

# Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion

By Alan Segal



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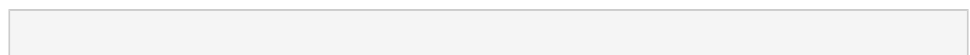
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A magisterial work of social history, *Life After Death* illuminates the many different ways ancient civilizations grappled with the question of what exactly happens to us after we die.

In a masterful exploration of how Western civilizations have defined the afterlife, Alan F. Segal weaves together biblical and literary scholarship, sociology, history, and philosophy. A renowned scholar, Segal examines the maps of the afterlife found in Western religious texts and reveals not only what various cultures believed but how their notions reflected their societies' realities and ideals, and why those beliefs changed over time. He maintains that the afterlife is the mirror in which a society arranges its concept of the self. The composition process for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam begins in grief and ends in the victory of the self over death.

Arguing that in every religious tradition the afterlife represents the ultimate reward for the good, Segal combines historical and anthropological data with insights gleaned from religious and philosophical writings to explain the following mysteries: why the Egyptians insisted on an afterlife in heaven, while the body was embalmed in a tomb on earth; why the Babylonians viewed the dead as living in underground prisons; why the Hebrews remained silent about life after death during the period of the First Temple, yet embraced it in the Second Temple period (534 B.C.E. –70 C.E.); and why Christianity placed the afterlife in the center of its belief system. He discusses the inner dialogues and arguments within Judaism and Christianity, showing the underlying dynamic behind them, as well as the ideas that mark the differences between the two religions. In a thoughtful examination of the influence of biblical views of heaven and martyrdom on Islamic beliefs, he offers a fascinating perspective on the current troubling rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

In tracing the organic, historical relationships between sacred texts and communities of belief and comparing the visions of life after death that have emerged throughout history, Segal sheds a bright, revealing light on the intimate connections between notions of the afterlife, the societies that produced them, and the individual's search for the ultimate meaning of life on earth.



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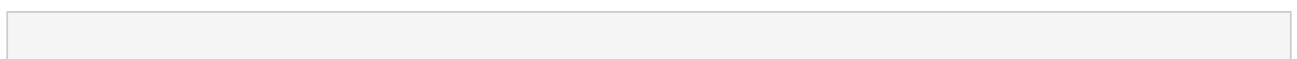
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## **Editorial Review**

From Publishers Weekly

This monumental study combines history, geography, mythology, archaeology and anthropology with biblical text analysis. Segal, a professor of Jewish studies at Barnard College, spent 10 years on this project, but the erudition he displays is undoubtedly the result of a lifetime of scholarship. In every culture, people ask the same fundamental questions about their existence, including "what happens after we die?" Although Segal maintains that answers to that question lie "beyond confirmation or disconfirmation in the scientific sense," he offers a comprehensive overview of how the afterlife is understood in the three main Western religions. He thoroughly examines early influences from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Canaan, Iran and Greece, then analyzes Jewish views as expressed in the first and second temple periods, the book of Daniel, the Dead Sea scrolls and writings from and about New Testament times, the early rabbis, mysticism and fundamentalism. For Christianity, systematic attention is given to Paul, the Gospels, the pseudepigraphic literature and the Church Fathers. Segal also scans Muslim beliefs as they appear in the Qur'an and the writings of Shi'a mystics and modern fundamentalists. The introductory and concluding chapters provide the essence of the presentation, enlivened by quotations from Shakespeare. Impatient readers may begin with these two chapters as a guide to determining which other sections of the book warrant further scrutiny. Careful readers, however, will take the trouble and the time to pore over this impressive contribution to our understanding of human belief and behavior.

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### **Review**

Praise for Alan F. Segal's *Paul the Convert*

"Bold and imaginative." —Paula Fredriksen, *Books & Religion*

"Alan Segal's new book challenges Jewish and Christian scholars alike to take a fresh look at this well-educated man, arguing not only that it is impossible to understand Paul's Christian writings without understanding first-century Judaism but that early Hellenistic Judaism is itself illuminated by Paul, since he was one of only two Pharisees to have left any personal writings at all." —*The Washington Post Book World*

"This is a thoughtful, demanding book that the serious student of Paul will find well worth the effort."  
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"Segal's work abounds in fresh insights for students of Paul." —F. F. Bruce, *American Historical Review*

"A brilliantly argued book. . . . Paul is neither hero nor villain for Segal but a fascinating historical and religious character, from whom we can learn much about both Judaism and Christianity. . . . I found myself thoroughly sympathetic to Segal's portrayal of Paul. More than that, I found myself convinced." —J. Christian Wilson, *The Christian Century*

"Elegantly produced. . . . Segal considers Paul's Pharisaic education and training as well as the Jewish context of his religious struggle after he became a Christian. He treats Paul as a Jew, a convert, and an apostle, and places his conversion from Pharisaism to Christianity in the context of his society and his mission to the Gentiles." —*America*

#### About the Author

ALAN F. SEGAL is Professor of Religion and Ingeborg Rennert Professor of Jewish Studies at Barnard College, Columbia University. He is the author of *Paul the Convert*, *Rebecca's Children*, and *Two Powers in Heaven*, as well as numerous scholarly articles.

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