Emendation, Editing, Elucidation:

Preliminary Remarks on the Historical Edition of Zoharic Texts

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This short paper will address the ongoing debate about which methodologies should be used to produce a critical edition of the Zohar, the foundational text of Kabbalah. Recent scholarship on the textual history of the Zohar, which draws from both manuscripts and early print editions, has set the stage for this debate. Opposing traditional models that sought to produce a critical edition by harmonizing the various textual strata of the Zohar, scholars have suggested alternative approaches that would instead feature apparatuses to illuminate the reception, editing, and dissemination of these various textual strata.[[1]](#footnote-4)1 Building on these suggestions, several studies published in the past few years have considered various strategies for compiling the textual strata of the Zohar.[[2]](#footnote-5)2

In the first part of the paper, I will briefly survey issues relating to the earliest textual witnesses of the Zohar, which demonstrate the dynamism and complexity of the earliest manuscript transmission processes. Then, in the main body of the paper, I will turn to exploring this dynamismthrough the prism of language by investigating textual variations in the use of Zoharic Aramaic across the textual witnesses. I will argue that differences in the various versions of the text do not reflect minor changes and errors in the transmission process, but rather essential pieces of information that comprise additional witnesses to the complex processes of the Zohar’s dissemination. I suggest that to fully understand these processes of dissemination and transmission, it is crucial to consider fluctuations in the linguistic matrices of the various texts. I will conclude with a few preliminary remarks about the optimal approach to producing a critical edition of the Zohar based on the manuscripts.

It was in the final two decades of the thirteenth century, in Castile, that texts later identified as part of the Zoharic corpus first appeared. From that point on, these texts had an incredibly complicated history of transmission and reception. All that survives from the first century and a half after the Zohar appeared in the cities of Castile are a few witnesses that contain different texts that can be identified with passages of the Zohar.[[3]](#footnote-7)3 Further, critically considering each of the groups to which these fragments belong reveals significant differences between the Zohar that was printed as a book in northern Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, on the one hand, and the manuscripts which ostensibly served as a basis for the earliest compilers and printers, on the other. These differences relate to the literary framework of the Zohar, among other things. What’s more, even the main documentary evidence in question is *indirect*, consisting of quotations from the Zoharin other works, Hebrew (mis)translations and paraphrases of Zoharic homilies, and sporadic references to Zoharic texts. *Direct* documentary evidence, i.e., surviving independent copies of long tracts from the Zohar, is vanishingly small from this period. In fact, the earliest extant direct witnesses date from nearly a century after the initial appearance of Zoharic texts and come from a locum as far as Byzantium. Later on, 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 into groups, each with common characteristics based on the location and period of transcription; that is, there seem to be discrete documentary regions across the entire Mediterranean basin.

Returning to the early, critical decades of dissemination, direct attestations of what was later on called “the Zohar”remain few and far between. This fragmentary documentation makes it very difficult for historians 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?

The manuscript tradition has precious little to tell us about this period, in which parts of the Zohar were first treated as complete units with discrete beginnings and endings. More thorough textual witnesses from this period might enable us to trace the routesand methods of the Zohar’s dissemination*.* Yet the surviving partial witnesses already testify to the considerable textual dynamism of the Zohar’shomilies on the Torah. Consider some of the earliest extant manuscripts of the Zohar*,* which were copied at various points over the fourteenth century and come from all over the Mediterranean basin. Of particular interest are MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 202, copied around 1300, which contains a few dozen folios of the Zohar’s homilies;[[4]](#footnote-8) MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 226, copied in 1311, which contains a Hebrew translation of many Zoharic texts[[5]](#footnote-10)5; a few manuscripts copied in Jerusalem in the second half of the fourteenth century that preserve unknown fragments from the *Zohar[[6]](#footnote-12)6*; and a number of Byzantine manuscripts from the end of the fourteenth century.[[7]](#footnote-14)7

When one compares these witnesses to one another and to other “Zoharic collections” from later periods up to and including the age of print, an exceptional degree of textual dynamism emerges. Broadly, this dynamism, or “fluidity” can be organized into the following three modalities of reception:

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 much disparity in the texts’ order, boundaries, context, given titles, language (Aramaic or Hebrew), and more.
2. *Lower criticism* concerns the wording of the text itself. A 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 transmitters 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 focus on it. However, the examples also touch on higher and lower criticism since the texts are sometimes printed in a particular *parashah*while various manuscripts incorporate them into other frameworks.

 Using three case studies, we will identify a number of significant phenomena that marked—or marred—the Zohar’s language in the formative stages of its dissemination. Taken together, these phenomena seriously challenge the much speculation 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.[[8]](#footnote-16)8

The basis for comparison will be a limited number of texts: on one hand, the early manuscripts mentioned above, all of which date to what can be termed the Zohar’s“dynamic period,” and, on the other hand, later Spanish and Italian manuscripts together with the first printings from Mantua and Cremona, in which the text had been more or less fixed. This essay’s focus on these textual witnesses in particular is intended to counter earlier research, which has generally characterized the Aramaic of the Zohar principally on the basis of later expressions, beginning with the publication of the Zohar in book form in the mid-sixteenth century. Underlying this earlier approach is an assumption that the various parts that comprise the broader corpus known as “the Zohar” in fact represent and reflect a single dialect with a uniform history of development.[[9]](#footnote-18)9 More broadly, most research on the language of the Zohar takes a reductive approach to the textual characteristics of the Zohar, obfuscating distinctions between its various components. This reductive approach was at the expense of a synchronic approach that considers the component texts that consolidated in their various historical contexts, and even more so of a diachronic approach that considers the processes behind the generation and consolidation of select compilations into a unified literary framework.[[10]](#footnote-19) The exempla discussed in what follows are meant to pave the path towards new research and to suggest the merits of an edition of textual witnesses from the earliest years of the Zohar’s dissemination. Such an edition would help to establish important phenomena relating to the earliest processes of the text’s dissemination, which would in turn allow us to achieve new and subtler understandings of both the generation and dissemination of texts comprising the Zoharic corpus and the development of differences between these texts.

[1] Lilith and the Books of Old

 The first example we will consider is taken from a passage that appears in the earliest textual witnesses, and later in print, in the homilies on *parashat Vayikra*. It should be noted that there is nothing substantive that ties this passage to that 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, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 202; MS Toronto, Friedberg Collection 5-015, copied in a Byzantine hand circa 1400; and the Editio princeps Mantua שי"ח-ש"ך.

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|  | Ms Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 202: 42v | Ms Toronto, University of Toronto, Friedberg 5-015: 232v | ספר הזהר (editio princeps), vol. III, Mantua 1560, 19a | Translation of the Mantua edition, based on The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, trans. Daniel Matt |
| 510 | ויביאה את האדם כתיקוניה לכלה לחופה כיון דחמת לילית דא|ערקת והיא בכרכי היםועד כען הא זמינא לאבאשא בני עלמא ועד זמין הק֗ב֗ה֗ לאחרנא חמי רשיעתא ולמהוי חורבן עלמין ויסלק להאי לילית וישדי ליה כחורבן דא בגין דהוא חורבנה דעלמא דכתי' שם הרגיע לילית ולא נ' ומצאה לה מנוח**ובספרי** דקדמאי אמרי דההיא דערקת מן אדם קוד[ם] לכן ואנן לא תנינן הכי  | ויבאה אל האדם בתקוניה ככלה לחופה. כיון דחמת לילית דא ערקת והיא בכרכי ימא ועד כען היא זמינא לאבאשא בני עלמא וכד זמין קב"ה לאחרבא רומי רשיעתא ולמיהוי חרבן עלמין יסלק להאי לילית וישרי לה בחרבן דא בגין דהיא חרבנא דעלמא דכתי' שם הרגיעה לילית ומצאה לה מנוח. ובספרי דקדמאי אמרי דהיא ערקת מן אדם קודם לכן ואנן לא תנינן הכי  | ויביאה אל האדם בתקונהא ככלה לחופה. כיון דחמת לילית דא ערקת והיא בכרכי ימא ועד כען איהי זמינא לאבאשא בני עלמא. וכד זמין קב"ה לחרבא  עלמין יסלק להאי לילית וישרי לה להאי חורבא בגין דהיא חורבנא דעלמא. הה"ד שם הרגיעה לילית ומצאה לה מנוח.ובספרי קדמאי אמרי דאיהי ערקת מן אדם מקדמת דנא ואנן לא תנינן הכי  | *And he brought her to Adam* (cf Gen. 2:22)—adorned like a bride for the canopy.“As soon as Lilith saw this, she fled, and she is in the cities of the sea, still intent on harming the inhabitants of the world. And when the Blessed Holy One destroys so that it becomes an eternal desolation, He will raise Lilith and settle her in those ruins, since she is the ruin of the world, as it is written: *there Lilith shall repose and find herself a resting place* (Isa. 34:14).“In the book of the ancients, they say that she fled from Adam before this; but we have not learned so.  |

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. However, in addition to deletions due to censorship, which careful comparison attests to in spades, there is another phenomenon present here: the multiplicity of Hebrew forms in the earlier textual witnesses as contrasted with Aramaic forms in later ones. Even in the brief excerpt considered above, it is possible to see how certain expressions occurring in both the earlier and later manuscripts appear in the earlier manuscripts in Hebrew yet in the later manuscripts in Aramaic: e.g., *karkhe ha-yam* (cities of the sea) becomes *karkhe yama’*; *ḥurban* (destruction) becomes *ḩurba’*; *ha-hi’* (she) becomes *ihi*; and *qodem lakhen* (before that) becomes. ומקדמת דנא.

 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, in which the text’s nominal and verbal forms were converted to those of more familiar Aramaic dialects, particularly the Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Babylonian Talmud.[[11]](#footnote-22)11

[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.[[12]](#footnote-24)12 It appears among the homilies on *parashat Vayikra* (which, like the previous example, it bears no specific connection to—) and also appears as a separate text.[[13]](#footnote-26)13

 In contrast to the previous example, none of the manuscript versions in this case read smoothly. If we choose any one of the manuscripts, let alone one of the late printings, we are left with a reading whose meaning is nearly inscrutable, and to the extent that it is, is not shared by any of the others. 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 reader encounters barriers to comprehension early on, however, in the form of bizarre hapax legomena commonly referred to as *ha-millim ha-zarot*, which can only be understood on the strength of context, if at all.[[14]](#footnote-28)14 The following table presents this passage as it is given in the following texts: (1) MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 202, which seems to have been copied in a Sephardic hand circa 1300 (and which unfortunately contains several errors); (2) MS Toronto, Friedberg Collection 5-015, copied in a Byzantine hand circa 1400; (3) MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 186, copied in the 15th c. in Sepharad; and (4) the distorted version found in the Editio princeps from Mantua c.1557–1559 (with notation from the Cremona edition of 1558–1559).

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|  | Ms Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 202: 27v | Ms Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 226: 149r | Ms Toronto, University of Toronto, Friedberg 5-015: 224v | ספר הזהר (editio princeps), vol. III, Mantua 1560, 10b | Translation of the Mantua edition, based on The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, trans. Daniel Matt |
| 5 | ובספרא דשלמה מלכא אמ' מטון די֒ בקטפורא דלתתא דכלילאן בקטפין דגופיה חד דחילו דכלאחד סתים שבילין חד נהיר עמיקין | בספר שלמה. אמ'  גופו אחד אימת הכלאחד סתום שבילים אחד נהר עמוקים | ובספרא דשלמה מלכא אמ' מטון י֝֞ בקטפור֒י דלת֔תא דכלילן בקטפון דגופיהחד דחילו דכלאחד סתים שבילין חד נהר עמיקין | ובספרא דשלמה מלכא אמר מטון די בקטפורא דלתתאדכלילן בקוטפין דגופיהחד דחילו דכלא חד סתים שבילין חד נהר עמיקא. | “And in the Book of King Solomon he says:Arrival of *yod* in concatenation of three, contained in the body’s cluster. One, feared by all; one, of concealed paths; one, river of depths. |
| 1015 | לבתר פריצאן באתוון ביתא באשתכלולי די֒ ה֒א בנינא דכלא  אב לכלא וֹ בן דאוליד ונפק מיניה ומיניה אשתכח [ ]בת מטרוניתא דכל [ ]נין בידהא אשתכחו | לאחר פרש שאותיות בית ביסודו יֹהֹ בנין הכל ושלימות השם הקדוש י֒ ראש הכל אב הכלוֹ בן שהוליד ויצא ממנו וממנו נמצא ד֒זה מטרונה שכל זיונים בידה נמצאו | לבתר פריט באתוון ביתא באשתכלוליה דיו֒ד הא בניינא דכלא ושלימו דשמא קדישאי֝֞ רישא דכולא אב דכולאו֝֞ בן דאוליד ונפק מיניה ומיניה אישתכח ד֞בת מטרוניתא דכל זיינין בידהא אישתכחו | לבתר פרט באתוון דאלפא ביתא בשכלולאיוד דא בניינא דכולא [...]לכל שלימו דשמא קדישא רישא דכלא אב לכלא. ו' בן דאוליד ונפיק מניה ומניה אשתכח ד'בת מטרוניתא דכל דינין בידהא אשתכחו. | “Afterwards, he explains letters in detail: The house by the consummation of *yod*, construction of all; completion of the holy name. Head of all, father of all. *Vav*—son that He engendered, issuing from Him, from whom derives *dalet*—daughter, *matronita,* in whose hands all weapons are found  |

Confronted by the obscurity of the passage above, commentators throughout the ages have proposed a number of creative interpretations, yet none that has been satisfactorily clarifying of its terminology. Indeed, a satisfactory clarification of this passage’s terminology will probably remain a desideratum; for even the early translator of MS Vatican ebr. 226 (from 1311) seems to have been so exasperated by the passage that he preferred to simply omit it entirely.

 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.

 The focus of the next passage is on the three letters *yod*, *vav*, and *dalet*, which together spell out 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 an exposition on the letter *heh* from the tetragrammaton, meaning, both *yod* and *heh* 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 *heh* that corresponds to the supernal mother? Kabalistic midrashim on the four letters of the tetragrammaton, their roles in the generation of existence generally, and in the emanation of the sefirot in particular, are extremely common in the cosmogonical and theological sections of the Zohar. In the case under consideration, it is possible that the transition from an explication of the three letters that spell out the letter *yod* to an explication of the letters *yod* and *heh,* comprising part of the tetragrammaton, might well have been due to a scribal error resulting from misunderstanding. In any event, it ultimately resulted in a significant change in the substance of the explication, as can be seen from the different versions, and as can also be seen in this particular case from the earliest attempts to translate the Hebrew text.

 Whatever the case may be, we find 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.” Divergent readings of the word די at the very beginning of the passage are similarly possible. The *dalet* can be vocalized with a mobile *schwa* and the *yod* taken to signify the letter *yod* itself, or, alternatively, the word can be read as the 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 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 reasoning, 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; such that “reasoning” may ultimately be responsible for the variation in readings and “correction” responsible for the variation in textual witnesses. What is most important for our purposes is that every single one of the witnesses in our possession takes the reader in a completely different direction, and this is something that editors of Zoharic texts must take and make note of in their editions.

[3] Parallel Hebrew and Aramaic Homilies

The previous examples touched on early translations of the Zohar into Hebrew and their heretofore unacknowledged importance for studying the Zohar’s text. The third and last example is dedicated to a different language problem: the so-called Hebrew parallels to the Zohar. These texts are documented indirectly in kabbalistic compositions dating from the end of the 13th century to the first half of the 14th century. In particular, they include: (1) early citations of the Zohar in writings from the ostensible generation of the Zohar;[[15]](#footnote-30)15 (2) pioneering translations of Aramaic midrashim; chiefly the translations of R. David b. Judah the Pious;[[16]](#footnote-31)16 paraphrastic parallels in the writings of well-known authors such as R. Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon[[17]](#footnote-32)17 and R. Isaac b. Solomon ibn Sahula;[[18]](#footnote-33)18 poetic arrangements into Hebrew;[[19]](#footnote-34)19 imitations such as those of Joseph Angelet,[[20]](#footnote-35)20 the author known as Joseph of Shushan ha-Birah,[[21]](#footnote-36)21 or by the creators of the texts printed under the title “Ra‘ayah Mehemna,” or the Tiqqunei ha-Zohar,[[22]](#footnote-37)22 and so on.[[23]](#footnote-38)23

The topic of the following Hebrew and Aramaic homilies is the theosophical elucidation of the *mitzvah* of *yibbum* (levirate marriage); the text specifically concerns 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 *Sod ha-Yibbum* (Secret of the Levirate Marriage) in a Hebrew work by Moses de León. Note that this is but a brief excerpt from a much larger text. De León wrote the latter around 129, and the text presented here comes from a copy made in Mamluk Jerusalem in 1382, when a small conventicle of scholars copied kabbalistic writings owned by one another—including our MS Vatican Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 283, copied in Jerusalem circa 1382/3:[[24]](#footnote-48)24

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| Ms Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 283: 52r | ספר הזהר (editio princeps), vol. I, Mantua 1558, 186b |
| אותו שמת בלא בנים אינו נכנס בתוך פלטרין של מלך ונפסק מאותה התמונה הכולל' כל התמונותונשמתו נשארה שלא נכללה במקום ששאר הנשמות נכללות ונכרת דמותו משם | וההוא דמית בלא בנין כד נפיק מהאי עלמא ההוא בר נש לא עאל בפרגודא ולא נטיל חולק בההוא עלמאונשמתיה לא אתכלילת באתר דכל נשמתין אתכלילו ואתגזר דיוקניה מתמן |

A comparison between these two sources reveals complete, word-for-word parallels in the Aramaic text and the Hebrew composition of de León, leaving no doubt that we are looking at a translation and its source text. A number of passages such as these—which occasionally also borrow the symbolism of their mystical source texts—are scattered throughout Moses de León’s Hebrew writings. Scholars have cited exempla of these from the time of Jellinek up to the present day.[[25]](#footnote-50)25 A careful inspection of the language of these Hebrew passages in comparison with their Aramaic versions should teach us much about the processes by which the Aramaic dicta in the Zohar were developed.[[26]](#footnote-51)26 In the quoted passage above the same idea is repeated in both the Hebrew and Aramaic texts: since the deceased did not father children, his soul is denied entry into the place of all other souls. Evidence that the Hebrew version is a *source* of the Aramaic translation (rather than a translation of it) can be found in the idiomatic language of these Hebrew passages, the majority of which obviously have Hebrew idioms as their source, and only a minority of which have been obscured in translation to Aramaic or neo-Aramaic forms.

The figurative language that expresses the core idea of this text is roughly equivalent in the two languages: **לא עאל** **בפרגודא** is very close to the Rabbinic**נכנס בתוך פלטרין של מלך** inRabbinic Hebrew; **אתגזר דיוקניה מתמן** is the equivalent of**נכרת דמותו משם** (his figure was severed from there in Medieval Hebrew). 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.[[27]](#footnote-54)27 The text in which it is found, and with which we will conclude, was not included in the first printings of the Zohar, though it was published about fifty years later in Salonika in what is conventionally called the *Zohar Ḥadash*.[[28]](#footnote-56)28 On the right, one can see a sentence from this passage as it appears in the aforementioned Byzantine collection in MS Toronto Friedberg Collection 5-015. On the left is the same passage from the editio princeps Salonica 1597, while in the middle is the aforementioned MS Vatican ebr. 283, copied in Jerusalem circa 1382/3, which preserves a Hebrew version:

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| Ms Toronto, University of Toronto, Friedberg 5-015: 244v | Ms Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, ebr. 283: 66r | [זהר חדש] (editio princeps), Salonica 1597, 107b |
| דתניא אמ' ר' יצחק האי מאן דיתפטר מן עלמא הדין יחידי בלא תניין איתמעט וישתצי מדמיונא דכללי כל דמיונין. | דתניא ר' יצחק אמ' הנפטר מן העולם הזה בלא שנינתמעטה דמותו ונכרת מתמונת כל תמונות. | דתניא אמר רבי יצחקהאי מאן דאיתפטר מן עלמא הדיןיחיד בלא תנייןאתמעט וישתיצי מדמיונא דכללי כל דמיונין. |

When previously discussing the Aramaization of Zoharic passages, we presented early examples of attempts at translation and discussed their importance for clarifying issues related to 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 is the translation.[[29]](#footnote-58)29 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. In contrast to the standard presentation of Zoharic texts in the framework of a uniform collection, arranged according to the weekly *parashah* (i.e., ‘the Zohar’)*,* the rare opportunity to study the early copying and editing of single texts from the Zohar *qua* separate texts—i.e., as transmitted independently in various manuscripts—reveals a variety of textual witnesses to the ways texts from the Zohar were disseminated in the early generations after the Zohar’s first appearance: in the original source language, in translation, and in reworking. Each of these singular texts constitutes evidence of the fact that even at the earliest period, Zoharic texts were disseminated predominantly indirectly. Further, they help to expose the various ways in which the texts were ordered and transmitted. They illustrate different stages in a process of editing texts that took hundreds of years.

Any appraisal of the language characterizing different passages in the Zohar must have at its foundation acute attention to and discernment of distinctions and variations that exist in the forms, frameworks, and modes of transmission of the different texts. Such an endeavor must also be undertaken with attention to the variations preserved in these texts as compared with both later manuscript copies and print editions. Similarly, any discussion of the heritage of a text ought to be preceded by an investigation into all of the prior textual witnesses of that text.

 The state and extent of the earliest witnesses might make progress seem impossible, given the traditional tools of philology. As a result, there has been 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 unit, as if there were no way to connect the dots between the various data points.

The other methodological extreme, on its own, is also unlikely to be productive. While the 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.[[30]](#footnote-60)30

In light of the findings presented here, I would like to suggest that an 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 that also respects the integrity of each fragment. To this end, future editors of Zoharic texts might consider digitally-enhanced synopses as the way forward. Digital databases would allow readers to make specific queries and retrieve particular cross-sections of the material, thereby facilitating ease of comparison, especially with regard to potential variations in language between parallel texts. Furthermore, the ability to visually rearrange results would be of great value. Such a synopsis would serve scholars as a dynamic and extremely valuable tool for pursuing historical and/or textual inquiries by creating a basis for comparison between the various discrete witnesses.

1. ## 1 In particular, see Huss’ detailed discussion (Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky: Chapters in the Reception History of the Zohar and the Construction of its Symbolic Value* [Jerusalem: Ben-Tzvi Institute, 2008], 43–83) on the cultural reception of the Zohar over the generations, and his suggestion that the manner in which Zoharic texts were disseminated and collected changed until they were consolidated into the *Book of Zohar* by a circle of Kabbalistic sages in the beginning of the 14th century. See also the research of Daniel Abrams on the textual witnesses of the Zohar, their gradual absorption, and the transmission of various fragments that connect back to an ostensible original source, inter alia, amidst a discussion of the agents who participated in the process of the Zohar’s transmission and dissemination: e.g., D. Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methologies and Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem and Los Angeles, 2013), 371–388; idem., “The Zohar as Palimpsest: Dismantline the Literary Constructs of a Kabbalistic Classic and the Turn of the Hermeneutics of Textual Archaeology,” *Kabbalah* 29 (2013): 7–60. See also: A. Goldreich, *Automatic Writing in Zoharic Literature and Modernism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2010), 23–53; A. Bar-Asher, “Perspectives on and Images of the Garden of Eden in 13th c. Kabbalistic Literature” (PhD diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2014), 8–28, and the scholarship cited there.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
2. 2 See especially the recent work of R. Meroz, *Yovele ha-Zohar: Meḥqar u-mahadurah biqortit mu‘eret shel Zohar, Parshat Shemot* (Tel Aviv: 2018); J. Benarroch, *The Yanuqa of Rav Hamnuna Sava: Analysis and Critical Edition of the Yanuqa Story* (Zohar III, 186a–192a) (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2019); L. Sachs-Shmueli, ed., “The Commandment of Qedushah in the Zoharic Piqqudin: A Modular Digital Edition of the Zoharic Text and its Adaptations in Hasidic Literature,” Mahadurot: Modular Hebrew Digitally Rendered Texts 1 (2021), Yehuda Halper editor-in-chief. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
3. 3 For a description of the consolidation of “Zoharic collections” during this period, see especially the survey of B. Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky,* 104–107; also see Meroz, *Yovele ha-Zohar,* 13–28. The elements discussed below are meant to enrich these discussions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
4. For the first critical use of this manuscript to evaluate the printed edition of the Zohar, see *Gershom Scholem’s* *The Book of the Zohar*: *With Notes in His Handwriting* (Jerusalem, 1873), 2211ff. The passages of the Zohar that are in the manuscript have been transcribed only recently. See: B. Richler, ed., *Hebrew Manuscripts in the Vatican Library* (Vatican, 2008), 208–210; D. Abrams, “The Earliest Manuscript of the Zohar: Ms. Vatican 202 circa 1300: A Quote in Aramaic in the name of Shimon bar Yohai in ‘The Secret of Levirate Marriage’ and the Various Copies of Zohar Text in Manuscript,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Mystical Texts* 34 (2016), 319. Examination of the compositions that were subsequently copied into the manuscript do not give the impression that they were [copied?] with particular care, though it is also possible that the compositions that served as a basis for copying were themselves defective. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
5. 5 This manuscript has been amply described by Benarroch, *Critical Edition,* 354–370. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
6. 6 For background on these manuscripts, see: M. Beit-Arié, “Hebrew Manuscripts Copied in Jerusalem Before the Ottoman Conquest,” in Benjamin Z. Kedar, ed., *Jerusalem in the Middle Ages: Selected Papers* (Jerusalem, Ben Zvi, 1979), 266–7; idem., “MS Paris Hebrew 803,” in Abraham David, ed., *From the Collections of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Jewish National and University Library, 1995), 119; E. Reiner, “Between Ashkenaz and Jerusalem: Ashkenazim in the Land of Israel after the Black Death,” vol. 4 (1984): 56 n.110, 60; A. Bar-Asher, “The Earliest Sefer ha-Zohar in Jerusalem: Early Manuscripts of Zoharic Texts and an Unknown Fragment from Midrash ha-Ne’elam (?),” *Tarbiz* 84 (2016): 575–614. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
7. 7 On these manuscripts, see especially: M.Z. Kedari, *Diqduq ha-lashon ha-aramit shel ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1971); A. Elkayam, “The Holy Zohar of Shabbetai Zvi,” *Kabbalah* 3 (1998): 345–350; G. Séd-Rajna, “Manuscrits du *Tiqquney ha-Zohar,*” *Revue des Etudes Juives* 129 (1970): 161–178. Also see Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 111. See also M. Beit-Arié’s remark in I. Ta-Shma, “R. Joseph Karo Between Ashkenaz and Sefarad: Inquiring into the Dissemination of the Book of the Zohar,” *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 169–170; R. Meroz, “R. Joseph Angeleṭ and his Zoharic Writings,” 21–22 (2007): 313–4; Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky,* 104–107. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
8. 8 For background on research on the Aramaic of the Zohar and discussions surrounding its designation as an ‘artificial’ language, see especially: G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), 163–6; I. Tishby, “Introduction: The Book of the Zohar and Research on the Zohar” in F. Lachover and I. Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 76–80; Kedari, *Diqduq*, 13–16; Y. Liebes, *Chapters in the Dictionary of the Book of the Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1976), 1–14; A. Goldreich, “An Iberian Phrase in an Unknown Fragment by the Author of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar,*” Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 8 (1989): 89–121; A. Tal, ‟In Search of Late Samaritan Aramaic”, *Aramaic Studies* 7 (2009): 187–188;; C. Mopsik, ‟Le judéo-araméen tardif, langue de la Cabale théosophique”, *Les cahiers du judaïsme* 6 (1999–2000): 4–13; Y. Liebes, ‟Hebrew and Aramaic as languages of the Zohar”, *Aramaic Studies* 4 (2006): 35–52; A. Rapoport-Albert and T. Kwasman, ‟Late Aramaic: The Literary and Linguistic Context of the Zohar”, *Aramaic Studies* 4 (2006): 5–19; S. Asulin, “Midrash ha-Ne’elam to Bereshit: Between Hebrew and Aramaic” *Ve-zot l’Yehudah: Articles in Honor of Prof. Yehudah Liebes on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. M. Niehoff, R. Meroz, and Y. Garb (Jerusalem, 2012), 222–253. See especially: : A. Damsma, ‟The Aramaic of the Zohar: The *Status Quaestionis*”, *Jewish Languages in Historical Perspective*, ed. L. Kahn, Leiden and Boston 2018, pp. 9–38; Elitzur A. Bar-Asher Siegal, ‟Are Literary Languages Artificial? The Case of the Aramaic of the Zohar”, *Aramaic Studies* 18 (2020), pp. 124–130; A. Bar-Asher, “The Zohar and Its Aramaic: The Dynamic Development of the Aramaic Dialects of the Zoharic Canon,” *Leshonenu: A Journal For the Study of the Hebrew Language and Cognate Subjects* 83 (2021): 221–287. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
9. 9 For a critical discussion that summarizes this passage, see Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*, 263–298. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
10. For a broader discussion of this passage, see: Bar-Asher…. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
11. 11 On this see Bar-Asher, “The Zohar and Its Aramaic,” esp. 235–280. The process of Aramaization and all the other expressions of textual standardization must factor into any critical edition of Zoharic texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
12. 12 See Liebes’ discussion in *Chapters*, 350, on how a number of languages are reflected in this passage, and in particular his suggestion that from a literary perspective, this passage seems to be based on the Aramaic apocryphal treatise “the Great Wisdom of Solomon,” which is mentioned by Naḥmanides in the latter’s introduction to his commentary on the Torah (see Bar-Asher, *Journeys of the Soul,* 305­–6 and the scholarship mentioned there). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
13. 13 Zohar III, 10b. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
14. 14 On the hapax in the Zohar, see Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 78–79. Also see Huss, “Clarification of the Hapax in the Book of the Zohar: Scientific Edition,” *Kabbalah* 1 (1996): 167–172. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
15. 15 Chief among these is Menaḥem Recanati ("the Recanati”). Scholem estimated that Recanati’s Torah commentary was written sometime circa 1300—see Scholem, *Major Trends,* 243; compare idem., *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik,* Zürich 1960, 63–64. See also A. Altmann, “Concerning the Authorship of the Sixty Reasons for the Commandments Attributed to R. Isaac ibn Parḥi,” *Kiryat Sefer* 40 (1964): 266; Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar,* 36; Ruben, *ha-Mova’ot*, 1–3.; Idel, “R. Menaḥem Recanati, the Kabbalist” (Jerusalem, 1998), 101–110; Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky,* 62, 87­–90; also see S. Immanuel, “*Pisqe R. Menaḥem me-Rekanati,*” *Shenaton ha-Mishpat ha-Ivri* 25 (2008): 166–8 (appendix 1) and the scholarship mentioned there. Also see the special epithets given by Recanati: “the book of the Zohar,” “the midrash on Ruth,” “the great book of the Zohar,” “the wonderous book of the Zohar.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
16. 16 See especially A. Goldreich, *Sefer ha-Gevul* *attributed to David b. Judah the Pious: Adaptation of a Zoharic text in the Generation after the Emergence of the Zohar* (Tel Aviv, 1972); D. C. Matt, *The Book of Mirrors Sefer Mar’ot ha–Zove’ot by R. David ben Yehudah he–Hasid* (Chico, CA 1982), 13–17, 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
17. 17 See the sources cited by A. Bar-Asher, “The Earliest Citation from Sefer ha-Zohar and from whence had the Sefer ha-Zohar Received its Name?,” *Kabbalah* 39 (2017): 80–83 n.4–16. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
18. 18 Idem., 83–84, n. 20–23; also see the turn to the writings of Baḥya b. Asher of Zaragoza, Shamayah b. Isaac ha-Levi, the author of “Şror ha-Ḥayyim,” and Shem Tov b. Abraham ibn Gaon in idem, 85 n.31. See also A. Bar-Asher, “Isaac b. Solomon ibn Sahula’s Commentary on Psalms,” *Koveṣ al-Yad* 26 (2018): 6–8, n. 21–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
19. 19 On this, see A. Bar-Asher, “Remnants of Early Translations and Commentaries to the Zohar from the Land of Israel: The Value of Old Manuscripts for the Texts, Editings, Translations, and Interpretations of the ‘Book of the Zohar’,” *Kabbalah* 44 (2019): 224–228. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
20. 20 For the different epithets/designations found in the writings of Joseph Angelet, i.e., *Sefer Qupat ha-Rokhlin* and *Sefer Libnat ha-Sapir*, see the notes in Huss, *Like the Radiance of the Sky*, 63, 90–95; for a discussion of Angelet’s dependence upon the Zohar, see Meroz, *R. Joseph Angelet,* 303–320. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
21. 21 On this subject see C. Mopsik, ‟Un manuscrit inconnu du Sefer Tashak de R. Joseph de Hamadan suivi d'un fragment inédit,” *Kabbalah* 2 (1997): 178–186; L. Sachs-Shmueli, *“The Book of Reasons for the Negative Commandments” by Joseph Hamadan: Critical Edition and Study of Taboo at the Time of the Composition of the Zohar* (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2019), 28–54. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
22. 22 See especially E. Gottlieb and M. Idel, *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of Tiqqune ha-Zohar and Ra‘aya Mehemna* (Jerusalem, 2003), 38, 88, 179, 189; also see A. Vick, ‟A Textual History of *Tiqqunei ha–Zohar*: The Career of a Kabbalistic Classic from the Earliest Known Manuscripts to the 1740 Printing in Constantinople”, (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
23. 23 It is worth noting that great benefit might be had by studying these sources too, which constitute secondary or indirect witness of Zoharic texts, in tandem with the midrashic units contained in the Zohar to *parashat Vayiqra* (on which our discussion above has focused). As just one example, the writings of Moses de Leon preserve long Hebrew texts that parallel—in both language and substance—passages in the Zohar on *Vayiqra*, e.g., two explications of the ten names of God that are not exhausted by the ten sefirot. These explications seem very close to two explications that are preserved, side-by-side, in the Zohar on *Vayiqra* (10b–11a; 11b), MS. Munich ebr. 47, 381a–385a; also see Mopsik, *Shekel ha-Qodeh*, 98–102, and A. Bar-Asher, ‟From Alphabetical Mysticism to Theosophical Kabbalah: A Rare Witness to an Intermediate Stage of Moses de León’s Thought”, *Revue des Etudes Juives* 179 (2020), 374 n. 84. In this connection, it is worth considering also that among Menaḥem Recanati’s extensive copying from the *derashot* in the Zohar, not a single copy draws from the printed edition of the Zohar to *parashat Vayiqra.* On this subject, see T. Ruben, *ha-Mova’ot*, 25, 36. Long sections from the Zohar, *parashat Vayiqra* cited below were translated into Hebrew. The translation has been identified as the work of R. David ben Yehuda he-Hasid and others. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
24. 24 The relevant passage from MS Vatican ebr. 283 was copied by Moses b. R. Jacob S”Ṭ, who copied the collection for R. Jacob b. Samuel. For the identification of the location in which the manuscript was copied, see Beit-Arié, *Manuscrits,* 259; Richler, *Catalogue,* 210; Benayahu, *Iggeret ha-Sofer*, 198­-9. For a discussion of the copies of the Zohar contained therein, see A. Bar-Asher, “The Earliest Sefer ha-Zohar in Jerusalem,” 575-614. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
25. 25 Many of these are collected in the introductions and footnotes to the critical editions of the manuscripts of De Leon, the majority of which have been published. See especially, I. Tishby, “Moses de Leon’s Responsa on Kabbalistic Matters,” *Koveṣ al Yad* 5 (1951): 11–2; G. Scholem, “Two collections of Moses de Leon: A Fragment from the Book *Shoshan Edut,*” *Koveṣ al Yad* 8 (1976): 327–8; E. R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses De León’s Sefer Ha****–****Rimm*on, Atlanta 1988, pp. 3-9, 43-55 (in the introduction); idem,‟The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets: New Evidence for the Early Activity of the Zoharic Circle”, *Kabbalah* 19 (2009), 157-158 n. 85; Moïse de Léon, *Le Sicle du Sanctuaire: Chéqel Ha–Qodech*: traduction de l’hébreu, introduction et notes par Charles Mopsik, (Paris, 1996), 7–73; *Moses de Leon’s Explication of the Chariot: Edited on the Basis of Manuscripts and with an Introduction* by A. Ferber-Ginat (Los Angeles, 1998), 20–35; R. Meroz, “Kabbalah, Science, and Pseudoscience in R. Moses de Leon’s Commentary on the 13 Attributes,” *Ve-zot l’Yehudah: Collection of Articles Dedicated to Prof. Yehudah Liebes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. M.R. Niehoff, R. Meroz, and Y. Garb (Jerusalem, 2012), 123–4, 133–4; A. Bar-Asher, *R. Moses de Leon’s Mishkan ha-Edut* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2013), 26–51; Y. Dan, *Toledot Torat ha-Sod ha-‘Ivrit* (Jerusalem, 2014), 261–289. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
26. 26 It is especially worth emphasizing this suggestion in contradistinction to other editions, which have preferred to view this passage as exceptional. See Y. Liebes, “Hebrew and Aramaic as Languages of the Zohar,” *Ha-‘Ivrit* 58 (2009–10), 4 n. 21; also see S. Pachter, “A Sin that Cannot Be Repented: On Moses de Leon’s Famous Dispute with the Zohar,” *Ve-zot l’Yehudah: Collection of Articles Dedicated to Prof. Yehudah Liebes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. M.R. Niehoff, R. Meroz, and Y. Garb (Jerusalem, 2012), 160–2. Compare also Meroz, *Kabbalah*, 133–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
27. 27 For these expressions and ther significance, see G. Scholem, “A New Witness to the Early Origins of the Kabbalah,” *Sefer Bialik* ed. Y. Fishman (Tel Aviv, 1934), 156; Y. Liebes, *Chapters,* 50–51; M. Halamish, *Joseph b. Shalom Ashkenazi’s Commentary on Parashat Bereshit* (Jerusalem, 1985), 147–8 n. 201; M. Idel, “The Soul of God: On the Divinity of the Soul according to Nahmanides and his School,” *Life as Midrash: Studies in Jewish Psychology in Honor of Prof. Mordechai Rothberg*, ed. S. Arzi, et al. (Tel Aviv, 2004) 362 n. 162; *Sefer Me’irat ‘Einayim of R. Isaac* דמן עכו, ed. A. Goldreich, (Jerusalem, 1984) 159, 376–7 n.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
28. 28 In Italy, this material was copied extensively. See A. Bar-Asher, *The Earliest Sefer ha-Zohar*, 579; R. Ḥaim Ovadiah, in his *Be’er Mayim Ḥayim* (Salonika, 1546), 140­–4. The printer erroneously identified this material with the writings of R. Joseph Gikatilla. Later it was reprinted in: Moses b. Shem Tov de Leon, *Ve-zot ha-Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Ḥokhmah* (Basil, 1608), גיליון יה, 3a–4b (section 52). [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
29. 29 As for the claim that De Leon’s own works were translations *from* the Zohar and that he occasionally failed to properly understand its subjects as presented in the Aramaic “source,” see D. Luria, *The Antiquity of the Zohar* (Warsaw, 1887), 2b–4b; and compare M. Kasher, “The Zohar,” *Sinai*: *Sefer Yuval—Koveṣ Torani Mada‘i*, ed. Y.L. HaKohen Maimon (Jerusalem, 1958), 45–48. This opinion has been advanced also more recently by Y. Liebes, “How was the Zohar composed,” Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought 8 (1989), 3; idem. “Zohar and Eros” *Alpayim* 9 (1994), 100 n. 214. For a discussion of alternative possibilities, see A. Bar-Asher, “The Zohar and its Aramaic,”?? and scholarship cited there. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
30. 30 A fundamental critique of this approach, especially when considering the compilation of texts in Zoharic literature, is offered by Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)