were willing to pursue the Weitzmann method as applied to the Ashburnham Pentateuch.²³

Como el re pharaon li fa murare doe cure pharon e nemelies e per affigere li curatiaco che li no
 possesse uocare i nohi e turo el di li connegnua lauorare ale doe cure a portare patre calce e
 Ene ogni alma oia per stentari e sempre negnua bastonadi.



Como el re pharon comanda a doe femene de egypto vna auena nome sefora e laltre sua
 la quale leuua i puni ele pure che nasena ale femene eubie che quando ci nascesse alquanto puro
 capio che lei uebia a dire e sola fosse pura che le la uebia saluare. queste doe femene se manco pi
 to ch'al re pharon non uolse a dire a pun veia curer e si se facea al re dignitos che le femene de
 li ebrei saneta ben leuare li puni ele pite quando le uaporauua sicbele no uegnua chomate



pui a leuare li soi nohi.
 Como el re pharon comanda al puouolo che si no li tena el quanto li nasena che lo so pur
 mo liume anegare ele pite che affera si la comenata. Capuoli. vii. de egypto.
 Como vno homo del tribu e leui el quale suo nome e sarai lieta per morare vna fema a del
 o tribu de leui la quale suo nome e sarabelis vni quale nohi de egypto.

FIGURE 5. Oppression of the Israelites, Padua Bible, London, Brit. Lib. Add. 15277, folio 1r. (By permission of the British Library)