Sefer ha-Zohar as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*

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In every literate culture there are books that are perceived as more significant than others in their quality, authority or sanctity. Such privileged books are commonly described by the terms “canonical”, “sacred”, “classical”, and so forth. This study offers a new typology of such books, which is based on a distinction between three major modes of reception of texts. I will suggest using the term “canonical text” to refer to texts that are regarded by a community as a source of authority, “sacred text” to refer to texts whose content is perceived as sacred, and “holy book” to refer to books whose non-semantic (i.e., phonetic, graphic and material) aspects are treated as such. In light of this distinction, I will examine the emergence of changing perspectives of Sefer ha-Zohar (The Book of Splendor) the central work of Kabbalah that became one of the most authoritative and

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revered texts in the history of Judaism. The study of the reception of the Zohar in light of these terms is intended to clarify the distinction between the three types of privileged texts and to contribute to understanding the history of the reception of the Zohar.

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In contemporary use, the terms “canon” and “canonical” text (which are derived from the Greek word denoting a measuring rod) are prevalent in literary, cultural and religious studies. The modern use of the term “canon” to denote privileged literary works consciously adopts a term replete with religious connotations. In religious studies the term denotes authoritative texts, while in literary and cultural studies it refers to texts that are a standard of literary excellence. In this study, I will use the term “canonical” to refer to an authoritative corpus of texts. I would like to emphasize that although such a definition is used to describe privileged religious books, it does not designate any “religious” element, such as the sanctity ascribed to a text or its use in ritual.

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3 Guy Stroumsa (“The Body of Truth and its Measures: New Testament Canonization in Context”, to appear in the Festschrift for Kurt Rudolf) suggests to distinguish between “cultural canonization” and “religious canonization”. According to Stroumsa, the reference to these two distinct phenomena by the term “canon” can be traced to the Alexandrians scholars’ use of term, in the third-century before the common era, to denote their collection of classical works, and to the use of the term by the Church fathers to denote the books of the New Testament. I am grateful to Prof. Stroumsa who made a copy of his paper available to me.