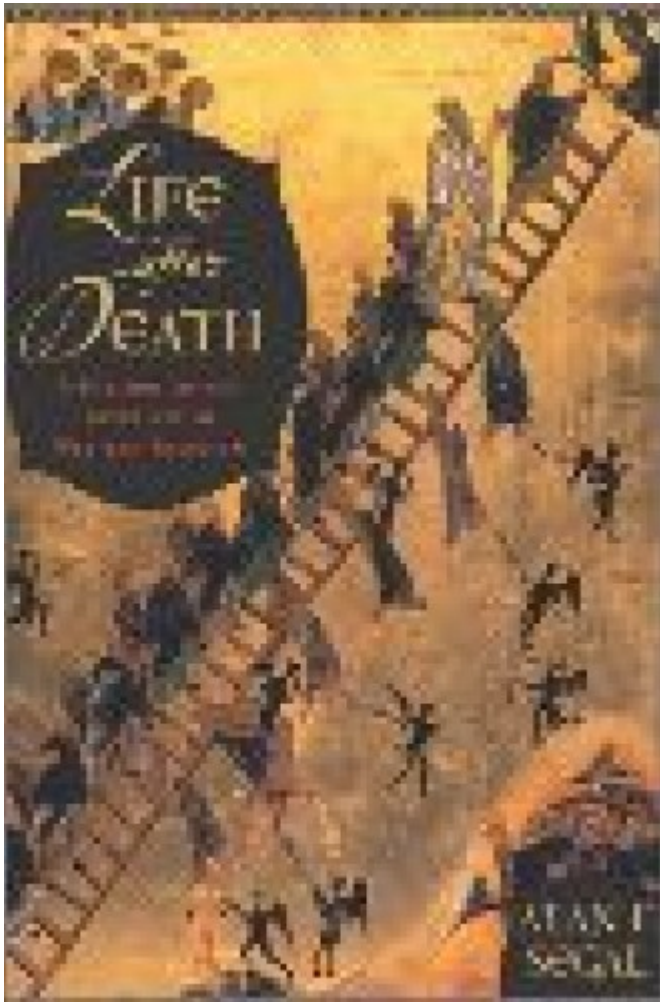


Life After Death

reviewed by [John J. Collins](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

In Review



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

Alan Segal

Doubleday

Life after death is not quite a complete history of the afterlife in Western religion. Alan Segal follows the development of beliefs in the afterlife in Christianity down to

Augustine and in Judaism through the rabbinic period. Only in the case of Islam does he comment briefly on contemporary beliefs. Nonetheless, he covers an extraordinary sweep of material, beginning with the cultures of the ancient Near East in the second millennium BCE.

Segal's achievement is all the more remarkable because he does not deal with concepts of the afterlife in isolation, but views them as integral parts of the societies and cultures in which they arose and flourished. He provides not just a summary of Egyptian ideas about life after death, for instance, but a sketch of ancient Egyptian religion in which these ideas played an integral part. This is accomplished in a flowing, discursive (and digressive) style that gives the reader the feel of being in a lecture hall or even of listening to a storyteller by the fireside.

Naturally, a book that covers such a wide range of material is more original in some parts than in others. Segal, professor of religion and Jewish studies at Barnard College of Columbia University, is known primarily for his work in Jewish and Christian mysticism around the beginning of the Christian era, exemplified in his books *Two Powers in Heaven* (2002) and *Paul the Convert* (1992). It is in this period that the beliefs about the afterlife that would dominate Western history took shape. Segal argues that Jews in the Second Temple period took over the idea of resurrection from the Persians and the concept of the immortality of the soul from the Greeks, in each case adapting the beliefs to their own needs.

Belief in resurrection is found especially in apocalyptic literature, having emerged in response to experiences of persecution and martyrdom. The resurrection body was a transformed body. In the earliest biblical instance, in the book of Daniel, the resurrected become like stars—a widespread metaphor for the afterlife in the Hellenistic world. There can be more emphasis on continuity with the physical body when the context demands it, as in the stories of martyrdom in 2 Maccabees. Segal ably explains the association of mysticism with belief in resurrection in the Jewish tradition.

The immortality of the soul was a more elitist idea that flourished in circles of the highly educated, such as the Jewish community of Alexandria. According to Segal, Paul, the earliest Christian witness to the resurrection of Jesus, conceived of it in apocalyptic terms. The story of the empty tomb developed later as a defense of the reality of the event. Later, the gnostics favored a belief in immortality of the soul, known through ecstatic experience, and the church fathers insisted on bodily

resurrection, which required the authority of church tradition. Augustine is credited with bringing the two streams of tradition together. Segal emphasizes the flexibility of the rabbis, who had to accommodate the ruling powers of the day. He also provides an illuminating sketch of the role of apocalyptic beliefs in the origin of Islam, and of the perversion of traditional ideas of martyrdom by suicide bombers in recent times.

There are numerous points of detail throughout the book that experts might dispute, but Segal is always able to cite reputable authorities in support of the positions he chooses. One such disputed issue is the conception of the afterlife in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Only a few scrolls speak clearly of resurrection. The more obviously sectarian scrolls, such as the Community Rule, speak instead of eternal life uninterrupted by death. Yet the scrolls do not know the Platonic idea of the immortal soul. This example is important, as it shows that the simple antithesis of resurrection versus immortality of the soul is *too simple*.

It should also be noted that the Platonic idea of immortality was not as dominant in the Hellenistic world as is often assumed. In fact, diverse views of the afterlife flourished side by side in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds and survived in Christianity and Judaism. Segal is correct in arguing that the more philosophical idea of immortality was primarily attractive to intellectual elites and that martyrdom and persecution were powerful stimuli for belief in resurrection. But various conceptions of resurrection continued to flourish when persecution was no longer a factor. Although the earliest Jewish apocalyptic movements may reasonably be characterized as sectarian, belief in the afterlife was no longer only a sectarian phenomenon in the New Testament period.

Segal exhibits impressive erudition in traversing a huge range of Jewish, Christian and pagan texts dealing with ecstatic experience and the afterlife, reviewing them rapidly under the not quite appropriate heading of "Pseudepigraphic Literature." A more leisurely examination of this literature would yield a more diversified picture of the concepts of the afterlife in late antiquity than is possible here.

But Segal is concerned with the long view rather than with the intricate details of any one period. He succeeds brilliantly in providing an account of the major trends that shaped a crucial aspect of religion in Islam, as well as in Judaism and Christianity. In the end there can be little doubt that any concept of life after death is a product of human imagination shaped by centuries-old traditions. But there also can be little doubt that belief in life after death responds to a deep-rooted need of

the human psyche that is by no means obsolete in the modern world. This is a richly learned and deeply humanistic book, both a mine of information and a pleasure to read.