

## THE ZOHAR, THE BOOK OF SPLENDOR, RADIANCE, ENLIGHTENMENT

### A BASIC CHRONOLOGY

The Zohar is the major text of Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. It is arranged in the form of a commentary of the Torah, the Five Books of Moses. It is a mosaic of Bible, midrash, medieval homily, fiction, and fantasy. Its central theme is the interplay of human and divine realities. Its language is a peculiar brand of Aramaic that breaks the rules of grammar and invents words. (Matt xv)

1275-1280 Moses de Leon settled in the city of Guadalajara and began to produce a mystical Midrash. (Matt 7)

1280-1286 Moses de Leon (born around 1240, probably in Leon, and died in 1305, in Arevalo, Spain) produced the main body of The Zohar. (Matt 8)

The Zohar is a pseudo-epigraphic work. The language is a pseudo-Aramaic spoken by Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai and his disciples as they wander through the Galilee exchanging kabbalistic insights. (Matt 8)

1281 Moses de Leon had already shown parts of The Zohar to at least one of his kabbalistic colleagues in Guadalajara, Isaac ben Solomon Abi Sahula. (Matt 8)

1286-1305 Moses de Leon wrote books in Hebrew under his own name and copied out portions of The Zohar for sale and circulation. (Matt 9)

1291 Moses de Leon remained in Guadalajara until at least this year, and from there he began circulating The Zohar. (Matt 9)

1305 Isaac ben Samuel arrives in Toledo from Acre, Israel. Isaac, who became one of the leading kabbalists of the fourteenth century, heard about the newly discovered Midrash of Rabbi Shim'on. He was able to meet Moses in Valladolid, who promised to show him the original manuscript if he came to Avila, where Moses lived. They parted and Moses set out for his home. But he became ill and died in the town of Arevalo. Isaac traveled to Avila and spoke with Moses' widow and she told him that there was no ancient manuscript, that Moses had written the book entirely from his own head. Isaac traveled on and made further inquiries and found support for Moses' claim. (From the diary of Isaac ben Samuel. Matt 3-4)

Moses de Leon's name faded. The Zohar was gradually accepted as the ancient wisdom of Rabbi Shim'on and his circle. By the middle of the sixteenth century, it ranked with the Bible and the Talmud as a sacred text (Matt 4)

- 15<sup>th</sup> century Passages of The Zohar were translated into Latin for use by Christian devotees of esoteric lore in Renaissance Italy. (Green xii)
- 1558 Mantua, Italy. Printing of Tikunei haZohar, a commentary of the first word of Genesis.
- 1558-1560 Mantua, Italy. Printing of the main body of the Zohar in three volumes.
- 1559-1560 Cremona, Italy. Printing of the main body of the Zohar in one volume.
- 1597 Salonika, Ottoman Empire. Printing of the main body of the Zohar in one volume.
- 1931-1934 United Kingdom. The Soncino Press edition in five volumes, edited by Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon.
- 1989 United Kingdom. *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, three volumes. Edited by Isaiah Tishby and translated from the Hebrew edition (1949, 1961) into English by David Goldstein.
- 2004-2017 The United States. Pritzker edition of the Zohar, 12 volumes. Edited and translated by Daniel C Matt and an Academic Committee of 22 experts.

#### Works Cited

Green, Arthur. *A Guide to the Zohar*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004.

Matt, Daniel C. *The Book of Enlightenment*. Translation and Introduction. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983.