



BICKERMAN, ELIAS JOSEPH

BICKERMAN, ELIAS JOSEPH (1897-1981), a leading scholar of Greco-Roman history and the Hellenistic world, whose research interests extended to Judaism, some aspects of Iranian history, and even Russian literature of the 18th-20th centuries. He was born in Kishinev and studied under M. Rostovtzeff at the University of Petrograd between 1915 and 1921. He then emigrated to Germany, where he studied at the University of Berlin, subsequently serving as *Privatdozent* (1929-33). In 1933 Bickerman escaped to France, where he worked at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique until 1942, when he left for New York. In 1952 he became professor of ancient history at Columbia University. He retired from teaching in 1967 but continued active research until his death, which occurred during a visit to Tel Aviv.

Bickerman's major works include *Chronology of the Ancient World* (originally written in German, translated into Italian, Russian, and English; latest rev. Eng. ed., London, 1980). A Russian revised edition of his classic *Institutions des Séleucides* (Paris, 1938) has appeared as *Gosudarstvo Selevkidov* (Moscow, 1985); see also Bickerman's articles "The Seleucids and the Achaemenids," in *La Persia e il mondo greco-romano*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, quaderno 76, Rome, 1966, pp. 87-117, and "The Seleucid Period" (*Camb. Hist. Iran* III/1, pp. 3-20). A series of revised articles on the Judeo-Christian tradition was published in three volumes under the title *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden, 1976-86).

Bickerman proposed original solutions to many neglected problems of ancient



history; in particular, he devoted a number of articles to various Old Iranian subjects. In “The Edict of Cyrus in Ezra” (*Studies in Jewish and Christian History* 1, pp. 72-108) he studied the decree of Cyrus the Great permitting Jews to return to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity. Two versions of this edict (one in Hebrew, the other in Aramaic), which differ greatly, are preserved in the Book of Ezra, and scholars had thought that at least one of them could not be authentic. According to Bickerman’s analysis, however, both texts are genuine: The Hebrew version is a royal proclamation published in many languages, and the Aramaic version is a memorandum to the royal treasurer. In “The “Zoroastrian” Calendar” (*Archiv Orientalní* 35, 1967, pp. 197-207) Bickerman demonstrated that the Achaemenid kings used the Babylonian cyclical calendar throughout the empire, though probably at the royal court itself regnal years were counted from the day of accession, rather than from the New Year as in Babylonia. Later the Seleucids and the Parthian kings maintained the Babylonian calendar as official. At least from the 1st century b.c., however, the fiscal administration in Iran was conducted according to the Zoroastrian calendar. “A propos d’un passage de Chares de Mytilene” (*La parola del passato* 91, Naples, 1963, pp. 241-55) contains a discussion of *proskynesis* (prostration before the Persian king, a sign of respect). The article “Darius I, Pseudo-Smerdis, and the Magi,” written in collaboration with H. Tadmor (*Athenaeum*, Pavia, N.S. 56, 1978, pp. 239-61), concerns the status of the Median magi in Persia proper under the Achaemenids. The authors conclude that, whereas in Media the magi were both priests and soothsayers, in Persia they were only wizards.

Bickerman was a member of the American Academy for Jewish Research, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the British Academy.

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