INTRODUCTION
Chapter One

Moses ben Shem Tob de León

1.1 Biographical Sketch

The author of Sefer ha-Rimmon, Moses ben Shem Tob de León, is best known from the controversy which surrounds him concerning his assumed involvement with either the authorship or editing of the crowning work of medieval Spanish kabbalah, the Zohar. As with many classical and medieval personalities, more is known about de León's literary career than about his personal life. It is assumed that he was born circa 1240 in León and died in 1305 in Arevalo. The first dated piece of biographical information that we know of with certainty, however, is the Hebrew copy of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed which was made for him in 1264.¹

From the research of Gershom Scholem² and several other scholars, most notably Alexander Altmann³ and Asi Farber,⁴ a clear picture of de León's intellectual development has emerged. De León's career can be divided into three distinct periods: philosophy,⁵ linguistic mysticism, and theosophy, i.e.

---

³Cf. A. Altmann, Qovez 'al Yad, n.s. 9 (1980): 219-93.
⁵With respect to de León's philosophical training, it is safe to assume that, in addition to Maimonides, he was versed in both Aristotelian and Neoplatonic sources, translated from Arabic into Hebrew. The influence of Aristotelian terminology is particularly prominent in the realm of psychology, as is evident especially from de León's Hebrew theosophic works; see Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 240-41, and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Philo and the Zohar," JJS 10 (1959): 37-38, 41-44. Concerning de León's use of Neoplatonic sources, see Scholem, Major Trends, p. 203. The penetration of Neoplatonic terminology into kabbalah was accomplished mainly through the writings of Isaac the Blind and his Gerones disciples as well as the writings of the so-called 'Iyyun circle. Cf. Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 3.
speculation centered on the contemplation of the ten divine emanations or gradations, the sefirot. *Sefer ha-Rimmon* clearly belongs to the last period as the work gives ample evidence of a mature, well-conceived theosophic posture.

The suspicion that de León may have had something to do with the writing of the *Zohar* did not originate, as some mistakenly assume, with the philological and historical researches of Scholem. Indeed, this charge, as is attested by the diary account of Isaac of Acre, a kabbalist more or less contemporary with de León, was made already at the time of the distribution of the work in the end of the thirteenth century. The history of this question as treated in both traditional and scholarly documents has been catalogued by Isaiah Tishby, and there is no need to review it here in detail. Suffice it to say that scholars today generally accept Scholem's conclusions that all of the *Zohar*, with the exception of the Ra'aya Meheimna section and the Tiqqunim, was authored by de León, sometime in the last two decades of the thirteenth century. From the point of view of *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, the question of the authorship and chronology of the *Zohar* is crucial. The question will be treated in more detail later on.

1.2 De León's Literary Corpus

Considerable uncertainty still exists with respect to the precise chronology of de León's literary production. If we accept the divisions of de León's intellectual career enumerated above, then his writings may be classified accordingly. In the pre-theosophic period, we know of one text which was definitely authored by de León, viz. the *Or Zaru'a*. Alexander Altmann, who published a critical edition of *Or Zaru'a* some years ago, was the first to suggest an early dating for this work, circa 1274. Altmann based his dating on a comparative analysis of *Or Zaru'a* with Joseph Gikatilla's *Ginnat 'Egoz*, a work on alphabetical mysticism written in 1274 under the influence of the

---


8 See reference above, n. 3.

9 See Altmann, *Qovez 'al Yad*, n.s. 9 (1980): 243-44.
ecstatic-prophetic kabbalism of Abraham Abulafia. Although Scholem\(^\text{10}\) had already noted the conceptual kinship between the two works, he nevertheless maintained that "Or Zaru'a" was composed in 1288/89.\(^\text{11}\) Insofar as "Or Zaru'a" is a philosophical-mystical treatise on cosmology that shows no sign of a developed theosophy, which is however evident in works dated from 1286 and 1287, it is indeed difficult to accept Scholem's dating, involving as it would the assumption that the author reverted to a previously held mystical system.

Asi Farber has accepted the earlier dating of Altmann, but has argued that despite the obvious literary connection between "Or Zaru'a" and Ginnat 'Egoz, there are significant doctrinal differences between the two works, e.g. the position accorded to Metatron in the realm of the separate intelligences: whereas for Gikatilla this angel is the last of the ten intellects, for de León he is the first.\(^\text{12}\) Farber has also identified several other treatises that may have served as possible sources for de León's "Or Zaru'a." In some instances, she has even argued that de León himself may have authored these texts.\(^\text{13}\) On the basis of her manuscript findings, therefore, Farber has concluded that in Castile in the 1270's there were at least three circles of Jewish esotericists concerned with the mysteries of the Hebrew language and the divine names: the school of Abulafia, the circle of Gikatilla, and the circle to which de León belonged.

With respect to the theosophic period of de León's career, there is again some uncertainty regarding specific details in chronology. Scholem argued that between 1275 and 1280, before becoming totally immersed in theosophical matters, de León composed the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, the earliest stratum of Zoharic literature, in Guadalajara.\(^\text{14}\) In this same period, presumably, we know


\(^\text{12}\)Farber, "*Li-Meqorot*," pp. 77-87.

\(^\text{13}\)Farber, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-96. The crucial texts are extant in MSS Vatican 441, Paris 779 and 817, JTS Mic. 2156.

\(^\text{14}\)Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 181-86, 188. It is clear that even within this one stratum of Zoharic literature there is a discernible evolution. I will cite but two examples. The section of *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Ruth (*ZH*, 75a-91b) approaches stylistically and linguistically the form of the main body of *Zohar*, whereas the short piece of *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Song of Songs (*ZH*, 60c-61d) accords thematically and conceptually with the theosophy of the later parts of the work.
of at least one other literary production of de León, the pseudepigraphic 'Orhot Hayyim attributed to R. Eliezer ben Hycanus. Interestingly enough, R. Eliezer figures more prominently in the Midrash ha-Ne'elam than does R. Shim'on bar Yo'hai, the mystical hero of the main body of the Zohar. From 1280 to 1286, according to Scholem, de León composed, in a pseudo-Aramaic, the various parts of the Zohar that are unified by style, language, and a common theosophic conception of God.

After the completion of the Zohar, if we follow Scholem's chronology, de León composed a separate treatise on the commandments, called Piqquda, which has been subsequently printed as part of the Ra'aya Meheimna stratum in the Zohar. He was also, apparently, involved in the editing of a collection of Geonic responsa, Sha'arei Teshuvah, to which he added Zoharic parallels under the name of the "Yerushalmi." It was in this period as well that he composed

It is evident, therefore, as Scholem had already suggested, that the author worked on the later parts of Midrash ha-Ne'elam as he began to compose the main body of Zohar; see Major Trends, p. 184.

15Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 183, 200; Kabbalah, p. 432. The second part of the text was published by Jellinek, without identifying the author, under the title Seder Gan Eden in his Beit ha-Midrash (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1967), 3:131-40; see Scholem, Major Trends, p. 393, n. 103.

16The Aramaic of the Zohar is actually a hodge-podge of both Eastern and Western dialects. On the Aramaic of the Zohar, see Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 163-66; Tishby, Mishnat ha-Zohar, 1:76-80 (Introduction); and the detailed study of M. Kaddari, Diqduq ha-Lashon ha-'Aramit shel ha-Zohar (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1971).

17Scholem, Major Trends, p. 185; Kabbalah, p. 234; E. Gottlieb, Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), pp. 215-30.

18Scholem, Major Trends, pp. 200, 396, n. 146; Kabbalah, pp. 213, 231. Cf. ShR 85:10; 149:9-10. The presence of Zoharic material in this collection of responsa was first noted by David Luria, who affirmed, however, on the strength of this evidence, the antiquity of the Zohar rather than recognizing the pseudepigraphic nature of these responses. See D. Luria, Ma'amor Qadmut Sefer ha-Zohar (Waraw, 1887), ch. 2; idem, "Introduction" to Teshuvot ha-Ge'onim: Sha'arei Teshuvah, ed. W. Leiter (New York, 1946), iii-xvi. Cf. Tishby, Mishnat ha-Zohar, 1:63 (Introduction). The name "Yerushalmi" was employed by de León in some other of his Hebrew writings, including Sefer ha-Rimmon, to refer to Zoharic passages. See below, § 2.7. Finally, it should be noted that both the Geronee and Castilian kabbalists already referred to the Sefer ha-Bahir as the "Yerushalmi." See Scholem, Origins of the Kabbalah, pp. 40-41, n. 68. Abraham Abulafia likewise cites the Sefer ha-Bahir in the name of the "Yerushalmi." See M. Idol, Kiivei R. 'Avraham 'Abul'afiyah u-Mishnato (Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976), 1: 160, n. 133. On the use of the same appellation, "Yerushalmi," to designate passages from the Midrash ha-Ne'elam in the writings of Isaac ibn Sahula, Todros Abulafia, de León (see, e.g., Sheqel ha-Qodesh, ed. A. W. Greenup [London, 1911], p. 107 = ZH, Ruth, 77d; the passage is cited in the name of Sitrei Torah in a fragment from Shushan 'Edut in MS Oxford 1947, f. 38a; see I. Ta-Shema, Tarbiz 40 [1971]: 105 who cites the text without identifying it as part of de León's work; my thanks to Professor Idol who
a host of Hebrew theosophic writings under his own name. The conclusion of Scholem is thus a reversal of that reached by Jellinek and Graetz who argued that de León's Hebrew writings preceded the Zohar. The first such writing which we know of by name is the Shushan 'Edut composed in 1286. The Sefer ha-Rimmon followed in 1287; Sefer ha-Mishqal or Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah in 1290; Sheqel ha-Qodesh in 1292; Mishkan ha-'Edut and Maskiyyot Kesef in 1293. Other works from this period of which we know but which cannot be dated precisely are: the untitled fragment in MS Munich 47; the Sod 'Eser Sefirot Belimah; She'elot u-Teshuvot be-'Inyenei Qabbalah. There are, in addition, various sodot of de León that are extant in MS Vatican 428 as well as MS Schocken 14. Three other works which de León mentions in his writings but which have not been found to date include: a commentary on Ecclesiastes entitled Sha'arei Tzedeq, Sefer Pardes, and Tappuhei Zahav. De León's creative literary career, in Scholem's view, came to a halt in 1293. From that time until his death in 1305 he dedicated his time and energy to making copies of the Zohar. The sequence of events may thus be summarized: the writing of the Zohar, the writing of the Hebrew works which compliment the Zohar, and the distribution of the Zohar.

The most serious challenge to Scholem's views came from Isaiah Tishby. While Tishby accepted the major claim of Scholem that de León was the author of the Zohar, he criticized Scholem's chronology. The following are the main objections raised by Tishby: (1) Most of the Zoharic passages in de León's Hebrew theosophic writings are presented as the author's own creation rather than as citations from an ancient source. (2) Generally speaking, the Zoharic passages
drew my attention to this manuscript), and other thirteenth-century kabbalists, see Scholem, "Peraqim mi-toledot sifrut ha-qabbalah," Kiryat Sefer 6 (1929-30): 113-17.

19Cf. A. Jellinek, Moses ben Schem-Tob de Leon und sein Verhältnis zum Sohar (Leipzig, 1852), and idem, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala (Leipzig, 1852), pt. 2, p. 70.


21The dating of this fragment remains especially problematic. In Scholem's original study of this text (see reference above, n. 10) he conjectured that he had found a fragment from de León's Shushan 'Edut. After finding an authentic fragment of the aforementioned treatise, however, Scholem recanted his original view. It is still unclear to what larger work the fragment in MS Munich 47 belongs. The fragment remains especially problematic from the point of view of de León's bibliography insofar as it contains material related to the early linguistic mysticism, on the one hand, and to the mature theosophical mysticism, on the other. See the remarks of A. Farber, "Li-meqorot," p. 87, n. 47; and see below, § 2.2.

that are cited are sentences or small fragments of larger passages that are to be found in the Zohar itself. (3) The Zoharic passages that are cited are often not brought as they appear in the Zohar but with significant variation. (4) The Zoharic passages are sometimes brought in the name of "the commentators," an expression inappropriate for the Talmudic period. (5) In several places de León expresses a view that is at odds with that established in the Zohar.23

Tishby therefore reached the conclusion, already posited by Jellinek and Graetz, that the Hebrew writings of de León preceded the Zohar. At the time of the composition of his first dated Hebrew theosophic work, Shushan 'Edut, de León had in front of him only a select number of passages, mostly from Midrash ha-Ne'elam, which were later incorporated into the Zohar. Furthermore, according to Tishby, when de León was working on his Hebrew writings he was concurrently involved in writing pseudepigraphic passages which he then inserted into his texts in the name of "the commentators," "the midrash," or "the ancients."24 In the case of many of these passages there was no Aramaic text before him which he was translating. Only from 1293 onward did de León work intensively on the Zohar. One of the proofs which Tishby offers to support his conclusion is the fact that, in his opinion, in Mishkan ha-'Edut (1293) we find many more hints and allusions to an "ancient" book than we find in de León's other writings. By the time of the later Hebrew works, therefore, the author's intention to compose an ancient, i.e. pseudepigraphic, midrash is clear. The actual writing of the Zohar therefore took place in the last decade of the thirteenth century.25

Most scholars have accepted the chronology of Scholem and, as far as I am aware, Tishby himself never restated his argument.26 Admittedly, there are problems with Tishby's counterthesis. I will note two of the more salient ones in this context. There is, first of all, the fact that Gikatilla's major theosophic works, Sha'arei Tsedeq and Sha'arei 'Orah, written circa 1290, as well as his commentary on the "Thirteen Attributes [of Mercy] that derive from the Highest Crown," show the definite influence of certain parts of the Zohar, including the 'Idrot.27 Even if it be argued that there is no direct mention of the Zohar in

23Tishby, Mishnat ha-Zohar, 1:106 (of the Introduction).
24Scholem of course used the same passages to prove that the Zohar was a completed work at the time that de León wrote his Hebrew theosophic treatises; see Major Trends, pp. 192, 394, n. 12.
25Tishby, Mishnat ha-Zohar, 1:106-07.
26It is interesting to note that in his address, "Terumat Gershom Scholem le-heqer ha-Zohar," Tishby presents Scholem's chronology without mentioning any points of contention. See Gershom Scholem: On the Man and his Work (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy for the Humanities and Sciences, 1983), pp. 32-47.
27Cf. E. Gottlieb, Mehqarim be-Sifrut ha-Qabbalah, pp. 132-62; J. Gikatilla, Sha'arei 'Orah, ed. J. Ben-Shlomo (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1970), 1: 162-63, 172, n. 61, 253, n. 144; 2:35, n. 6, 107-08, nn. 5-6; Gikatilla, Sod yud-gimmel
these works or even a paraphrase therefrom,²⁸ it has been shown by Asi Farber²⁹ that in an earlier work of Gikatilla, his Commentary on Ezekiel's Chariot, there are such paraphrases. A second argument in favor of Scholem's dating was advanced by Ephraim Gottlieb.³⁰ The argument is based on the fact that Bahya ben Asher in his Commentary on the Torah, completed in 1291, makes use of the Zohar. Indeed, on two occasions he cites the Zohar in the name of "the Midrash of R. Shim'on bar Yoḥai."

In all likelihood, then, the Zohar, or at least sections of it, began to circulate in the latter half of the 1280's. It may be said with certainty, moreover, that in his Hebrew writings de León did in fact make extensive use of the Zohar, at times quoting from it in a fictitious vein but more often simply employing its terminology and symbolism. Not only do we find paraphrases and citations but also similar lines of exegesis of scriptural and rabbinic passages. From my own research I have not found that Tishby's position with respect to Mishkan ha-‘Edut and the rest of de León's corpus is fully substantiated. That is, the use of the Zohar, as far as I can tell, is not substantially different in the early and later Hebrew texts. Whether one is evaluating Shushan ‘Edut, Sefer ha-Rimmon, Sefer ha-Mishqal, Sheqel ha-Qodesh, or Mishkan ha-‘Edut, it seems to me that de León's unique use of the Zohar is evident. In all of his major Hebrew theosophic texts, he exemplifies the same freedom with respect to the Zohar, to cite a passage in the name of some fictitious guise (e.g., in the name of the sages or the midrash) or rather to simply paraphrase a passage without noting a textual dependency at all. Evident in all of his texts as well is his penchant for combining isolated Zoharic sections that treat the same topic. In short, de León did not adhere to one strict methodical use of the Zohar, as is the case with kabbalists such as David ben Yehudah he-Hasid or Menahem Recanati. There is also, as Scholem asserted, a similarity in the peculiar Aramaic of the Zohar and the Hebrew idiom of these works. It does seem correct, therefore, to assert that de León had the bulk of the Zohar before him when composing his other theosophic writings and that he was intent on popularizing the mystical system contained therein. Yet, as will be suggested later on, certain sections of the Zohar, most notably the 'Idrot, do present some difficulties to an otherwise cogent and coherent picture painted by Scholem.

---

²⁸See, however, Ben-Shlomo in the introduction to his edition of Gikatilla's Sha'arei 'Orah, 1: 29-30.  
³⁰Gottlieb, Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitvei Rabbenu Bahya ben 'Asher (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1970), pp. 167ff. It should be noted that Scholem had already mentioned Bahya's use and citation of the Zohar; see Major Trends, pp. 188, 394, n. 120.