

ALBERT I. BAUMGARTEN

Elias Bickerman  
as a Historian of the Jews

*Texts and Studies in*

*Ancient Judaism*

131

---

**Mohr Siebeck**

Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism  
Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum

Edited by

Peter Schäfer (Princeton, NJ)  
Annette Y. Reed (Philadelphia, PA)  
Seth Schwartz (New York, NY)  
Azzan Yadin (New Brunswick, NJ)

131





Elias Bickerman reading.

Albert I. Baumgarten

Elias Bickerman  
as a Historian of the Jews

A Twentieth Century Tale

Mohr Siebeck

*Albert I. Baumgarten*, born 1942; 1972 PhD Columbia University; currently Professor of Jewish History at Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel.

e-ISBN PDF 978-3-16-151464-7

ISBN 978-3-16-150171-5

ISSN 0721-8753 (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Frontispiece: Elias Bickerman reading. Photo courtesy of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Morton Smith Papers-Jewish Theological Seminary, Personal Photos, Box 21.

© 2010 by Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, Germany.

This book may not be reproduced, in whole or in part, in any form (beyond that permitted by copyright law) without the publisher's written permission. This applies particularly to reproductions, translations, microfilms and storage and processing in electronic systems.

The book was typeset by Martin Fischer in Tübingen using Minion typeface, printed by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Spinner in Ottersweier.

Printed in Germany.

## Preface

I long intended to write something substantial on Elias Bickerman. I viewed the short biography I contributed to the *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (1999) 1.126–127 as an interim effort, intended to be elaborated when the opportunity arose. And then, while on sabbatical in New Haven in 2003–2004, I was returning from a seminar in Philadelphia, on March 24, 2004. On the train, I wrote the first sentence of what I thought would be a short article on Bickerman. The topic has swept me away since and pushed aside other promising research projects, deferred for now to the future. In the process, I have acquired a case of “archivitis,” probably terminal, as I pursued information about Bickerman all around the world.

All this has taken time, as one archive led to another; one person that I met suggested others with whom I should speak. In the end, I believe that I have been the beneficiary of the slow and incremental pace of the project. Looking back on the past five and a half years, I believe that the time devoted to research and writing has stimulated thinking and reflection that might not have taken place if – one day, by some strange chance, impossible in the real world – someone had delivered, all at once, boxes full of the archival papers I eventually accumulated, together with transcripts of the meetings I conducted.

I experienced the joy of learning many new things, entire academic fields of endeavor about which I knew little or nothing when I began. I met many exciting and interesting scholars of the highest distinction. The seduction of the discovery of the details of Bickerman’s life and the temptation to tell that story in all its specifics has been near irresistible. This knowledge threatened to run over and go out of control. Many revisions were necessary to maintain the focus on what was essential – the historian, his *métier*, his contributions, his life, and how all these pieces were connected with each other. The advice of friends, colleagues, and editors – described in grateful detail in the “Acknowledgements” – was crucial in helping avoid writing more about Bickerman than any sane person might be willing to read.

This book is the result. It still asks and offers answers to the questions I meant to raise in the short article begun in March 2004, but they were much more complex and required much more time and effort than I realized when I began.

Bickerman would not have approved of this book. As will be discussed in detail in the pages that follow, he wanted his life story hidden and went to some trouble

to achieve that end. And yet, one of the principles he stressed was that there were no exceptions: the Bible was to be read by the same methods and standards as Tacitus and Livy. Accordingly, Bickerman cannot be an exception to the tenet of inquiry that one can achieve a better understanding of the contributions of a historian by viewing them in the light of his or her life experience.

I have sometimes thought, in jest, of dedicating this book to Amtrak, since my writing on Bickerman that led to this book began on their train. More seriously, however, I dedicate it to my daughter, Elisheva Baumgarten – my most significant contribution to historical scholarship, my closest colleague, my most perceptive reader, and my toughest critic – in the hope that she will be convinced.

Jerusalem, Israel  
September 1, 2009

Albert I. Baumgarten

## Contents

Preface .....	V
Introduction .....	1
Why Bickerman? .....	1
A Russian Jew .....	4
An Historian of the Jews .....	7
Goals .....	9
The Sources .....	11
An Entire Life .....	15

### Part One

#### The Life

Chapter One: An Historian's Past .....	18
Basic Biography .....	18
Bickerman's Silence About Himself .....	25
A Postivism at Odds with Memoir .....	28
Skeletons in the Closet .....	30
Joseph Bickerman's Autobiography .....	34
Bickerman's Silence in Context .....	36
Bickerman's Oral Autobiography .....	38
In Russia .....	38
An Officer in the White Army .....	39
Women .....	41
Escape From France .....	43
"T.B. Deported by the Germans, Ps. 35:17" .....	45
Conclusion .....	48
Chapter Two: Father and Son .....	50
Joseph Bickerman, Russian <i>Maskil</i> .....	50
Joseph Bickerman the Russian Jew .....	52
Father and Sons on Zionism .....	53

Joseph Bickerman the Russian Liberal .....	55
Fighting The “Kommikike” Conspiracy .....	56
A Minority View .....	62
Joseph Bickerman and Simon Dubnow .....	68
Joseph Bickerman and German Culture .....	71
Joseph Bickerman: Conclusion .....	74
Chapter Three: Becoming an Historian .....	77
Rostovtzeff’s Student .....	78
Why History? .....	80
Russia vs. Berlin .....	82
Failure in Berlin .....	86
No <i>Halbgebackenes</i> .....	91
The German Academy .....	96
Jews in the Academy in the Weimar Years .....	99
A German Jew? .....	108
A Second Chance .....	112
Wider Implications .....	116
Chapter Four: The Nazi Era: 1933–1942 .....	118
Helping Hands .....	120
From Berlin to Paris .....	121
Flirting with the Hebrew University .....	125
Staying on in Paris .....	127
Fleeing France .....	130
Conclusion .....	139
Chapter Five: From <i>Life</i> to <i>Work</i> .....	143
Professor Bickerman .....	148
Leaning Right in a Left-Wing Academy .....	151
Bickerman the Russian .....	156
Bickerman the Jew .....	164

## Part Two

### The Work

Chapter Six: The Chain of Scholarly Tradition: Scaliger, Bernays, and the <i>Philosophes</i> .....	172
Jacob Bernays .....	173
Joseph Scaliger .....	176

Covering up for Scaliger – Following in the Footsteps of Bernays .....	179
The <i>Philosophes</i> .....	180
Conclusion .....	183
 Chapter Seven: The Jury of His Peers: Täubler, Tcherikover, Momigliano, and Smith .....	 185
Eugen Täubler (1879–1953) .....	185
Victor Tcherikover (1894–1958) .....	190
Arnaldo D. Momigliano (1908–1987) .....	193
Morton Smith (1915–1991) .....	205
 Chapter Eight: A Classicist Having Fun .....	 211
A Surprising Lacuna .....	212
Repercussions .....	215
Classicism and Anti-Semitism .....	216
The Pressures on a Jewish Classicist .....	218
The Classicist in Context .....	222
Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) .....	226
The God of History and the Faith of a Historian .....	228
A Religious Response to the Holocaust .....	232
Schmidt on Bickerman’s Faith .....	235
Conclusion .....	236

## Part Three

## A Usable Past

Chapter Nine: The Jews who got it Wrong: The Hellenizing Reformers	240
Modern Ideological Commitments .....	248
Ancient Hellenists and Reform Judaism .....	249
Back to Russia .....	253
The Example of M.O. Gershenzon (1869–1925) .....	257
Jewish Communists .....	262
Beards .....	264
Past and Present in <i>Die Makkabäer = The Maccabees</i> .....	267
Conclusion .....	268
 Chapter Ten: The Jews who got it Right: Maccabees, Pharisees, Rabbis, and Diaspora Jews .....	 270
Those Hellenistic Pharisees .....	279
Jewish Law for the Gentiles: The Jewish <i>Ius Gentium</i> .....	281

Diaspora Jews who Got it Right .....	282
What Kind of Hybridity Was This? .....	284
Where Does Bickerman Fit? .....	287
The Blessings of Roman Rule .....	290
Conclusion: The “Captive Child” Returns Home .....	293
For Other Audiences .....	295
Bickerman’s Life Experience: A Twentieth Century Tale .....	298
The Absence of the Third Bickerman – One Last Time .....	300
Final Arrangements .....	301

#### Part Four

#### Appendices, Bibliographies, Acknowledgements, and Indices

Appendices .....	306
Time Line .....	322
Bibliography – Archives .....	325
Bibliography – Publications of Joseph and Jacob Bi(c)kerman(n) .....	332
Bibliography – Publications of E.J. Bickerman .....	333
Bibliography – Works About Elias Bickerman .....	334
Bibliography .....	335
Conversations .....	348
Acknowledgements .....	350
Index of Sources .....	355
Index of Ancient and Medieval Persons .....	357
Index of Modern Persons .....	359
Index of Places .....	365
Index of Subjects .....	368

## Introduction

“L’art du biographe consiste justement dans le choix ... De patients démiurges ont assemblé pour le biographe des idées, des mouvements de physionomie, des événements. Leur œuvre se trouve dans les chroniques, les mémoires, les correspondances et les scolies. Au milieu de cette grossière réunion le biographe trie de quoi composer une forme qui ne ressemble à aucune autre.”

The essence of the biographer’s craft is making choices. The biographer’s industrious assistants have collected ideas, physical characteristics, and events. Their work is found in chronicles, memoirs, correspondence, and commentaries. From among this rough collection of materials, the biographer picks the sources on the basis of which to draw a figure that is absolutely unique.

M. Schwob, *Vies Imaginaires* (1957) 16.

### Why Bickerman?

Elias Bickerman (1897–1981) is hardly a household name. He was not a public intellectual;<sup>1</sup> unlike other émigré scholars of his time, he never became a cultural icon.<sup>2</sup> Outside the circles of historians who study Greco-Roman antiquity or Jews and Christians in the ancient world, few would recognize his name. Yet, this book tells his story because it is a *definitive twentieth century Jewish tale*: Bickerman’s life encompassed many of the major Jewish and general events of the century and illustrated important aspects of the twentieth century’s intellectual, social, and political history.<sup>3</sup> This book argues that his historical scholarship, in particular

---

<sup>1</sup> Compare Bickerman’s life and career with that of his History Department colleague at Columbia University, Richard Hofstadter: see D.S. Brown, *Richard Hofstadter: An Intellectual Biography* (2006). On the other side of the ocean, compare him with Joseph Bickerman’s friend, Benzion Dinur (Dinaburg), cited at length, below in, “Father and Son,” 50–60. On Dinur see D. Myers, “History as Ideology: The Case of Ben Zion Dinur, Zionist Historian, ‘Par Excellence,’” *Modern Judaism* 8 (1988) 167–193; *Idem, Re-Inventing the Jewish Past – European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (1995) 129–150. See also A. Rein, *The Historian as a Nation-Builder: Ben Zion Dinur’s Evolution and Enterprise*, Ph.D. Thesis, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2000 [Hebrew]; *Eadem*, “Patterns of National Historiography in B. Dinur’s Works,” *Zion* 68 (5763) 425–466. [Hebrew].

<sup>2</sup> See S. Aschheim, *Beyond the Borders* (2007) 81–118, for Aschheim’s attempt to understand “Why do we love (hate) Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Franz Rosenzweig, Gershom Scholem, and Leo Strauss?”

<sup>3</sup> See further Barbara Tuchman’s explanation of why she chose certain figures to be the sub-

his numerous studies on the Jews of antiquity, is best understood against the background of that momentous century.

Born in Kishinev in 1897, Elias Bickerman moved first to Odessa and then to St. Petersburg in 1905, when he was eight. He lived there until the Russian Revolution and through the first few years of communist rule. From 1922 on, his story continued in Weimar Berlin; Bickerman was there on January 30, 1933, when Hitler came to power. By the end of 1933, however, Bickerman managed to move to Paris. After seven relatively good years, the next major segment of his life was difficult – the first years of WWII in France – until he escaped via Marseille and Casablanca to the United States, in July 1942. The first ten American years were also trying, but ultimately Bickerman's life in the United States became economically secure and comfortable. The last chapter took place in the re-born Jewish state of Israel, where Bickerman was a regular summer visitor: he died and was buried there. Marxism, Nazism, Zionism, as well as American democracy – the leading ideologies of the twentieth century – all have a role in this story. Since Bickerman was Jewish, he shared the special fate of Jews in the twentieth century, for good and ill.

At the same time, Elias J. Bickerman was one of the most distinguished twentieth century students of both the ancient Greco-Roman world and of the history of the Jews in antiquity. As opposed to a “vertical” approach that connected ancient Jews to the Biblical past or Jewish future, Bickerman placed the ancient Jews firmly in the Mediterranean world of antiquity. Insisting on a vital, active, fruitful, and creative relationship between Jews and Greek culture, both in the Land of Israel and the ancient diaspora, Bickerman reached conclusions about ancient Jews that remain standard even today. Articles he wrote as long as seventy years ago are cited as if they had been published yesterday, as the most important and virtually the last word on the topics they treat.<sup>4</sup> Bickerman's wide-ranging

---

jects of her popular biographies, B. Tuchman, “Biography as a Prism of History,” in M. Pachter (Ed.), *Telling Lives: The Biographer's Art* (1979) 134–136.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the best indication of the enduring value of his contributions is the recent republication of Bickerman's three volumes of *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*, with the French and German articles translated into English, along with the English version of *God of the Maccabees*, all long out of print. See *Studies ... A New Edition*. For a critical appraisal of this new edition see J. Méléze-Modrzejewski, “Juifs et chrétiens: Bickerman redivivus, À propos d'une publication récente,” *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* (2008, 2) 1–9. See also A. Baumgarten, “Review, E.J. Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History, A New English Edition including The God of the Maccabees*,” *Zion* 73 (5768) 199–206 [Hebrew]. – At the same time, as is to be expected in a living field, some of Bickerman's contributions have been surpassed on the basis of new knowledge from new documents (The Dead Sea Scrolls, for example) or alternative approaches. See, for example, the discussion of the fate of Bickerman's analysis of the *Testaments of the XII Patriarchs* or of *Jubilees*, below, “The Jews who got it Right,” 275–277. – I cite Elias Bickerman's publications throughout this book by brief title only, with full description in the appropriate section of the Bibliography.

knowledge of the ancient world, with a special focus on documents (inscriptions and papyri), combined with his understanding of the dynamics of human historical experience and the brilliance of his original insights, enabled him to transform our understanding of significant moments in ancient Jewish history.<sup>5</sup>

Scholarship in the wake of Bickerman's contributions has not been the same. Arnaldo Momigliano (1908–1987), one of the giants of the field, told Louis Finkelstein, the long-time Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary (1895–1991), that *Bickerman was the foremost historian of antiquity of their generation*.<sup>6</sup> Momigliano repeated this evaluation often. According to Hayim Tadmor, one of Bickerman's closest friends in Jerusalem (1923–2005), *Momigliano made the same observation to him. Tadmor then asked, "but what about Momigliano?" to which Momigliano replied that his own conclusions might not stand the test of time, but Bickerman's would*.<sup>7</sup>

As a scholar, Bickerman was a product of the distinguished European academic world before WWII, a world of immense richness. He studied and taught with some of the most outstanding experts in the field in St. Petersburg and Berlin. He lived in Paris from 1933 to 1941, when Paris was the last major refuge of European civilization against the advance of fascism and Nazism. This past was destroyed, first by the Communists and then irrevocably by the Nazis, never to recover its former distinction. Those times run the risk of being lost from living memory. All of Bickerman's contemporaries are dead, and many of his students and younger friends have also passed away, while those still living are of retirement age, almost all in their seventies or eighties. Four people who knew Bickerman well, with whom I spoke when preparing this biography, died during the years I was engaged in researching and writing this book (see below, "Conversations"). Bickerman's story is therefore fading, and it must be told now, before it is too late, as a way of preserving the era in which he lived, in all its glory.

---

<sup>5</sup> Tropper, xiii–xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Finkelstein to Kogan, August 14, 1967, Ratner Center, RG1, Series W, Box 247, folder 4.

<sup>7</sup> As explained below, 12, all oral recollections retold in this book are set in italics, to emphasize the special and problematic nature of oral memories. Tadmor added that *when he related Momigliano's assessment to Bickerman the latter was silent, but later wrote that Momigliano, as usual, was wrong. Bickerman was convinced that the greatest scholar of antiquity of the generation was Louis Robert, the absolute master of ancient epigraphy*. This opinion reflects the importance Bickerman assigned to the detailed study of documents as a key to deeper and more accurate understanding of the ancient world. – On the tension that sometimes marred the relationship between Momigliano and Bickerman that may help explain why Bickerman thought Momigliano wrong, "*as usual*," see below ("The Jury of his Peers," 201–204).

## A Russian Jew

Despite his years in Europe and his eventual citizenship in the United States, Bickerman was fundamentally a Russian Jew. His Russian heritage, I will show, played a key role in his scholarship and life. Russians in the nineteenth century were unusually interested in figuring out just what it meant to be Russian, in Russia's place and mission in the world. Since questions concerning the present and visions of the past regularly run in tandem with each other,<sup>8</sup> different visions of the Russian past were in constant competition with each other to be the defining paradigm of the present and future of Russia. Whether a critical historian would approve of any of these versions of the Russian past or would judge them all to be more imagined or invented is of no concern here. What mattered was the passionate exploration of the meaning of being Russian that found expression in historical and ethnographic research, art, literature, and music.<sup>9</sup>

This search was based on the belief that being Russian was an innate, mystical, almost magical, even supernatural form of identity. A good example is Natasha's dance, as told by Tolstoy in one of the most-beloved passages from *War and Peace*. Tolstoy's Natasha had lived her entire life in a non-Russian and wholly European environment, but that mattered not-at-all. When Natasha and her brother Nikolai visited their 'Uncle' and his housekeeper, Anisya, in their village, the 'Uncle' began to play Russian folk music; Natasha "knew," somehow, just how to dance, as if dance itself was an instinctive response from the depths of the Russian soul:

Where, how, and when had this young countess, educated by an *émigrée* French governess, imbibed from the Russian air she breathed that spirit, and obtained that manner which the *pas de châte* would, one would have supposed, long ago effaced? But the spirit and the movements were those inimitable and unteachable Russian ones that 'Uncle' had expected of her. As soon as she struck her pose and smiled triumphantly, proudly, and with sly merriment, the fear that at first seized Nikolai and the others that she might not do the right thing was at an end, and they were all already admiring her ... Anisya Fyodorovna ... laughed as she watched this slim, graceful countess, reared in silks and velvets and so different from herself, who yet was able to understand all that was in Anisya and in Anisya's father and mother and aunt, and in every Russian man and woman.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, some Russian Jews were entering the wider world of European secular culture, leaving behind their roots in the Jewish past. How might they negotiate old and new allegiances and put them together into a contemporary

<sup>8</sup> See the extensive literature written over the past decades in response to M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (1992). See also the literature in response to E. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in E. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (Eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) 1–14.

<sup>9</sup> See the detailed discussions in O. Figes, *Natasha's Dance* (2002), from which I have learned much.

<sup>10</sup> L. Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, translated by L. and A. Maude (1998) 546.

coherent whole? One key question was whether these Jews could or would be accepted as Russian, an identity where religion and nationality were tightly intertwined.<sup>11</sup> Was Natasha's dance really unteachable, as Tolstoy wrote, or could Jews learn to do it? Some tried very hard! Whether they succeeded or not, in their own eyes, or that of others, the question of how these Russian, European, and Jewish pieces would fit together, if at all, remained urgent, with any number of opposing answers.

One way of framing this issue is to put it in terms of the "universal" and the "particular." As newcomers to European secular culture, Jews saw it as a "universal" value and were concerned with integrating this "universal" with the "particular" aspects of Judaism. How should Jews interact with other cultures? What form(s), if any, should Judaism preserve in this new "universal" context? As might be expected, differences about goals, hopes, and dreams for the Jewish present and future also spawned competing visions of the Jewish past. Historians had an important role to play in this discussion. They were responsible for elaborating a national past that could serve as a guide for the present and future. They were expected to debate and judge the merits of rival alternatives, since the fate of a nation supposedly depended on its history.<sup>12</sup> For Russian Jews, for example, a series of historical works, written at first in Hebrew and then later in Russian, attempted to fill that void.<sup>13</sup>

To complicate matters further, later in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, in response to any one (or combination) of a series of events – from pogroms in Russia, to the Dreyfus trial in France, or Bolshevik victory in Russia, up to the Nazi threat of extermination at the time of WWII – many of these same Jews and/or their children became interested in being Jewish in ways that had previously been unimportant to them. This search could take several forms: sometimes, it was cosmopolitans developing a more intense Jewish identity in their own lifetimes. At other times, the phenomenon had a generational aspect, as sons strove to recover a sense of being Jewish that their fathers or grandfathers had tried hard to forget. This new interest was not necessarily religious in any traditional sense. When it came to obeying God's commanding voice, many of these Jews were deaf. Nevertheless, whatever the direction(s) taken and the reason(s) motivating the change, the relationship between the "universal" and the "particular" was revised.

---

<sup>11</sup> As Figs notes, *Natasha's Dance*, 376, for Russians the distinction between Russian orthodox faith and other religions was a boundary that "was always more important than any ethnic one, and the oldest terms for a foreigner (for example, *inoverets*) carry connotations of a different faith."

<sup>12</sup> For one discussion of this process, in specifically Zionist and Jerusalem centered terms, see Myers, *Re-Inventing the Jewish Past*.

<sup>13</sup> See A. Greenbaum, *Stages in the Historiography of Russian Jewry* (2006) [Hebrew].

There is a Jewish literary version of Natasha's dance – pale by comparison to the original; not every writer is a Tolstoy – that expressed this yearning to be more Jewish and the notion that this was somehow possible despite all the alienation from the old Jewish world that had taken place in the interim. In his historical novel *Three Cities*, Scholem Asch (1880–1957) created the story of Zachary Mirkin, a weak and vacillating “superfluous” Jew, who became a tough “new” man as a result of the experiences narrated in the book. Zachary was raised as a Russian Christian and was first told the secret that he was Jewish at age twelve, by his Russian nurse-maid. As an adult, Zachary Mirkin met an old Jew from a village town who spoke to him in Yiddish – a language that Mirkin only really began learning, with the investment of some effort, later in the novel. Nevertheless, contrary to all reason and notwithstanding all the distance that separated him from his Jewish past, Mirkin found, in this encounter, that he was blessed with an innate Jewishness that could be instantly re-activated: “The old Jew spoke Yiddish, with a Russian accent, and employed many Hebrew phrases. Yet Mirkin understood him. It was as if words that had lived for a long time within him had all at once come to consciousness.”<sup>14</sup>

This phenomenon of “coming home” was not limited to Russian Jews, but had its equivalent across all of Europe. Jews were rethinking their notions of the proper relationship between the “universal” and the “particular,” and there was a widespread renewed focus on the Jewish past that would serve their newly conceived aspirations for the Jewish present and future.

Bickerman's story is part of this larger picture, both European and Russian. Like many Russian Jews, Bickerman wanted to discover how to put together the pieces of his Russian and Jewish identities. In Bickerman's case, thanks to his wandering, the puzzle was more complex, as his identity included German, French, and American elements as well. Although Bickerman rarely stated the contemporary objectives of his scholarly work, certainly never in the terms with which this book is framed, I will argue that questions of how to integrate facets of identity and how to find the right balance between the “universal” and the “particular” were crucial to his corpus. I intend to show how the issues raised by Bickerman's life were reflected in his scholarship and culminated in his search for a usable Jewish past. Furthermore, I will contend that when Bickerman “came home” as a Jew, his particular path to that goal was to take advantage of his prior training in the study of the ancient world to understand ancient Jewish sources in Hebrew and Aramaic, works that had previously been beyond the horizons of his scholarly interest or ability.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> S. Asch, *Three Cities* (1933) 233. For Zachary Mirkin's upbringing see *ibid.*, 53–56, 62–68; for his difficulties with Yiddish later in life see *ibid.*, 338.

<sup>15</sup> For Bickerman's life story as one of returning home see also Hengel, 172–173 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, xxviii–xxix.

In sum, Bickerman's career will be presented here as an example of that aspect of historiography in which past and present, life, times, and scholarship all illuminate each other. His story, his intellectual biography in particular, will be told as one that encapsulates a particular sort of Jewish life in the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> The argument is that Bickerman was not only an historian of the Jews, he was also a Jewish historian, whose personal identity as a Jew was intimately connected with his research as an historian of the Jews.

### An Historian of the Jews

I am not the first to want to discuss Bickerman's life and work in terms of the complexities of his Jewish identity. This was Momigliano's intention when he wrote the memorial notice that appeared as "The Absence of the Third Bickerman." He would have liked to present Bickerman in the same way that he analyzed the lives and contributions of so many other Jewish scholars like himself, showing (among other things), how a good deal of the best in classical scholarship of the past two hundred years derived from the traumas of Jewish scholars, and how the "sometimes precarious position (of these Jewish scholars) in the modern world sharpened their understanding of the ancient."<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, as recognized by Momigliano, a number of difficulties blocked his endeavor and also stand in my way. They need to be addressed and overcome, as much as possible, at the outset.

The first difficulty is describing Bickerman as an historian of the Jews, rather than as an historian of the classical Greco-Roman world. This is definitely contrary to Bickerman's self-conception: he viewed himself as a Classicist. As Bickerman told the story, his studies of ancient Jews were those of a specialist in Classics having "fun" working outside his own area of expertise. His contributions on Greco-Roman antiquity in numerous articles and his book on Seleucid Institutions are of the first rank and confirm Bickerman's self description as an historian of ancient Greece and Rome.

Nevertheless, the emphasis in this biography on Bickerman as an historian of the Jews is justified. First, that is the way his brother, Jacob Bickerman (1898–1978), understood Elias' career: "my older brother, born in 1897, still writes books and articles on ancient history, especially of the Jews."<sup>18</sup> Lest this be dismissed as the misperception of a non-specialist with an agenda – Jacob was a

---

<sup>16</sup> Turning a life story into a test probe for understanding the times of the subject is quite common. See above n. 3. For discussion of this practice in the autobiographies of historians see J. Popkin, *History, Historians and Autobiography* (2005), esp. 184–220. For one outstanding autobiography of a historian as the story of the twentieth century see E. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times – A Twentieth-Century Life* (2003).

<sup>17</sup> M. Goodman, as quoted on back jacket of A. Momigliano, *Essays on Ancient and Modern Judaism*, edited with an Introduction by Silvia Berti, translated by Maura Masella-Gayley (1994).

<sup>18</sup> *Two Bickermans*, 83.

chemist and anxious to emphasize his family's Jewish identity in his autobiography – Arnaldo Momigliano also saw Elias Bickerman principally as an historian of the Jews. In Momigliano's judgment, "Bickerman left his mark mainly on the study of Judaism within the Hellenistic world."<sup>19</sup> Or, again, Bickerman was "the scholar who, more than any other, has taught us to understand Judaism in its Hellenistic surroundings."<sup>20</sup>

Caution, however, is still needed. These quotations from Momigliano are from works written relatively late in Momigliano's life, when Momigliano was more concerned with his own Jewish heritage than he had been in his middle years. As a result, Momigliano may have overstated the Jewishness of the scholars whose careers and contributions he analyzed, Bickerman included.<sup>21</sup> If so, Momigliano's testimony may not be much more meaningful than Jacob Bickerman's. Yet, Bickerman himself makes the case: his one "big book," the *magnum opus* of his American years, was the massive *The Jews in the Greek Age*.<sup>22</sup> As discussed elsewhere, for reasons beyond Bickerman's control and for which he was not at fault, this book never appeared in its original form, with thousands of learned footnotes. It was finally published posthumously, without any notes.<sup>23</sup> Abridged or not, this was the major contribution of Bickerman's years in the United States, and it is the best justification for the choice of theme for this biography.

Once Bickerman's interest in Judaism is explicitly acknowledged, it fits into a larger picture. This focus on Judaism was part and parcel of the concentration on ancient religions – Greco-Roman,<sup>24</sup> Jewish,<sup>25</sup> and Christian – that drove much of Bickerman's work.<sup>26</sup> It was therefore no accident that Morton Smith (1915–1991 – Bickerman's Columbia colleague and friend)<sup>27</sup> and Emilio Gabba (Bickerman's friend and colleague from Pisa and Pavia) chose to call Bickerman's collected essays on Greco-Roman topics, *Religions and Politics in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras*, with *Religions* first in the title. However, when Bickerman turned his principal attention to the Jews of antiquity, it was more than just an elaboration and specification of this general interest in ancient religious life. I will

<sup>19</sup> Momigliano, 217.

<sup>20</sup> A. Momigliano, *Alien Wisdom – The Limits of Hellenization* (1975) 97.

<sup>21</sup> See below ("The Jury of his Peers," 200).

<sup>22</sup> On *The Jews in the Greek Age* as the culmination of Bickerman's scholarship see also Hengel, 181, 191 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, xxxvii & xlvi–xlvi.

<sup>23</sup> A. Baumgarten, "Bibliographical Note," in *The Jews in the Greek Age*, 309. On the fate of the notes see below, n. 36.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, "Die römische Kaiserapotheose," *Religions and Politics*, 1–36, from 1929.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, "Ritualmord und Eselkult," *Studies, Part Two*, 225–255 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, 497–528, from 1927.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, his earliest published works in German, "Das Messiasgeheimnis und die Komposition des Markusevangeliums," *Studies, Part Three*, 34–52 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, 670–691, from 1923, and "Das leere Grab," *Studies, Part Three*, 70–81 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, 712–725, from 1924.

<sup>27</sup> On Morton Smith see below ("The Jury of his Peers," 205–210).

argue that his study of ancient Judaism should be seen in the light of the concern with the “universal” and “particular,” as framed by contemporary experience, all in search of a usable Jewish past.

For him, Greek culture represented the ancient “universal,” while the Jewish culture represented the “particular.” These two elements eventually combined to become two of the most important constituents of Western culture. The master questions Bickerman asked about ancient Jews on the basis of these conclusions were: What was the nature of the ancient Jewish-Greek amalgam? How was it created? What varieties of Jewish-Greek amalgams existed in antiquity and how did they relate to each other? What does comparing these ancient alternatives to each other teach us about the questions Jews of the time asked and the answers they offered? Who rejected specific alternatives, and why did they do so? On the other hand, who accepted the answers rejected by others, and why were these alternatives acceptable to those who adopted them? In a word, how did ancient Jews negotiate their relationship between the “universal” and the “particular?”

However, these questions were not being asked in a void, but as part of the construction of a usable past, based in no small part on the modern world in which Bickerman lived. They had a contemporary referent of significance to Bickerman. It was therefore important to him to distinguish the winners from the losers, to indicate the successful alternatives in ancient Jewish experience, and those which failed. Who were the ancient Jews who “got it wrong,” and who were those who “got it right,” when they integrated the “universal” and the “particular” in their own differing ways?

In arguing the thesis of this book and uncovering Bickerman’s construction of a usable Jewish past, the comparison and contrast between Bickerman and his friend / colleague Arnaldo Momigliano will be of great value. The two men shared much more than scholarly interests and saw many aspects of Jewish identity over the ages in similar ways, especially as a result of their WWII experiences. Momigliano was much more candid than Bickerman in specifying the contemporary commitments that inspired his analysis of the Jewish past. Momigliano therefore provides clues to understanding the connection between past and present in Bickerman’s work.<sup>28</sup>

## Goals

This book has several goals. The first is simple: conventional biography. Some of this material is well known and therefore briefly summarized, but other parts of the story of Elias Bickerman’s life are recounted in detail. In particular, the account of his escape from France to the United States, from the fall of Paris in the summer

---

<sup>28</sup> These points will be elaborated below (“The Jury of His Peers,” 193–205).

of 1940 until his arrival in Baltimore, MD, on July 29, 1942, is as full and complete as possible. The basic story has been told many times about other survivors, in history, biography, autobiography, and fiction.<sup>29</sup> There is not a single detail in Bickerman's case that does not have its equivalent in other accounts: Bickerman's WWII experiences have nothing new to teach us. And yet, there is a moral obligation to tell the story whenever possible, even if it is only about the experiences of one couple who were fortunate enough to escape the horrors of those murderous times. The duty to honor the heroes and identify the villains never ends.

Next, and principally, this is an intellectual biography that focuses on Bickerman's scholarship. While I have anecdotes to recount, and personal information to reveal and discuss, I do not intend to write the sort of scholarly biography that emphasizes gossip or personality, decried by Momigliano:

In our time there is a great danger that those who talk most readily about historians and scholars may not know too much about history and scholarship. Housman's homosexuality or Wilamowitz's erratic behavior with his father-in-law Mommsen are easier to describe than Housman's achievements as an editor of Manilius or Wilamowitz's understanding of Aeschylus. Equally, it is easier to criticize Eduard Meyer's political pamphlets during the First World War than his analysis of the papyri of Elephantine or of Egyptian chronology.<sup>30</sup>

Instead, this book tells the story of the master questions that were the core of Bickerman's scholarly life – what these questions were, how Bickerman came to formulate them, and the answers he offered – against the background of his life and times, his own personal wrestling with the “universal” and the “particular” in the twentieth century over the course of his life, all in service of the overall thesis of this book, understanding how Bickerman created a usable Jewish past.

At this point, another significant difficulty looms. Bickerman himself never used the term central to my analysis, a “usable Jewish past.” Quite to the contrary, he saw his results in positivist terms and insisted that he had no contemporary motive or agenda to promote.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, just as considering Bickerman to be an historian of the Jews goes against his self-description as a Classicist, in presenting Bickerman as constructing a usable Jewish past I am contradicting a fundamental aspect of his self perception. Bickerman, however, provides his own rejoinder to this problem. At the end of *The Jews in the Greek Age*, Bickerman elaborated on a comment Vico had made: “Yet, as Vico observed more than two centuries ago, people accept only the ideas for which their previous development has prepared their minds, and which, let us add, appear to be useful to them.”<sup>32</sup> Bickerman thus recognized the importance of intellectual utility. My case is based on apply-

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, W.A. Neilson (Ed.), *We Escaped: Twelve Personal Narratives of the Flight to America* (1941).

<sup>30</sup> A. Momigliano, “New Paths of Classicism in the Nineteenth Century,” in G.W. Bowersock and T.J. Cornell (Eds.), *Studies on Modern Scholarship* (1994) 223.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Maccabees*, 7–8.

<sup>32</sup> *The Jews in the Greek Age*, 304–305.

ing this general principle to Bickerman's own work as an historian of the Jews. For Bickerman, I will argue, past and present resonated with each other and it is this resonance that I intend to explore and elaborate under the rubric of a "usable Jewish past." It is on the basis of intellectual utility that I will show the ways in which Bickerman was not only an historian of the Jews but also a *Jewish* historian, that is a Jew concerned with the history of the Jews as part of his efforts at self-understanding as a Jew.

## The Sources

A final difficulty concerns the sources on which to base this book. Bickerman did not want his story told. He refused to write an autobiography and ordered his personal papers destroyed. Morton Smith, Bickerman's Columbia colleague and friend, carried out this charge.<sup>33</sup> As a result, as noted by Momigliano, events from Bickerman's political and religious life are only vaguely known.<sup>34</sup> Along the same lines, Emilio Gabba wrote to me that "to write a biography of Prof. Bickerman is certainly a heavy task."<sup>35</sup>

In part, as will be discussed explicitly in the next chapter, Bickerman himself bears primary responsibility for the lack of sources on which to base a biography: he loved to mystify. Therefore, despite his professional commitments as an historian, in addition to ordering his papers destroyed and refusing to write an autobiography, Bickerman did not talk much about his past with many friends. Neither Momigliano nor Gabba, for example, were aware of *Two Bickermans*, the autobiographies of his father and brother, until the existence of this book was called to their attention by Larissa Bonfante (who met Bickerman when she was a student at Columbia and who was the spouse of Leo Raditsa, 1936–2001, one of Bickerman's Columbia students). Further complicating matters and increasing the level of confusion, Bickerman told selected friends wildly exaggerated tales of his past, which are regularly contradicted by the documents, when they exist (see below, "An Historian's Past," 38–49). Under those circumstances, how can one hope to connect Bickerman's past and present, life, times, and scholarship?

The challenge of writing Bickerman's biography is therefore substantial: many of the usual and conveniently assembled written sources for such an endeavor are gone, their place filled by a strange combination of silence and fantasy. In addition, the circle of Bickerman's friends and relatives who knew him directly has shrunk with the passing years. My efforts are based first on personal knowledge as Bickerman's student and collaborator. He was the supervisor of my MA thesis,

---

<sup>33</sup> See below ("An Historian's Past," 26–27).

<sup>34</sup> Momigliano, 217.

<sup>35</sup> Letter of December 29, 2005.

until he was replaced in that role upon retirement from Columbia. As a Professor Emeritus, he was one of the examiners of my doctoral thesis. While in graduate school, I checked the notes of the original version of *The Jews in the Greek Age*<sup>36</sup> and also prepared the indices for the English translation of *Chronology of the Ancient World*. After finishing graduate study and moving to Canada, in 1973, I prepared the indices for the first two volumes of *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*. Following Bickerman's death, I helped edit the third volume of *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* and *The Jews in the Greek Age* for posthumous publication. When in New York, from 1973–1981, I visited him often, and we were both in Jerusalem in the fall of 1977. We last spoke in Jerusalem, on the evening of August 18, 1981, where we both attended the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies, less than two weeks before his death.

In addition to my own recollections, I have drawn on the memories of others, conducting extensive conversations with the circle of Bickerman's students and friends, past and present, alive and no longer among the living.<sup>37</sup> Bickerman was a colorful character, and numerous stories about him circulate. Many of these anecdotes are recounted at crucial junctures in this book. These anecdotes are set in italics, in recognition of the special plastic nature of stories of this sort, since "least of all we can rely on memory ... Unaided by written documentation, it is almost certain to get the facts wrong."<sup>38</sup> Bickerman's friends were scholars whose academic expertise often overlapped with his own, so the relationship was both professional and personal. The dual nature of Bickerman's connection with these friends means that the insights they offer are varied and rich; their memories help illuminate the world from which Bickerman came and the ideals he held, both as an historian and a person of his time and place, whether or not the details of Bickerman's life they relate are correct.

This study is also based on documents in the archives of individuals and organizations, public and private.<sup>39</sup> While Bickerman ordered his executors to

---

<sup>36</sup> As I wrote, Baumgarten, "Bibliographical Note," 309, I believed these notes had been lost, but a virtually complete set of notes to the original version of *The Jews in the Greek Age* is in the Bickerman Archive, Jewish Theological Seminary, Box 5, folders 2, 5, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21. The pages of these notes are numbered in Bickerman's hand.

<sup>37</sup> My conversation partners who appear throughout the book are described more fully in the "Conversations" section of the Bibliography.

<sup>38</sup> Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, 413.

<sup>39</sup> I am grateful to the late Martin Hengel (1926–2009), Larissa Bonfante, Muhammad Dandamayev, and A. Mordechai Rabello who have made their personal collections of correspondence with Bickerman available to me for writing this book. I thank the late Miriam Tadmor for letters and documents concerning Bickerman in the files of her late husband, Hayim Tadmor. Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker, daughter of Jacob Bickerman, sent me correspondence concerning her uncle that she found in her parents' papers. Her brother, Michael Bickerman, answered questions and sent me several photos from the family collection. Mrs. Shari Friedman, who helped edit Bickerman's *The Jews in the Greek Age*, gave me copies of letters from Bickerman to others of which he gave her copies. Finally, David Goldin sent me the extensive collection of letters and postcards exchanged between his parents, Judah and Grace Goldin, and Elias Bickerman.

destroy his personal files, they did not eliminate the papers found in his office after his death. They did not have access to the typescript of the final version of *The Jews in the Greek Age*, or the correspondence to and from him, or dealing with his case, in the records of many individuals and organizations. The archival material includes unpublished papers from Bickerman's student days and hitherto unknown publications by Bickerman in the popular and student press from his years in Berlin. These archives are identified throughout by brief title and are then fully named and described in the Bibliography.

Bickerman also appears in the published correspondence of his friends and colleagues. Sometimes he is writing to them or they to him; sometimes they are writing to each other about him. These published letters supplement the archival material and provide additional insights. They are also described fully in the Bibliography.

Another set of sources utilized extensively is the work of Elias Bickerman's father and brother, Joseph and Jacob Bi(c)kerman(n).<sup>40</sup> Their autobiographies, published by Jacob as *Two Bickers: Autobiographies by Joseph and Jacob J. Bickerman* (1975), as well as the books issued by the "Patriotic Union of Russian Jews Abroad," headed by Joseph in émigré Berlin, are important sources for the outlook of the son. As Arnaldo Momigliano wrote, there was significant agreement in world view between father and sons. The three men lived as a real family and shared long-term political and religious beliefs.<sup>41</sup> The writings of Joseph and Jacob Bickerman are therefore especially important for determining the convictions of Elias Bickerman – they fill in the voice of the absent third Bickerman. These works of Joseph and Jacob Bickerman are also cited by brief title only, with full description in the Bibliography.

As a guide and control against unchecked imagination, like many biographers, I have turned to literature of the period to help supplement what is known from

---

<sup>40</sup> Elias Bickerman and his family spelled their last name at least three different ways over the course of their lives. Elias was Bickermann during his German years, Bickerman in Paris, and Bickerman in the United States. His father and brother, Joseph and Jacob, also experimented with various spellings but eventually settled on Bickerman. – The variation in spelling the family name – a source of amusement, confusion, and comment to a generation of scholars – went back at least as far as Joseph's father, Menashe, who wrote his name as Bickerman, Bekerman, Dikerman, Diker, and Biker. See *Two Bickers*, 78. When I refer to Joseph and Jacob Bi(c)kerman(n) throughout this book, their last name is Bickerman. When I cite their publications, I retain the original spelling in that work. Note, however, that the confusion is reflected in at least one of the original works: J. Bickerman (Ed.), *Ten Years of Bolshevich Domination: A Compilation of Articles edited by Joseph Bickermann* (1928). – The experience of the Bi(c)kerman(n)s was the same as that of many Russian refugees. Compare Bickerman's teacher, Michael Rostovtzeff, who also experimented with different ways of spelling his name, until he settled on Rostovtzeff. See R. Fears, "M. Rostovtzeff," in W.W. Briggs and W.M. Calder III (Eds.), *Classical Scholarship, A Biographical Encyclopedia* (1990) 405.

<sup>41</sup> Momigliano, 218–219. For a short while, during the February Revolution, the views of father and sons diverged, but they soon came to agree again; Momigliano, 219, based on *Two Bickers*, 51–52.

the usual sort of documents;<sup>42</sup> in Bickerman's case, Russian literature, especially the writings of Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977).<sup>43</sup> Unlike Bickerman, of middle class Jewish origins, Nabokov was born into a noble and very wealthy Christian family. Nabokov, however, was only two years younger than Bickerman, and both grew up in St. Petersburg. As a result of their anti-communism, both emigrated to Berlin and then left Germany for Paris with the rise of Nazism. Both reached the United States during WWII, with significant help from Michael Rostovtzeff (1870–1952), who was Elias Bickerman's principal mentor at the University of St. Petersburg. Nabokov's portrayals of émigré Berlin have been invaluable, while his classic depiction of Pnin, a Russian professor ill at ease and out of context in a post-war American college, helps fill in details describing Bickerman.

The work of Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) has been another source of significant insight. While Akhmatova was almost a decade older than Bickerman, both were from St. Petersburg, and her writing was famous well before Elias Bickerman and his family left for Berlin, even if Elias Bickerman probably did not know Akhmatova personally in St. Petersburg. Akhmatova became the epic poet of persecution and suffering, first at the hands of the communists and then the Nazis, during the siege of Leningrad. According to the poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky (1940–1996), her poetry tempered hearts against vulgarity, helped control the terror that was part and parcel of daily life for so many years, and provided protection against “the stampede of history.”<sup>44</sup>

Elias Bickerman's admiration for Akhmatova and his high estimate of her work were confirmed by Larissa Bonfante and Nina Garsoian (one of Bickerman's first students when he taught at Columbia). Bickerman's letters to his Russian friend and colleague, Muhammad Dandamayev, reinforce this point, as Bickerman referred repeatedly to books about Akhmatova that Dandamayev was ordering for him.<sup>45</sup> In a later letter, he asked Dandamayev to order a book by Akhmatova on Pushkin.<sup>46</sup> Finally, *Dandamayev remembers that on one of his visits to Leningrad, Bickerman lectured on Akhmatova at the State Hermitage*. Given his life experience, it takes no special insight to recognize why Bickerman needed to find shelter from “the stampede of history” in the poetry of Akhmatova.

The final group of sources on which I have drawn are a number of memorial notices that appeared at the time of Bickerman's death. There are also several

---

<sup>42</sup> For one general example, see the discussion of the use of literature to supplement what is known from other sources in writing the life of Samuel Pepys, in H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf's Nose – Essays on Biography* (2005) 32–34. For one example in writing the life of a historian, see A. Boureau, *Kantorowicz – Stories of a Historian*, translated by S.G. Nichols and G.M. Spiegel (2001).

<sup>43</sup> I owe the idea of turning to Nabokov to a suggestion of Anna Geifman of Boston University.

<sup>44</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “The Keening Muse,” *Less than One – Selected Essays* (1983) 41.

<sup>45</sup> Bickerman to Dandamayev, February 1973, January 4, 1974, and April 5, 1974, Dandamayev files.

<sup>46</sup> Bickerman to Dandamayev, March 25, 1978, Dandamayev files.

more recent article length studies of his contributions.<sup>47</sup> These studies are cited by author's name only in the notes of this book. Full citations, again, are in the appropriate section of the Bibliography.

## An Entire Life

In sum, the usual impediments that face biographers are multiplied in Bickerman's case by the efforts necessary to overcome the difficulties just presented. As any biographer should, I have pieced together evidence from different sources, a detail from one archival document that overlaps with that from another, confirmed or confuted by other evidence. When the documents suggest explanations, I have been attentive to those interpretations, but all too often the documents do not explain as much as one might like: they were not written in order to answer our questions. When confronted with these circumstances, I have worked as a *bricoleur*,<sup>48</sup> suggesting interpretations and connections to help fill in the missing pieces and complete the analysis of Bickerman, the historian. However, it would be naïve to think that I have been granted immunity from the errors, misunderstandings, and biases of biographers. In that sense, I am far more than the narrator of the account to follow, based on the evidence found in the archives; rather, I am the author.<sup>49</sup>

The approach here also follows the lead of Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that no matter what sources are available, biography should never present the life of its subject as if it were a series of inevitable stops along the tracks of a metro route connecting two distant points, birth and death. Rather, alternate stops must be considered in order to make better sense of the stops chosen, as well as the multiple routes that might connect these points.<sup>50</sup> One might suspect that there is something modern (or worse, postmodern) about this approach. However, as Hermione Lee has explained, Bourdieu's point was made, perhaps more artistically, at the end of the nineteenth century by Henry James, who wrote that death "smooths the folds" of the person one loved: "The figure retained by memory

---

<sup>47</sup> There is, however, no monograph length work that offers a comprehensive portrait of the man and analysis of his place as a scholar. Martin Hengel noted this lack and identified such a work as a desideratum. See Hengel, 175 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, xxxi–xxxii.

<sup>48</sup> In using the term this way I am following the lead of others (see the following note) and modifying the sense in which it was initially proposed by C. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (1966) 16–33. *Bricolage*, as I practice it, is a much more intellectual/scientific activity than Levi-Strauss intended, and employs more precise task-specific tools than Levi-Strauss posited as being found in his *bricoleur*'s toolkit. Perhaps, however, insistence that my work is of a different order than that of Levi-Strauss' *bricoleur* is only a professional conceit.

<sup>49</sup> See A. Farge, *Le goût de l'archive* (1989), esp. 86–96; N. Lapierre, *Le Silence de la Mémoire – A la recherche des Juifs de Ploek* (1989) 260.

<sup>50</sup> P. Bourdieu, "L'Illusion Biographique," *Actes de Recherches en Sciences Sociales* 62–65 (1986) 69–72.

is compressed and intensified: accidents have dropped away from it and shades have ceased to count; it stands, sharply, for a few estimated and cherished things, rather than nebulously, for a swarm of possibilities.”<sup>51</sup>

There is a mystery about a living person. Any plausible narrative of his or her life must take adequate account of “the swarm of possibilities” and be freed from the “mythology of coherence.”<sup>52</sup> A real person’s life is rarely, if ever, a closed coherent system in which all the parts are in perfect and unified accord with each other, teleologically organized from start to finish.

This book enters into Elias Bickerman’s life, times, and places in order to engage in a conversation with him about his life and his work.<sup>53</sup> This conversation will focus on the themes introduced in the preceding pages: the “universal” and “particular,” the resonance between contemporary experience and analysis of the Jewish past, the complexities of “coming home” as a Jew in the twentieth century, and the creation of a usable Jewish past. Bickerman’s silence about his past makes him an unwilling conversation partner. Indeed, the falsehoods that he spread when he talked about himself with certain friends makes a meaningful conversation even more difficult. One must wonder: is Bickerman a reliable and credible conversation partner? Finally, as one party to that conversation, I bring to it attitudes, values, preconceptions, and life experiences, as well as an interest in my subject. As at least two examples thus far have shown, I am willing to overrule my subject and offer explanations of my own that contradict his. If, as argued by Schwob in the epigraph to this chapter, the art of biography consists in making choices to draw a picture that is unique, this is the intellectual portrait of Bickerman that I elect to offer.

The first part of this book takes up Bickerman’s *Life*. After discussion of a number of key aspects of Bickerman’s life, the second part turns to his *Work* as an historian, setting him in a scholarly context of predecessors and peers, then turning to appreciate his self-understanding as a classicist having “fun” studying ancient Jews. The third major part shows how *Life* and *Work* came together in the construction of *A Usable Past*, the central thesis of this biography. The final section contains *Appendices, Bibliographies, Acknowledgments and Indices*.

---

<sup>51</sup> Henry James, “James Russell Lowell,” *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1892), as quoted by Lee, *Virginia Woolf’s Nose*, 1. See also M. Stanislawski, *Zionism and the Fin de Siècle – Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky* (2001) xx: “None of the subjects of this book had any inkling at the beginning of his adult life what he would believe at the end of his life; and, unless one believes in a rather vulgar version of either predestination or historical determinism, each could have gone in many different ways. This is what makes each of their ultimate journeys (and our own) so fascinating.”

<sup>52</sup> See Q. Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8 (1969) 16–22.

<sup>53</sup> Understanding biography as a conversation between the subject and the biographer is a widespread convention. For one example see Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, xviii. For an extreme example see A. Lieblich, “Writing Biography as a Relationship,” *Nashim* 7 (2004) 206–211.

*Part One*

The Life

## Chapter One

### An Historian's Past

"*Il est admis que la vérité d'un homme, c'est d'abord ce qu'il cache.*"  
A. Malraux, *Antimémoires* (1967) 15–16.

"Oh! the tales *he has* narrated  
Of *his* deeds of derring-do  
Have been much exaggerated,  
Very much exaggerated,  
Scarce a word of them is true!"  
With apologies to W.S. Gilbert, *The Yeomen of the Guard*

Writing to Solzhenitsyn, criticizing his efforts at poetry, Akhmatova told him, "There isn't enough *zagadka* (puzzle or mystery) in your poetry." Solzhenitsyn replied: "Yes, well, and some people think there is too much *zagadka* in yours."<sup>1</sup>

Bickerman, in his attitude towards the story of his life, was a faithful disciple of Akhmatova, whose poetry is sometimes obscure in the extreme, like the tip of an iceberg of which more than 90 percent is submerged.<sup>2</sup> Bickerman was a consummate puzzle solver when it came to the ancient past but seemed to love to create puzzles about himself. He was an historian who, when he did not choose silence, consistently played fast and loose with his own past. Both the silence and the falsehoods seem to stand in explicit contradiction to Bickerman's professional commitment as an historian.

### Basic Biography

To solve some of the puzzles of Bickerman's work and life and to discover the connections between scholar and scholarship one must start with a basic biography. As will become clear in this chapter, however, even such simple facts as date of birth, or marriage, and employment history, are obscure when it comes to Bickerman. As a result of his combination of silence and fantasy, already noted and to be discussed in greater detail in the pages that follow, there are errors in virtually all accounts of his life, which must be corrected in order to have a proper

---

<sup>1</sup> W. McNaughton, "Introduction," in A. Akhmatova, *Poem Without a Hero and Selected Poems*, translated by L. Mayhew and W. McNaughton (1989) 24.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

basis for biography. Here are the basic facts as I have discovered them. Citation of the sources on which my account of Bickerman's life is based is either in the notes or discussed in detail at the appropriate points in the body of the book.<sup>3</sup>

Elias Bickerman, born in Kishinev on February 2, 1897 (os),<sup>4</sup> was the older son of Joseph Bikerman (February 15, 1867 (os) – January 4, 1942)<sup>5</sup> and Sarah Margulis (July 15, 1861 (os) – March 2, 1931),<sup>6</sup> who were married in 1896. His mother was married to Naftuli Vaislovich before she married his father, and Elias had an older half sister, Minna Vaislovich (1891–1948?).<sup>7</sup> Elias' younger brother, Jacob (October 26, 1898 (os) – June 10, 1978), was born while the family lived in Odessa. Coming to the West, Jacob never “gregorianized” his birthday on official documents. Given his status as a refugee and difficulties negotiating numerous bureaucratic hurdles, this was a headache he was happy to avoid.<sup>8</sup> However, both he and his brother Elias westernized their patronymic Russian middle names by calling themselves Elias Joseph and Jacob Joseph. For a picture of the Bi(c)kerman(n)s from St. Petersburg in 1916, see Appendix III, Plate 1.

Joseph Bikerman was a journalist who was considered a man of exceptional insight and acumen in the turbulent times through which he lived and whose opinion on these events was highly valued. In 1905, Joseph settled the family in St. Petersburg, where Elias was educated in Greek and Latin classics, and Jacob studied chemistry. Elias Bickerman's principal mentor at the University of St. Petersburg was M. Rostovtzeff (1870–1952), and the two men maintained close contact for life. After the February Revolution, when it became possible for Jews to serve as officers in the Russian army, Elias became a cadet, training at the Peterhof. He was at the front briefly in the Southern Caucasus during WWI and subsequent fighting and was wounded in Armenia. He also served briefly in the Red Army during the Civil War, but then returned to a desk job in the Admiralty in St. Petersburg, where he and his family lived through the first difficult years

---

<sup>3</sup> As an aid to the reader, I summarize the information contained in the Basic Biography in a Timeline, below 322–324.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Julian calendar, then used in Russia. It was replaced by the communists with the Gregorian calendar, in force virtually everywhere else, despite its Catholic origin.

<sup>5</sup> For Joseph Bikerman's date of birth see *Two Bickersmans*, 1. I learned his date of death from Martine Rudine, Service Presse Ville de Nice, Letter of July 21, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Margulis Bikerman's dates of birth and death are based on the information in file #82325 at the Weissensee cemetery in Berlin, where she was buried. Her birthdate in that file is July 15, 1867, but this is incorrect, and must be corrected to July 15, 1861; she was six years *older* than her husband, *Two Bickersmans*, 25 and 83.

<sup>7</sup> *Two Bickersmans*, 83 and 141. Apparently, Jacob Bikerman knew that Minna had survived the carnage of WWII in and around Leningrad but lost touch with his half sister. This is the likeliest explanation for the date of her death “1948?”

<sup>8</sup> *Two Bickersmans*, 83–84. Cf. however V. Nabokov, *Pnin* (1989 Reprint) 67, and V. Nabokov, *Speak Memory – An Autobiography Revisited* (1989 Reprint) 13. – In family circles, Jacob Biker- man's birthday was celebrated on the Gregorian equivalent of Oct. 26 (os) = Nov. 8.

of communist rule, until they escaped through Poland in 1921. They arrived in Berlin in April 1922 – Bickerman was then twenty-five years old. Bickerman studied for a doctorate in Berlin, completed in 1926,<sup>9</sup> under the tutelage of E. Norden (1868–1941) and U. Wilcken (1862–1944). Bickerman’s teachers – from Russia to Berlin – thus included three of the most outstanding masters of the discipline of the time.<sup>10</sup>

In Berlin, on August 31, 1933, Elias’ brother Jacob Bickerman married Valentine Leivand (September 27, 1908 (os) – January 15, 2005), originally from St. Petersburg, whom he met at a Russian poetry group in Berlin.<sup>11</sup> Sometime during the Berlin years, Elias Bickerman was romantically involved with Leonie Zuntz (1908–1942), sister of his fellow student of classics, Günther Zuntz (1902–1992), and there was talk of a marriage. Leonie was a scholar, studying Hittite at Munich.<sup>12</sup> The family was of Jewish descent, but Leonie’s grandfather, Nathan Zuntz (1847–1920), had converted, and the family remained Christian.

As I heard the story from the late Martin Hengel of the Institut für antikes Judentum, Tübingen University, who was instrumental in Bickerman’s receiving the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize from Tübingen University in May 1977, and who was a close friend of Günther Zuntz, *Bickerman was invited for dinner to the Zuntz home to meet the family, but arrived late, in time for dessert.* His “Russian” lack of punctuality did not sit well with the Zuntz family – one of the stereotypes of Russians among German speakers was that they were “beyond all time and punctuality.”<sup>13</sup> As a result of this gaffe, all talk of marriage ended. Professor and Mrs. Hengel remembered an awkward evening at their home in Tübingen, at a reception in Bickerman’s honor when he received the Lucas Prize, when their friend Günther Zuntz was also present. Old memories of a failed romance in Berlin, decades earlier, made this a very uncomfortable occasion.

Bickerman did not pass on his first try at Habilitation in Berlin, in July 1929, and only succeeded on his second attempt, in February 1930. Habilitation meant that Bickerman was now a *Privatdozent* in Berlin, but he was forced out by the rise of Nazism in September 1933. On November 21, 1933, he left Berlin for Paris,

<sup>9</sup> *Das Edikt*.

<sup>10</sup> For brief biographies of these men see Fears, “Rostovtzeff,” 405–418 and B. P. P. Kytzler, “Eduard Norden,” Briggs and Calder, *Classical Scholarship*, 335–340. More detailed studies of Rostovtzeff are cited below. On Norden see also A.I. Baumgarten, “Eduard Norden and his Students: A Contribution to a Portrait, Based on Three Archival Finds,” *Scripta Classica Israelica* 25 (2006) 121–139, where numerous other accounts and assessments of Norden’s career are noted. To the best of my knowledge there is no biography, brief or otherwise, of Wilcken.

<sup>11</sup> Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker, letter of June 11, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> See L. Zuntz, *Die hethitischen Ortsadverbien arha, par̄a, piran als selbständige Adverbien und in ihrer Verbindung mit Nomina und Verba* (1936).

<sup>13</sup> S. Zweig, *The World of Yesterday* (1943) 200. For Germans of the era, Jews in particular, proper moral and social comportment were critical. See G. Mosse, “Jewish Emancipation: Between *Bildung* and Respectability,” in J. Reinharz and W. Schatzberg (Eds.), *The Jewish Response to German Culture – From the Enlightenment to the Second World War* (1985) 1–16.

where he taught at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études*. At first, 60 percent of his salary (later on, only 50 percent) was paid by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. In France, at the age of thirty-nine, on July 28, 1936,<sup>14</sup> he married Anita Suzanne Bernstein (April 13, 1913 – May 9, 1998). She was born in Gera, a small textile town near Weimar,<sup>15</sup> the daughter of Georges and Toni Bernstein, themselves originally from Posen in the Eastern part of Germany, today in Poland. There was a religious ceremony the following day at the Synagogue Buffault.<sup>16</sup>

Bickerman remained in Paris for about a year after the German conquest in the summer of 1940, until sometime in the summer of 1941, when he “crossed the line” into Vichy France. From then, until he left for the United States, he was either with his wife in Nice or under house arrest in La Bourboule (a small town near Clermont-Ferrand; in better times, also a famous spa, with hotels, villas, and a casino, where people came to take the waters) or Aix-en-Provence. On the basis of an appointment at the New School for Social Research, funded by a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, he received a visa to the United States. He and his wife departed Marseille at the end of June 1942, traveled via Casablanca, and arrived at Baltimore on July 29, 1942.<sup>17</sup> At the New School, he was affiliated with the *École Libre des Hautes Études*, the French “University in Exile.” When his appointment there terminated in 1945, he held part-time teaching positions at Columbia University in Spring 1948 and Spring 1949 and was also assisted by grants from the Jewish Theological Seminary. While in New York, during these years, the Bickermans lived at the elegant Hotel Orleans, 100 West 80 Street, opposite the Museum of Natural History.<sup>18</sup> Bickerman then taught at the West

---

<sup>14</sup> Mairie du 6<sup>e</sup> Arrt., Paris, Marriage Bickerman-Bernstein. The witnesses to the civil wedding were the Leivands, Valentine Bickerman's parents. – July 28 was a date of some emotional significance to Bickerman, his mother's birthday. She was born on July 15, 1861 (os) = July 28 (Gregorian). However, July 28, 1936 was also Tisha b'Av, the day of mourning for the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, and not a date on which Jews would normally have married.

<sup>15</sup> George Bernstein was a textile merchant, which probably explains why he lived for a time in Gera. The family left Gera shortly after Anita Suzanne was born. They appear on a register of residents in 1912 but are no longer on the register of residents in 1914. At the time of Anita Suzanne's marriage, they lived in Berlin. In September 1939, they escaped Germany for Nice. – Gera was a very small Jewish community, some 500–600 people, with a rented room in the Hotel Grundprinz that served as its synagogue, primarily for services on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Gera was not a place that a family that wanted to live an intensive Jewish life would have chosen. From that perspective, it may not be an accident that on their daughter's birth certificate in the Gera Archive the Bernsteins listed themselves as belonging to the “Mosaic” faith.

<sup>16</sup> Philippe Landau, Conservateur des Archives, Consistoire Israelite, Paris, letter of July 25, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Arrival card in HIAS/HICEM Files. Despite this, on his American naturalization papers, the date of arrival of the Bickermans is August 1, and Bickerman wrote to Hans Lewy in his letter of February 15, 1943, Lewy Archives, that he had been in the United States since the previous August.

<sup>18</sup> Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker remembers visiting her aunt and uncle there, letter of May 26, 2008.

Coast branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary, The University of Judaism in Los Angeles, from 1950 to 1952.

In 1952, he received his principal academic position in the United States, as Professor of Ancient History at Columbia University in New York, as successor to W.L. Westermann (1873–1954).<sup>19</sup> Bickerman taught at Columbia until 1967, where his most important colleague and successor as senior faculty member in the area was Morton Smith. He lived in Columbia faculty housing, at 21 Claremont Avenue, until his death. However, Bickerman, a political conservative, was not part of the “Upper West Side Kibbutz,” the group of liberal Jewish professors who lived in the Morningside Heights area.<sup>20</sup>

After retirement from Columbia, Bickerman spent the year 1967–68 at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, as well as six months at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in the Summer and Fall of 1977. In May 1977, Bickerman received the Dr. Leopold Lucas Prize from Tübingen University. Through these post-retirement years, until his death, he retained a connection with the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he had many friends, colleagues, and the use of an office. He also taught occasional courses.

The Bickermans became naturalized United States citizens in the Spring of 1948,<sup>21</sup> but they never had any children. After about twenty years of marriage, at a date I cannot determine exactly,<sup>22</sup> Bickerman and his wife parted.<sup>23</sup> Anita

<sup>19</sup> On Westermann’s life and career see below (“From *Life* to *Work*,” 146–148).

<sup>20</sup> See Brown, *Richard Hofstadter*, 73. There were other reasons as well. Bickerman was European and the other faculty members were mostly American. Furthermore, as Rachel Hadas remembers, the faculty families all had children who played with each other, which facilitated friendships among the parents, but the Bickermans had none. See Rachel Hadas, “Classics,” *New England Review* (Spring 2001) 36–51.

<sup>21</sup> According to records in the US Southern District Court of New York, available on-line at <http://www.italiangen.org/southersearch.asp>, Elias Bickerman became a naturalized US citizen on March 15, 1948, Anita Suzanne Bickerman on April 5, 1948.

<sup>22</sup> The last written mention of the Bickermans together refers to Mrs. Bickerman being with her husband in Los Angeles in 1950–51 and having returned to New York (since her husband’s future in Los Angeles was not definite) in the Spring of 1951. Although her husband continued in Los Angeles in 1951–52, there is no evidence that Mrs. Bickerman joined him there that year. See Bickerman to Simon Greenberg, August 28, 1951, and Simon Greenberg to Bickerman, August 31, 1951, Ratner Center, RG 4–1–4. However, the indication that Anita Suzanne Bernstein was Bickerman’s spouse in the 1958/59 edition of *Who’s Who in America*, 234c–235a, referred to below, suggests strongly that the couple was still together after 1951.

<sup>23</sup> According to very scanty information on the back of old notes in the Bickerman Archive, Jewish Theological Seminary, Box 3, folder 21, Mrs. Bickerman received payments from her former husband of \$7601.00 during the years 1967–77 (Galton? to Bickerman, undated, but after 1977. Another scrap of paper in the same folder is a letter from David Galton, dated March 2, 1979. Perhaps it is the top of this letter). She sued, apparently to get more money, around 1977. The heading of the first scrap just cited is Bickerman vs. Bickerman, indicating a lawsuit of some sort. Elias Bickerman was to make a “second payment” of \$6000 in 1979 (Galton to Bickerman, 5/8/79, Bickerman Archive, Jewish Theological Seminary, Box 2, typescript of *Jews in Greek Age*, back of 214). I have no idea of how many other payments there were, for how much, or how large the overall settlement was.

Suzanne lived many years in Europe. Under the rules then in force (but later revoked as unconstitutional), naturalized citizens who resided abroad “too long” lost their American citizenship. This may explain the letter in the files of the United States District Court, New York, NY, dated February 6, 1958, that Anita Bickerman was no longer a United States citizen. She preferred Italy, and her 1966 application for Social Security was filed from Rome. Eventually, she returned to the United States, and her address at the time of death was 20 West 72 Street, New York, NY 10023, in the Lincoln Center area of the West Side of Manhattan. Her declining years may have been lonely: a search of *New York Times* obituaries from around the date of her death for a notice put in by family members or friends yielded nothing.

Elias Bickerman effectively erased this marriage from the story of his past. He noted his marriage to Anita Suzanne Bernstein in his initial appearance in the 1958/59 edition of *Who's Who in America*, 234c–235a, but this fact was omitted from the entry in the 1960/61 edition, 245b, and all subsequent editions. Few of his friends knew that he was ever married. Hayim Tadmor was an exception: he supplied the information that Bickerman was divorced for Bickerman's death certificate. Reciprocally, Anita Bernstein Bickerman's American relatives erased Elias Bickerman's memory from their family history. According to Ruth Berns (widow of Max Berns, nephew of Georges Bernstein, and first cousin of Anita Suzanne Bickerman), the marriage was terminated in France, and she insisted that she never met Elias. According to this version of the family history, Anita supposedly reached the United States on her own.<sup>24</sup>

From January 1959, at the very latest,<sup>25</sup> until his death, Maria Altman (May 18, 1905 (os?) – April 9, 2000)<sup>26</sup> was Elias Bickerman's partner.<sup>27</sup> By mutual agreement, this relationship was kept secret from virtually all Bickerman's students, friends, and relatives. Maria Altman was convinced that even Jacob Bickerman and his wife Valentine were unaware of her connection with Elias. She wrote to Valentine Bickerman on October 24, 1982, a little more than a year after Elias' death, informing her of the relationship and explaining that it had been a mutually agreed secret. In reply, Valentine Bickerman indicated that the family had long

---

<sup>24</sup> Ruth Berns, affidavit of September 7, 1999. Surrogate's Court, New York County, Estate of Anita Suzanne Bickerman, File 2572–1998. Max Berns, had he been alive, should have known better, given his correspondence with Rockefeller Foundation officials, as outlined, below, 44. He should have known that the only reason Anita Suzanne Bickerman reached the USA was her marriage to Elias Bickerman. – For a photograph of Elias and Anita Suzanne Bickerman from 1945, after their arrival in the United States, see Appendix III, Plate 3.

<sup>25</sup> The Bickerman archive, Jewish Theological Seminary, Box 3, Folder 41, contains a letter to Maria Altman addressed to her at 21 Clairmont (*sic!*) Avenue, dated January 7, 1959, which Bickerman used as scrap paper for notes.

<sup>26</sup> Dates of birth and death based on Social Security files. See below, n. 28.

<sup>27</sup> She wrote to Hayim Tadmor from 21 Claremont on November 15, 1981, thanking Tadmor for his help in taking care of matters concerned with Bickerman's demise, Tadmor files. Maria Altman moved soon thereafter to Bal Harbor, Florida, where she lived until her death.

been aware of the connection, but chose to overlook it. Maria Altman was an old friend of Valentine Bickerman's from St. Petersburg and Berlin. They had grown up together and they had a number of mutual friends.<sup>28</sup> Valentine therefore identified Maria Altman's unmistakable voice when she called her brother-in-law, and Maria Altman answered the phone. Nevertheless, Valentine Bickerman pretended she did not know who it was.<sup>29</sup>

According to Shaye J.D. Cohen (Morton Smith's student at Columbia and later Bickerman's colleague at the Jewish Theological Seminary), *even Morton Smith never met Maria Altman*.<sup>30</sup> Hayim Tadmor was aware of her existence, as the notes in his files indicate that he called to inform her of Bickerman's death. However, writing to Valentine Bickerman a year after Elias Bickerman's death, Maria Altman explained that she had never met Tadmor up to that point.<sup>31</sup> To the best of my knowledge, only Emilio Gabba of Pisa and Pavia met her on Bickerman's summer visit of 1977. Gabba related *that when Bickerman visited Italy one summer, he brought a female companion; Bickerman and that woman spoke to each other in Russian*. This woman was Maria Altman, and the year was 1977, as confirmed by the Dandamayev correspondence.<sup>32</sup>

Bickerman died in Tel Aviv, while on his annual summer visit to Israel, on August 31, 1981. Shortly before his death, on August 19, 1981, he delivered his last academic paper at the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies. Bickerman escaped the turmoil of the twentieth century three times and lived in four different countries. He was buried in Har Hamenuhot in Jerusalem.

---

<sup>28</sup> As detailed in her application for Social Security #109-18-7813, filed in New York on December 7, 1941, she was born Maria Stern, in Leningrad, on May 18, 1905. As there are several Maria Altman's in the Social Security Death Index one can be certain this is the correct Maria Altman, since her signature on the application is an exact match for that on her letters to Hayim Tadmor. According to the Social Security Death Index, available online from several genealogy tracing companies, such as <http://ssdi.rootsweb.ancestry.com/>, she died on April 9, 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Maria Altman to Valentine Bickerman, October 24, 1982; Valentine Bickerman to Maria Altman, undated draft or copy; Maria Altman to Valentine Bickerman, November 1, 1982, all three in Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>30</sup> Since Bickerman was not observant, he could not invite his Jewish Theological Seminary friends to his home. This helped shield his relationship with Maria Altman from them. However, considerations of *kashrut* did not apply in the case of Smith, who was not Jewish. He never seems to have brought her along and always went alone when invited to the homes of his friends in the United States.

<sup>31</sup> Maria Altman to Valentine Bickerman, November 1, 1982, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>32</sup> Bickerman wrote to Dandamayev that he should write to him c/o Mrs. Maria Altman in Busaco, Portugal and Locarno, Switzerland, during August and early September of that year. See Bickerman to Dandamayev, July 7, 1977 and July 17, 1977, Dandamayev files. Even here, there was an element of secrecy. In the July 17, 1977 letter, Bickerman asked Dandamayev to send letters to him c/o Mrs. Maria Altman, but requested that Dandamayev "underline his name on the envelope or *simply omit my name on the address* (emphasis mine)."

## Bickerman's Silence About Himself

Bickerman wanted to be remembered for his scholarship. He did not want attention focused on his life and experiences.<sup>33</sup> He would not have approved of this book. Silence about himself was a habit of long standing, as the people closest to Bickerman, who appear frequently in this book, testify. M. Rostovtzeff, his St. Petersburg mentor, commented that in his correspondence, Bickerman, “never speaks about his family affairs.”<sup>34</sup> After Bickerman's death, his close friend and Columbia colleague, Morton Smith, was asked for personal information about Bickerman. Smith replied: “He almost never (to me) spoke of his past life, and the few exceptions were mostly undated anecdotes about unnamed individuals.”<sup>35</sup>

When Emilio Gabba wrote to Valentine Bickerman thanking her for a copy of *Two Bickermans*, he related that he had known Bickerman for many years, since 1952, and that they had “close ties of respectful friendship and devotion.” Nevertheless, until he read this book (of which he was previously unaware), “I did not know very much about his family and early years.”<sup>36</sup> According to Larissa Bonfante, E. Volterra (1924–1984), the Italian specialist in the history of Roman law, another good friend of Elias Bickerman, requested “any information ... about Elias' life and family,” as he also knew very little. Bonfante therefore asked Valentine Bickerman to send Volterra a copy of *Two Bickermans*.<sup>37</sup>

Elias Bickerman's silence about his past was conscious. As he wrote to his brother Jacob, “Professor Altman (*sic*),”<sup>38</sup> who was in the office next to his at the

<sup>33</sup> Smith, xi.

<sup>34</sup> Rostovtzeff to Johnson, October 4, 1940, Rostovtzeff Archive = Bongard-Levin #9.

<sup>35</sup> Morton Smith to Hans Katzenstein, September 29, 1981, in a letter of which I found a copy in the Tadmor Files. I thank Shaye J.D. Cohen, Smith's literary executor, for permission to cite this letter. For Bickerman's silence about himself in conversation with Smith see also K. Bringmann, “Elias Bickermann und der ‘Gott der Makkabäer,’” *Trumah* 17 (2007) 3, n. 6. See also Parente, 243: “*il B. non amava parlare di sé.*” – On the other hand, Bickerman apparently spoke much more about his past to Hengel than to others. As Hengel put it, Bickerman could talk for hours and hours but conclude by insisting that he was a tiresome person: “*Ich weiss, ich bin ein anstrengender Mensch,*” Hengel, 198 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, liv. See also E. Gabba, editor's note to Parente, 237, on Bickerman as a brilliant conversationalist. – Hengel was certain that Bickerman was more open in conversation with him (Bickerman also chose to send Hengel a copy of *Two Bickermans*, below, n. 43), because Hengel represented a connection to Bickerman's German (Berlin) past, from before 1933. Unlike other academic acquaintances, the names of Bickerman's beloved Berlin teachers meant something to Hengel (letter of January 26, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Emilio Gabba to Valentine Bickerman, August 3, 1982. Bonfante suggested that Valentine Bickerman send a copy of *Two Bickermans* to Arnaldo Momigliano, and the latter requested that a copy also be sent to Gabba. See Bonfante to Valentine Bickerman, March 15, 1982 and April 7, 1982; Momigliano to Valentine Bickerman, May 6, 1982, all in Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>37</sup> Bonfante to Valentine Bickerman, May 7, 1982, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files. On Volterra, Momigliano, and Bickerman see below, “The Jury of his Peers,” 203–205.

<sup>38</sup> Professor Altman was Professor Alexander Altmann (1906–1987), the intellectual historian of the Jews, who studied philosophy at Berlin. After the rise of Nazism, Altmann emigrated to England and eventually to the United States.

Institute of Advanced Studies in Jerusalem in 1977, asked “personal (biographical) questions. I answered him that I am only interested in the future and not in the past.”<sup>39</sup> A remarkably ironic answer for one historian to give to another! Finally, as Maria Altman wrote to Valentine Bickerman concerning her long-term partner, “he was a very private person.”<sup>40</sup>

Hans Lewy (1901–1945), Bickerman’s friend from their student days in Berlin, was the only exception to this rule of silence. After arriving in the United States, it was a mark of their special relationship that Bickerman wrote to Lewy that he and his wife were now safe, in the United States “since the last August,” his brother and family were in London, and his father had died in Nice in January 1942.<sup>41</sup>

Given Bickerman’s reluctance to share private information, it is not surprising that when his brother Jacob Bickerman invited Elias to submit his own autobiography to the collection of family autobiographies that eventually appeared as *Two Bickermans: Autobiographies of Joseph and Jacob Bickerman*, Elias declined.<sup>42</sup> The third Bickerman was missing. In a letter to Jacob, written after *Two Bickermans* was published, Elias justified (explained away?) his decision not to participate on three grounds: (1) his poor English, which still required correction, while Jacob wrote flawless English, “golden metal,” as Elias added in Russian; (2) his poor memory, so that “I have completely forgotten even the stories you tell about me” in *Two Bickermans*; and (3) “what I remember better are my girls.” His memories of the past, he insisted, were focused on the women in his life, his conquests.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Elias Bickerman to Jacob Bickerman, June 16, 1977, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>40</sup> Maria Altman to Valentine Bickerman, November 20, 1982, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>41</sup> Bickerman to Lewy, February 15, 1943. – Bickerman acknowledged his academic debt to Lewy several times. He noted Lewy’s help with an early article, writing: “*Darauf hat mich mein Freund Dr. Hans Lewy in Berlin hingewiesen, der auch sonst durch Rat und Tat diese Arbeit kräftig forderte* (“Ritualmord und Eselkult,” *Studies, Part Two*, 238, n. 55 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, 509, n. 55).” Indicating Lewy’s assistance with *Der Gott der Makkabäer*: Bickerman wrote: “*Das Buch verdankt ihm reiche Anregung und mannigfache Verbesserung* (*Gott der Makkabäer*, 4).” In fact, contrary to what Bickerman’s remarks might suggest, Lewy’s role was not limited to the contents and arguments of the book. At the request of the publisher, Schocken Verlag, Lewy had corrected and improved Bickerman’s written German. As a note in the Schocken Archive states, Bickerman’s *Gott* was: “*zur Zeit zur Stilrevision bei Dr. Hans Lewy, Jerusalem* (Schocken Archive, Wiss. Verlag, note of June 20, 1936, listing “*Manuskripte in Arbeit*”).

<sup>42</sup> *Two Bickermans*, 83; Momigliano, 218.

<sup>43</sup> Elias Bickerman to Jacob Bickerman, February 8, 1976, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files. Nevertheless, Elias Bickerman admired his brother’s book and wanted to make sure that its existence was known. Combining this letter with an earlier one, Elias Bickerman to Jacob Bickerman, January 20, 1976, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files, Elias Bickerman wanted to make sure it reached Martin Hengel of Tübingen, and the libraries of the Hebrew University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. He offered to pay, as necessary, to realize that goal. However, as the correspondence with Valentine Bickerman cited above indicates, many of his closest friends were unaware of the book.

Bickerman opposed efforts at autobiography and biography to such an extent that he wanted to make it impossible to reconstruct his life story: he ordered his executors to destroy his personal papers, adding a stipulation that they not be read.<sup>44</sup> He also directed that unfinished academic papers and other writings that did not meet his standards of beauty, regardless of whether or not they proved their points, should be put aside and destroyed. Morton Smith carried out Bickerman's instructions.<sup>45</sup>

Bickerman took other steps to conceal his personal life. Many pages of reading notes and drafts in files in the Bickerman archives, including the typescript of *The Jews in the Greek Age*, are on the backs of correspondence, since Bickerman routinely used the backs of letters he received for this purpose. Yet, Bickerman seems to have been careful not to use letters with personal information. With very few exceptions, his drafts and notes are on the backs of form letters that reveal little or nothing about the life of the recipient. To extract some evidence from them about the man is a significant challenge.<sup>46</sup>

Bickerman thus went to some trouble to be silent about himself and to make it difficult for others to tell the story of his life. The only significant concession he made was to submit brief details to successive editions of *Who's Who in America*, beginning with volume 30 (1958/59) 234c–235a, and to refer the curious to that entry.<sup>47</sup> Towards the end of his life, he submitted an expanded version of the *Who's Who in America* narrative to the *International Biographical Dictionary of Central European Emigres, 1933–1945*.<sup>48</sup> As might be expected, these brief accounts offer no help in determining Bickerman's motives for opposing a biography. Thus, when Bickerman ordered his personal papers destroyed and refused to write an autobiography, these steps also concealed the reasons why he did not want his story told. All we know is what Bickerman told his brother, and these seem to be poor excuses for refusing to submit an autobiography to the family collection. Clues to Bickerman's motives for secrecy can be found in his writings, and hints in articles about him by friends and colleagues afford the basis for a few guesses, but certainty is impossible: the third Bickerman will never be fully present.

---

<sup>44</sup> Smith, xi. If Elias Bickerman saved any of his father's papers, when Joseph Bickerman died in Nice in January 1942, and brought them to the United States, they were presumably also destroyed at the same time.

<sup>45</sup> M. Smith and E. Gabba, "Preface," vii.

<sup>46</sup> For first conclusions that can be based on these form letters see Baumgarten, "Bibliographical Note," 309. See also below ("From *Life* to *Work*," 166).

<sup>47</sup> Smith, xi. It was an honor to appear in *Who's Who in America*, particularly for someone who had arrived in the United States as a refugee academic in 1942.

<sup>48</sup> The entry on him appeared in volume 2.1 (1983) 103. The entries on his father and brother are in the same volume, 107–108.

## A Postivism at Odds with Memoir

Martin Hengel of Tübingen raised the possibility that Bickerman – a consummate storyteller, when he chose to do so, with an extra-ordinary life story to tell – would write his autobiography, or at least support the production of a series of biographical essays or *Festschrift*, as is traditional in academic circles when an eminent scholar retires. Bickerman insisted, however, upon, “no autobiography, no *Festschrift*.”<sup>49</sup> As Bickerman explained to Hengel, he did not feel himself old enough, or distinguished enough to merit this sort of attention – even though when Bickerman first met Hengel he was around seventy years old and was already world-famous, having published hundreds of articles and books.<sup>50</sup> Bickerman elaborated upon his sense of unworthiness in a letter to Hengel, of November 14, 1976, in the Hengel Files, commenting on his “old articles” now being prepared for the collected volumes, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History*:

I am often saddened to see how imperfect these papers are. I hardly know Hebrew, I am ignorant of the Talmud, of the Akkadian, or of other Oriental languages. Thus my work in our field is amateurish – *Stuckwork* (*sic!*). I should have stick to Latin and Greek, to papyri, to the *Urkundenlehre*. But a (*vacat*)... here, thinking of my teachers, Wilcken and Norden, I see my limitations. As a matter of fact, my only advantage is longevity. By some chance, I survived while better ones disappeared: for instance Hans Lewy. On the other hand, I still had the chance to learn from Rostovtzeff and at the Friedrich-Wilhelm University in Berlin before 1933.<sup>51</sup>

This was not false modesty, but represented an on-going sense of inferiority. As he wrote to his brother Jacob, “I was always a bad student. Do you know that some day Stolbzo<sup>v</sup><sup>52</sup> came to our class, spoke of some students and said about me: ‘As to B. he is the third in the class ... from the bottom.’”<sup>53</sup>

This attitude may also have been a response to Bickerman’s WWII experiences. Many survivors were troubled by the fact that they were still alive, while others, far better than they, had died. As David Daube wrote, “I am too aware of being inferior to many who perished in the upheavals of the past fifty years.”<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Hengel, 175 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, xxxi. While there was no *Festschrift*, a memorial volume to Bickerman appeared as *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University* 16–17 (1984–85).

<sup>50</sup> Hengel, 175 = *Studies ... A New Edition*, xxxi. The first letter in the Hengel-Bickerman correspondence is from March 1, 1967. See below, “Bibliography-Archives.”

<sup>51</sup> This letter will be discussed in detail in the chapter devoted to Bickerman’s “Becoming an Historian,” as well as in the chapter on Bickerman as “A Classicist Having Fun.”

<sup>52</sup> Stolbzo<sup>v</sup> was the head of the Realgymnasium in St. Petersburg that Bickerman attended. See *Das Edikt*, 39: “*Nach Ablegen der Reifeprüfung im Jahre 1915 an dem ehem. Stolbzo<sup>v</sup>s Realgymnasium in St. Petersburg ...*”

<sup>53</sup> Elias Bickerman to Jacob Bickerman, February 8, 1976, Dina Bickerman Schoonmaker Files.

<sup>54</sup> D. Daube, *The Jottings of David Daube – Reflections from the 20<sup>th</sup> century by one of its foremost legal minds*, ed. C. Carmichael (2008) 138.