

Translations of the Zohar: Historical Contexts and Ideological Frameworks*

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Abstract

The Zohar, a compilation of Kabbalistic texts which were written in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, was bestowed an authoritative and sacred status in many Jewish communities. Together with its central role in Jewish culture, the Zohar stimulated considerable interest in Christian Kabbalistic and Western esoteric circles. In recent years, a newly awakened interest in the Kabbalah and the Zohar has been evident in many circles both in Israel and all over the world. The interest in the Zohar stimulated its translation into different languages, each created according to different motivations and within diverse theological and ideological frameworks. This article offers a review of the history of translations of the Zohar and discusses the historical contexts and ideological frameworks in which these were created.

Keywords

Zohar, Kabbalah, Christian Kabbalah, Western Esotericism

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Introduction

The Zohar, a compilation of Kabbalistic texts, most of them probably composed in Castile in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, became the central book of Kabbalah and has been accepted in many Jewish circles since the early modern period as an authoritative and sacred text. It was also highly esteemed by Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, as well as by modern Western esotericists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Today, there is ongoing interest in the Zohar in many Jewish circles, as well as amongst non-Jewish spiritual seekers and scholars of Jewish and religious studies.

Most of the Zoharic texts are written in Aramaic. Since the appearance of the Zohar, parts of the text and sometimes the whole Zoharic corpus (which was printed for the first time in the sixteenth century) were translated to different languages. The different translations of the Zohar were all done for the purpose of enabling readers who could not understand Aramaic to approach the Zohar. Yet, these translations differ from one another in the reader-audience they address, in the choice of Zoharic material translated, and in the ideological, political and economic factors that stimulated and enabled the various translation projects.

Partial reviews of Zohar translations were made by Isaiah Tishby in his introduction to *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, and by Gershom Scholem in his encyclopedic article on the Zohar.¹ A detailed review of translations of the Zohar in English was made by Don Karr in 1985 (and updated several times since).² My study is based on these partial reviews, as well as further research in libraries (especially the Gershom Scholem Library at the National Library of Israel), catalogues and archives. The number of Zohar translations, especially anthologies of the Zohar, is very large. Many of the earlier translations were never printed, some of the translations were made in languages which are not accessible to me, and new translations may have appeared after I finished my research. Hence, although I have tried to make my study as comprehensive as possible, it is probably not exhaustive. The purpose of the study is not to provide a full list of Zohar translations; rather, it seeks to outline their history and to examine the different historical, social and ideological contexts in which they were created.

¹ Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101–2; Gershom Scholem, *Kabbala* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 239–42.

² Don Kar, “Notes on The Zohar in English,” <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/kab/karr/zic.pdf> (accessed 15.11.2016).

In the following, I will offer a chronological survey of Zohar translations, beginning with the early translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, which were made in the fourteenth century. I will discuss the Latin translations of the Zohar made by Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance, the translation of anthologies of the Zohar into Jewish vernacular languages in the Baroque period, and the Sabbatean inspired translations of the Zohar in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. I will further examine the first translations of the Zohar into modern European languages, which were made by Christian authors, as well as later translations into European languages by Western occultists as well as Jewish scholars. I will conclude the article with a discussion of twentieth and twenty-first century scholarly translations of the Zohar, and of the recent translation projects conducted in Jewish orthodox and neo-Kabbalistic circles. Before beginning the discussion of the Zohar translations and their historical contexts, I would like to offer a short introduction on the Zohar and its reception history.

The Zohar and Its Reception

As mentioned above, the Zohar is a compilation of texts which were written by several Jewish Kabbalists in Castile in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The major part of the Zoharic canon constitutes Kabbalistic interpretations of the Torah in Aramaic, which are attributed to the second century sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his companions. Other units making up the Zoharic corpus are *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar*, *Ra'aya Mehemna*, *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, *Sifra de-Zeni'uta*, and commentaries on Ruth, Lamentations, Song of Songs, and others.³ A significant part of the Zoharic texts was probably composed by the Castilian Kabbalist, R. Moshe de Leon. Yet, scholars agree that some Zoharic components, such as *Tiqqunei Zohar*, *Ra'aya Mehemna* and probably also other units, were written by different authors.⁴

The Zoharic texts were not at first perceived, or circulated, as one literary whole, nor were they initially called “Zohar” or attributed to R. Shimon Bar Yochai. Only in the first decades of the fourteenth century did the new notion of a literary composition called the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendour) emerge among several Kabbalists. Following the emergence of this new idea, Kabbalists and scribes started collecting Zoharic manuscripts and creating compilations of what each of them perceived to be The Zohar, or part of it.

³ Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 159–62.

⁴ Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 85–90.

Prior to the printing of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century, the content and scope of *Sefer ha-Zohar* was undetermined, and diverse cultural agents created different Zoharic corpora. In the vast collection of Zoharic manuscripts copied between the fourteenth and mid-sixteenth centuries, only a few are identical or can be regarded as belonging to the same family.

The first printings of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century created the Zoharic canon as we know it today. The corpus was printed for the first time, almost simultaneously, between the years 1557–1560 in two editions: one in Mantua by a group of Jewish printers, and the other in Cremona by Christians and converted Jews. The Mantua publishers set out by printing a volume of *Tiqqunei Zohar*, later adding three volumes of the Zohar divided according to the portions (*parshiot*) of the Torah. Apart from Zohar commentaries to the Torah, other Zoharic texts were included, such as *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, *Ra'aya-Mehemna*, and *Sifra de-Zeni'uta*. At the same time, the printers in Cremona fashioned their edition in one volume, also arranged according to the Torah portions and including almost all of the texts found in the Mantua edition as well as additional texts, such as a Zoharic interpretation of the Book of Ruth, and *Sefer ha-Bahir*. The printers of both editions created their collections on the basis of several manuscripts. Some Zoharic texts that circulated in manuscript form were not incorporated into the first printed editions. A number of these texts were collected in a special volume, later known as *Zohar Hadash*, printed in 1597 in Salonica.

The Zohar was bestowed an authoritative and sacred status in many Jewish communities; first among the Kabbalist circles in Spain and later on, following the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and the printing of the Zohar, among many other Jewish communities. It was perceived as the main authoritative source on matters of the Kabbala, and was also influential on issues concerning Jewish customs and laws (*Halacha*). Together with its central role in Jewish culture, the Zohar stimulated considerable interest in non-Jewish circles: among Christian Kabbalists in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and occult circles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In recent years, a newly awakened interest in the Kabbala and the Zohar has been evident in many circles both in Israel and all over the world.

The interest in the Zohar stimulated its translation into different languages. Throughout the years, from the time the Zohar appeared in the late thirteenth century and up to the present, it has been translated into numerous languages. I would like to turn now to examine the first translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, which were made in the first three centuries following its appearance.

The First Hebrew Translations of Zoharic Literature

It is possible that some translations of passages from Zohar into Hebrew were done before the writing of the Zoharic texts was completed and before the idea of a literary unit called *Sefer ha-Zohar* was formulated. In the writings of Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla and those of Rabbi Moses de Leon, written at the end of the thirteenth century, one finds several passages written in Hebrew which are parallel to texts that appear in the Zoharic corpuses in Aramaic.⁵ Yet, it is difficult to determine whether these passages were translated by these Kabbalists from a Zoharic Aramaic text to Hebrew, or whether the authors of the Zoharic texts translated them to Aramaic from the writings of De Leon and Gikatilla. The first comprehensive translations of Zoharic texts were probably completed in the early fourteenth century by the Kabbalist Rabbi David Ben Yehuda He-Hassid.⁶ Nonetheless, it should be noted that Yehuda He-Hassid does not mention that these texts were translated from the Zohar, which is never mentioned explicitly in his writings.

Zoharic texts translated into Hebrew as *Midrash Yehi Or* (Homily on “Let there be light”) appear in *Menorat Ha-maor*, a book by Rabbi Israel ibn Joseph Al-Nakawa, written in Toledo in the second half of the fourteenth century.⁷ In 1491, Rabbi Isaac Mor Hayyim, a Spanish Kabbalist living in Italy, translated and interpreted the beginning of the *Idra Zuta* (The Small Assembly) in a letter he sent to Rabbi Isaac of Pisa.⁸ Numerous Hebrew paraphrases of Zoharic passages appear in the early sixteenth century in the book *Tzror Hamor* by Rabbi Avraham Saba.⁹ More comprehensive translations of the Zohar into Hebrew were produced in the late sixteenth century, including one in Egypt by Rabbi Yehuda Masud,¹⁰ as well as two other anonymous translations in Egypt, one of them written in 1576.¹¹

⁵ Asi Farber-Ginat, *Joseph Gikatilla's Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998), 29 (Hebrew); Elliot Wolfson *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses De Leon's Sefer Harimon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 47–48.

⁶ Moshe Idel, “The Translation of R. David ben Judah Hehasid of the Zohar and His Interpretation of the Alfa Beita,” *Alfi sefer* 8 (1980): 60–73; (1981): 84–98 (Hebrew); Daniel C. Matt, *The Book of Mirrors* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1986), 13–15.

⁷ Hyman Enelow, *Sefer menorat hama'or* by Israel ibn Joseph Al-Nakawa (New York: Bloch, 1929–1931).

⁸ Albert William Greenup, “A Kabbalistic Epistle by Isaac b. Samuel b. Hayyim Sephardi,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 21 (1931): 370–74.

⁹ Abraham Gross, *Iberian Jewry from Twilight to Dawn: The World of Rabbi Abraham Saba* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 68.

¹⁰ Parts of this translation are found in the following manuscripts: New York JTS MS 1769, New York JTS MS 2009, Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan University MS 1065, St. Petersburg MS Evr. Antonin A 9, St. Petersburg MS. Evr. II A 801, Jerusalem Rabbi Kook Institute MS 745.

¹¹ Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel MS Heb. 8^o147. The other translation, which was

The first translations of Zoharic texts into Hebrew, mainly in the late fifteenth and throughout the sixteenth century, were done in order to spread the Zohar beyond the elite rabbinical circles that were fluent in Aramaic, aimed at larger educated Jewish circles that could read Hebrew but found it difficult to read Aramaic. Thus, Rabbi Isaac Mor Hayyim explained in his letter to Rabbi Isaac of Pisa that he translated an article of the Zohar into Hebrew because Italian Jews were not proficient in Aramaic.¹²

The first Zohar translations into Hebrew were circulated only in manuscripts. The printing of the Zohar in the mid-sixteenth century aroused severe objections among Kabbalists who claimed that the Zohar was an esoteric text that should not be distributed publicly. It may well be that this objection was the reason that the first translations into Hebrew were not printed. As we will see later on, translations of the Zohar in Hebrew appeared in print for the first time only in the seventeenth century, in anthologies that contained only stories and moral advice from the Zohar.

The First Translations of the Zohar into Latin

The first translations of the Zoharic literature were made into Hebrew by Jewish scholars for a Jewish readership. From the beginning of the sixteenth century the Zohar was also translated into Latin by Christian authors, for the benefit of Christian readers. Within the framework of the Renaissance notion of ancient wisdom - *prisca theologia* or *philosophia perennis*.¹³ Christian scholars showed great interest in the Kabbalah and The Book of Zohar perceived to contain ancient divine wisdom. At the outset of the sixteenth century, Latin translations of passages from the Zohar (mostly based on quotes from the Zohar in Rabbi Menachem Recanati's commentary of the Torah) were included in the writings of Paul Riccius, Pietro di Galatino and Agostino Giustiniani.¹⁴ Around the same

copied in the year 1603 is found at Oxford, Bodleian Library MS 1561. Parts of this translation were printed in 1946. See Obadya Hedaya *The Complete Book of the Zohar on the Torah* (Petach Tikva: Yalkut, 1946).

¹² Albert William Greenup, "A Kabbalistic Epistle by Isaac b. Samuel b. Hayyim Sephardi," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 21 (1931): 370.

¹³ On the notions of *prisca theologia* and *philosophia perennis* see Wouter Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy. Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6–8.

¹⁴ See François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 25–34; Gershom Scholem, "Considérations sur l'histoire des débuts de la kabbala chrétienne," in *Kabbalistes Chrétiens*, eds. Gershom Scholem et al. (Paris: Albin Michel, 1979), 31; Khen-Melekh Merhavyah, "Two Quotes from *Midrash hane'elam* in a Latin Manuscript,"

time, sections of the Zohar were translated into Latin for the Cardinal Egidio de Viterbo, probably by Baruch of Benevento.¹⁵ In 1553, the French Christian Kabbalist, Guillaume Postel, finished a comprehensive translation of the Zohar to Genesis, with a commentary. According to Postel, the one who helped him understand the Zohar was an illiterate Venetian nun, Mother Johanna. Postel could not find a publisher for his translation, probably because of the radical messianic commentary it contained. Because he did not receive back the manuscript of his translation, which he sent to the printer Oporinus in Basel, Postel prepared a second translation, which was based on the Cremona edition of the Zohar. This translation, which was more comprehensive than the first, was lost.¹⁶ In the introduction to his second translation of the Zohar, Postel wrote that the Zohar contains the oral version of the Torah delivered to Moses on Mount Sinai and put into writing by Simeon the righteous, mentioned in the New Testament, who belonged to a secret Jewish group that believed in Jesus.¹⁷ He believed that the truths of the New Testament and the Zohar were identical and that they contained the doctrine of the true religion that was abandoned by the Jews, who rejected Jesus, and forgotten by the Christians.¹⁸ Postel, who regarded himself as the “Pope of the natural Zoharic theology,” viewed the translation of the Zohar as a messianic mission symbolizing the beginning of the fourth and final historical era that follows the third era considered to have begun with Christ’s birth.¹⁹

Translations of the Zohar into Latin in the sixteenth century were done with the perception that that the Kabbalah in general and the Book of Zohar in

(Hebrew), *Kiryat sefer* 23 (1968): 566–67. A few short texts from the Zohar were translated into Latin earlier, most likely in the fourteenth century. See *ibid.*, 568.

¹⁵ François Secret, *Le Zohar chez les Les Kabbalistes chrétiens de la Renaissance* (Paris: Mouton, 1964), 23, 34–42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23, 51–63; Marion L. Kuntz, *Guillaume Postel, Prophet of the Restitution of all Things: His Life and Thought* (Hague: Nijhof, 1981), 110, 112–13, 137; Judith Weiss, “Guillaume Postel’s Introduction to His First Latin Translation and Commentary on the Book of Zohar” (Hebrew), in *And This Is for Yebuda: Studies Presented to Our Friend, Professor Yebuda Liebes*, eds. Maren R. Niehoff, Ronit Meroz, and Jonathan Garb (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 2012), 258–59; Ronit Meroz and Judith Weiss, “The Source of Guillaume Postel’s 1553 Zohar Latin Translation,” *Renaissance Studies* 28, no. 4 (2014): 1–14; Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann *Geschichte der Christlichen Kabbala*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2012), 582–96.

¹⁷ Bernard McGinn, “Cabbalists and Christians: Reflections on Cabala in Medieval and Renaissance Thought,” in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, eds. R.H. Popkin and G.M. Weinder (Dordrecht: Springer, 1994), 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

particular contain ancient divine knowledge, as well as hermeneutic techniques that reveal and prove the truths of Christian doctrines. Consequently, Christian Kabbalists were greatly interested in broadening the acquaintance with the Zohar among the Christians through its translation into Latin, and among the Jews through its distribution in the original languages. Therefore, in addition to the Latin translations of the Zohar, Christian Kabbalists took part in copying Zohar manuscripts and were involved in printings of the Zohar in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century.

The Latin translations and the Christians' involvement in printing the Zohar had an influence on the internal Jewish controversy regarding its publication. Rabbi Jacob Israel Finzi, one of those most vehemently opposed to the printing of the Zohar, claimed that its publication would play into the hands of Christians interested in its translation: "Thus, God forbid, it would get into the hands of the nations and they would copy it into their language and do with it as they please."²⁰ Rabbi Emmanuel of Benevento, one of the printers of the Mantua edition of the Zohar, dismissed Finzi's objection, arguing that the Christians already had access to Kabbalistic writings: "Both in manuscripts and in print in their tongue."²¹

Anthologies of Zohar Translations in Hebrew and Yiddish

As mentioned above, the translations of the Zohar into Hebrew did not appear in print in the sixteenth century, most likely because of the objection to distributing the Zohar to the public that followed the controversy of its first printings. Translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, as well as into Yiddish, were first printed in the seventeenth century. These were mostly anthologies of Zohar passages that were perceived as exoteric and not comprehensive translations. A short anthology of Zohar translations in Hebrew, *Mekor Hokhmah*, by Rabbi Issachar Baer of Kremnitz, was published in Prague in 1611. An adaptation in Yiddish of a passage from the Zohar describing the righteous women's palace in the Garden of Eden was published as an appendix to *Sefer Olam Haba* in Hanau in 1620. In 1660 Constantinople, a comprehensive anthology of Zohar articles translated into Hebrew was printed in the book *Me'ulefet Sapirim* by Rabbi Shlomo Algazi. Stories from the Zohar (as well as from other Kabbalistic sources) translated into Yiddish were published in *Ma'seh Adonai* by Rabbi Simeon Akiva Baer ben

²⁰ Simcha Assaf, "The Controversy over the Printing of Kabbalistic Literature" (Hebrew), *Sinai* 5 (1939): 8.

²¹ *Ma'arechet Ha'Elobut* (Mantua, 1558), 4a.

Joseph, which was first published in the beginning of the seventeenth century in Frankfurt-am-Main. The same author also included tales from the Zohar in Yiddish in *Abir Ya'akov*, first published in Sulzbach in 1700.

As stated, translations of the Zohar were meant to expand the circle of its availability to an audience that was unable to read it in its original form. Yet, because the Zohar was perceived as an esoteric text that roused animated controversy even when printed in Aramaic, the Jewish scholars who translated it into Hebrew and Yiddish had to justify their actions. The authors of the first printed anthologies of Hebrew translations of the Zohar justified their translations by distinguishing between the esoteric and exoteric sections of the Zohar and by claiming that the anthologies contained “*pesbat*” (the simple, literal meaning of texts) articles which are allowed to be distributed to the public. Rabbi Issachar Baer of Kremnitz describes his book, *Mekor Hokhmah*, as “*peshtei Zohar*” intended for the “masses of the world”, Rabbi Shlomo Algazi also stressed that his anthology contained a collection of Zohar articles “according to the way of *pesbat*.” The distinction between *pesbat* articles of the Zohar and its secretive parts (*sodot*) enabled the distribution of Zohar passages to the larger public through their translation into Hebrew and Yiddish, while preserving the image of the Zohar as an esoteric text.

Printing of Latin Translations of the Zohar

We have seen above that the Zohar was already translated into Latin in the sixteenth century. However, large parts of Zoharic literature appeared in Latin in print only in the late seventeenth century, in the second volume of the highly influential book by the Christian Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1684). Differing from the Jewish scholars who translated and published only passages perceived as exoteric in the seventeenth century, Knorr von Rosenroth translated the sections perceived to be the most esoteric: *Sifra diTzenni`uta*, *Idra Raba* and *Idra Zuta*. Up until the twentieth century, von Rosenroth’s book was the most important source for spreading the Kabbalah in general and the Book of Zohar in particular in European culture. As we will see further on, some of the translations of the Zohar into European languages that were published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were based on the Latin translations of Knorr von Rosenroth.

Similar to Christian Kabbalists of the sixteenth century, von Rosenroth found in the *Zohar* the pure and ancient source of ancient wisdom that had been passed on from generation to generation:

In the Cabbalist writings of the Jews I hoped I would be able to discover what remained of the ancient Barbaric-Jewish philosophy... I had no greater wish than that I might be permitted to enjoy the sun itself and its bright light once all the clouds of obstructions and hindrances were scattered. I scarcely hoped I would be able to catch sight of this light unless I followed in the footsteps of that river and arrived at the spring itself. I believed that I would discover this spring in these very ancient books.²²

Following the Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance period, Knorr von Rosenroth and the Christian Kabbalists who worked with him in the court of Count Christian August in Sulzbach viewed the Kabbalah and the *Zohar* as an effective means of converting Jews. In the first volume of *Kabbalah Denudata*, von Rosenroth asserted that from experience he had learned that deepening Christians' knowledge of the Kabbalah enabled a better dialogue with the Jews. He believed that presenting the truths of Christianity in terminology accepted by the Jews could persuade them to convert to Christianity. Translations of the *Zohar* and other Kabbalistic writings in *Kabbalah Denudata* were intended to deepen Christian knowledge of the Kabbalah; he hoped that this would help convince the Jews to read the Christian scriptures: "by which means at length the Jews would be able to read our writings and gradually be drawn back into the way of truth."²³

From this perspective, translation of the *Zohar* into Latin was only part of a broader mission of the Kabbalistic-Christian collaboration of von Rosenroth and members of his circle. In 1684, the same year von Rosenroth's translations of the *Zohar* into Latin were published, the Christian Kabbalists in Sulzbach initiated and financed the printing of the *Zohar* (in its original language) in Uri Ben Shraga Bloch's publishing house. This edition was no doubt intended to broaden the Jews' acquaintance with the *Zohar*, which, as said, was perceived by Christian Kabbalists to be consistent with Christian doctrines. That same year, the Christian-Kabbalistic collaboration in Sulzbach was concluded with a printing of the Syriac New Testament in Hebrew type, *Ditika Hadata*. It may well be that this printing was meant to enable Jews proficient in Zoharic

²² Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach 1677). I follow the translation of Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 111.

²³ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 74; Allison P. Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah in the Seventeenth Century*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 113.

Aramaic to read the New Testament in a similar language and, as von Rosenroth had hoped, discover the similarity between the Zohar and Christianity.²⁴

Knorr von Rosenroth's translations of the Zohar into Latin were not only intended for a missionary purpose, they were also motivated by internal Christian interests. Von Rosenroth, who attributed post-Reformational discord amongst the Christians to their reliance on Greek philosophy, argued that returning to the original source of Christianity, which was found in the Kabbalah, would unite the Protestants and the Catholics (as well as the Jews), in the single, true faith:

Because I suspected that so great a separation of Christian religions arose from no other cause than from such great diversity among Christians of philosophical principles and metaphysical definitions... it immediately occurred to me that I should hunt out that same ancient philosophy which flourished at the time of Christ and the Apostles... As I was about to examine those ancient opinions about God and other spiritual and theological matters, I fell upon this most ancient book of the Jews, which is called Sohar, or Book of Splendor... I discovered that the chapters themselves and teachings, which ought rather to be called fragments, are ancient enough and amply set forth the most ancient opinions and hypotheses.²⁵

Despite von Rosenroth granting the Kabbalah great importance, there is also an apparent ambivalence in his evaluation of the Zohar, which he describes as dirt containing nuggets of gold and precious gems within it:

I entered the path, worn by few, traversed by no one I knew, and, furthermore, filled with so many hard stones, uneven places, chasms, precipices, and such mud that it is not surprising that so many, filled with dread, abandoned it with disgust... I shall sketch for you in a few words what gold and whatever gems I have thus far dug out of this dirt and what hope leads me further.²⁶

In the beginning of the eighteenth century two additional anthologies of Latin translations of the Zohar were printed. In 1720, in Amsterdam, the Swedish Hebraist, Andreas Norrelius published a short book called: *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum*. This anthology contains Zoharic passages with

²⁴ Boaz Huss, "The Text and Context of the Zohar Sulzbach Edition," in *Tradition, Heterodoxy and Religious Culture: Judaism and Christianity in the Early Modern Period*, eds. Chanita Goodblatt and Howard Kreisel (Be'er Sheva: Ben-Gurion University Press, 2006), 117–38.

²⁵ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 74. I follow the translation of Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 114.

²⁶ Knorr von Rosenroth, *Kabbalah Denudata* (Sulzbach, 1677), 4. I follow the translation of Coudert, *The Impact of the Kabbalah*, 114–15.

Christological interpretations, taken from the book *Mateb Moshe* (The Rod of Moses), the Zohar interpretation of Norrelius's teacher, the converted Jew Johan Kemper (formerly Moshe Ben Aharon Cohen of Krakow).²⁷ The Zohar passages and interpretations from Kemper's work are incorporated in the original language (Aramaic and Hebrew) and translated into Latin, with specific comments by Norrelius, who opened his book with a lengthy introduction that includes a Latin translation of the famous liturgical poem *Bar Yochai* by Rabbi Shimon Ibn Lavi. Norrelius's book was printed a second time, in a French translation, in the beginning of the twentieth century.²⁸

Norrelius also accepted the early dating of the Zohar and its attribution to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (whom he identifies as Simeon the righteous, who, according to the Gospel of Luke, received the baby Jesus into his arms).²⁹ Norrelius, like his teacher Kemper, assumed that the Zohar contained original Jewish doctrines identical to the teachings of early Christianity. Like von Rosenroth and his circle, Norrelius had missionary aspirations in translating the Zohar. In the opening pages of his book he declared that it was intended for both Jews and Christians and as aforesaid, he printed the Zoharic passages and Kemper's Christological interpretation in the original language as well. In the introduction he stated that his aim was to spread among the Jews – and strengthen among the Christians – belief in the trinity, and called upon the Jews to recognize that the Christians maintained the pure and true belief of their forefathers.³⁰ Norrelius tried, unsuccessfully, to print the translation of the New Testament in Hebrew written by Kemper. This is a further similarity between Norrelius and Kemper's activities in Uppsala in the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the project of Knorr von Rosenroth and his circle in Sulzbach in the late seventeenth century.

Norrelius's translation project was connected to the Sabbatean movement.

²⁷ See H. J. Schoeps, "Rabbi Johan Kemper in Uppsala," *Kyrkohistorisk Årsskrift* 46 (1945): 146–75; Shifra Asulin, "Another Look at Sabbateanism, Conversion, and Hebraism in Seventeenth-Century Europe: Scrutinizing the Character of Johan Kemper of Uppsala, or Moshe Son of Aharon of Krakow" (Hebrew), in *The Sabbatean Movement and Its Aftermath: Messianism, Sabbateanism and Frankism*, ed. Rachel Elior, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2001), 423–70; Elliot Wolfson, "Messianism in the Christian Kabbalah of Johann Kemper," in *Millenarianism and Messianism in the Early Modern World*, eds. M. Goldish and R. H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 139–87.

²⁸ The French translation by Jean de Pauly was published as *Aurore de la Foi Orthodoxe des Anciens Cabbalistes* in the occultist journal, *Le Voile D'Isis*, vol. 38, 1933, by Paul Vulliaud. I will expand on other translations of the Zohar by de Pauly and Vulliaud later on.

²⁹ Andreas Norrelius, *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum* (Amsterdam, 1720), 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

The Zoharic texts that he translated are taken from the book *Matteh Moshe*, by Johan Kemper, who was a Sabbatean prior to his conversion. Shifra Asulin demonstrates that Kemper did not abandon his Sabbatean ideology after his conversion, and several Sabbatean concepts and doctrines can be found in his commentary.³¹ Norellius probably was not aware of his teacher's hidden Sabbatean agenda. Yet, interestingly, he noticed the similarities between his teacher's doctrines and those of the Sabbatean Nehemia Hiya Hayun in his book *Oz le-Elohim* (a chapter of which Norrelius translated into Latin).³²

Additional translations of the Zohar into Latin from the beginning of the eighteenth century are found in the anthology by Gottfried Christoph Sommer, *Specimen Theologiae Sobaricae* (Gothae, 1734). Similar to the translations of von Rosenroth and Norrelius, there was also a missionary Christian-Kabbalistic motive behind Sommer's translation. Sommer, who divided his book into twenty sections based on various Christian dogmas, believed in the compatibility between the Zohar and the New Testament, and included articles from the Zohar in his book that he felt were in affinity with Christian doctrines. As I will show later on, a translation of Sommer's book into German was included in Friedrich Christoph Oetinger's *Öffentliches Denkmal der Lehrtafel Prinzessin Antonia*, printed in Tübingen in 1763. Translations into German and Yiddish, based on Sommer's book, appeared in the nineteenth century.

Knorr von Rosenroth's translations were also the basis for translations of the Zohar into English and French in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the same period in which Norellius's book was translated into French. Hence, these Latin translations of the Zohar, mainly von Rosenroth's but also those of Norellius and Sommer, became the central source of acquaintance with the Zohar in European non-Jewish culture up to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Yiddish and Ladino Translations of the Zohar

I would like to turn back to Jewish translations of the Zohar. In the period that Christian Kabbalists were translating the Zohar to Latin, several translations appeared in Jewish vernacular languages – Yiddish and Ladino (Jewish Spanish). As mentioned, several short passages, mostly tales, from the Zohar had already been published in Yiddish translation in the late seventeenth century. A more comprehensive translation of Zoharic articles in Yiddish, the

³¹ Shifra Asulin, "Another Look at Sabbateanism," 438–58.

³² Norrelius, *Phosphoros Orthodoxae Fidei Veterum Cabbalistarum*, 22–23, 353.

book *Nabalat Tzvi*, was first printed in the beginning of the eighteenth century (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1711). The translation written by Rabbi Zelig Chotsh was published by his great-grandson, the Sabbatean sage Rabbi Tzvi Hirsh Chotsh. This translation was published in numerous editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some under the title *Nofet Tsufim*.

In contrast to the translations of the Zohar into Hebrew and Latin intended for educated circles that were proficient in these high culture languages, translations of the Zohar into Yiddish were intended for wider circles, including women. Thus, the title page of the book *Nabalat Tzvi* carried the following verse: *Assemble the people, men, women and little ones and the sojourner within your gates so that they may hear* (Deuteronomy 31:12).

Like the editors of anthologies of Zohar articles translated to Hebrew, Rabbi Tzvi Chotsh and those who approbated his book defined the Zoharic articles in *Nabalat Tzvi* as “*peshatim*” (simple meanings) and “words of moral.” Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt wrote in his approbation: “He [i.e., Chotsh] wishes to print here *peshatim* and words of moral from the Book of Zohar in the language of Ashkenaz [i.e., Yiddish] to merit the masses, the young and the old, the women and the simple people...”³³

Alongside the claim that the texts included in the book *Nabalat Tzvi* belong to the *peshat* level of the Zohar, Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz presents another justification for printing the Zohar in Yiddish:

If I would have said that it should not be printed in the language of Ashkenaz, because of the holiness of the Zohar...it is to the contrary. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai himself wrote in a foreign language, the language of translation [i.e., Aramaic] spoken at that time by the whole nation. And although there are reasons and deep explanations for his writing in the language of translation (as is explained in revealed and concealed books), nonetheless, he was not concerned whether women and simple people would read it [i.e., the Zohar].³⁴

According to Katz’s claim, the Book of Zohar – in its entirety – was written as an esoteric text from the outset and therefore its distribution should not be prevented but encouraged through translation into the colloquial language.

A different justification for the translation of the Zohar into Yiddish was raised by Rabbi Wolf of Dessau, who claimed in his approbation to *Nabalat Tzvi* that the secrets of the Kabbalah should be revealed in the days of the Messiah:

³³ Chotsh, *Nabalat Tzvi* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1711), Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt approbation.

³⁴ Chotsh, *Nabalat Tzvi*, Rabbi Naphtali Hakohen Katz of Frankfurt approbation.

And now he [i.e., Chotsh], thought to print revealed articles from the Book of the Zohar, in the language understood by women and those whose strength is as women's, so that they will know God and the land will be filled with knowledge. As it is written in the holy Book of the Zohar: "When the days of the Messiah are near, even children will explore the secrets of wisdom."³⁵

The claim that in the age of redemption the limitations on revealing Kabbalistic knowledge and teaching the Zohar are void, which originates in Zoharic literature itself, appeared in many sources in the first half of the sixteenth century and served to justify the first printings of the Zohar.

The first translations of the Zohar in Ladino were most likely written during this same period. These translations, whose original date of writing is unknown, are found in manuscripts from a later period that were held by the Donmeh - the Sabbateans who converted to Islam.³⁶ This, added to the fact that Rabbi Tzvi Chotsh, who printed the translation of the Zohar in Yiddish, was also a Sabbatean, indicates that Sabbatean circles stood behind the spreading of the Zohar in spoken languages in the first half of the eighteenth century. Rabbi Moshe Hagiz's critique of translating the Zohar into spoken languages and teaching it to young boys and women, published in his book *Mishnat Hakhamim* (1733), is also directed, most likely, against Sabbateans who spread the Zohar among the uneducated echelons of society:

Now every empty-headed, mischievous, poor youth takes the Book of Zohar in his hand and goes out with it to the public and boasts throughout the city that he knows to explain and clarify and translate it from language to language and reads it before women and children in a foreign language [i.e., vernacular].³⁷

Translations into the vernacular in the eighteenth century were done within the Sabbatean effort to spread the Zohar, which as mentioned held a central position in their movement. Sabbatean circles were involved in the printing of Zoharic literature in the first half of the eighteenth century and in spreading ritualistic reading customs; most of the commentaries on the Zohar that were printed during this period were written by Sabbateans.³⁸

³⁵ Chotsh, *Nahalat Tzvi*, Rabbi Wolf of Dessau approbation (According to Zohar, vol. 1, 117b).

³⁶ A translation of the Idra Rabba is found Jerusalem, National Library MS heb 8^o917. A translation of the Idra Zuta is found in Jerusalem, National Library MS. heb 8^o918 and heb 8^o2086. Translations of Zohar passages to Ladino are found also in Cambridge, Harvard MS. Heb 79.

³⁷ Moshe Hagiz, *Mishnat Hakhamim*, (Wandsbeck, 1733), 56b.

³⁸ Boaz Huss, *The Zohar: Reception and Impact* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2016), 223–32.

The First translations of the Zohar into German

In the late eighteenth century the first Zohar translations into a modern European language appeared. As mentioned above, the German Lutheran theologian, Friedrich Christoph Oetinger included in his book *Die Lehrtafel der Prinzessin Antonia* (Tübingen, 1763) a German translation of Zohar texts (done by his friend Karl Hartman), printed in Latin in the above-mentioned book by Gottfried Christian Sommer. In 1824, in Berlin, an additional translation of Zoharic texts into German appeared (printed aside the Aramaic original), also based on Sommer's anthology, by the Protestant theologian and orientalist Friedrich August Tholuck, entitled *Wichtige Stellen des Rabbinischen Buches Sohar*. In the introduction, Tholuck reiterates the Christian-Kabbalists' notion that the Zohar contains equivalents of the Christian doctrines.³⁹ The purpose of the anthology of translations of the Zohar, says Tholuck, is to broaden Christian theologians' knowledge of Kabbalah and provide them with an arsenal in their mission to spread the Christian Gospel to the Jews:

From this important book we provide here a series of noteworthy articles that a Christian scholar, Sommer, has previously collected. They are mainly these, which greatly agree with the Christian doctrine. The missionaries of the Christian faith among the Jews will be able to use these to reach, by themselves, a deeper insight of ancient rabbinical scriptures, and to persuade the Israelites that so much of what they condemn in Christianity has already been declared by their forefathers as holy teaching ... Through these the distinguished missionary of faith among the Israelites will be given a new arsenal with which he will enlighten some of the sons of Abraham and awaken the will of Christian theologians to study the scriptures of the Jews and to spread Christian knowledge among them.⁴⁰

Tholuck hoped that the Jews would also read his book and in his introduction – he also appealed to the “Sons of Israel who are reading these pages.” Later, in Warsaw, 1844, Tholuck's anthology was published in a Yiddish translation by the Anglican mission.⁴¹

In the second half of the nineteenth century, additional editions of Tholuck's German text were published as well as another edition of Oetinger's book.⁴²

³⁹ August Tholuck, *Wichtige Stellen des Rabbinischen Buches Sohar* (Berlin, 1824), 6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–6.

⁴¹ The Zohar texts from this book were reprinted (in the original Aramaic) by Ephraim Deinard in the framework of his polemics against the Zohar, in order to show that it is “full of Christian opinion.” Ephraim Deinard, *Alatab* (St Louis, 1927), 51.

⁴² Gerhard Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica* (Leipzig: W. Drugulin 1927), 116, 154.

A new translation into German of the Zohar articles translated by Sommer and Tholuck, prepared by the Jewish convert to Christianity, Johann Heinrich Raphael Biesenthal, was published in Berlin in 1854 under the title *Auszüge Aus dem Buche Zohar*. In the introduction, Biesenthal claims that his translations, based on the original text, are better than those of his predecessors, notwithstanding the difficult language, and the “exceptional dark mysticism” of the Zohar.⁴³

During this same period, translations of the Zohar came out for the first time in other European languages: English and French. These translations also relied on Latin versions (though on Knorr von Rosenroth’s rather than Sommer’s). Nevertheless, as I will show in the following, these translations were not done out of Christian-missionary ideology, but rather in the framework of the esoteric and occultist trends of the turn of the nineteenth century. Before I turn to discuss these translations, I would like to give a short review of a few translations of the Zohar done by Jews in the nineteenth century.

Jewish Translations of the Zohar in the Nineteenth Century

In contrast to the eighteenth century, during which, as we saw above, several translations of the Zohar were written in Yiddish and Ladino, throughout most of the nineteenth century very few translations were written that were intended for the Jewish audience. In the 1830s, Rabbi Elyakim Milzahagi of Brody prepared a large translation in Hebrew, which was part of a comprehensive commentary to the Zohar that he wrote which was never printed and was lost.⁴⁴ Milzahagi was affiliated with the Haskalah (Jewish enlightenment) circles in Galicia, and his text was, most likely, the first Zohar translation written in the framework of the Jewish enlightenment movement. In 1859, an anthology of Zohar texts in Ladino, *Sefer Leket HaZohar in Ladino*, prepared by Avraham Ben Moshe Finzi, was published in Belgrade. The translation included 248 Zohar articles, mainly tales and moral sayings. Translations of Zohar texts in French appeared in the book by Michel Weill, Chief Rabbi of Algeria, *La Morale du Judaïsme*, printed in Paris in 1875.⁴⁵ As we will see in the following, we see the first translations of Zohar texts into French (based on the Latin

⁴³ Johann Heinrich Biesenthal, *Auszüge aus dem Buche Sohar mit deutscher Übersetzung* (Berlin: P.G Löw, 1854). I am grateful to George Kohler, who helped me read the introduction.

⁴⁴ Elyakim Milzahagi mentions this in his unprinted book found in MS Jerusalem 4^o121 Heb, 4a.

⁴⁵ Zoharic texts translated into French were included earlier in a book by the scholar Adolphe Franck, *La kabbale ou, La philosophie religieuse des Hébreux* that was published in Paris in 1843 (and translated a year later into German by Adolf Jelinek).

translations of Knorr von Rosenroth) at about the same time in non-Jewish occultist circles as well.

In 1887, the first – and as far as I know the only – translation of the Zohar in Jewish-Arabic was printed in Pune, India. Differing from the anthology of Zohar texts in Ladino that included texts perceived as *peshat*, the translation printed in Pune is of one of the most esoteric portions of the Zohar, the *Idra Zuta*. The book, entitled *Idra Zuta, or the Lesser Holy Assembly, Translated from the Aramaic Chaldee into Arabic [in Hebrew Characters]*, was translated and printed by Avraham David Ezekiel, a member of the Iraqi Jewish community in India. The translation of the *Idra Zuta* was the first of nine Arabic-Jewish publications (most of them translations of Kabbalistic texts, including *Sefer Shomer Emunim* and *Sefer Yetzira*) that were printed by Ezekiel in the printing house he founded in Pune, in the years 1878–1888.⁴⁶ The Translation of the *Idra Zuta* into Jewish-Arabic enraged the rabbis of Jerusalem, Hebron and Baghdad. A decree against Ezekiel's translation, signed by the chief rabbis of Jerusalem, was published in the Jerusalem Hebrew newspaper, *Havazelet*:

We are thus obliged to decree in the power of the Divine Presence (*Shechina*) which never left the Wailing Wall, and in the power of the holy *Torah*, that no son of Israel should be allowed to read the above mentioned printed *Idrot* in other languages, under any circumstance. Furthermore, every person called by the name of Israel, has the obligation to make an effort to keep and hide the translations in a place where no foreign hand can reach them, and eliminate them from the world.⁴⁷

In response, Ezekiel wrote the rabbis a letter in which he defended his translation.⁴⁸ Ezekiel asserted that far from being forbidden to translate the *Idra*, it is “a religious obligation (*mitzva*) to study and teach and write and translate it into Arabic, which is the accustomed language amongst us.”⁴⁹ He relies on a passage from Hayim Vital's introduction to *Etz Hayim*, to the effect that it is a *mitzva* to reveal kabbalistic secrets of the *Zohar*, as this revelation will bring forth redemption. He adduces several examples of kabbalistic texts written in foreign languages, or translated into them. He writes, defiantly, that the decree did not

⁴⁶ Boaz Huss, “The Sufis From America: Kabbalah and Theosophy in Puna in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations*, eds. Boaz Huss, Marco Pasi, Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 167–93.

⁴⁷ *Havazelet* 18 (18), 24 February 1888 (12 Adar 5648), 138–39.

⁴⁸ The letter was published by Pinchas Grayevsky, “On the Translation of the *Idrot* to Arabic” (Hebrew), *Megintzei Yerushalaim* 2 (1930): 15–16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

achieve its goal, but on the contrary enhanced the sales of the book, which was now out of stock. As mentioned, contrary to most of the prior translations into Jewish languages, which avoided translating the esoteric portions of Zoharic literature, Ezekiel chose to translate and print one of the most secretive texts of the Zohar. Why did Ezekiel choose this specific portion and bring upon himself the wrath of the rabbis of Baghdad, Hebron and Jerusalem?

The answer to this lies in Ezekiel's membership in the Theosophical Society and his connections with its leaders, Madame Helena P. Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott.⁵⁰ Blavatsky and other members of the Theosophical Society (and, as will be shown later, also members of other Western esoteric movements that were active during the same period) were greatly interested in the Kabbalah. Because their knowledge of it was drawn mostly from the Christian Kabbalistic tradition, the Zoharic texts that they were acquainted with were mainly texts owing to Knorr von Rosenroth's translation. In exactly the same year that Ezekiel's Jewish-Arabic translation of the *Idra Zuta* was printed in Pune, an English translation of the text was printed by Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, who was also affiliated with the Theosophical Society. The connection between the two translations is revealed by the fact that in both the *Idra Zuta* is translated into English as "The Lesser Holy Assembly."

Western Esoteric Translations of the Zohar into English and French

Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, the first translator of the Zohar into English, was a member of various English occultist groups and one of the founders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In London, in 1887, he published English translations of the Zohar, based on Knorr von Rosenroth's Latin translation of *Sifra Detzniuta*, *Idra Raba* and *Idra Zuta*. Similar to the Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Mathers saw in the Zohar a means of unveiling the original message of Christianity. However, Mathers, like other esotericists of his period, opposed institutionalized Christianity, and hoped for a spiritual Christian revolution that the translation of the Zohar would serve to advance:

I say fearlessly to the fanatics and bigots of the present day. You have cast down the Sublime and Infinite one from His throne, and in His stead have placed the demon of unbalanced force; you have substituted a deity of disorder and of jealousy for a God of order and love; you have perverted the teaching of the crucified One.

⁵⁰ Boaz Huss, "The Sufis From America," 167–93.

Therefore at this present time an English translation of the Qabbalah is almost a necessity, for the Zohar has never before been translated into the language of this country nor as far as I am aware, into any modern European vernacular.⁵¹

During the same period additional English translations of the Zohar were printed in the United States; these were written from a similar perspective by the independent scholar and freemason Isaac Myer.⁵² In contrast to Mathers, Myer did not base his translations on those of Knorr von Rosenroth, rather he translated from the original Aramaic. His Zohar translations were included in his book *Qabbalah: The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yebuda Ibn Gabirol*, printed in Philadelphia in 1888. Similar to Mathers, Myer accepted the antiquity of the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular, however he placed less of an emphasis on the Kabbalah's similarity to original Christianity, and instead emphasized its similarity to Asia's "Ancient Wisdom Religion":

The Qabbalah of the Hebrews is undoubtedly of great antiquity, a reminiscence of an ancient "Wisdom Religion" of Asia, for we find its doctrines, in germ, in the ancient Buddhist, Sanskrit, Zen, and Chinese books, also examples of its peculiar exegesis in the occult book, Genesis, and in Jeremiah. The present text-book of the Qabbalah is the Sepher ha-Zohar, Book of Illumination, or Splendor.⁵³

English translations from the Zohar, which were prepared by Nurho de Manhar (also known as William Williams), a member of The Golden Dawn, were published in the early twentieth century in the occult journal, *The Word*, edited by Harold Percival in New York.⁵⁴

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several translations of the Zohar were printed in French; these were also written in the framework of increasing interest in esoteric and occult teachings at the turn of the century. The first of these translations is that of the *Idra Raba* by Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant, 1810–1875), which is based on Knorr von Rosenroth's *Kabbalah Denudata*. Lévi's translation was included in *Le Livre des Splendeurs*, which was

⁵¹ Samuel Liddel MacGregor Mathers, *The Kabbalah Unveiled* (London: G. Redway, 1887), 2.

⁵² Many more translations from the Zohar into English, based on earlier translations, as well as on the original Zohar, are found in Myer's archive in New-York public library. <http://archives.nypl.org/mss/2090#detailed> (accessed 15.11.2016).

⁵³ Isaac Myer, *Qabbalah: The Philosophical Writings of Solomon Ben Yebuda Ibn Gabirol* (Philadelphia: The author, 1888), 439.

⁵⁴ The translations were published in the volumes of *The Word* printed 1906–1913 (vols, 4–12). The translations, compiled by John H. Draais, were reprinted in Nurho de Manhar, *Zohar: Bereshith, Genesis, and expository translation from Hebrew* (San Diego: Wizards Bookshelf, 1978).

printed in 1894 by his follower Papus (Gérard Encausse, 1865–1919). Eliphas Lévi emphasized the antiquity of the Kabbalah, which according to him was known to Jesus and John the Apostle (but not to Paul, who only had a notion of its existence).⁵⁵ According to Lévi's outlook, the Zohar contains the universal secrets of revelation of which Judaism informed the world, secrets shared with Freemasonry, Gnosticism, the Templars and other occult movements.⁵⁶ Eliphas Lévi's translation of the *Idra Rabba* was intended to spread the universal gospel of the Kabbalah, which would unite Jews and Christians, remove ignorance and fanaticism, and serve as a basis for world peace:

Study of the Kabbalah will turn the Jews and Christians into a single and united nation. Ignorance and fanaticism will in vain aspire to perpetuate war. Peace is already presented in the name of philosophy, and tomorrow it will be implemented by religion, liberated from the control of the desires of humanity. We must prepare for this tremendous event by revealing the concealed treasures of the Jewish wisdom to men of science. And for this we are publishing the translation and commentary of the theogeny of the Zohar found in the *Sifra Detzniuta*.⁵⁷

In 1895, a year after the printing of Eliphas Lévi's *Le Livre des Splendeurs*, French translations from other Zoharic units in the *Kabbalah Denudata* were published by Henri Chateau, a member of L'Ordre Kabbalistique de la Rose-Croix, with an introduction by Papus.⁵⁸ A translation of the *Sifra Detzniuta* entitled *La Clef du Zohar* by Albert Jounet (1863–1923), a Christian socialist and a member of the French Theosophical Society, was printed in Paris in 1909. Jounet, whose translation was written from an occult-Christian perspective, assumed that despite the Zohar's being written in the thirteenth century, it contains ancient doctrines that concord with Christian esoteric teachings and with the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Chinese, Indian, Celtic and Greek mysteries.⁵⁹ Following Lévi, Albert Jounet also viewed spreading the Zohar as a means of mending the rift between Jews and Christians. However, differing from Lévi and other occultists, Jounet presented a clear Christian missionary position, very close to that of the Christian Kabbalists from earlier periods. According to Jounet, becoming acquainted with the Zohar would enable Christians to acknowledge the esoteric truths found in the Old Testament, and the Jews to

⁵⁵ Eliphas Lévi, *Le Livre des Splendeurs* (Paris: Chamuel, 1894), 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

⁵⁸ Henri Chateau, *Le Zohar* (Paris: Chamuel, 1895).

⁵⁹ Albert Jounet, *La Clef du Zohar* (Paris: Bibliothèque Chacornac, 1909), 1.

understand the truths of Christianity.⁶⁰ Then “the Jews and the Christians will unite in prayer to Jesus, who dwells in eternity and awaits their reconciliation, to reveal his glory to the world.”⁶¹ Jounet concluded his introduction with “the Kabbalistic promise that the Messiah will come to this world because of the Book of Zohar.”⁶² Despite his great admiration of the Zohar, “whose religious and philosophical sublimity cannot be contested”,⁶³ Jounet displayed an orientalist ambivalence regarding the Zohar:

Like most of the Oriental books, and particularly those written through initiation, the Zohar appears chaotic. First of all, it is compiled of varied works, mixed up without any order. Secondly, these works do not adhere to the logical methods of the West. The authors of the Orient follow the rules of musical composition more than they do the rules of literary composition.⁶⁴

As we will see in the following, similar orientalist ambivalence is also expressed in the writings of Jewish scholars who studied and translated the Zohar at the same period.

The first comprehensive translation of the Zohar into French (and into a European language in general), was printed in Paris by Emile Lafuma between 1906–1912. The author of the translation, Jean de Pauly – who claimed he was an Albanian aristocrat but was most likely the notorious converted Jew, Paul Meyer – died in 1903 before his translation was printed.⁶⁵ De Pauly accepted the early origins of the Zohar and, following the Christian Kabbalists who preceded him, claimed that the Zohar contains Christian doctrines. In his words, the Zohar is: “An appropriate book to enlighten men and to contribute to the glory of God... There is nothing better suited to achieve this goal than a translation of the Zohar whose doctrines, even if these precede Christianity, reinforce the Christian truths.”⁶⁶ The publisher, LaFume, who shared the view that the Zohar contains Christian doctrines,⁶⁷ also expressed ambivalence

⁶⁰ Ibid., 3–4.

⁶¹ Ibid., 4.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Scholem, *Bibliographia Kabbalistica*, 120; Paul Fenton, “La Cabbale et l’academie,” *Pardes*, 19–20 (1994): 229; Dominique Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction française du Zohar,” in *Jüdisches Denken in einer Welt ohne Gott, Festschrift für Stéphane Mosès*, eds. J. Mattern, G. Motzkin and S. Sandbank (Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2000), 120–29.

⁶⁶ De Pauly wrote this in a letter to LaFume, dated 1900, that is quoted in Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction,” 125.

⁶⁷ Jean de Pauly, *Le Livre de la splendeur: Doctrine ésotérique des Israélites*, (Paris: LaFume, 1906), 4.

toward it. LaFume compared the Zohar to a great river at whose source (the ancient Jewish-Christian tradition) the water is pure, but which becomes polluted with erroneous doctrines and traditions as time goes on.⁶⁸ Despite this, he claimed the enlightened reader could find “pure lumps of gold and precious stones” in its waters.⁶⁹

When it was published, De Pauly’s translation caused great reverberations, and throughout the twentieth century several anthologies of the Zohar in French were based on it.⁷⁰ De Pauly also translated into French the anthology of Zoharic articles in Latin by the Swedish Hebraist, Andreas Norellius, which was discussed above. The translation was printed in 1933 by Paul Vulliaud, in *Le Voile d’Isis* under the heading: “Aurore de la Foi Orthodoxe des Anciens Cabalistes.” In 1930, Vulliaud published a translation of the *Sifra Deẓniuta*, based on de Pauly’s translation.⁷¹

Jewish Neo-Romantic and Zionist Translations

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several Jewish European scholars worked on translating the Zohar into various languages, influenced by turn-of-the-century neo-romantic and orientalist perspectives. As we will see in the following, some of these translations integrated Western esoteric perceptions of the Kabbalah with a Jewish nationalist approach.

Naphtali Herz Imber (1856–1909), a Hebrew poet whose song “ha-Tikva” (“the Hope”) became the anthem of the Zionist movement (and later of the State of Israel), translated several Zoharic passages into English. These translations were published posthumously in his book, *Treasures of Two Worlds*.⁷² Imber, who was associated with theosophical and occult circles, related that the reform rabbi, Shlomo Schindler, and the president of the Boston branch of the Theosophical Society, George Ayers, proposed in 1893 to fund a complete translation of the Zohar into English.⁷³ Similar to other Jewish nationalist

⁶⁸ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Bourel, “Notes sur la première traduction,” 127–28. De Pauly’s translation was reprinted in Paris in 1970.

⁷¹ Paul Vulliaud, *Traduction intégrale du Sifra Di-Tẓeniutha, le livre du secret* (Paris: E. Nourry, 1930)

⁷² Naphtali Herz Imber, *Treasures of Two Worlds: Unpublished Legends and Traditions of the Jewish Nation* (Los Angeles: Citizens printing shop: 1910), 76–110.

⁷³ Imber referred to this plan in an article he wrote in the journal he edited, *Uriel*, published (in only one volume) in 1895. See Naphtali Herz Imber, “What is the Cabbala?” *Uriel* 1(1), (1895): 19. See Boaz Huss, “Forward to the East: Naphatali Herz Imber’s Perception of

thinkers, who will be discussed later, Imber viewed the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular as a vital spiritual Jewish tradition, juxtaposed to the dogmatic rabbinical tradition: “That book is in opposition to Rabbinical tradition: as it explains the laws according to their esoteric meanings and spiritual solutions, which are in conflict with the dim, dogmatic dead letter.”⁷⁴

Within the context of large projects which translated Jewish literature into German, such as Buber and Rontzweig’s translation of the Old Testament and Buber’s translations from Hassidic literature, several translations of the Zohar appeared. Christian Ginsburg related that Ignatz Stern, a Jewish Hungarian scholar active in the late nineteenth century, prepared a German translation of the *Sifra Detzmita*, and of the *Idra Raba* and the *Idra Zuta*, which remained archived in manuscripts.⁷⁵ In 1913, Ernst Müller and Shmuel Hugo Bergman, who were both active in the Zionist movement and later became interested in Rudolph Steiner’s Anthroposophy, published translations of several Zoharic passages at the end of the volume *Vom Judentum*, prepared by the Zionist student union of Prague, Bar Kochba.⁷⁶ Müller published further translations of Zoharic articles in the journal *Der Jude*, between 1913 and 1920.⁷⁷ In 1920, he published a book about the Zohar including translations, and in 1932 he published an anthology of Zoharic articles translated into German.⁷⁸ An additional anthology of Zoharic articles translated into German was published in Berlin by Jankew (Jakob) Seidmann, who was also associated with Zionist circles.⁷⁹

In the same period, Jewish scholars in Eastern Europe began to translate Zoharic texts into Hebrew and Yiddish. In 1921, in the second part of his Hebrew article “The Key to the Book Zohar”, published in parts in the journal *Ha-Tekufa* in Warsaw, Hillel Zeitlin published an anthology of translated Zoharic texts with a commentary. Zeitlin introduces his anthology with an enthusiastic description of the Zohar:

What is the Zohar? The Zohar is a sublime, divine soul that descended suddenly

Kabbalah,” *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 12, no. 3 (2013): 404.

⁷⁴ Imber, “What is the Cabbala?” 16.

⁷⁵ Christian D. Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development, and Literature* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1955), 230.

⁷⁶ *Vom Judentum: Ein Sammelbuch* (Leipzig: K. Wolff, 1913), 274–84.

⁷⁷ Eleonore Lappin, *Der Jude 1916–1928* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 362.

⁷⁸ Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar und Seine Lehre: Einleitung in die Gedankenwelt der Kabbalah* (Wein & Berlin: R. Löwit, 1920); Ernst Müller, *Der Sohar: Das Heilige Buch Der Kabbalah, Nach dem Urtext* (Wien: Heinrich Glanz, 1932).

⁷⁹ Jankew Seidman, *Aus dem heiligen Buch Sohar des Rabbi Schimon ben Jochai* (Berlin: Im Welt, 1932).

from the world of emanation down to earth in order to be revealed to the eyes of man in millions of lights and shadows, colours and hues. God, blessed be He, picked one precious stone from his crown and threw it down, and the stone shattered and scattered, sowing myriads of sparks, elating, rejoicing, and delighting in myriads of shapes and shades that emerged from eternity to illuminate all the dark corners and to satisfy all that craves and yearns for light; and to sustain and warm everything that had been killed by the chill of science and the darkness of ignorance, and the blindness, and the burden of nature, and the malice and the hardship, and the cruelty of mankind. The Zohar was revealed to the people of Israel and to the entire world through visions, parables, tales, and flashing words, piercing thoughts, the heights of heaven, the depths of the abyss, the glory of the stars, the language of divine heights, the murmur of eternal trees, the depth of the forest thicket⁸⁰

However Zeitlin's position on the Zohar is not unequivocal. His neo-romantic enthusiasm from the Zohar is ambivalent and coupled with disdain, reminiscent of the attitude of Knorr von Rosenroth and other non-Jewish translators of the Zohar:

The Zohar – a mixture of the deepest of the deep truisms and fantasies, straight and crooked lines, straight and misleading paths, fit, perfect, and clear sketches and alien and strange ones, the strength of a lion and the weakness of a child, the sound of cascading waters and the whisper of a spring, pits of darkness and caves of mysteries, brevity, clarity, and acuity of eternal wisdom and prolonged discussions that continue endlessly, infiltrating one another and interweaving as in a long and complex dream . . . according to its content and its richness, the Zohar is all – divinity; its exterior often confusing and uncertain.⁸¹

In 1922–1923 an anthology of Zoharic tales by the writer and historian Azriel Nathan Frenk (1863–1924) was printed in two volumes. Frenk, like other thinkers of his time, emphasized the value of the Zohar as a national Jewish text:

This is how the Zohar shed its spirit over all of us, over all the sons of our nation; it was absorbed in our blood, our soul, our spirit and our essence, and it implanted within us gentleness and innocence, mercy and forgiveness, the aspiration for greatness, glory, magnificence; it ridiculed the sufferings of exile and the tortures of this world, mocked the obstacles and hurdles in our lives, which characterize our people and are rarely found among the nations. The Zohar planted all these

⁸⁰ Hilel Zeitlin, “The Key to the Book Zohar” (Hebrew), *Ha-Tkufah* 6 (1920): 314.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

[traits] in the hearts of those who studied it, and they disseminated it among all the people of our nation that they led.⁸²

Frenck emphasized the national merit of translating the tales of the Zohar into Hebrew:

The purpose is to allow those who know Hebrew, in abundance or little, at least something from something out of the beauty found in the Zohar, from these things that became, as said, a part of our soul, our spirit, our essence, we decided to choose a collection of tales from this book and edit these in a way that they would be understood by anyone, young and old, those who learned Hebrew and are used to reading a bit in the Holy books... We believe that in this book we will successfully integrate the beauty of the books of Kabbalah into the new Hebrew literature, intended for both those who know and those who are learning Hebrew.⁸³

However, as with Zeitlin, there is an apparent ambivalence toward the Zohar in Frenck's words. Alongside his great admiration for the Zohar he claims: "In addition, there are many mistakes in the Book of Zohar, things are twisted, confused, and missing..."⁸⁴

During this same period Shmuel Hirsh Setzer (1882–1962), a scholar from Eastern Europe who later settled in the United States (and immigrated to Israel in his final years), published translations of Zoharic articles in Yiddish, and later on in Hebrew.⁸⁵ Like other Jewish thinkers of his time, Setzer described the Zohar in enthusiastic, poetic language: "The book of the glory and foundation of the secret doctrine, the Book of Zohar, the big and deep mystical sea, whose waves rise to the heights of human imagination and crash in the lofty space into splinters of color and shades the eye will never be satiated from viewing."⁸⁶ Setzer reflects about his translations:

My main worry was that the gentle intoxicating scent that emanates from the original words would not dissipate in translation. That nothing would be lost from the wonderful poetic spirit, from the lofty vividness that they excel in, by its being

⁸² Azriel Nathan Frenck, *Sefer agadot hazohar* (Warsaw: Achiasaf, 1923–4), vol. 1, 12 (Hebrew).

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁵ Setzer's translations of the Zohar into Yiddish were published in the journal *Das Wort*, volumes 1–4 (1921–1924). Zoharic articles translated into Hebrew were printed by Setzer in volumes 24–23 and 38–39 of the journal *Ha-Doar* (1954). These translations were reprinted after he died in Shemuel Tsevi Setzer, *Selected Writings* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot le-Sifrut, 1966), 110–17.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

poured from vessel to vessel. That as far as possible nothing would be lost from the enormous impression the words in their original form can have on the reader even when these will be read from my translation.⁸⁷

Alongside these scholars one must also note the Hebrew author and Nobel Prize laureate, Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1887–1970), who included passages of the Zohar translated into Hebrew in his book *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe), first printed in Jerusalem in 1938.

In the interval between the two world wars, two publishing houses initiated a comprehensive undertaking of translating the Zohar into Hebrew. Working in Berlin, the national poet Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) introduced a plan to publish the Zohar in Hebrew with Dvir publishing house, however the plan was never consummated.⁸⁸ At the same time Hillel Zeitlin began a project of translating the Zohar into Hebrew, initiated by Ayanot publishing house, also operating in Berlin. According to Simon Rawidowicz who managed the publishing house, translation of the Zohar was among the first priorities of Ayanot, who viewed this undertaking as “a unique national obligation.”⁸⁹ In the end, only the translation of the introduction to the Zohar was published, after Zeitlin perished in the Holocaust.⁹⁰

Increasing interest in the Zohar and in Kabbalah in general in the first half of the twentieth century led to competition between different translators. This competition was expressed in Hillel Zeitlin’s critique of the unbecoming rabbinical language used by Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg in his translation of the Zohar, *Sefer Shaarei Zohar Torah* (which will be discussed in the following). He also criticized Rosenberg’s (whom he refers to as “Rosentzweig”!) choice to only translate the Zohar partially: “This translation has no scientific or religious value. The rabbi who translated it (his name is Rosentzweig) only collected a few homilies from each portion and translated them into imprecise and unbecoming rabbinical Hebrew.”⁹¹ Zeitlin wrote an even harsher critique of the anthology by Azriel Nathan Frenk: “Its value is much less than that of the book *Shaarei Zohar Torah*, because it contains only a few pages and has absolutely nothing in it; there are only a few parts translated from a few easy

⁸⁷ Ibid., 73.

⁸⁸ Jonatan Meir, “Hillel Zeitlin’s Zohar: the History of a Translation and Commentary Project” (Hebrew), *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 10 (2004): 124.

⁸⁹ *HaMetzuda* 1 (1942): 36.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 40–81.

⁹¹ Hillel Zeitlin, “A letter to Simon Rawidowicz,” *HaMetzuda*, vols. 3–4 (1945): 340.

places. It is only suitable for young people.”⁹² On the other hand, Bialik, who as mentioned aspired to do a translation of the Zohar for Dvir, raised doubts before Rawidowicz whether Zeitlin was the best person to translate the Zohar, and claimed, most likely in an attempt to thwart Zeitlin’s translation project, that he had a translation in hand, ready to go to print!⁹³

The Soncino Zohar Translation

As we saw above, in the framework of increasing interest in the Kabbalah in general and the Zohar in particular in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zohar was translated in its entirety into French by the converted Jew Jean de Pauly. At that time, only the Zoharic units published in Latin in Rosenroth’s *Kabbalah Denudata* had been translated into English, by Samuel MacGregor Mathers, along with a few additional Zoharic articles translated by Isaac Myer and Naftali Hertz Imber. A comprehensive edition of the Zohar in English was prepared for the first time only in the 1930s, by the Soncino Press. The translators were the Jewish scholars Maurice Simon and Harry Sperling, and Paul Phillip Levertoff, a Jewish-born convert to Christianity. They were assisted by the scholar, rabbi, and Theosophist Joshua Abelson, who wrote the introduction to the edition. In his introduction, Abelson described the Zohar as “a compilation of a mass of material drawn from many strata of Jewish and non-Jewish mystical thought and covering numerous centuries.”⁹⁴ Abelson also expressed the national, neo-romantic idea that the Zohar in particular and the Kabbalah in general represent the mystical spirit that grants vitality to rabbinical Judaism:

Indeed herein may be said to lie the undying service which the Cabbalism has rendered Judaism, whether as creed or as life. A too literal interpretation of the words of Scripture giving Judaism the appearance of being nothing more than an ordered legalism, an apotheosis of the “letter which killeth” a formal and petrified system of external commands bereft of all spirit and denying all freedom of the individual – these have been, and are still in some quarters, the blemishes and shortcomings cast in the teeth of Rabbinic Judaism. The supreme rebutter of such taunts and objections is Cabbalah. The arid field of Rabbinism was always kept well watered and fresh by the living streams of Cabbalistic lore.⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., 341.

⁹³ Simon Rawidowicz, *My Conversations with Bialek* (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1983), 41, 46 (Hebrew).

⁹⁴ Maurice Simon, Harry Sperling and Paul Levertoff, *The Zohar*, vol. 1 (London: Soncino, 1931–34), xi.

⁹⁵ Ibid., xiv.

However, Abelson too expresses an ambivalent stance, characteristic of the modernist scholars, in describing the Zohar as “a veritable storehouse of anachronisms, incongruities and surprises.”⁹⁶

The Soncino edition was the main source of acquaintance with the Zohar for the English speaking world in the twentieth century. Only in the past few decades, as we will see, have additional comprehensive translations into English been done, with the intention of replacing this edition.

The Hebrew Translations of Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag

In the same period, the Zohar was also translated into Hebrew among traditional circles in response to the awakening interest in the Zohar among Jewish scholars and Zionists (and perhaps also in response to the interest non-Jews showed in the Kabbalah and the Zohar at the time). Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg (1859–1935), a Hassidic Polish rabbi who immigrated to Canada in 1913, translated large portions of the Zoharic literature (a translation which, recall, won a belittling critique from Hillel Zeitlin). Rosenberg began his project of translating and editing the Zohar in Hebrew in Poland and continued in Canada. He edited the Zoharic articles in the order of the Torah portions, and printed his translation with a short commentary called *Ziv HaZohar* (the light of the Zohar), alongside the Aramaic source. Like the traditional translators preceding him, Rosenberg refrained from translating the more esoteric sections of the Zohar, such as *Sifra Detzniuta* and the *Idrot*. The first volume was published in Warsaw in 1906 and the complete translation was published later in Montreal and New York, between 1924–1930.⁹⁷ In the introduction to his book, Rosenberg repeats the claims justifying the spreading of the Zohar that were used in earlier periods, first and foremost the claim that the Zohar will be revealed in the final generation before redemption: “It is explained...that the Book of Zohar will be revealed in a new and celebrated way in the final generation, and this revelation is its spreading among the general public of Israel.”⁹⁸

Rosenberg’s project of translating the Zohar was related to the national Jewish awakening of the time, the increase in the scope of Hebrew readers, and the publication of secular literature in Hebrew. Rosenberg presents his

⁹⁶ Ibid., xii.

⁹⁷ Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, *Sha’arei Zohar Torah* (Warsaw: Edelstein, 1906); *Zohar Torah al Hamishab Humshei Torah*, vols. 1–5 (Montreal, 1924–5. Reprint New York: Rosalg, 1955).

⁹⁸ Ibid., vol. 1, 5a.

translation of the Zohar as a response to the rise of Jewish secular literature, which he describes as “books of heresy”:

And we see that because of our numerous transgressions books of heresy are greatly increasing during these times and their buyers are many. They succeed in catching souls in their net by glamorizing the books in all kinds of embellishment. This is principally because these books are written in a clear and easy language. And the holy books, full of the light of the holy Torah, are set aside in the corner. In particular the holy book of Zohar which is regarded as something that is obscure, that is not understood, like some kind of amulet.⁹⁹

Due to the fact that Aramaic was much less known among Jews in the modern era, Rosenberg asserts that the Zohar must be translated into Hebrew: “This idea did not let my eyes sleep or my soul rest for a long time and forced me to take upon myself this difficult task to translate to the holy tongue all the articles and in-depth commentaries from the book of Zohar so that they could be understood by the community of Israel.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that the perspective of Rosenberg’s translation is traditional and the background for his project, he says, is the struggle against secular education, the effect of the national Jewish awakening is apparent in his words. Thus, in his paraphrase of the words of the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Avraham Azulai, Rosenberg identifies Schechina, the Divine presence, as the national light: “And know that the main purpose of the Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in writing the Zohar was that at that time the national light (i.e., the Shechina) was without abundance, without support and with no assistance.”¹⁰¹

The most comprehensive translation of the Zohar into Hebrew written in the modern period is the famous translation and interpretation of Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (1884–1954), who was associated with Hassidic circles in Poland prior to his emigration to Palestine in 1921. The translation and interpretation of the Zohar, *Hasulam* (the ladder) is the final literary undertaking of Rabbi Ashlag, who previously had worked mainly on writing commentaries on Lurianic texts, which is the context in which he developed his unique Kabbalistic doctrines. The *Sulam* commentary, including the translation of the Zohar into Hebrew, constitutes the apex of Ashlags’ project of spreading the Kabbalah and eliminating limitations on the study of esoteric aspects of the Zohar. In his

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenberg, *Zohar Torah*, vol. 1, 5a.

¹⁰¹ Rosenberg, *Zohar Torah*, vol. 1, 5a. Compare to Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le Avraham* (Amsterdam: Imanuel Ataias, 1685), 7a. (There, of course, the words “national light” do not appear.)

introduction to his commentary and translation, Ashlag reiterates the traditional approach that justifies spreading the Zohar with eschatological reasoning:

And now in this generation, as we are already nearing the end of the last two thousand years, permission has been granted to reveal his [i.e. Isaac Luria's] words, may his memory be blessed, and the words of the Zohar to the world in a large measure, in such a way that from this generation and onward the words of the Zohar will begin to be revealed more and more until the entire measure, as the blessed God has desired, is revealed.¹⁰²

Based on this eschatological approach, Rabbi Ashlag justifies the spreading of the entire Zohar to the greater public. Contrary to the Kabbalists in earlier periods who sufficed with translations of the *peshat* of the Zohar, and in contrast to Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, who refrained from translating the esoteric portions (as did the translators of the Soncino edition to English), Rabbi Ashlag interpreted and translated the entire Zohar (except for *tikkunei* Zohar that were translated after he died by his disciple Rabbi Yehuda Zvi Brandwin). In an article he wrote after *Hasulam* was printed he asserted that the scope of his commentary and translation project served as proof that his generation had reached the days of redemption:

And here is the strong proof that our generation has reached the days of the Messiah because our eyes see that all the previous commentaries of the Book of Zohar did not even explain ten percent of the most difficult parts of the Zohar and even the little they did were as abstruse as the words of the Zohar itself. In this generation we have been given the interpretation of *Hasulam*, which is a complete interpretation of the words of the Zohar and does not leave any ambiguity of the Zohar unexplained. And these explanations are based on the simple analytic common sense that any average reader can understand. And the fact that the Zohar is revealed in this generation is clear proof that we are already within the days of the Messiah, at the outset of the same generation about which is said “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9).¹⁰³

It should be noted that although Ashlag was a non-Zionist ultra-orthodox Rabbi, he connected the spreading of the Zohar to the revival of the Jewish nation, and he viewed both the establishment of the State of Israel and the spreading of the Zohar through the interpretation of *Hasulam*, as evidence of the beginnings of redemption. Following the above he wrote:

¹⁰² Yehuda HaLévi Ashlag, *Hasulam*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Itur Rabanim, 1955), 17.

¹⁰³ Yehuda ha-Lévi Ashlag, *Matan Torah* (Jerusalem: Kabbalah Research Center, 1982), 134–35.

This concedes that it is our generation that is the generation of the days of the Messiah. And therefore we have been granted redemption of our holy land from the hands of the gentiles. We have also been granted the revelation of the Book of Zohar. Which is the beginning of implementing the saying “for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:9) “and they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying: ‘Know the Lord’; for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them” (Jeremiah 31:33).¹⁰⁴

The First Academic Translations of the Zohar

Some of the translations of the Zohar that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century were written from a modern academic perspective, using critical, historical and philological tools. Some of the Jewish scholars discussed above who dealt with translating the Zohar (Hillel Zeitlin, Nathan Frank and Joshua Abelson) received academic training. Yet, the most outstanding representative of the academic approach to the study of the Kabbalah and the Zohar in the twentieth century is Gershom Scholem who, similar to other Jewish scholars previously discussed, turned to the study of Jewish mysticism under the impact of Zionist ideology and the influence of the neo-romantic trends of the early twentieth century. Scholem’s most significant studies on the Zohar are his article “Did Rabbi Moses de Leon write the Zohar” from 1926 (in which he raises doubts regarding the ascription of the Zohar to Rabbi Moses de Leon),¹⁰⁵ and the two chapters dedicated to the book of Zohar in his book *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, printed for the first time in 1941, in which he retracted his opinion and determined that the entire Zohar was written by de Leon.¹⁰⁶ As we will see in the following, in addition to these studies Scholem translated Zoharic articles into German, and later on into English.

Despite Scholem reaching the conclusion that the Zohar is a pseudo-epigraphic work written by Rabbi Moses de Leon, he believed that its value as one of the most notable books in Jewish literature – and mystical literature in general – was not blemished. He asserted: “To the streak of adventurousness which was in Moses de Leon, no less than to his genius, we owe one of the most remarkable works of Jewish literature and of the literature of mysticism

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 137.

¹⁰⁵ Gershom Scholem, “Did Moses de León Write the Zohar?” *Mada’ei hayabadut*, 1 (1926): 16–29.

¹⁰⁶ Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156–204.

in general.”¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, together with his great esteem for the book and the genius of its author, Scholem is party to the ambivalence regarding the Zohar and Kabbalah which characterized the attitude of many modern Jewish thinkers. Scholem’s ambivalence regarding the Zohar was expressed in his words on the primitive modes of thought and feeling of the author of the Zohar, alongside profound, contemplative mysticism:

[T]he author’s spiritual life is centred as it were in a more archaic layer of the mind. Again and again one is struck by the simultaneous presence of crudely primitive modes of thought and feeling and of ideas whose profound contemplative mysticism is transparent... a very remarkable personality in whom as in so many mystics, profound and naive modes of thought existed side by side.¹⁰⁸

In 1935, Scholem published his book *Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung, Ein Kapitel aus dem Sohar* (The Secrets of Creation: A Chapter from the Zohar), which included a German translation of the beginning of the book of Zohar and a historical introduction. Later on, in 1949, Scholem published a selection of Zoharic articles translated into English, in partnership with Sherry Abel. Later this anthology was translated into many other languages, including French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Dutch.¹⁰⁹ The purpose of the small volume of translations of the Zohar to English was, in the words of Scholem: “conveying to the reader some notion of the power of contemplative fantasy and creative imagery hidden within the seemingly abstruse thinking of the Kabbalists.”¹¹⁰

Scholem rejected – often with extreme severity – other modern translations of the Zohar, because these did not meet academic criteria or because of their lack of literary value. In his introduction to his German translation, Scholem criticized the translations of the Zohar that preceded it in German and other European languages, without mentioning specifics.¹¹¹ In a review of Zohar translations published in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (and later printed in his book *Kabbalah*), he criticized the translation of Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg, which he

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 204.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 175.

¹⁰⁹ Gershom. Scholem, *Le Zohar: Le livre de la splendeur*, trans. E. Ochs (Paris: Seuil, 1980); Scholem, *El Zohar: el libro del esplendor* trans. L. Colomé (México: Berbera, 1984); Scholem, *Zoar: o livro do esplendor*, trans. Ana Maria Moreno Bueno (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Renes, 1977); Scholem, *Zohar: Il Libro dello splendore*, ed. E. Loewenthal (Torino: Einaudi, 1998); Scholem, *De Zohar, kabbalistische fragmenten*, (Amsterdam: J. P. Schoone, 1982).

¹¹⁰ Gershom Scholem, *The Book of Splendour: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah* (New York: Schocken, 1976 [1949]), 23.

¹¹¹ Scholem, *Die Geheimnisse der Schöpfung*, 19.

claimed lacked all literary value, and the translation of Rabbi Ashlag – for being too literal and full of errors.¹¹² He also rejected de Pauly's translation into French and accused him of “distortions and adulterations.”¹¹³ Scholem approved of the good style of the Soncino translation to English of Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, but he claimed that it suffered from an incomplete and erroneous, understanding of the Zohar.¹¹⁴

Scholem's critique of modern Zohar translations is an expression of competition for the Zohar's cultural capital, which increased in the beginning of the twentieth century among various circles, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In his critique of other Modern translators of the Zohar, Scholem asserted his and his pupils' expertise in philological and historical research methods, expertise that other translators of the Zohar at the time did not possess. Hence, the only modern Zohar translation which he was prepared to acknowledge as valuable, without reservation, was that of his student Isaiah Tishby, which was translated, according to Scholem, in a “meticulous and fine style.”¹¹⁵

The translations of the Zohar into German and English were marginal aspects of Scholem's broad activity in Kabbalah research. He found little interest in spreading the Zohar to the broader public and integrating it in contemporary culture. A single attempt to spread the Zohar to the broad Israeli public, in the framework of the modern academic school of Kabbalah research founded by Scholem, was the above-mentioned anthology of Zohar translations done by Scholem's disciple, Isaiah Tishby, called *Mishnat Hazohar* (The Wisdom of the Zohar). The first volume of the book, which includes thematic introductions to the Zohar accompanied by translations of relevant passages, was published by the Bialik press in 1949. The second volume was published in 1961 and a shorter version was published by the Dorot press in 1969.¹¹⁶ The purpose of the book, as described by Tishby in the introduction of the first edition was “to open up these hidden riches for the Hebrew reader...in an ordered and concentrated form.”¹¹⁷ It is interesting to note that even though Tishby was Gershom Scholem's pupil and though *Mishnat Hazohar* reflects

¹¹² Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 240.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ A French translation was published in 1977: Isaiah Tishby, *La Kabbale: Anthologie du Zohar*, traduction française de I. Rouch (Paris: Berg International, 1977). In 1989, an English translation was published: Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: The Littman Library, 1989).

¹¹⁷ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, xxv.

Scholem's position regarding the Zohar to a great extent, the initiative for this project was not Scholem's but that of Fishel Lachover and Shmuel Abba Horodotzky.¹¹⁸ It must also be emphasized that *Mishnat HaZohar* is an anthology with the goal of presenting the teachings of the Zohar in an ordered and concentrated form, rather than offering the Hebrew reader a comprehensive translation of the Zohar, as Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag began to do at exactly the same time and which Hillel Zeitlin had planned to do previously. From this perspective, Tishby's project is close in nature – and completes – Bialik's cultural ingathering (*Kinus*) project, which aspired to collect and edit anthologies of the classics of Jewish literature in a Zionist, secular framework.¹¹⁹

Like Scholem, Tishby rejected other modern Zohar translations that were not written from an academic perspective. In a review of Zohar translations in the introduction to *Mishnat HaZohar*, Tishby wrote about Rabbi Yudel Rosenberg's translation: "Instead of clarifying the subject matter the translator's system forced him to mix up the parashiyot, and to chop up the passages into small pieces. The translation itself is unreliable."¹²⁰ On Zeitlin's translation: "Neither the translation nor the explanation fulfilled the hopes that Zeitlin raised. The original text was not corrected in the least and in many places the translation is inaccurate. Nor does the style match that of the Zohar. In his explanatory notes many matters are introduced that have nothing to do with the literal meaning of the Zohar."¹²¹ Tishby also criticized the English translation by Sperling, Simon and Levertoff, saying, "The translators did their work in good faith, but their lack of knowledge of kabbalistic doctrines led them into error from time to time." He invalidated de Pauly's translation into French as "full of dreadful mistakes and Christianizing falsifications", and he noted that Ernst Müller's translation "was effected with great care, but there are frequent mistakes in comprehension."¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid. According to Zeev Gries, it was Gershom Scholem who urged Bialik press to cancel their contract with Horodetzky, and persuaded Tishby to connect with Lachover to complete the project. Consequentially, Horodetzky sued the Bialik Institute, and they published his preface in a separate edition. See Zeev Gries, "Isaiah Tishby's Contribution to the study of the Zohar" (Hebrew), *Davar* 25.11.1994, 21; Jonatan Meir, "Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar," 154–55.

¹¹⁹ Meir, "Hillel Zeitlin's Zohar," 155.

¹²⁰ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, 125, note 611.

¹²¹ Ibid., note 610.

¹²² Ibid., 102–103.

Contemporary Academic Translations of the Zohar

Tishby's *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, was published in English in 1989 and earlier in French in 1977. In the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, additional anthologies of Zoharic articles in English, translated by scholars affiliated with academic institutions, were published¹²³: Daniel Matt's anthology, *The Book of Enlightenment* (1983),¹²⁴ which preceded his comprehensive translation project (to be discussed in the following); a (partial) translation of the *Secrets of the Letters* by Stephen Wald (1988)¹²⁵; a translation of the *Midrash ha-Neelam Ruth*, by Lawrence Englander and Herbert Bassler (1993)¹²⁶; a translation of eight Zoharic stories by Aryeh Wineman (1997)¹²⁷; a translation of *Zohar Lamentations* by Seth Brody (1999)¹²⁸; and translation of the *Sifra detzēniuta* by Pinchas Giller (2001) and Ronit Meroz (2016).¹²⁹

Alongside these anthologies and translations of specific Zoharic segments in English, in the late twentieth century two comprehensive projects of Zohar translations appeared – one in French the other in English – by academic scholars who based their translations on critical philological research. Charles Mopsik began a project of translating the Zohar into French in 1981 that went

¹²³ Besides the “academic” translations of the Zohar into English, in the second half of the twentieth century additional translations into English were published, including a second edition of Mather's translation edited by Dagbort D. Runes (Dagbort D. Runes, *The Wisdom of the Kabbalah* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957). An interesting translation is that of the *Sifra Detzēniuta* and the *Idrot* (done according to the original say the authors) by two engineers, who claimed that the anthropomorphic imagery of the texts is a description of a machine to produce manna. See George Sassoon and Rodney Dale, *The Kabbalah Decoded* (London: Duckworth, 1978). Another translation of the *Sifra Detzēniuta* and the *Idrot* (including the text called *Idra de-bei Mishkana*), is Roy. A. Rosenberg, *The Anatomy of God* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1973).

¹²⁴ Daniel C. Matt, *The Book of Enlightenment* (Mahwa: Paulist Press, 1983); The translations were reprinted in Daniel .C Matt, *Zohar: Annotated and Explained* (Woodstock, Paths publishing, 2002).

¹²⁵ Stephen G. Wald, *The Doctrine of the Divine Name, an Introduction to Classical Kabbalistic Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

¹²⁶ Lawrence A. Englander and Herbet W. Bassler, *The Mystical Study of Ruth* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993).

¹²⁷ Aryeh Weinman, *Mystic Tales from the Zohar* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

¹²⁸ Seth Brody, *Commentary on the Song of Songs and other kabbalistic commentaries* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, 1999), 153–206.

¹²⁹ Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 158–69. (Giller also translated the portion known as *Idra debi Mashkana*. Ibid., 169–71); Ronit Meroz, “The Archeology of the Zohar: Sifra Ditseniuta as a Sample Text,” *DAAT* 82 (2016): xxv–xxxix. (The translation is of a shorter version of the text, found in Ms. Vatican 213.)

unfinished due to his untimely death in 2003.¹³⁰ Since 2003 Daniel Matt has been publishing a comprehensive translation into English, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*.¹³¹ Recently, Nathan Wolsky and Joel Hecker translated *Midrash ha-Neelam* portions of the Zohar in the framework of the Pritzker Edition.¹³² The detailed introductions to these translations, based on the research of Scholem and his pupils, summarize the academic research approach to the Zohar. Yet, these comprehensive Zohar projects present a different position than that of Scholem regarding the spreading of the Zohar and its place in modern culture. Both Matt and Mopsik prepared full translations of the Zohar, rather than anthologies of translated Zoharic articles. Despite the two scholars' use of academic methods and presentation of modern hermeneutic perspectives of the text, they do not view the Zohar as a historically valuable document suited mainly (or only) to research, but as a cultural resource bearing spiritual meaning for the modern reader. Scholem's ambivalent stance, discussed earlier, expressed both "admiration" and "disgust" for the Zohar. The translations of Mopsik and Matt were written out of veneration and esteem, mainly expressing "admiration" of the Zohar. This position, reminiscent of the approach in neo-romantic translations of the Zohar of the early twentieth century, is clearly expressed in Daniel Matt's introduction to the Pritzker Edition of the Zohar:

The Zohar's teachings are profound and intense...follow the words to what lies beyond and within; open the gates of imagination.... Above all, don't reduce everything you encounter in these pages to something you already know. Beware of trying to find "the essence" of a particular teaching...here essence is inadequate unless it stimulates you to explore ever deeper layers, to question your assumptions about tradition, God and self.¹³³

The words of introduction by Margot Pritzker (of the Jewish American multi-millionaire family), who initiated and sponsored Daniel Matt's translation project, perfectly illustrate its background, addressing a reader who seeks to rely on the authority of modern academic research, but who searches for spiritual meaning relevant to his or her life in the Zohar:

¹³⁰ Charles Mopsik, *Le Zohar*, vols. 1–4 (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1981–2000).

¹³¹ Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vols. 1–9 (Stanford University Press, 2003–2016).

¹³² Nathan Wolsky, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 10 (Stanford University Press, 2016); Joel Hecker, *The Zohar, Pritzker Edition*, vol. 11 (Stanford University Press, 2016).

¹³³ Matt, *Zohar Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, xxv–xxiv.

I wanted to be able to study the Zohar from an English translation that would draw upon the research and scholarship of the past half-century. I determined to sponsor such a translation... My family and I now present the Zohar to the English reading public, with the hope that the radiance that flows from this great work and from the Jewish mystical tradition will bring light to those who seek it.¹³⁴

As we will see in the following, during the period in which Matt began his project of translating the Zohar into English, Michael Berg and members of the Kabbalah Center were also working on an English translation. Although I do not believe that these were prepared in direct response to one another, their appearance in the same period reflects competition between different circles (academic scholars versus neo-Kabbalah practitioners) for control over the Zohar's cultural capital and its presentation to the English-speaking public.

The New Age of Zohar Translations

There has been extensive activity in translations of the Zohar in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Translations based on previous translations (including those by Jean de Pauly, Gershom Scholem, Azriel Nathan Frenk, Ernst Müller and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag) have appeared in various languages including German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Rumanian, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and Japanese.¹³⁵ Several translations into Hebrew have been completed in recent decades by Jewish ultra-orthodox Kabbalists. Rabbi David

¹³⁴ Matt, *Zohar Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1, xiv.

¹³⁵ Translations into Rumanian (Carola Francisc, *Zoharul, cartea splendori, traducere din ebraica de Jean de Pauly, traducere în limba româna de Carola Francisc* (Bucuresti: Antet, 1997), and Spanish (Lenó Dujovne, *El Zohar*, vols. 1–5, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sigal, 1977–1978)) are based on that of de Pauly. For a translation into Dutch based on Müller's translation see Ernst Müller, *Zohar, Het Heilige boek van de Kabbalah*, vertaling G. J. van Lamoen (Deventer: Ankh-Hermes, 1982). For a Polish translation based on Franck's translation, see Azriel Nathan Frenk, *Opowiesci Zoharu, przelozyl z hebrajskiego, wstepem i komentarzem opatrzył I. Kania* (Krakow: Wydawn. Literackie, 1988). For a partial Russian translation based on Ashlag's Hebrew translation see: Efrem Bauch, *Zohar Parashat Pinchas*, Jerusalem 1995 (Еф. Бауха, Зоар, парашат Пинхас, Иерусалим 1995). The anthology of Zoharic articles in Hungarian is based, according to the title page, on translations by Müller and Mopsik, as well as the Ashlag translation and the Soncino translation of the Zohar into English. See Daniel Bíró and Peter Réti, *Zóhár: a ragyogás könyve* (Budapest: Holnap Kiado, 1990). Müller's *Der Zohar* was translated to Japanese in Ishimaru, Shoji, *Zoharu Kabara no seiten* (Hosei University Press, 2012). Previously, Mathers' *Kabbalah Unveiled* was translated in Handa, Itaru, *Beru wo nuida kabara* (Kokusho Kanko kai, 2000) (I am grateful to Shin'ichi Yoshinaga for this information). For translations into various languages based on Scholem's English translation, see footnote 109.

Shalom Batzri, head of the Kabbalistic Yeshiva “Hashalom”, and one of the prominent Kabbalists in Israel in recent years (known for his performance of a Dybbuk exorcism in 1999), collected, translated and edited the collection *Legends of the Zohar*, printed between 1981–1993. This collection was also translated into English, Spanish and French.¹³⁶ Alongside Batzri’s anthology (which includes articles perceived as *Peshat Zohar*) several comprehensive translations of the Zohar into Hebrew have recently come out. A translation of the Zohar is included in Rabbi Daniel Frisch’s anthology of Zohar commentaries, *Matok MiDvash*, published between 1986–1990.¹³⁷ In the introduction to the book, Frisch printed “An essay on the magnitude of importance of studying the book of Zohar and all the other secrets of the Torah in our time.”¹³⁸ In it, the traditional perceptions regarding the eschatological significance of studying the Zohar are repeated, as well as the notion that the Zohar contains words of morality and religious awe (Yirat Shamayim) which can also be learned by those who are not proficient in the Kabbalah.¹³⁹ A Hebrew translation of the Zohar was also included in the Zohar commentary of Yechiel Bar Lev, *Zohar with Yedid Nefesh Commentary*, published in 14 volumes between 1992–1999.¹⁴⁰ Another translation into Hebrew, without a commentary, was published in ten volumes in 1998 by *Yerid Hasefarim* publishing house.¹⁴¹ This translation was prepared by a team of scholars headed by Rabbi Shlomo Cohen, and includes an extensive introduction by Rabbi Yehuda Edri. In the introduction Edri engages in lengthy discussions of the authorship of the Zohar, the history of the Kabbalah, the structure of the Zohar, commentaries of the Zohar, and other subjects. He accepts the traditional position regarding the antiquity of the Zohar, and repeats the eschatological claim as a justification for the translation project.¹⁴² Shlomo Cohen stresses that he abstained from translating the *Idra Raba*, the *Idra Zuta* and *Sifra Ditzniuta*, following the decree against the translation of these sections. It is possible that this emphasis serves

¹³⁶ David Shalom Batzri, *Tales of the Zohar*, 7 vols. (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1981–1993) (Hebrew); Idem, *Tales from the Zohar*, translated into English by Edward Levin (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1992); Idem, *Historias Del Zohar*, traducción, D. Litvak, (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1992); Idem, *Histoires du Zohar*, traduits en français par Y. Lederman, (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1993).

¹³⁷ Daniel Frisch, *Matok MiDvash*, vols. 1–4 (Jerusalem: Machon Da`at Yoseph, 1986–1990).

¹³⁸ Frisch, *Matok MiDvash*, vol. 1, 14–19.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴⁰ Yechiel Bar Lev, *Zohar with Yedid Nefesh Commentary*, vols. 1–14 (Petah Tikvah: n.p., 1992–1997)

¹⁴¹ *Sefer Hazohar*, 10 vols. (Jerusalem: Yerid Hasefarim, 1998).

¹⁴² Ibid., vol. 1, 20.

to distinguish the *Yerid Hasefarim* translation from that of Rabbi Ashlag, who included these sections in his translation.

In addition to translations of the Zohar into Hebrew, an anthology of Zoharic articles translated into English with commentary was prepared by Rabbi Moshe Miller, a member of the Habad Hasidic movement.¹⁴³ Moshe Miller published a comprehensive essay claiming the antiquity of the Zohar, in which he vehemently disagrees with the conclusions of the academic school of Scholem, Tishby and their ilk, but nevertheless relies on academic studies from recent years (first and foremost those of Moshe Idel).¹⁴⁴

A more comprehensive translation of the Zohar into English was prepared by the largest neo-Kabbalistic movement, the Kabbalah Center. The translation, completed by Michael Berg, was published in twenty-three volumes between 1999–2003.¹⁴⁵ This edition is based on Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag's Hebrew translation and commentary, *Hasulam*. The edition begins with lengthy introductions by Philip Berg, the founder of the Kabbalah Center, and his son Michael, which present the neo-Kabbalistic ideas of their movement. The Bergs accept traditional Kabbalistic perceptions regarding the authenticity of the Zohar, its authority and its holiness, but they integrate these perceptions with typical New Age ideas. Accordingly, Michael Berg explains the purpose of his translation project based on the traditional perception that studying and spreading the Zohar will bring redemption closer, but as far as he is concerned redemption equals transformation to a higher level of global consciousness:

The following translation of the Zohar strives to open a door to the great cosmic mysteries for those who are genuinely interested in understanding the structure and laws of the universe. It is thus utterly vital for the spiritual and physical survival of humanity; and its teachings are designed to lead humanity to the days of the Mashiach, the long-prophesized return of the golden age, when peace, compassion, wisdom and love will prevail among people, when harmony will rule in the depths below as it does in the heights above. Such are the true goals of all metaphysical systems... Transformation of consciousness is the point, for from that comes the elevation of global consciousness, given our current condition, we cannot afford to ignore the gift of these Holy words any longer. It is time to change the world.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Moshe Miller, *Zohar Selections Translated and Annotated* (Morristown: Fiftieth Gate Publication, 2000).

¹⁴⁴ Moshe Miller, *The Authenticity of the Zohar*. http://www.chabad.org/kabbalah/article_cdo/aid/380763/jewish/Other-Claims-and-Responses-Continued.htm (accessed 15.11.2016).

¹⁴⁵ Michael Berg, *The Zohar by Shimon Bar Yochai with the Sulam commentary*, 23 vols. (New York: Kabbalah Center International, 1999–2003).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, lxxvii.

In his introduction, Philip Berg ties the spreading of the Zohar to the arrival of the New Age of Aquarius:

The critical moment of change would arrive in conjunction with the Aquarian Age... The Aquarian influence will be a subtle force that will permit the gradual spread of the Holy Grail until it becomes an integral force of humankind.¹⁴⁷

Differing from traditional Kabbalists and modern Jewish translators of the Zohar, who underline the “Jewish” nature of the Zohar as a religious or national text, Philip Berg emphasizes the universalist nature of the Zohar (an emphasis reminiscent of the Christian Kabbalistic and occultist approach): “The entire world will come to understand that the holy Zohar, which ushered in the second revelation, was intended for all humankind.”¹⁴⁸ This emphasis is expressed by adopting a Christian term, “the Holy Grail”, as another name for the Zohar. In a segment integrating New Age astrological perceptions, Berg asserts that the publication of the “Holy Grail” in its entirety will allow the attraction of positive astral influence in the world (by means of reading-scanning the Zohar) and will lead to the elimination of chaos from our lives:

To address these influences, which can at times be positive or negative, the Holy Grail was assigned the task of tapping these positive influences and eliminate (sic) the negative influences. Each year brings with it a host of different influences. Nevertheless, the scanning-reading charts that will become available after the publishing of the entire Holy Grail, will assign the appropriate section of the Holy Grail to each and every week in any given year. Thus, the practitioner will have at his/her fingertips the relevant and timely connecting-section towards the elimination of chaos from our lives.¹⁴⁹

Like many others who translated the Zohar, Michael Berg criticizes and invalidates the previous translations of the Zohar into English. He speaks out against abridged editions (probably referring to the Soncino Edition) and against the anthologies that came out in English:

Those who think they are familiar with the text, from often highly abridged editions or ones that assemble aphorisms into subject categories, will invariably find this edition utterly different from what they have been accustomed to thinking of as the Zohar. The other works are best viewed as being like the trailers one sees

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., xxviii.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., xxv.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., xx–xxi.

long before the actual movie arrives: and like many trailers they have created an entirely misleading impression of what they were supposed to represent faithfully.¹⁵⁰

Berg claims that he intentionally refrains from writing an academic interpretation of the Zohar. His objection is directed against academic translators such as Daniel Matt, who began his translation project in the same period. Berg's words highlight the competition over the growing cultural capital of the Zohar between neo-Kabbalists and academic scholars of Kabbalah:

Those involved with producing this edition were faced with the question of whether to present it in a formal academic manner – with footnotes, scholarly digressing on linguistic matters, and so on – or to offer it to the world in a form as simple and unadorned as possible, so that its purpose would remain solely what it always has been: to bring light where formerly there was none. We chose the latter course, since providing material for yet more obscure treaties on metaphysical theology serves no real purpose, but it does betray the real purpose of the Zohar.¹⁵¹

Conclusion

The various translations of the Zohar reviewed in this article were created in different historical, social and political contexts and were written from diverse theological and ideological standpoints and hermeneutical perspectives. For all the translations of the Zohar that have been and continue to be created over the generations, there is one common denominator – the desire to spread it among audiences who are unable to read it in its original format. The various translations, however, differ from one another in the reader-audience they address, in the choice of Zoharic material translated, in the reasons used to justify the translation and in the ideological, political and economic factors that stimulated and enabled the various translation projects.

In several cases, common ideological factors stand behind translations done in different languages. Thus, Sabbatean ideology motivated eighteenth-century Zohar translations into Yiddish and Ladino, with Sabbatean circles also possibly involved in Latin translations of the period. During the Renaissance and the Baroque period, and in the modern era as well, Christian Kabbalists, converted Jews and missionaries translated Zoharic articles into Latin, German, French and Yiddish. Theosophical and occultist circles translated the Zohar

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., lxxiii.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., lxxi.

into English and French at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Jewish scholars affiliated with these circles translated Zoharic articles into Arabic and German. At the outset of the twentieth century, Jewish scholars affiliated with neo-romantic and Zionist circles translated the Zohar into German, Hebrew, Yiddish and English. Various English, French and Hebrew translations were written in the twentieth and twenty-first century from an academic perspective, based on a historical-philological research approach. Other translations in Hebrew and English were done during this same period by contemporary Jewish Kabbalists, using traditional and neo-Kabbalistic approaches.

The various theological and ideological perspectives from which the Zohar translations were created, as well as the diverse audiences they were intended for, formed the nature and scope of the different translations. Some chose to translate particular sections of the Zohar. Others created anthologies of translated Zoharic articles, which were chosen by different criteria. Christian Kabbalists like Sommer and Norellius chose to translate Zoharic articles that, according to their understanding, conveyed Christian conceptions. Traditional Jewish Kabbalistic circles generally chose to translate articles considered *Peshat Zohar*, mainly anecdotes and moral stories. The more comprehensive translations written by Jews in the twentieth century, for example the Soncino translation in English and the *Yerid Hasefarim* in Hebrew, also refrained from translating the most esoteric units of the Zohar, such as the *Idrot* and *Sifra Detzniuta*. In fact, it was exactly these esoteric parts that were translated by Sabbateans into Ladino and by the Christian Kabbalist, Knorr von Rosenroth, into Latin. Following von Rosenroth, these texts became central in occultist circles at the turn of the nineteenth century. In contrast, the modern anthologies of Zoharic articles that have been written from an academic perspective are generally divided according to subjects that reflect the categories according to which academic research of Kabbalah is carried out.

There was often competition between the different ideological circles behind the Zohar translation projects over the cultural capital (and sometimes the economic gains) that Zohar translation provided. The more the fame of the Zohar and its value as a cultural commodity increased in communities that were unable to read it in its original tongue, the more competition between various groups around the control of translation and distribution of the Zohar increased as well. As Pierre Bourdieu observes, “In fact, analysis of the fields of cultural production shows that, whether among theatre and film critics or political journalists, whether in the intellectual field or the religious field,

producers produce not, or not so much as people think, by reference to their audience, but by reference to their competitors.”¹⁵² To a great extent this is true regarding the field of Zohar translations, especially in the modern era. As we have seen in this review, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century great interest in the Kabbalah arose among Western esoteric circles in Europe and the United States. In this context various Zohar translations were created in European languages, most of which were based on Knorr von Rosenroth’s Latin translation of the Zohar. It may well be that the appearance of these translations encouraged the writing of Zohar translations in German and later in English by Jewish translators that were mostly based on the Aramaic original. These translations drew critique from Gershom Scholem and his disciples, who claimed that they did not adhere to rigorous academic standards. The academic scholars created translations in Hebrew, German and English that deployed historical and philological tools. The competition over the cultural capital of the Zohar also encouraged the creation of Zohar translations in Jewish Kabbalistic circles. It seems that it is not a coincidence that Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag’s translation project was created during the same period in which Tishby’s comprehensive anthology was published.

In the late twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century interest in the Zohar and the Kabbalah is growing in many circles, resulting in intensive Zohar translation activity, mostly English, French and Hebrew. As we saw, three new translations of the Zohar in Hebrew have appeared in the past few decades (by Daniel Frish, Yechiel Bar Lev and Shlomo Cohen), which were all created in orthodox circles. In my opinion, the appearance of these translations should be regarded as a response to the intensive spreading of the interpretation of *Hasulam* by neo-Kabbalistic groups, mainly the Kabbalah Center (and recently the Bnei Baruch group). The appearance of two new comprehensive translations of the Zohar into English in the past few years, the Pritzker Edition by Daniel Matt and Michael Berg’s translation for the Kabbalah Center (as well as Moshe Mille’s partial translation) was stimulated by competition for the growing English readership interested in Kabbalah. The increasing popularity of the Kabbalah and the Zohar amongst Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, and the fact that very few circles today are able to read it in its original form, promises the appearance of additional Zohar translations in the future.

¹⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 165.

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