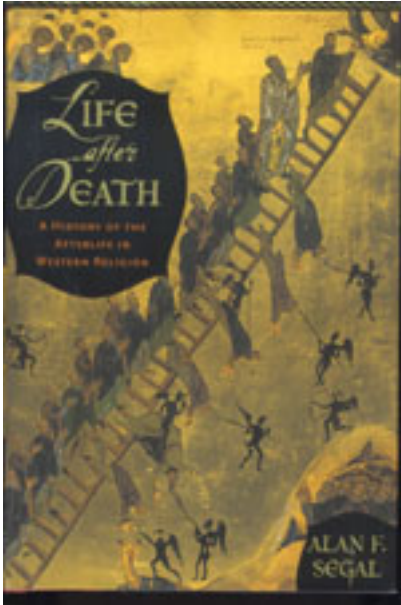


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**Segal, Alan F.**

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

New York: Doubleday, 2004. Pp. xii + 866. Hardcover.  
\$37.50. ISBN 0385422997.

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In many ways this is a remarkable volume, and a very difficult one to review. Its subject is belief in the afterlife in Western tradition as it developed through millennia from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia to the early Middle Ages. It covers subjects ranging from Egyptology to Christian doctrine and Islam. It deals with themes such as Muslim, Christian, and Jewish fundamentalism. No reviewer can postulate to cover all these subjects and live up to the enormous eruditeness of its author, Alan F. Segal, Professor of Religion and of Jewish Studies at Columbia University.

Professor Segal's project is to trace the development of beliefs in the afterlife and resurrection from the very beginnings—as far as written sources are concerned—from the very different ideas about afterlife found in ancient Egypt, in ancient Mesopotamia, and in ancient Israel, defined as the First Temple period, until fully developed beliefs in later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and to place these developments within a societal context, that is, the question of how society in its various forms influenced religious beliefs.

The project progresses through four parts, each characterized as major changes in human self-perception and individualization.

The first part, “The Climate of Immortality” (27–170), covers the early history of this belief. It presents three really distinct and different ideas about immortality as found in Egypt, with its optimistic belief in a blessed afterlife, or in Mesopotamia, with its much more sinister view on the ultimate fate of all human beings. The material from Canaan—mostly from Ugarit—is part of this section. The biblical ideas about afterlife are put in contrast to beliefs as found in the cultures surrounding Israel.

The second part, “From Climate to Self” (173–281), traces ideas about afterlife in Iranian religion (the religion of Zoroaster), with its famous dualistic view of the world, and follows up with an exposure of Greek ideas concentrating on Homer, Plato, and Aristotle. Here especially the Greek notion of the resurrection of the soul is put in focus, quite different from the developing belief in an afterlife and in resurrection in Second Temple Judaism, including the Essene community that wrote—according to the author—the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The third part, “Visions of Resurrection and the Immortality of the Soul” (285–396), follows the course of development from early beliefs in resurrection to the more radical and outspoken ideas in apocalypticism and millenarianism and to the sectarian diversity of Judaism in New Testament times, including in this section the ideas of the Jesus movement and similar religious formations.

The fourth part, by far the largest, “The Path to Modern Views of the Afterlife” (399–695), synthesizes earlier threads in the development of a belief in afterlife and resurrection concentrating not least on the enormous contribution of Paul in the formation of Christian ideas about life after death and the ultimate resurrection, followed up by the later discussion among the church fathers among early rabbis, and, finally, in Islamic tradition.

The book ends with a comprehensive “Afterword” (697–731) that summarizes the content of this study in an excellent way and shows the trajectories of the ancient beliefs in later mostly European tradition, exemplified by Shakespeare. The monograph includes comprehensive notes (733–81), an extensive bibliography (783–831), including almost a thousand titles, and a general index.

As already indicated, this monograph represents a remarkable achievement for which the author is to be congratulated. As he says, this is his story about the development of ideas about afterlife, and, indeed, it is. The style and presentation is lucid and easy to follow, at least for the “educated layperson.” In conclusion, it is a highly recommendable intellectual achievement. Any critical note to follow may be considered “nit-picking” and should be reckoned for no more. Even if it is possible to raise serious questions

concerning parts of the presentation, such criticism will not detract in any serious way from the general impression that this is a major work and a general and indispensable prolegomena to a future debate about the subject of the belief in afterlife in the modern world.

No one can claim any longer to cover all fields included in a work of this character in a totally satisfying way. This must also be said about the author of this volume. This reviewer will have to concentrate on subjects that fall within his area of competence. Whether or not such criticism that may be relevant to these fields is representative for the whole volume is thus an open question. However, being an expert in only parts of the area covered by this book means that the author—in spite of his extensive and generally representative bibliography—has left out some of the basic works relevant to parts of his argumentation. In general, such omissions are not very important, but we may mention the absence of major works relating to Mesopotamian religion, such as the ones by, for example, Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (1976), or the more recent by Jean Bottéro, *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia* (2004, but Bottéro has written about the subject since 1952). A. Leo Oppenheim's famous warning (in his classic *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*) about presenting Mesopotamian religion in only one shape should probably also have been included.

More serious is the omission of the, without doubt, most important recent history of Israelite religion, by Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period: From the Exile to the Maccabees* (OTL, 1994; German original from 1992), as well as a comprehensive body of literature challenging, for example, the conventional hypothesis of the origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls among a *supposed* community of Essenes at Qumran. As a matter of fact, the reconstruction of West Asiatic religion in and outside of Mesopotamia, including the religion of ancient Ugarit, which is simply accepted as representing *Canaanite* religion in general, is perhaps the weakest part of this study, based on a limited number of scholars having quite traditional opinions about ancient Israel and its religious developments. As a matter of fact, the indiscriminate way the author uses the term “Israel” indicates a remarkable lack of familiarity with recent trends within biblical studies—trends that may not interest the author but nevertheless includes serious objections to some of his principal arguments.

Thus the author shows no awareness of the renewed discussion about the appearance of monotheism in the ancient Near East in the first millennium B.C.E. Here the inclusion of Herbert Niehr's important monograph from 1990, *Der höchste Gott: Alttestamentlicher JHWH-Glaube im Kontext syrisch-kanaanäischer Religion des 1. Jahrtausends v.Chr.*, might have persuaded Alan Segal at least to reconsider some important aspects of his

analysis, as emergent monotheism in its many forms provides an alternative approach to the whole question of the developments of beliefs in afterlife in this crucial period of human intellectual history.

However, such criticism cannot, as already indicated, detract from the general value of this work. It only shows that we sometimes have to decide how to approach a subject of general interest covering a vast scholarly field. It is no longer possible to write a note like that of the famous German historian of the ancient world, Eduard Meyer: in his old age, he found it impossible to acquire a firsthand knowledge of the recently deciphered Hittite language, and for this reason he apologized to his readership that he had to rely on translations; otherwise, his many volumes of ancient history, *Geschichte des Altertums*, were solidly based on his mastering of all the then-known ancient languages, including Greek and Latin at one end, and Egyptian and Akkadian at the other. The advantage of having a general work of this character is the homogeneity of the presentation. It is more an essay than a traditional scholarly study, and in this capacity it behaves like an essay, including very little in the way of discussion with different opinions from the ones entertained by the author.

The alternative would be to include authors with expertise in all the fields covered by this volume. The individual parts would in this case most likely have been more solidly embedded in the present state of debate within these fields, but at a loss: it is hardly likely that all authors would have shared the same ideas about the development of beliefs in afterlife. It would have been quite a different book, surely interesting in many ways but without the appeal of this volume, based on one person's opinion and reconstruction.