Alan F. Segal 1945- 2011

April DeConick

It is with great personal sorrow that I write this morning in memory of my dear friend, adopted mentor and intellectual father, Alan F. Segal.

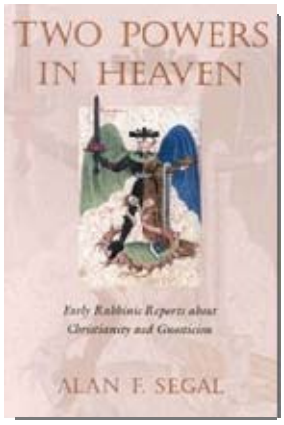
May the flights of angels sing you to your rest, dear friend.

He passed away yesterday afternoon after a long illness. I cannot imagine my world without Alan, as I am sure is true of so many he befriended with his kindness. Alan had that special something about him, a spark that made him a great intellect while also a kind person who embodied genuine charity and friendship.

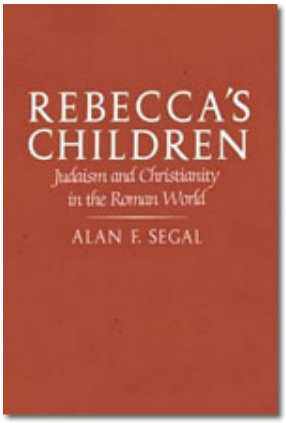
I met Alan through my work when I was doctoral student at the University of Michigan. He took interest in my studies on early Christian mysticism. Four of us (Alan, Chris Morray-Jones, Jim Davila and myself) launched the early Jewish and Christian Mysticism unit at SBL in 1996 in order to open up a space at our annual meetings for the discussion of mystical traditions within Judaism and Christianity. This unit has been a long-standing strong group ever since.

Alan's work has been nothing less than tremendous. He wrote books that crossed religions, working easily in Paul, Gnostic materials, and Rabbinic texts alike. He was gifted in interdisciplinary work, and knew the Jewish and Christian traditions equally well and treated both with respect. He was always the voice of the cutting edge, never afraid to move against the current or to say what needed to be said.

From early on in his career, his interest was in patterns of ascent of the soul, and he worked his ideas out arguing that patterns of ascent and descent were essentially the same, although opposite directions. Although he relied on Strauss and structuralism to argue for emergent patterns, he was solidly grounded in sociology and was interested in how patterns were modified within different religious environments. It was the modifications that he was after; this is what interested him.

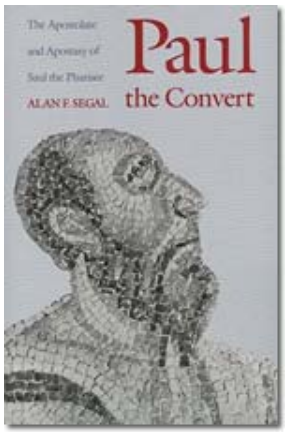


His first book, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism*(Leiden: Brill, 1977), is nothing less than a classic. He noticed that the rabbinic debates about there being two powers in heaven were in play because there is an old tradition in Judaism that anthropomorphizes God, usually by confusing YHWH with his angel. The figure is given various titles like Son of Man or Manlike in the theophany texts like Daniel. Philo knows the figure as "the second god" or the "logos". It is this tradition that lays the foundation for interpretations of Jesus that make him out to be God. It is also the tradition that was used by Gnostics to develop their demiurge. The rabbis become concerned about this tradition and its usage following the Jewish War. Like their biblical fathers, they wanted to yield up an uncompromising monotheism to ensure their fealty to YHWH.

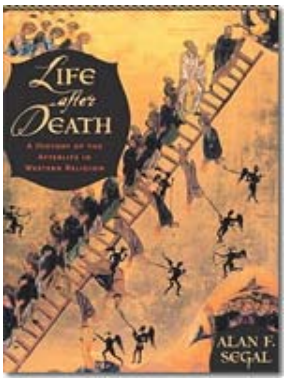


His second book, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986), is an absolute must-read for anyone studying early Judaism and the formation of Christianity. The book came out of his teaching experiences and seminars where he wrestled with the controversial idea that Christianity wasn't a product of Hellenized Judaism but was Judaism's sibling. In other

words, both Judaism and Christianity formed during the same period and were products of the Israelite religion as it manifested during the Second Temple period. He writes, "Like Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca, the two religions fought in the womb. Throughout their youth they followed very different paths, quarreling frequently about their father's blessing. As was the case with Rebecca's children, the conflict between Judaism and Christianity molded their characters and determined their destinies" (p. 1).



His third book, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990) is the best modern treatment of Paul ever written. Alan showed in this work that Paul was a Jewish mystic, and it was his experience of the post-resurrection Jesus as the manifestation of the Kavod, that turned him into a Christian and a theologian. Alan wrote this book as a Jewish scholar trying to clarify Jewish history from the writings of Paul and understand Paul as a Jew. How do you explain his conversion from this perspective? He was writing against scholars of Jewish studies who "frequently disparage Paul's writings, as if to say 'Nothing serious can be concluded about Judaism from such a person'" (p. xv). Alan felt that this was nonsense. He wrote, "This is a pretext for ignoring writing with disturbing evaluations of Judaism" (p. xv), and "To be used effectively, the NT should be read with allowance for its anti-Pharisaic and sometimes anti-Jewish tone. Almost every page of the NT reveals intolerance of its Jewish milieu that is borne of an intensely aggravated family conflict" (p. xvi).



His last book, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), is unrivaled in its coverage. It contains almost 900 pages of analysis of western religious traditions and their views of the afterlife. True to his sociological bent, he demonstrates how various pictures of the afterlife are tied to the society's view of the human body and politics. The questions he addresses are raised in his first chapter: "What do these notions of the afterlife suggest about the ultimate meaning of life to these people? Why do they change over time? What social and historical issues lie behind these changes? How do the doctrines themselves condition further discussion and conflict within the various communities as they relate to other communities who value the same traditions? Why do we insist that life continues beyond the grave and why do we give credence to those who have experienced it and return to tell us about it?" (p. 23).

Alan once told me as we lamented his long illness, "Everyone must die." It is a painful truth that he was fully and personally aware of. It is within this light that I now read the conclusion to his book on the afterlife and I hear his voice resonating: "Religion's imagining of our hereafter also seems to say the same - our 'immortal longings' are mirrors of what we find of value in our lives. They motivate our moral and artistic lives. Our longing itself deserves a robe and crown, nothing less. If humans can be, in Hamlet's words, 'in apprehension like a god,' do we not deserve his epitaph: 'flights of angels sing us to our rest'?" (p. 731).

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