

The Washington Haggadah by Joel Ben Simeon.
Introduction and Translation by David Stern, Introduction by Katrin Kogman-Appel.
The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011.

Joel Ben Simeon, or Joel Feibush Ben Simeon as he should more correctly be known, was a 15th century German-born scribe and illustrator who worked in Germany and northern Italy and whose prodigious output includes eight haggadot, three prayerbooks and a commentary to the book of Psalms. His talent as a scribe was immense, and the pages of his work remain even today both a joy to read and a source of amazement for their quality and cleanliness of line; his illustrations, often evincing the influence of both countries in which he worked, are evocative of their time and place and were influential on the works of others.

In 1478, Joel Ben Simeon wrote the haggadah that was brought to America in the late 1880s by the author, polemicist and publisher Ephraim Deinard and it arrived at the Library of Congress in 1919, earning its 'Washington' soubriquet.

This edition of the Haggadah, superbly printed by the Belknap Press is divided into three parts: opening from right to left there is a fine facsimile of the haggadah text itself, in all its technical glory, followed by an annotated translation by David Stern, Professor of Classical Hebrew Literature at the University of Pennsylvania: from left to right the opening text is an introduction to the text, entitled The Life of a Book, embracing the origin of the Seder and the development of the haggadah as a liturgy, as well as details of how this particular haggadah became part of the collection of the Library of Congress. The second chapter, by Katrin Kogman-Appel, Associate Professor of the Arts at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, is first an analysis of Joel's work and the milieu in which it was created, and an explanation of the way a haggadah was fashioned in the 15th century before proceeding to an examination of the illustrations and illuminations used in contemporary Jewish texts and the imagery found in the Washington Haggadah; the chapter concludes with a folio by folio commentary on the illustrations in the text.

This is a truly beautiful edition of the Washington Haggadah, accompanied by two excellent and highly informative articles, and will be a must for Haggadah collectors and devotees of the Passover ritual alike; it is also a very fruitful source for those, like me, fascinated by the arcane imagery of the medieval haggadot.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh