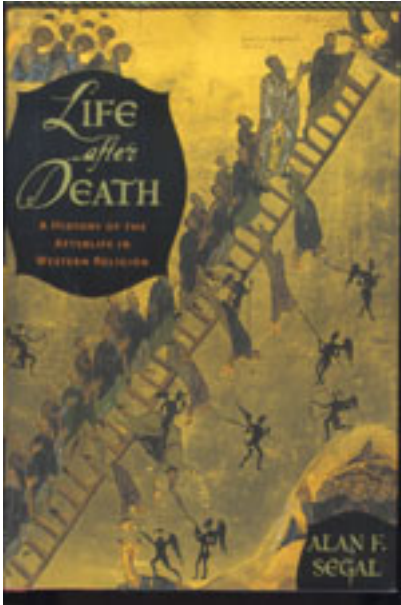


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Segal, Alan F.

Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion

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This massive volume treats conceptions of the afterlife from Pharaonic Egypt through the contemporary world, with the major focus on the ancient periods, especially late antiquity. With substantial treatments of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, First Temple Israel, Iran, and Greece, as well as early Christianity (through the time of Augustine), Second Temple and rabbinic Judaism, and Islam, and continual involvement with the social sciences, Alan F. Segal's study leaves the reviewer hard put to think of a comparable volume.

If there is a common theme to these exceedingly disparate discussions, it lies in the author's application of a social model of religious belief to the various groups whose literature he surveys. Given his foundational conviction that the image we hold of the afterlife is "a projection of our own desires and goals" (68), the question to which Segal continually reverts is that of "*cui bono*?" To whose benefit is this belief in the afterlife?" (4). Since Segal seems to imply that *cui bono* is the key question for historians, it is unfortunate that he does not contextualize the concept of benefit within the diverse cultures that he treats but writes as if it were a static essence with the same meaning everywhere. Though he speaks repeatedly about "the importance of doubt to faith" (712), even claiming that "[f]aith without doubt is merely intolerance, ultimately fanaticism"

(21), he seems reluctant to entertain doubt about his own functionalist or materialist presuppositions, even when the interpretations that they suggest are exceedingly far-fetched.

A salient example is Segal's attempt to derive the disinterest of the Sadducees in the afterlife from their putative economic class. Since "paradise" comes from a Persian word for "pleasure garden," "[t]he Sadducees . . . needed no paradise after death because they found paradise in their backyards" (378). The reviewer suspects that he is not alone in doubting that wealthy Jews thought they found in their backyards the everlasting felicity in a restored and perfected world that their less affluent countrymen associated with paradise.

At other times the social explanations seem to fail even within the domain of social history. For example, adhering firmly to the now conventional hypothesis that "deprivation and disconfirmation are motivators to apocalypticism and martyrdom," Segal must counter the claim of Stephen L. Cook that proto-apocalyptic is the product not of the dispossessed and marginalized but of priests who held considerable power. To do so, he argues that "[Cook's] notion of deprivation is just too narrow," for it "takes no account of the issues of colonial and imperial oppression" (315–16). Because "colonial and imperial oppression" characterizes the deprivation of the entire society, however, it is too broad to tell us why some groups were drawn to apocalypticism and others were not, or why some expected individual resurrection while others, also confronting national humiliation and persecution, adhered comfortably to the historic hope for national restoration alone. That is precisely the challenge for which the deprivation theory was invoked in this context in the first place.

In his substantial discussion of First Temple Israel, Segal hews to the conventional view that the afterlife held no great interest (except in the form of a putative cult of deified ancestors) and that death could not be reversed. Perhaps this is why he devotes less than a page to what he calls "explicit revivifications" (145–46) in that period (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:18–37; 2 Kgs 13:20–21) and comments that Enoch and Elijah are "the only two exceptions" to the rule that all must die (154). He thus misses altogether the suggestive use of the verb *laqaḥ* ("take") in Pss 49:15 and 73:24 (cf. Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:5, 9, 10), in which the poets also speak of avoiding Sheol or avoiding death. Similarly, Segal largely dismisses the story of Adam and Eve, which has traditionally been taken as relating to the same subject, on the grounds that it is "merely a charming and amusing story" (161) in which "the scene is played for laughs" (168). Should one ask how an etiology of mortality, endless toil, pain in childbirth, male dominance, and exile from paradise can be interpreted as funny, Segal's answer is that "[t]he story comically implies that if the issue were native intelligence we would be living in a very different world, one in which

women ruled” (165). There is ample room to doubt, however, that the story is about “native intelligence” at all.

Segal adheres to the long-established idea that “[t]he notion of life after death developed in the land of Israel to explain the martyrdom of the righteous for their religious views” in the Maccabean wars (271), though he does find a “scriptural root” in Isa 66 (203). The earlier vision of resurrection in Ezek 37:1–14 is thus “a symbolic rather than a literal message” and envisions Israel’s “political, social regeneration” only (260). Segal thus does not address the critical point that the metaphor for national regeneration there is not enhanced fertility and the return of lost children, as it is elsewhere, but rather the emergence of the revived dead from their graves—surely a major milestone on the way to the later expectation of resurrection. He misses the connection of this to the self-understanding of Israel as a people continually threatened by death but miraculously reviving. (The reviewer has sought to highlight this theme in earlier literature in “The Resurrection of the Dead and the Construction of Personal Identity in Ancient Israel,” in *Congress Volume: Basel, 2001* [ed. A. Lemaire; VTSup 92; Leiden: Brill, 2002]: 305–22). Segal’s inattention to the factor of peoplehood may be connected to his tendency to speak of “a covenant between God and humanity” (e.g., 94), a rarely attested notion in the Hebrew Bible. The overwhelming majority of biblical references to covenant in all periods actually speak of a covenant between God and Israel.

Segal’s discussion of Paul concentrates on the latter’s visionary experience and makes productive use of ancient Jewish mysticism to illuminate it, focusing on the apostle’s “sense of the transformation and divinization (or angelification) that he felt was inherent in his encounter with the risen Christ” (419). This is then contrasted with the canonical Evangelists, for whom “Jesus’ resurrected body was a literal, physical body revived” (442). The contrast is suggestive but overdrawn: literal, physical bodies cannot make themselves invisible at will, and, according to Mark 6:45–52 and Matt 14:22–33, Jesus walked on water even before he rose miraculously from the dead (and was thus mistaken for a ghost already then). As in the case of Segal’s treatment of the Hebrew Bible, so in his handling of the New Testament, readers may find themselves wishing for a more sustained, exegetically careful analysis of the relevant texts.

Indeed, the cursory nature of Segal’s discussions is problematic throughout his book. In the section devoted to “The Pseudepigraphic Literature,” we find only about one page each on the *Ascension of Isaiah* and Pseudo-Philo and less than a page on the *Testament of Moses*. The chapter on “The Church Fathers and Their Opponents” devotes just a page and a half to Justin and Irenaeus together and less than three to Tertullian.

The lack of careful exegesis and attention to the particularity of the text is especially apparent in the chapter on rabbinic Judaism, where a number of mistakes are made and unwarranted generalizations drawn. Speaking of *m. Sanh.* 10:1, Segal writes that “[t]he Tannaim state . . . that one must believe that the vivication [*sic*] of the dead is present in the Torah itself” (606). This misses the existence of text-critical variants that lack the words “in the Torah” (cf. *t. Sanh.* 13:5). Similarly, addressing the interpretation of Num 18:28 by the school of Rabbi Ishmael in *b. Sanh.* 90b, Segal tells us that this “is the first time within a community accepting resurrection as a religious doctrine that we actually see an argument about whether the belief in resurrection is true at all” and notes that “[t]he school of Rabbi Ishmael was not declared heretic and ostracized” for its doubts (615). The debate, however, is not about “whether the belief in resurrection is true at all.” It was only about whether Num 18:28 evidences the belief (as Segal correctly implies on the previous page), and it would have been highly irregular for rabbis to be “declared heretic and ostracized” simply for doubting a proof-text for a doctrine they do not challenge. The same sort of inattentive reading is manifested in the claim that the prayer *’ēlōhay nēšāmā* in *b. Ber.* 60b is “said in the evening, before sleep” (622). It is said in the morning, after waking.

Another doubtful point of philology underpins Segal’s erroneous conclusion that the rabbis “are not actually interested in defining the afterlife with the notion of the resurrection of the fleshly body.” Here the operative reasoning is that the rabbis derived their *terminus technicus* for resurrection (*tēhīyat hammētīm*) from Isa 26:19, from which they might just as well have coined “a hypothetical *tequmat hanevelot*,” with the meaning “the raising of corpses” (607). But the noun *tēhīyā* does not occur in Isa 26:19, the failure to employ a nonexistent expression is not much evidence of anything, and *tēhīyat hammētīm* could just as easily have come from other verses (e.g., 1 Sam 2:6) or from none at all. As for Segal’s larger point, it is plain from *b. Sanh.* 90a–91b (*inter alia*) that the rabbis are very much committed to the resurrection of a fleshly body, however transformed and healed it may or may not be.

At one point Segal, who teaches at Barnard College, Columbia University, speaks of the appeal of a feminist reading to “a professor of religion at a women’s college (but part of a major university)” (164), and indeed there are places where his interpretations seem to force recent notions of sex and gender into ancient texts. In his discussion of Mesopotamia, for example, he observes that “Gilgamesh and Enkidu are a couple, similar to the primal couple Adam and Eve in the Bible, ironically almost the ‘Adam and Steve’ of televangelist polemics against homosexuality” (91). Unlike Adam and Eve, however, Gilgamesh and Enkidu are not a primal couple—there is no reason to think they lacked parents—and the homoerotic connotations of their friendship seem to reflect something more like an adolescent infatuation than a lifelong orientation. Segal himself notes “the

unabashed explicitness of the depiction of heterosexual sex” in Gilgamesh (84). A similar tendentiousness characterizes his claim that in Gal 3:26–28 “Paul explicitly says that the body of Christ is arsenothelous [*sic*], androgenous [*sic*], bisexual (genetically), hermaphrodite” (432). To this, one must minimally retort that the word “explicitly” is surely an exaggeration, and Segal needs to reckon with the possibility that the passage simply means that the three binary oppositions that define circumcision in Gen 17 do not apply to the superseding Christian rite, baptism. (See Troy W. Martin, “The Covenant of Circumcision [Genesis 17:9–14] and the Situational Antitheses in Galatians 3:28,” *JBL* 122 [2003]: 111–25). Finally, in this connection mention should be made of Segal’s claim that before Augustine, “the difference between resurrection and immortality had functioned to distinguish . . . male from female” (595). Without empirical evidence for the implication that men were more likely to favor resurrection, but women, immortality, the functionalist argument is disturbingly circular.

In his chapter on Islam and the “Afterword” that follows it, Segal largely abandons the stance of the social historian and assumes one more like that of the preacher. He advocates gun control, offers opinions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and critiques American Protestant fundamentalism. Given the projectionist view of religion to which he rigorously adheres in the preceding discussions, however, the basis for the various value judgments he makes is unclear, and the reader is led to suspect an abrupt change of philosophical commitment. For example, although Segal puts the word “orthodox” in quotes in discussing the church fathers’ struggle with the gnostics, he is nonetheless able to pronounce that the movements associated with the attacks of 9/11 “are not normative for Islam” (671) without putting “normative” in quotes or addressing the question of how he knows which Islamic sect is normative and which are heretical, and why. Similarly, Segal is able to determine that “[t]he genius of the Moral Majority is that it falsely suggests that these conservatives are moral” (684), an especially odd determination in the light of his claim in the next sentence that “whether they are moral or not depends on one’s religious assumptions” (685). If so, and if we are to accept his judgment on the Moral Majority, then he needs to specify the principles by which we are to determine the truth value of religious assumptions. If, on the other hand, Segal simply means that the conservatives in question fail to live up to their own moral prescriptions (who doesn’t?), then this eminently arguable conclusion cries out loudly for supporting data. How large was the sample of Christian moral conservatives that underlies it, what was the nonconservative control group, and how did the interviewers assess moral behavior?

Segal’s intense animus against American Protestant fundamentalists seems premised on the belief that literalism occludes and distorts the real meaning of biblical texts. “In a sense,” he writes near the end of his massive study, “we too often convince ourselves of the literal truths of religion by an act of will when we know that they are but metaphors”

(728). But metaphors for what? On the one hand, Segal argues that “afterlife notions are mirrors of our cultural and social needs” (710). On the other, he asserts a few pages later that “religion . . . answers human needs” (720). The mirroring of a need does not answer it, however, and a meaningful metaphor must have not only a vehicle but also a tenor, a higher truth that cannot be equivalently conveyed in a nonmetaphorical manner. Unfortunately, this study seems unable to affirm consistently and coherently any truth higher than projectionism and the historical relativism that goes with it, and this renders the prescriptive tone apparent in the last chapters incongruous.

Nonetheless, the conceptual and philological shortcomings of this impressively ambitious book will surely not prevent it from assuming an important role in a number of discussions for years to come.