HEBREW MANUSCRIPT FRAGMENTS IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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The research and study of medieval Hebrew manuscript fragments has a long tradition in the Czech lands. The leading figures of the Czech Enlightenment, Josef Dobrovský and Fortunát Durych, devoted attention to such fragments within the context of Bible Criticism and worked closely in this field with German and Italian Hebraists (Johann David Michaelis and G. De Rossi). Dobrovský even published a small example of comparative material for the textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible in the study “Pragische Fragmente hebräischer Handschriften” (published in the journal “Orientalische und exegetische Bibliothek”, vol. 12, 1777, edited by J. D. Michaelis); at the author’s request his name was not stated at the time. The fragments that were saved by Dobrovský are mainly parchment fragments from the bindings of early printed books from the collections of Prague’s former Jesuit Library and are now in the Manuscript Papers of Dobrovský at the Museum of Czech Literature in Prague. Dobrovský and Durych’s collaboration also produced a manuscript collection—now unfortunately missing—of select examples of Hebrew tombstone and wall inscriptions, manuscripts and manuscript fragments from Prague (“Specimen palaeographiae hebraicae in monumentis Pragensibus lapideis, parientinis, membraneis et chartaceis collectum”). In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, only occasional and random attention was paid to the registration and study of Hebrew manuscripts in the Czech lands. In the case of Hebrew manuscript fragments, this was almost always a marginal affair, limited only to brief bibliographical descriptions of certain Hebrew fragments within the context of catalogues of manuscripts and early printed books in the historical collections of libraries and archives in Bohemia and Moravia, or brief mentions in travel reports by the Jewish Museum’s specialist staff members.

At the beginning of 2000, work began at the Jewish Museum in Prague under the supervision of Olga Sixtová on preparations for a comprehensive catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts in the collections of archives, libraries and museums in the Czech Republic. As primary
attention was paid to the cataloguing of unregistered separate Hebraic manuscripts—such as Torah scrolls and Megillot Esther or archive materials in Hebrew and Yiddish—secondary finds of Hebrew manuscript fragments on the covers of manuscripts and archive records were made during the cataloguing work, although not enough attention was paid to this material at the outset. It was not until the beginning of 2004 that work began on the systematic research into Hebrew manuscript fragments, with the collaboration of the author of this paper. The first phase of the project involved the excerption of all the available records on Hebrew fragments on the basis of secondary bibliographic sources, such as published and unpublished catalogues of manuscripts, incunabula and early printed books, as well as the inventories of archive collections. The next phase involved the photographic documentation, subsequent identification and systematic cataloguing of Hebrew fragments.

So far, 396 fragments have been found as part of the research; 218 of these were found in Prague libraries and archives. We have completely charted the collections of manuscripts and incunabula at central libraries (The National Library in Prague, the Moravian Library in Brno and the State Research Library in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia) and at several church and monastery libraries (the Metropolitan Chapter House in Prague, now administered by the Prague Castle Archives; the former Franciscan Library in Cheb, now kept at the National Library in Prague), and several state regional and district archives, among others. In some cases, the entire historical collection was researched with the active collaboration of the employees of certain libraries (e.g., the Library of the Royal Canonry of the Premonstratensians at Strahov Monastery and the National Library in Prague) (fig. 17–18). This year, systematic research is being undertaken into all the monastery libraries and smaller central libraries and archives in the Czech Republic. A frequent problem we have come up against in monastery libraries is that of uncatalogued book collections, which often makes research inaccessible and very limited.

With regards to the classification of Hebrew scripts, the majority of manuscripts belong to the Ashkenazic area (almost two-thirds of the collected material) and a small group of manuscript fragments are from Italy and Spain. In terms of the content of the manuscript fragments, 28% are biblical texts, Aramaic targumim and biblical commentaries, 35% are texts from the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud and commentaries on them (so far there is no record of the Jerusalem Talmud), 32% are liturgical materials, such as Siddurim, Maḥzorim