Ancient Studies in Memory of
Elias Bickerman

The Journal
OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SOCIETY

VOLUME 16–17: 1984–1985

Jewish Theological Seminary, 3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027

US ISSN 0010-2016

Composition: Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, IN

Printing: Braun-Brumfield, Inc., Ann Arbor, MI

The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society welcomes articles on all aspects of the ancient Near East. Manuscripts, which must be typed at least double-spaced, and all illustrations should be sent to the Editors, Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 3080 Broadway, New York, NY 10027. A style sheet will be sent on request to prospective contributors.

Subscription information: This double issue, vols 16 & 17, $30 for institutions, $20 for individuals. Regular annual subscription, $15 for institutions, $10 for individuals. Available back issues (all $15 per volume): Vols 4, 5 (*The Gaster Festschrift*), 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 (*Bravmann Memorial Volume*), 14, & 15. Other volumes are available from AMS Press, 56 East 13th Street, New York, N.Y. 10003; and on microfilm from University Microfilm Inc, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.
Foreign orders: Add $1 for postage. Students receive a 20% discount on current issues; proof of student status should accompany order.

Table of Contents

Preface

It is a fitting tribute to the memory of Professor Elias Bickerman that the present volume, originally contemplated as a single issue of the *Journal*, has elicited such a large and generous response from the invited scholars that it has grown to be a volume that could only be embodied as a large double issue. Though published somewhat belatedly in 1987, *Ancient Studies in Memory of Elias Bickerman* comprises volumes 16 and 17, for the years 1984 and 1985, of the *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*. It is also apt that this scholarly memorialization be published in this *Journal*. We have moved our home from Columbia University to the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, as Professor Bickerman moved into office space at the Seminary after his retirement from Columbia. The large number of Columbia and J.T.S. scholars who have contributed to this volume attest to Professor Bickerman's close associations in both academies. Yet as broad as Professor Bickerman's scholarship was, so did his academic associations circle the globe. Accordingly, scholars from many countries have honored the memory of their colleague and friend here. This tribute to Professor Bickerman's memory and contribution to the world of scholarship would not have been possible without the generous assistance of the following benefactors:

The Alexander Kohut Memorial Foundation of the American Academy for Jewish Research;
The Jewish Theological Seminary of America; and
The Lucius N. Littauer Foundation.

We, and all who may learn from the scholarship in this volume, are deeply in their debt.

*Elias J. Bickerman: An Appreciation**

Elias Joseph Bickerman[1] (July 1, 1897–August 31, 1981), for many years a professor of ancient history at Columbia University and a special research fellow at the Jewish Theological Seminary, was one of the greatest classicists of the twentieth century. His erudition extended to practically all aspects of Greco-Roman antiquity: Diplomatics and the history of political institutions; chronology; historiography; intellectual, cultural, and religious history (Greek, Roman, Christian, and Jewish); and belles-lettres. In six languages he published several books and over a hundred articles, many of which are now classics.[2] Bickerman's extraordinary range can be illustrated by the titles of some of the articles he published during the last years of his life: "Love Story in the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite," "The Notion of Marriage at Athens," "Darius I, Pseudo-Smerdis, and the Magi," and "The Generation of Ezra and Nehemiah." Since a full appreciation of Bickerman's scholarship would be out of place here, I shall first describe some characteristics of his work and then summarize three of his important contributions to Jewish studies.

Bickerman always had a profound respect for the ancients. Believing that their words must be treated seriously, he had little patience for those modern scholars who cavalierly dismissed various documents as inauthentic or hastily generalized about "Greeks" and "Orientals" without appreciation for the complexities of ancient culture. Like his teacher Michael Rostovtzeff, Bickerman stressed the minute study of documents, determining their precise nuances, identifying the standard and the exceptional clauses, and tracing the institutional channels through which the documents were composed and transmitted. On the basis of this philological and historical research Bickerman was able to authenticate many texts which had been widely regarded as forgeries. Bickerman argued that ancient (and medieval) scholars were frequently the best interpreters of ancient literature and history. In his discussion of biblical books he would frequently cite patristic and rabbinic interpretations to show that some problems raised by modern criticism were already treated in another form in antiquity. He also enjoyed demonstrating that some issues raised by modern criticism were not real issues at all, but were the symptom of the retrojection of modern perspectives upon ancient material.

In sum, the goal of Bickerman's research was the establishment of contexts: Political and institutional contexts for documents, political and historiographical contexts for histories and polemics, and literary and cultural contexts for literature. Nothing was ever treated in isolation. Bickerman was always comparing and contrasting, illuminating one aspect of antiquity with another.

---

* Reprinted from the *Jewish Book Annual* 40 (1982–83), 162–65.

1 In French publications the name frequently appears as Elie Bikerman, in German as Elias Bickermann.

2 Many of Bickerman's articles have been collected in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden; part I, 1976; part II, 1980; part III, 1986), and in *Religions and Politics in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Como, 1985).

These characteristics of Bickerman's scholarship are clearly exemplified by his studies in ancient Jewish history. First, his great attention to documents. In their descriptions of the Maccabean era, First Maccabees, Second Maccabees, and Josephus quote many documents of Seleucid kings, and these documents, especially those favorable to the Jews, were often regarded by scholars as Jewish forgeries. Bickerman demonstrated that the vast majority of them adhere to the correct terminology and form, and contain benefits which were regularly bestowed by Hellenistic kings. Hence, he concluded, either the documents are the work of very skillful forgers (a possibility to which, we must admit, Bickerman gave insufficient attention), or else they are authentic. Bickerman opted for the latter possibility and has led modern scholarship after him. The most famous study of this type is "A Seleucid Charter of Jerusalem," a brilliant exposition of a document quoted by Josephus in the name of Antiochus III. In another brilliant article the same method was employed to vindicate the decree of Cyrus quoted in the biblical book of Ezra. Bickerman even studied documents which were indubitable forgeries. He sought to date the Letter of Aristeas, which describes the origin of the Greek translation of the Bible, on the basis of various technical terms which appear in the bogus documents which it cites.

Second, the study of the documents led Bickerman to a new understanding of the Maccabees. *The God of the Maccabees* (Berlin, 1937, in German; a serviceable but inadequate English translation appeared in 1979) is remarkable not only for its praise of the Maccabees and the Maccabean martyrs as the saviors of monotheism, a message of hope to the Jews of Hitler's Germany; not only for its survey of the pagan, Jewish, and Christian interpretations of the Maccabean revolt from antiquity to the middle ages, a wonderful demonstration of history as propaganda and propaganda as history; it was especially remarkable for its central thesis: The persecution of the Jewish religion by Antiochus Epiphanes was inspired and engineered not by Epiphanes himself but by militant Jewish apostates. The clash between Judaism and Hellenism was not the outcome of the policy of a mad Hellenistic king—Bickerman stressed that paganism was generally a tolerant system which did not interfere in the religious life of its subject nations—but was the result of internal Jewish tensions. Bickerman saw the extreme Hellenizers as the forerunners of the extreme reformers of nineteenth century Germany, Jews motivated by a desperate desire to "belong" to contemporary western society and to take their fellow Jews with them in the quest. The question raised by Bickerman and his ingenious solution are still the subject of debate.

The other major contribution of *The God of the Maccabees* was the discovery of Maccabean Hellenism. Bickerman was the first to show that the Maccabees were *not* "anti-Hellenistic," but were prepared to draw upon the riches of Hellenistic culture so long as Judaism would be enriched, not threatened, by the process. This point was brought out even more clearly in *From Ezra to the Last of the Maccabees* (New York, 1962). The institution of Hanukkah as a day of celebration, the correspondence between the Maccabees and the Spartans, and the plebiscite to elect Simon high-priest (First Maccabees, chapter 14), demonstrate the Maccabean willingness to incorporate the ways of the Greeks. Bickerman advanced the same thesis for the rabbis of the Talmud. In one article he showed that the framework of the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the Eighteen Benedictions) is that of a Hellenistic civic prayer, in this case, the civic prayer of Jerusalem; in another he showed that the chain of rabbinic tradition outlined by

Sayings of the Fathers was modeled on the chains of tradition advanced by the Greek philosophical schools. Bickerman sought to prove that ancient Judaism was part of the ancient world and must be interpreted in the light of the host culture.

Bickerman was one of the very few scholars whose works are always worth reading, always stimulating, and always important. The world which produced him and shaped him no longer exists. Born in Kishinev to a secular Jewish family, reared in St. Petersburg, educated in Berlin by the last generation of great German classicists, and fully at home in the literature of Russia, Germany, France, Italy, and England, he was one of the last remaining links to a humanistic ideal which now eludes us.

Shaye J. D. Cohen