Alan F. Segal: A Life in Perspective

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This volume began as a Festschrift to honor the scholarly contributions and influence of Alan F. Segal. Sadly, it became a memorial volume following Alan’s death February 13, 2011 due to complications from leukemia. Many of the papers in this volume were originally presented at a colloquium held in December 2010, to celebrate Alan’s retirement from 30 years of teaching at Barnard College. Alan unfortunately was unable to attend the colloquium, having entered the hospital the day before. He did have a chance to speak with the attendees from his hospital bed via Skype during the dinner and appreciated the fact that everyone was enjoying a day of scholarly engagement and a fine meal in his honor. Thankfully, Alan knew that this volume was in process, although he sadly did not live to see its completion.

1 Scholarship

The title of the volume reflects the broad and evolving interests covered by Alan over the course of his scholarly career. Crossing Boundaries in Early Judaism and Christianity: Ambiguities, Complexities, and Half-Forgotten Adversaries derives from a line in Paul the Convert. It also aptly captures the leitmotif that links most of Alan’s work: boundary crossing, either through conversion, heavenly ascent, or passage to the Otherworld in death. During his prolific career, Alan published several significant and ground-breaking studies that shifted our understanding and approach to early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. The brilliance and enduring influence of Alan’s research derive from Alan’s ability to see a bigger picture, make connections between traditions, and look for patterns, often by paying close attention to the similarities between texts in different religious traditions. While most scholars are trained to master a narrow terrain, Alan took the risks inherent in stepping outside of a

1 Alan F. Segal, Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xi.

2 Alan published ninety-five books and articles in his career on early Judaism and Christianity, mysticism, gnosticism, life after death, and resurrection, but also on magic, computers, and social scientific approaches to understanding religion. In this Introduction, I will limit my discussion to his most significant publications.
single field to answer bigger questions. Like the subjects of his research, Alan crossed boundaries. He understood that religions do not operate in academically defined silos, but in complex societies populated by complicated human beings, who are psychologically driven by wants, needs, and fears. For this reason, Alan engaged with a variety of social-scientific theories and approaches that illuminated ancient sources and enabled him to reveal new angles on familiar material.

This interdisciplinary approach enabled Alan to propose groundbreaking and often controversial theories about the origins of rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and gnosticism. Since most of the scholarship on Judaism and Christianity had historically been shaped by confessional commitments, Alan's ability to shed these blinders and see the same material with fresh eyes was cutting-edge and redefined the way scholars approach this material today. As a Jew, studying early Christian writings from a Jewish perspective and as Jewish documents, Alan recast our understanding of both Judaism and Christianity. Rather than thinking about the two faiths in terms of parent and child, or new dispensation and old, Alan rejected any whiff of Christian triumphalism and presented both faiths as simultaneous and competing attempts by first-century Jews (and a few gentiles) to grapple with the social and political pressures created by Hellenistic and, later, Roman cultural and political domination. A new generation of scholars has been nurtured on this approach and the fields of early Judaism and Christianity emerge radically redefined as a result.

Alan completed his PhD in 1975 at Yale University under the direction of Judah Goldin and Nils Dahl. His selection of a rabbinicist and New Testament scholar as directors and mentors reflects Alan's early commitment to study rabbinic texts within a larger social context that included not only Hellenistic Jewish writings, such as Philo and Josephus, but early Christian documents as well. Alan's dissertation was published two years later as *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism*. Alan's interdisciplinary use of primary source materials in *Two Powers* enabled him to draw connections between scattered rabbinic references to “two powers in heaven,” visions of the throne in Merkavah mysticism, Paul’s ecstatic conversion, and the gnostic demiurge.

His methods and conclusions contributed to, and challenged reigning assumptions in, multiple fields. For example, he borrows form criticism and tradition history from New Testament studies to date rabbinic sayings against

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