Emendation, Editing, Elucidation: Towards a Historical Edition of Zoharic Texts

This essay will engage with the lively ongoing debate about the best appropriate methodology to adopt in producing a critical edition of the pivotal kabbalistic work, the *Zohar*.

The first section will comprise a very briefsurvey of the problematic state of the *Zohar*’searliest textual witnesses, demonstrating the dynamic aspects of the initial manuscript transmission. Then, the body of the essay will explore this dynamismthrough the prism of language, that is, by investigating the textual variation and use of Zoharic Aramaic across the witnesses. Based upon the findings reached, we will conclude with a few words about the optimal approach to producing a critical edition of the *Zohar* from manuscript.

The remarks presented herein can only represent a sliver of a broader, ongoing study, which is heavily indebted to the work of prior scholars. In this regard, I would like to specifically mention the enormous contribution of Daniel Abrams, who has devoted many studies to the various aspects of the reception of the *Zohar* in manuscript and in print.

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As far as we know, it was during the last two decades of the thirteenth century in Castile that texts later identified as part of the Zoharic corpus first appeared, and from that point forward they had a very complicated history of transmission and reception. Although fully exploring this history is beyond the scope of this paper, we will make some general observations on the rather poor textual witnesses of the *Zohar* in the first few decadesafter its appearance.

The main documentary evidence in question is *indirect* in nature. That is, it consists of quotations from the *Zohar* in other works, as well as Hebrew translations (or attempts thereof) and paraphrases of Zoharic homilies, and sporadic references to Zoharic texts. But *direct* documentary evidence, independent copies of long tracts from the *Zohar*, is vanishingly small in this period. In fact, the earliest extant direct witnesses date from nearly a century after the initial appearance of Zoharic texts, and are from several thousand kilometers away, in Byzantium. From the tail end of the fourteenth century until the first print runs of the *Zohar* in sixteenth-century northern Italy, the manuscript witnesses tend to separate out into groups, each with common characteristics based on the location and period of transcription. We can therefore speak confidently of discrete documentary regions across the entire Mediterranean basin.

Returning to the early, critical decades of dissemination, direct attestations of what we call the *Zohar* remain few and far between. This fragmentary documentation makes it very difficult for a historian to answer the most pressing questions about the text of the *Zohar,* such as: How large was the corpus of so-called Zoharic texts? How delineated were its textual boundaries? Of what texts was itcomposed? What were its major textual branches? And, on an even more basic level, what was this corpus of texts called? How did readers and copyists refer to it?

In the case of the Zohar, this work from the beginning of the Late Middle Ages has left us with very little from its first century of public existence, while other works produced in the exact same milieu fared much better—full copies of them survive. The *Zohar*’s fate was singularly unfortunate, and there are two undeniably contributing factors. First, simply put, the corpus in question was massive. Second, as others have observed, certain, complicated its acceptance and veneration.

Of this period, which would have been so critical to the *Zohar*’s particular routesand methods of dissemination, the period in which pioneering attempts were made to treat parts of the *Zohar* as if they were complete units with discrete beginnings and endings, the manuscript tradition has precious little to tell us indeed.

Nevertheless, we can and must work with what we have. The surviving partial witnesses amply bear out the considerable textual dynamism of the *Zohar*’shomilies on the Torah. There are some early manuscripts of the *Zohar* from all over the Mediterranean basin that were copied at various points over the fourteenth century. Of note are MS Vatican 202, copied around 1300, which has a few dozen folios of the *Zohar*’s homilies; MS Vatican 226, copied in 1311, which contains a Hebrew translation of many Zoharic texts; a few manuscripts copied in Jerusalem in the second half of the fourteenth century that preserve unknown fragments from the *Zohar*; and a number of Byzantine manuscripts from the end of the fourteenth century.

When one compares these witnesses to one another and to other “Zoharic collections” from later periods up to and including the age of print, the exceptional degree of textual dynamism stands out. This dynamism, or “fluidity”, is expressed in each of the following three important parameters:

1. *Higher criticism*, that is, the classification, organization, and editing of textual units. When placed side by side, the same units appear to have been transmitted in or adapted to *different textual frameworks*. There is great disparity in the texts’ order, boundaries, context, given titles, language (Aramaic or Hebrew), and more.
2. *Lower criticism*, which concerns the wording of the text itself. Again, comparison of parallel textual units reveals great fluctuations in the text across decades and geographical expanses. Often, the textual tradition of these units was apparently so weak that attempts were made to standardize it.
3. *Language reception*, meaning the Semitic language used in transmission, elucidation, and translation. Early witnesses indicate quite clearly that tradents and transcribers encountered many difficulties in deciphering the meaning of unfamiliar Aramaic forms and terms. This occurred even at the stage of transcription, let alone during explication and translation.

This third and final aspect of the *Zohar*’s transmission history has been little studied, and the following examples will center around it. However, the examples also touch on higher and lower criticism, since the text is sometimes printed in a particular *parashah*while various manuscripts incorporate them into other frameworks.

Through three select case studies we will identify a number of significant phenomena that marked or marred the *Zohar*’s language in the formative stages of its early dissemination. Taken together, these phenomena seriously challenge the speculative theories bandied about in recent decades about the *Zohar*’s Aramaic, especially the romantic notion that it was not some artificial construct but a living, spoken language, perhaps even the argot of mystics.

The basis for comparison will be a limited number of texts: on one side, the early manuscripts mentioned above, all of which date to what can be termed the *Zohar*’s“dynamic period,” and, on the other side, later Spanish and Italian manuscripts alongside the first printings from Mantua and Cremona, in which the text had been more or less fixed.

[1] Lilith and the Books of Old

The first example is taken from a passage that appears in the earliest witnesses, and later in print, in the homilies on *parashat Vayikra*. There is nothing substantive, however, that ties it to this specific *parashah*. In the homily that immediately precedes the section in question, there is a mythological description (relying on earlier sources) of Lilith and other impure spirits who attempted to attach themselves to, and even enter, Adam when he was still the only human being in the world. Later, after Eve was formed from his rib, Lilith took note and fled overseas. The following table presents this *parashah* as it is given in MS Vatican 202; MS Toronto, Friedberg Collection 5-015, copied in a Byzantine hand circa 1400; and Mantuah:

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This synoptic comparison makes the discrepancy between the texts glaring. In the Mantua edition, there is no trace of the expression **לאחרבא רומי רשיעתא ולמהוי חורבן עלמין**, “to destroy wicked Rome and bring destruction to the world,” an omission which is almost certainly due to censorship.

Beyond deletions due to censorship, which careful comparison attests in spades, there is another phenomenon present here: the multiplicity of Hebrew forms in the earliest textual witnesses and of the Aramaic forms found in later ones. We find the same thing in the interesting continuation, which contains a passage from the *Book of Ashmedai*, followed by a complete spell in Aramaic for the banishment of Lilith during marital relations.

Careful examination of other early manuscripts reveals scores of such examples, where Hebrew elements are replaced by Aramaic equivalents. The clear trend towards eliminating Hebrew forms attested in later manuscripts, and then in print, makes it almost certain that these texts underwent a systematic Aramaization. This would have been part of the more extensive process of standardizing the Aramaic text, which adjusted the text’s nominal and verbal forms to those of more familiar Aramaic dialects, particularly the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud.[[1]](#footnote-1)

[2] The *Book of Enoch* and the *Book of King Solomon*

The second example concerns one of the many mysterious apocryphal books invented by the *Zohar*. It appears among the homilies on *parashat Vayikra* (which, like the previous example, it bears no specific connection to), and it also appears as a separate text.

In contrast to the previous example, in this case none of the manuscript versions read smoothly. If we choose any one of the manuscripts, let alone one of the late printings, we end up with a reading that produces a unique meaning not shared by any of the others, and one that is nearly inscrutable. A synoptic comparison reveals probable instances of corruption, although it proves difficult to reconstruct the original reading and the subsequent process of corruption with a high degree of confidence.

What we can say is that the Aramaic fragment from “the *Book of King Solomon*” includes a theosophical exposition of the alphabet, a kind of “alphabetical mysticism.” The barrier to understanding is met at the outset, however, when the reader encounters bizarre hapax legomena commonly referred to as *ha-millim ha-zarot*, which can only be understood on the strength of context, if at all.

Presented below are the first three lines in Aramaic, from MS Vatican 202:

תמונה שמכילה שולחן

התיאור נוצר באופן אוטומטי

It is difficult to know where to begin with this passage, because even the opening words are mystifying. Commentators throughout the ages have proposed some very creative interpretations, but we still have no lexicon that satisfactorily clarifies the terminology, and probably never will. Even the early translator of MS Vatican ebr. 226 (from 1311) was exasperated by this passage. He took the easiest option of simply leaving it out.

The next three short clauses (**חד דחילו דכלא / חד סתים שבילין / חד נהיר עמיקין**) perhaps help us to make sense of things, as they gesture towards a potential exposition of some kind on the threefold nature of the Hebrew letter *yod*. In other words, in the “*Book of King Solomon*” three parts were isolated in the *yod*, perhaps three letter strokes.

This speculative reading fits nicely with the next passage. The focus here is on the three letters *yod*, *vav*, and *dalet*, which together spell the name of the letter *yod*. These letters respectively correspond to the father, the son, and the daughter-matron, a theosophical scheme in which there is a descending hierarchy of the masculine potency, its lower masculine offshoot, and its lower feminine offshoot. However, in the earlier Vatican manuscript witnesses, the homily also includes the letter *he* from the Tetragrammaton, meaning, both *yod* and *he* are treated. Should we assume that this was part of the original text, or was it perhaps a later interventionto fill out the theosophic genealogy, by providing a *he* that corresponds to the supernal mother?

Whatever the case may be, there are here dramatically divergent readings of the word הא. It can be vocalized with a *tzere* and read as the letter *he*, or it can be vocalized with a *kamatz* and read as Aramaic *ha*, meaning “hence” or “therefore.” A similar divergence occurred with the word די at the very beginning of the passage. The *dalet* can be vocalized with a mobile schwa and the *yod* stands for the letter *yod* itself, or the word can be reanalyzed as Aramaic *di*, meaning “that” or “which.” The Mantua edition read it the second way, such that the very subject of the homily, the letter *yod*, is confusingly not mentioned in this line. By reading the text this way, the Mantua edition (and the many others based on it) closes off all other interpretive possibilities, so that one comes away with an understanding that could not be more different from those of the other versions.

With a difficult text like this, it’s very tempting to deploy logic, based on context, syntax, or semantics, on a word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence basis, to produce the “correct reading” of the entire passage. As a matter of fact, Over the centuries, learned copyists undoubtedly could not withstand the temptation and attempted to do precisely this. The important takeaway is that every single one of the witnesses in our possession takes the reader in a completely different direction, and this is again something that editors of Zoharic texts must take note of and make note of in their editions.

[3] Parallel Hebrew and Aramaic Homilies

The previous examples essentially touched on early translations of the *Zohar* into Hebrew and their underexplored importance for many aspects of studying its text. The third and last example is dedicated to a different language problem: the so-called Hebrew parallels to the *Zohar*. I am referring of course to those texts originally written in Hebrew that contain long parallels of complete textual units in the *Zohar*, and can be considered to some extent to be the earlier Hebrew versions of these units.

The topic of the following Hebrew and Aramaic homilies is the theosophical elucidation of the *mitzvah* of *yibbum* (levirate marriage), and the sentences we will read specifically concern the spiritual fate of a man who dies childless. According to the kabbalistic idea presented in the *Zohar*, if his wife does not undergo *yibbum*, his soul cannot return to its source and enter the divine “storehouse of souls” in the World to Come, identified theosophically with the upper *sefirah* of *Binah*.

The first Aramaic text appears in the homilies on the Judah and Tamar story cycle in *parashat Vayeshev*, and the Hebrew parallel is from a passage titled סוד הייבום in a Hebrew work by Moses de León. Note that these are but a few lines from a much larger text. De León wrote the latter around 1290, and is presented here from a copy made in Mamluk Jerusalem in 1382, when a small conventicle of scholars copied kabbalistic writings owned by one another:

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The same idea is repeated in the two texts: since the deceased did not father children, his soul is denied entry into the place of all other souls. The figurative language that expresses this idea is partly equivalent in the two languages: **לא עאל** **בפרגודא** is very close to **אינו נכנס בתוך פלטרין של מלך**; and **אתגזר דיוקניה מתמן** is the equivalent of **נכרת דמותו משם** (his figure was severed from there). Still, the texts do display some variety: **נפסק מאותה התמונה הכוללת כל התמונות** (his image loses its connection to the ideal image) appears only in de León’s Hebrew text.

But this final image too, which originated with the earlier Geronese kabbalists, made its way into the Aramaic homilies of the *Zohar*. The text in which it is found, and with which we will conclude, was not included in the first printings of the *Zohar*, but it was published about fifty years later in Salonika in what is conventionally called the *Zohar Ḥadash*. On the right, one can see a sentence from this passage as it appears in a Byzantine collection in MS Toronto, with which we are already quite familiar. On the left is the same passage from the very early MS Vatican 283, copied in Jerusalem, which preserves a Hebrew version:

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When previously discussing the Aramaization of Zoharic passages, we presented an early example of translation attempts and discussed their importance for clarifying issues in the text’s transmission and reception. These two texts highlight a different but no less interesting textual phenomenon: the preservation of Hebrew and Aramaic versions of the same homiletical material. In such instances, it is not at all easy to say which is the original and which the translation. Sometimes, there are grounds for assuming that both versions circulated from the outset. These data can inform us about the formation of the text and language of the *Zohar* itself, and not only about its transmission and reception. Moreover, the importance of a finding like this goes well beyond questions of phraseology, to the more fundamental questions of the chronology of the *Zohar*’s composition. Here, it has a major bearing on the original language in which the text was composed. Such findings open up new vistas for resolving thorny problems.

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We will conclude with some thoughts, based on the material presented herein, on the practicalities of editing Zoharic texts.

The state and extent of the earliest witnesses can make it seem impossible to progress using the traditional tools of philology. There has been instead a strong tendency to focus on each particular witness on its own, describing its unique character and minutest detail. While this approach is understandable, it is not satisfactory to merely treat each text as a discrete, disconnected unit, as if one cannot find a way to connect the dots between the various data points.

The other methodological extreme, on its own, is also unlikely to be productive. This antiquated approach of using printed editions as the control while labeling all other versions “variants,” has enjoyed a surprising resurgence of late. The popularity and welcome simplicity of this method cannot overcome the inherent problems of prioritizing or normalizing printed versions.

In light of the findings presented herein, the optimal approach must lie somewhere in the middle. The best way to probe these texts and their textual dynamism, is through a synoptic analysis of the relevant textual evidence while also respecting the integrity of each fragment. To this end, digitally-enhanced synopses are most likely the way forward. The printed synopses face a number of challenges, principally that they are too rigid. Digital databases allow for making specific queries and retrieving particular cross-sections of the material, facilitating ease of comparison. Furthermore, the ability to visually rearrange results can be of great value. This type of synopsis can serve scholars as a dynamic, developing tool that, with all due caution, can be of great worth in historical or textual inquiry, by creating a basis for comparison between the various discrete witnesses.

1. On this see xxx. The process of Aramaization and all the other expressions of textual standardization must factor into any critical edition of Zoharic texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)