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THE DE ROSSI COLLECTION OF HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS AT THE
BIBLIOTECA PALATINA AND ITS IMPORTANCE FOR JEWISH
HISTORY

Introduction

The collection of approximately 1500 Hebrew manuscripts amassed by the Parma priest and professor Giovanni de Rossi during the 18th century, and acquired subsequently by the Biblioteca Palatina located in the same city, has survived there intact until the present day. De Rossi himself wrote a descriptive catalogue in Latin of his entire collection, and this no doubt served as a *vadum mecum* for the relative small coterie of scholars who travelled to Parma to study individual manuscripts there during the late 19th and 20th centuries. In our own present time, the world of learning has benefited by a new catalogue of the entire collection (and of the Palatina's smaller Stern collection of Hebrew manuscripts as well), edited by Benjamin Richler and with palaeographical and codicological descriptions by Malachi Beit-Arié. The two Jerusalem scholars are to be congratulated on their outstanding achievement which, building to be sure on the work of predecessors who labored over many years at the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew manuscripts on the description and analysis of their continuously growing collections, has resulted in a most readable and useful volume that includes much information not conveyed earlier by de Rossi or other scholars who followed him.

Having studied many of the manuscripts during several visits, both longer and shorter, to Parma over the past two decades, I eventually became convinced that these texts as a whole, particularly when studied with the colophons and other observations that scribes and readers often included in them, contain valuable and often still unexplored historical information that, when brought together and considered in its entirety, might well require serious revisions, reassessments and augmentations to the present understanding of Jewish history and Hebraic culture during the Middle Ages and beyond, as depicted and, one might say, enshrined in printed works. Through the following observations I hope to show why the task of investigation is an urgent one, only made more so by publication of the recent catalogue. The presentation takes the form of an analysis of individual Parma manuscripts, which will continue until several series of critical evaluations of all the pertinent texts has been achieved. The first series will focus on texts of Sarfatic – i.e., medieval French — origin, beginning with descriptions of the several immediately following manuscripts.

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