

# H-Net Reviews

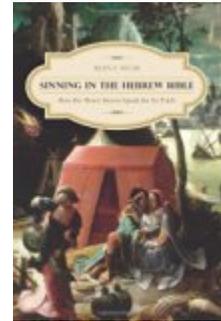
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Alan F. Segal. *Sinning in the Hebrew Bible: How The Worst Stories Speak for Its Truth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 286 pp. \$89.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15926-5; \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-15927-2.

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## Immorality and Authenticity

Many of the Bible's most familiar stories "are not stories that you would make up to attest to your glory," and this "may be important for discussing their historicity and authenticity" (p. 2). This is the essence of the last, posthumous book by Alan Segal, professor of religion and Jewish studies at Barnard College. The introduction to the book presents the course his argument will take. The Bible's stories of the patriarchs and of the covenant between God and Israel are mythical in the sense that they are paradigmatic for Israelite "history," which can be said to begin with the invasion of Shishak, recorded in 1 Kgs 14:25 but also in Egyptian sources (where he is called "Shishonq"). The key to understanding the connection between the myths and the history is the fact that so many of the stories of the earlier books are "terrible" (p. 21 and *passim*).

Chapter 1, "The Matriarch in Peril," begins by tackling one of the more difficult problems in the book of Genesis: how to understand the three stories, in Genesis 12, 20, and 26, in which Abraham and Isaac pass their wives Sarah and Rebekah off as their sisters, creating a situation in which the matriarch is *almost* sexually compromised, but instead the patriarch regains her and leaves with much wealth. Since these three versions of the same story have three different morals, "the morals themselves must be later than the basic story" (p. 33). One key is that the second version of the story has Abraham explaining, "In fact, she actually is my sister—my father's daughter, though not my mother's" (Gen 20:12). This suggests that

Tamar's telling Amnon (2 Sam 13:13) that David would give her to him in legal marriage was not just a desperate attempt to prevent him from raping her, but evidence of "a time before the Levitical and Deuteronomistic law codes" (p. 48).

Chapter 2, "The Golden Calf," points out the obvious link between this famous story and the golden calves set up by Jeroboam in Bethel and Dan according to 1 Kings 12. The connection is not meant to be subtle, since Aaron makes a single calf but tells the Israelites, "These are your gods" (Exod 32:4). The story is both a satirical take on Jeroboam's false religion and a warning that God will not put up with it. And this gives us a chronological perspective: "Before the Deuteronomistic Historian, the story of the golden calf at Sinai served as the mythical prototype to demonstrate that the LORD was angry at the north. After the Assyrians, the narrator merely had to recite the facts. God had destroyed the northern kingdom through the might of the Assyrian army. So the golden calf incident only makes full sense before the destruction of the northern kingdom" (p. 70).

Chapter 3, "A Historical Tragedy," is Segal's discussion of Deuteronomy—"the keystone of the entire documentary hypothesis in biblical scholarship"—and the Deuteronomistic History (p. 83). The voice of Deuteronomy itself is that of the scribal bureaucracy, but the editor/narrator of the Deuteronomistic History "is a moralist" (p. 91). This editor knows that the best argument

against the religion practiced in the northern kingdom is simply to point out that they were destroyed by Assyria. “The earlier argument against them was an elaborate JE comparison between the northern kingdom’s calf worship and its heretical nature at Sinai” (p. 99).

Chapter 4, “The Concubine of the Levite,” compares Genesis 19 and Lot’s offer to let his daughters (rather than his guests) be raped with the similar but more gruesome story of Judges 19, where the intended male victim pushes his own concubine out the door, where she is indeed raped to the point of death. This latter story is “full of realistic details that are otherwise incomprehensible except for thinking that they must have grown out of an actual historical context” (p. 112). It must be earlier than the mythical, etiologial story of Genesis 19: “For most of their oral life, both stories could have been developing at the same time; only the more troublesome moral issues within the story of the concubine drive the development of both stories, so that is, in a way, logically prior” (p. 118).

Chapter 5, “The Horror of Human Sacrifice,” compares the story of the “binding of Isaac” in Genesis 22 with the action of the besieged King Mesha of Moab, who “took his firstborn son, meant to reign after him, and offered him as a burnt offering atop the wall” (2 Kgs 3:27); the Hebrew words for “offered him as a burnt offering” precisely replicate God’s command to Abraham. These stories “are related to each other by hypotypicity, they are both prototypes of the mythical rejection of human sacrifice, but they exist in chiasmic opposition” (p. 125). Both stories must therefore date to approximately the same time as the Mesha stele, “about 840 BCE” (p. 151).

Chapter 6, “Ways of a Man with a Woman,” juxtaposes the story of David and Bathsheba, Joab, and Uriah with the “ironic but comic rather than cynical view of the relationship between men and women” found in the Adam and Eve story of Genesis 3 (p. 165). Segal’s portrayal here of Adam and Eve suggests that a better comparison would be with Manoah and his wife in Judges 13, but in fact the story is “a kind of astute political commentary on the royal marriage between David and Bathsheba” (p. 178). The bottom line of these tales is that “In order to enter the covenant, one needs moral discernment. It is absolutely necessary for the task” (p. 179).

Chapter 7, “No Peace in the Royal Family,” returns

to Amnon’s rape of Tamar. “Its very distastefulness almost guarantees that there is a historical kernel to the story” (p. 181). The Sodomite mob of Genesis 19 and the gang rapists of Judges 19 all return for consideration, but the main comparison here is with the story of Dinah in Genesis 34. Once again this is a mythical version of a historical happening from the time of David, “back-dated anachronistically into the time of the patriarchs” (p. 193); similarly, the relationship of Absalom and Amnon “cries out to be understood in terms of the primeval history of Adam’s children, Cain and Abel” (p. 194).

Segal’s conclusion ties together the argument he has woven through his comparison of the mythical stories in the Torah with the more realistic stories of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. These stories “mediated stress points and built an ethnic identity based around common ancestry, real or imagined.... [Most of the stories were] written after the united kingdom ... but before the Deuteronomistic Historians” (p. 222). “[T]here is no justification for the terrible stories of rape and murder in the Court History unless something like that happened and stimulated a parallel mythical discussion of its significance in the patriarchal period” (p. 248). Moreover, since the central issue of the Torah is the covenant, the different ways in which the sources picture covenant “in the most comfortable way to their own social positions” (p. 256) “makes quite implausible to me the idea that the Bible’s interest in covenant could have emanated from the Persian or Greek periods” (p. 257).

Columbia University Press has done Segal no favor by publishing the book without carefully editing it; there are a number of signs that this is a first draft that the author had no opportunity to check over and smooth out. Despite this, the book is eminently readable and presents Segal’s argument clearly. He seems to have been prompted to write by the reliance of his notorious Columbia colleague, Nadia Abu El-Haj, on the work of the biblical minimalists, but his own effort will certainly not convince them (p. 272, n. 6). Biblical scholars who are reader to accept much of Genesis-Kings as dating from the First Temple period will find some of Segal’s comparisons interesting, but he judges this material from the perspective of “what a professor of religion at a women’s college ... would have liked” (p. 171). His book’s greatest value lies in forcing contemporary readers to grapple with biblical stories that some would prefer to ignore.

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