CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

GIOVANNI BERNARDO DE’ ROSSI’S

DICTIONARY OF HEBREW AUTHORS (DIZIONARIO STORICO DEGLI AUTORI Ebrei e DELLE LORO OPERE)\(^1\)

One of the gems of Hebrew bibliography is the *Dizionario storico degli autori ebrei e delle loro opere* (*Dictionary of Hebrew Authors*) of Giovanni Bernardo de’ Rossi, a bio-bibliographical work published in Parma (1802) and encompassing the spectrum of Hebrew literature (figs. 76, 77).

The author’s erudition and the *Dictionary’s* many virtues notwithstanding, this bibliographical treasure is not, today, widely known, and even less frequently quoted. Several reasons can account for the *Dictionary’s* obscurity. It was written in Italian, limiting its accessibility; the background of the author, a Catholic abbé, as well as his utilization of material from non-Jewish sources; and, I would suggest, the availability of a contemporaneous work, the *Shem ha-Gedolim*, the bibliographical masterpiece of R. Hayyim Joseph David Azulai (Hida, 1724–1806), published only a few years earlier (Livorno, 1774–86), which has overshadowed the *Dictionary*.

The Italian Christian-Hebraist Giovanni Bernardo de’ Rossi was born on October 25, 1742, in Castelnuovo Don Bosco, east of Turin in the Piedmont. He learned in Ivrea and afterwards in the University of Turin, where, as a theology student, de’ Rossi began his study of Hebrew. In October, 1769, he accepted an appointment as professor of Oriental languages at the University of Parma, where he remained for the rest of his life. De’ Rossi’s interests and studies were concentrated in three fields dealing with the Hebrew book, that is, typography and the history of the Hebrew book, bibliography, and textual variants in the Hebrew Bible. His concentration on these fields, particularly into the area of textual variants, resulted in his becoming a collector of manuscripts and early printed books.\(^2\)

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1 The original version of this article was published as the “Prolegomenon” to Giovanni Bernardo de Rossi’s *Dictionary of Hebrew Authors (Dizionario Storico degli Autori Ebrei e delle Loro Opere)*, Mayer Sulzberger translation (Lewiston, N.Y., 1999), pp. v–xvi.

De’ Rossi expresses his love of and fascination with books in the introduction to *De typographia hebraeo-Ferrariensi*, where he writes:

There is no art which carries men away into greater admiration than typography; none which even at its origin had gained greater renown. Scarcely had it been invented, scarcely had the first specimens been published, when it was esteemed by all, wonderful, portentous, divine. Kingdoms, provinces, States, princes, and private men strove with one another in their eagerness to take hold of it, to cultivate it, to advance it to greater perfection, and, with equal zeal, authors learned in its origin and progress, are diligently investigating as to who introduced it into the world and developed it, as to which cities first took it up, as to which books were first produced in each province and state.3

De’ Rossi’s study of textual variants in the Hebrew Bible, the preparation of which necessitated visiting libraries throughout Italy, resulted in his *Variae Lectiones Vetus Testamenti* (Parma, 1784–88), for which he received the knighthood of St. George from the court of Parma. The first products of this research dealing with Hebrew printing were *De typographia hebraeo-Ferrariensi* (Parma, 1780) and *Annali ebreo-tipografici di Sabbioneta* (Parma, 1780), on Ferrara and Sabbionetta, respectively. An appendix to the latter work was published three years later (Erlangen, 1783).

These books were followed by de’ Rossi’s most significant and best known works on Hebrew bibliography, the *Annales hebraeo-typografici sec. XV* (Parma, 1795), a detailed descriptive listing of Hebrew incunabula, in Latin, in three parts, consisting of 51 “editiones anno in signitae,” 35 “editiones anno destitutae,” and 67 “editiones falsae ac suppositiae.” De’ Rossi is credited with being the first bibliographer to distinguish Hebrew incunabula as a separate classification of books; the *Annales* are considered “the foundation stone of the study of Hebrew incunabula and in many respects remain unsurpassed.”4 This pioneer work on incunabula was followed by the *Annales hebraeo-typografici ab an. MDI ad. MDXL* (Parma, 1799), which, divided into the same three categories,

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