

The Aramaic Text of the *Zohar*

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The Zohar: Pritzker Edition reflects a reconstructed Aramaic text, based on original manuscripts. Why was the creation of such a text necessary? All previous translations of the *Zohar* are based on the standard printed editions, which nearly all derive from the Mantua edition (1558–60), supplemented by variant readings from the Cremona edition (1559–60). At first I intended to follow the same procedure, but upon examining many of the original manuscripts of the *Zohar* dating from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, I discovered a significant number of superior readings that had been rejected or revised by editors of the first printed editions.

Upon further examination, I noticed something more intriguing—a phenomenon familiar to scholars of medieval texts. Within the manuscripts themselves were signs of an editorial process: revision, reformulation, and emendation.¹ After careful analysis, I concluded that certain manuscripts of older lineage reflect an earlier recension of the *Zohar*, which was then reworked in manuscripts of later lineage.²

¹ See Ernst Goldschmidt, *Medieval Texts and Their First Appearance in Print*; Malachi Beit-Arié, “Transmission of Texts by Scribes and Copyists: Unconscious and Critical Interferences”; Israel Ta-Shma, “The ‘Open’ Book in Medieval Hebrew Literature: The Problem of Authorized Editions”; Daniel Abrams, introduction to *Sefer ha-Bahir*, edited by idem, 8–14; idem, “Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature.” (Complete bibliographical information on all sources cited in these notes is available in the bibliography of the first volume of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*.)

² Among the manuscripts reflecting an earlier recension are the following: Cambridge, University Library, MS Add. 1023; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 217; New

I realized that I could no longer rely on the printed versions of the *Zohar*, since these obscured earlier versions. So I took it upon myself to reconstruct a new-ancient version of the Aramaic text based on the manuscripts, one which could serve as the foundation for my translation.

If I could have located a complete, reliable manuscript of the *Zohar*, this would have provided a starting point. Unfortunately no such manuscript exists anywhere in the world; in all likelihood it never did, since from the start the *Zohar* was circulated in sections or booklets. Probably no single complete *Book of the Zohar* existed until it was printed nearly three hundred years later in the sixteenth century, collated from various manuscripts.³

This situation left me with two choices. I could select the best manuscript for each individual Torah portion of the *Zohar* and produce a

York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 1761; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 1564; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 779; Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 2971; Toronto, University of Toronto, MS Friedberg 5-015; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 206, 208. Manuscripts resembling (and perhaps underlying) the Mantua edition include: London, British Museum, MS 762; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 781; Parma, Perreau 15/A.

A list of eighty-four *Zohar* manuscripts (assembled by a team working under Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer) was published by Zvia Rubin in “Mif’al ha-Zohar: Mattarot ve-Hessegim,” 172–73. Ronit Meroz of Tel Aviv University is conducting a systematic analysis of over six hundred extant manuscripts and fragments of the *Zohar*. In her extensive research she has identified numerous examples of editing and revision. While the discovery noted here of earlier and later recensions of the *Zohar* is my own, I have benefited from discussions with her and wish to thank her for sharing her insights with me. See her article “Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations” and her other studies listed in the bibliography of the first volume of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*.

For further information on the manuscripts of the *Zohar*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:99–101; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 236–37; and the comments of Malachi Beit-Arié, cited by Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar*, 103–4.

³ See Abrams, “Eimatai Hubberah ha-Haqdamah le-Sefer ha-Zohar?”; idem, “Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature,” 61.

“diplomatic” text, an exact reproduction of the original. Or, I could fashion a critical text, selecting from a wide range of variants in different manuscripts.

After consulting with members of the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, I chose to compose a critical text, based on a selection and evaluation of the manuscript readings. The primary reason was simply that even for individual sections of the *Zohar* there is no one “best” manuscript: each has its own deficiencies and scribal errors. Back in the sixteenth century, the editors in Mantua and Cremona also fashioned critical texts, the former drawing on ten manuscripts, the latter on six.⁴

For the first two volumes of the translation, I identified approximately twenty reliable manuscripts, based on the criteria of provenance, age, lack of scribal errors, and legibility. The originals are preserved in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris, Munich, Rome, the Vatican, Parma, Toronto, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, while microfilm copies are available in the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, in the Jewish National and University Library on the campus of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.⁵

It is appropriate to describe the methodology used in this scholarly undertaking. My research assistant meticulously combs through about half of

⁴ See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:98. For an enlightening comparison of diplomatic and critical editing, see Chaim Milikowsky, “Further on Editing Rabbinic Texts.”

⁵ See the list of *Zohar* manuscripts appended below. Bound copies of nearly all of these manuscripts are housed in the Gershom Scholem Collection, Jewish National and University Library.

these manuscripts and prepares a list of variant readings.⁶ For particularly difficult words or phrases, we check additional manuscripts. In addition to the manuscripts, my assistant lists variants from the Mantua and Cremona editions of the *Zohar*, as well as the edition used by Moses Cordovero in his sixteenth-century commentary, *Or Yaqar*.⁷

My procedure for establishing the Aramaic text is as follows. I begin with Reuven Margalioṯ's edition of *Sefer ha-Zohar*,⁸ based on the Vilna edition, which in turn is based on the Mantua edition. This represents a relatively reliable starting point. In front of me I have the list of variants prepared by my research assistant, photocopies of the original manuscripts, and other witnesses referred to previously.⁹ I peruse the variants line by line. Some of these are simply scribal errors or glosses, but some represent what appear to be better readings. When I identify an apparently better reading, I check if it is shared and confirmed by several reliable manuscripts and witnesses. If it is, I consider substituting it for the printed text. In other cases, the list of variants enables me to select between alternative readings included in the printed text.

⁶ I am deeply grateful to Barry Mark and, following him, Merav Carmeli, for sedulously recording these variants. Without their devoted efforts, it would have been impossible to prepare this Aramaic text.

⁷ I also check readings in other sources including: Menaḥem Recanati, *Peirush al ha-Torah*; Joseph Angelino, *Livnat ha-Sappir*; Abraham Galante, in *Or ha-Hammah*; Shim'on Lavi, *Ketem Paz*; Abraham Azulai, *Or ha-Levanah*; *Derekh Emet* (a list of emendations to the Mantua edition); Shalom Buzaglo, *Miqdash Melekh*; Yehudah Ashlag, *Peirush ha-Sullam*; and Gershom Scholem's *Annotated Zohar*.

⁸ *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margalioṯ.

⁹ See above, note 7.

Over the centuries, *Sefer ha-Zohar* has been revised by countless scribes and editors who tried to smooth away the rough edges of the text by adding an explanatory phrase, correcting an apparent syntactical mistake, or taming a wild neologism by substituting a more familiar, bland term. Often, relying on the variants, I decide to remove these accumulated layers of revision, thereby restoring a more original text. I seek to recover the *Zohar's* primal texture and cryptic flavor.

If the early manuscripts preserve unusual, striking wording that is revised or “corrected” by several later manuscripts and the printed editions, I tend to go with the older reading. Often, according to the more reliable manuscripts, a Zoharic rabbi creatively paraphrases a Talmudic saying. Some of the later manuscripts and the printed editions may then restore this saying to its exact Talmudic form. In such cases I emend the printed text in favor of the *Zohar's* original formulation—original in both senses: older and creative. In the commentary accompanying my translation, I cite the Talmudic saying on which the paraphrase is based, so that readers can see the transition and trace the imaginative process.

I do not claim to be fully restoring “*the* original text of the *Zohar*.” There may never have been any such thing, since the text probably emerged over decades, written and distributed piecemeal. However, through painstaking analysis of the variants, I am able to scrape away some seven hundred years of accretion and corruption, and at least approach that elusive, hypothetical original.

This Aramaic text of the *Zohar*, the basis of my translation, is available here on the website of Stanford University Press. Let me emphasize that although it is a critical text (that is, one based on numerous manuscripts and witnesses), it is not a full critical edition, since an apparatus of the variants is not yet included. This apparatus is still in unedited form but will eventually be made available.

Above, I outlined my method of establishing the Aramaic text. Now, I will describe how the files on this website have been composed.

I first create a word-processing file by downloading (with permission) the standard Aramaic text of the *Zohar* page by page from the compact disc created and distributed by Bar-Ilan University: The Global Jewish Database (The Responsa Project). This CD contains the 1923 Vilna edition of the *Zohar*, published by Romm Press (virtually identical with Margalioth's later edition of the *Zohar*). I then peruse and edit this file, correcting any typographical errors (originating either in the Vilna edition or on the CD), selecting (on the basis of manuscripts) between alternative readings included in the printed text, and in other cases, substituting variant readings that I have adopted from the manuscripts. I also punctuate and paragraph the text, and restore common abbreviations found in the manuscripts and printed editions but spelled out on the Bar-Ilan CD (e.g., אע"ג, הה"ד, כד"א, קב"ה). The file is then transmitted to Stanford University Press, where it is converted into Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) and posted on this website.

Each Aramaic *Zohar* file contains the text corresponding to one volume of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*. The first file consists of *Zohar* 1:1a-76b, according to the standard Aramaic pagination; the second file consists of *Zohar* 1:76b-165b.

I present here three versions of each file:

The first version presents the text in simple format.

In the second version my emendations of the standard Aramaic text are underlined so that readers can identify them easily.

The third version, prepared by my brother, Rabbi Jonathan Matt, resembles the second version (with emendations underlined) but includes several user-friendly features:

- 1) Corresponding page numbers in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* are indicated in brackets.
- 2) Biblical verses appear in italics.
- 3) Citations of these verses include verse number in addition to chapter number.

There is no single right way to read the *Zohar*, and there is no single canonical version of its Aramaic text. I hope that this new-ancient version restores some of the flavor and qualities of the original that have been gradually lost over seven hundred years.

Zohar Manuscripts Consulted in Preparing the Aramaic Text

(*Zohar* 1:1a-165b)

Cambridge, University Library. Heb. Add. 1023; Dd. 4.2, 1; Dd. 10.14, 4.

London, British Museum. 762; Gaster 747, 773.

Moscow, Guenzburg Collection, Russian State Library. 83, 487.

Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek. Cod. Hebr. 217.

New York, Jewish Theological Seminary. 1761.

Oxford, Bodleian Library. 1564, 2433.

Paris, Bibliothèque nationale. Hébr. 778, 779, 781.

Parma, Biblioteca Palatina. Perreau 15/A.

Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense. 2971.

Toronto, Friedberg Collection, University of Toronto Library. 5-015.

Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica. Ebr. 206, 207, 208; Neofiti 23.