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Deconstructing the Bible

*Joseph's Bones:
Understanding the Struggle Between God and Mankind in the Bible*
by Jerome M. Segal

book review by Michael J. Prival

We secular humanists have a difficult time in reading the Bible as literature. Our viewpoint is historical and scientific. As a result, we know that the Bible, unlike a real work of literature, is a hodgepodge of texts by multiple authors with varying degrees of writing talent and often conflicting agendas, thrown together by often sloppy editors. Only deeply religious Jews or Christians, their minds, we would say, clouded by their faith, can look at such a confused set of writings and declare that it is a unified work that can be understood within itself.

Well, Jerome M. Segal has written a book that challenges us to see the Bible differently. Segal, who is a Research Scholar at both the Center for International and Strategic Studies and the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy of the University of Maryland, is best known as the founder and president of the Jewish Peace Lobby. Having turned his attention to the Bible, Segal has made a masterful attempt to understand at least its opening books as a work in itself, as if he knew nothing about the Bible's multiple origins or the thousands of years Bible-oriented religious traditions (though in fact he knows a great deal about these things.) To those of us who have studied the Bible from a secular humanistic perspective, many of Segal's conclusions are commonplace – God is vain and immoral, righteous people are punished for the transgressions of others, only human power can ensure human survival and dignity. However, Segal's originality is in his bold assertion that these critical conclusions about God in the Bible text are, in fact, the intended messages of the text, not just the product of modern analytical reading.

In order to enter Segal's Biblical world, we must suspend all our prior knowledge about the texts – archaeology, history, religion – and consider only the words themselves. Segal focuses on the first six books of the Bible, the *Hexateuch*, which tell the story of the world, of humankind, and of the Israelites from Creation through the conquest of the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua.

Segal correctly points out that there is nothing in the texts that asserts that the deity was the author, as religious tradition would have it. But Segal concludes, far more radically,

that, at least in the time period covered by the Hebrew scriptures, the Bible implies that the deity never even read most of these texts and was unaware of what they contain. The texts function as, in Segal's words, "the people's book." It is a book of protest, written for the purpose of instructing the Israelites about their condition as those chosen by Yahweh, a powerful but insecure god of limited moral sense. The Bible's function is to indicate how humans can express their freedom and ethical nature independent of the dolt who bosses them around.

For Segal, the essence of human ethics, which Yahweh does not understand at all, is to be found in that human paragon of love and forgiveness, Joseph. As a young boy Joseph offends his brothers needlessly, leading them to sell him off to travellers. However, the key to Joseph's personality is not that he becomes the wise and just leader of Egypt, second in power only to the Pharaoh, but that, in the end, he cannot control his tears when reunited with his brothers who have come before him as supplicants. Joseph forgives and rewards the brothers who have wronged him. The contrast with the vindictive Yahweh could not be clearer. The consistent ethical behavior of the adult Joseph comes not as a result of following Yahweh's commandments, which have not even been promulgated yet, but rather, in good humanist fashion, from within Joseph himself. He spurns the advances of the wife of Potiphar, his master, not because he is afraid of getting caught, but simply because yielding to her would be the wrong thing to do.

The stories about Joseph take up a full one-third of the first book of the Bible, *Genesis*. At the very end of *Genesis*, the dying Joseph asks the Israelites to bring his bones back to the land promised to their ancestor Abraham, the future land of Israel, but only when the Israelites in Egypt are united in their return to that promised homeland. The actual burial of his bones comes at the very end of the book of *Joshua*, the final book of the *Hexateuch*. Thus the story of Joseph's bones brackets all that occurs during the more than four centuries from the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt to their liberation and settlement on the Land of Israel. One of Segal's startling insights is that this placement of the story of Joseph's bones, combined with Joseph's dominance of the *Genesis* text, indicates the enormous significance of the story of Joseph.

Perhaps more startling is Segal's assertion that the Israelites of the Exodus, wandering for 40 years from Egypt to Canaan, carried not one ark, but two. We all know of the famous Ark of the Covenant, presumably containing the engraved Ten Commandments. But the sojourners must have been also carrying Joseph's body which had been, as stated in the closing words of *Genesis*, embalmed and put in a coffin (the Hebrew word for coffin, *aron*, being the same as that for the ark that held the Ten Commandments). Segal cites earlier commentary on these two arks, but this commentary is based on a traditional religious perspective. For Segal, the image of the Israelites schlepping these two arks around for 40 years – one representing Yahweh and his commandments, the other

containing Joseph's body – is meant to contrast the morally defective deity, Yahweh, and the morally close-to-perfect human, Joseph. So the Israelites carry Yahweh's ark out of fear while they carry Joseph's coffin out of love. Their hope is that one day Yahweh will become as compassionate as Joseph had been.

Segal discusses the stories that illustrate how Yahweh administers justice – by time and time again slaughtering thousands when his orders are questioned or disobeyed even in the most minor way. Segal tells how Abraham, and later Moses, plead with Yahweh not to administer collective punishment, but rather to punish only those individuals who are guilty. But Yahweh does not seem to be concerned about people as individuals. His mission, according to Segal, is not justice; his mission is to be known. He has created humankind so that he can be acknowledged and understood by them as their supreme, if unpredictable, boss. Again, we who have read these texts from a secular humanistic perspective already know of Yahweh's murderous vanity.

In fact, there were Gnostic Christians in the second century who mocked Yahweh as the creator of a flawed world – a god too ignorant and full of himself to acknowledge the existence of the greater god above him. Similarly, Elisha ben Abuyah, a great hero to many of us secular humanists, is described in the Talmud as a renowned second century scholar and teacher who denied the existence of a powerful and just deity based on his observations of the suffering of the righteous. The Jewish tradition that spoke out against the moral failings of Yahweh is pushed back centuries further by Segal to the Hebrew Bible authors themselves.

In Segal's analysis, Yahweh is an insecure deity who needs people and chooses the Israelites to obey and worship him because he really can't go it alone. Nevertheless, Yahweh claims, and actually believes, that he is a great god, sufficient unto himself. Segal compares Yahweh's self-deception to that of Sartre's waiter who only acts at being a waiter.

This pathetic deity, says Segal, is filled with regret for his past acts of wanton violence, particularly when he killed almost every living human and animal in the great Flood of Noah's time. People like Abraham and Moses are essentially Yahweh's therapists, trying to keep him from going berserk again, though with only limited success. Unlike Joseph, Yahweh needs others to tell him what's right and what's wrong. Only humans in the Bible stories have any intrinsic sense of ethics, and the deity must learn from them how to behave morally. Segal points out that, in the texts, Yahweh describes himself as a forgiving god and he prescribes elaborate rituals by which the Israelites can expiate their transgressions, yet he is, time after time, incapable of demonstrating forgiveness and compassion.

So, for Segal, the Bible's intended message is that morality does not come from God, but rather from within ethical human beings such as Joseph. As others have pointed out before Segal, Yahweh's ethical sense improves over time within the Bible stories. In fact, in a rather fanciful afterward, Segal presents us with the image of Yahweh himself, in the person of the young Jesus, studying the texts of the *Hexateuch* for the first time and being transformed by them, particularly by the story of the deeply compassionate Joseph.

In the end we need to ask if Segal has imposed modern thinking on ancient texts or has actually made a surprising discovery about the texts themselves. This can only be answered, I think, by closely reading key passages in which Yahweh's cruelty is most manifest and trying to discern if the Bible narrative itself is siding with Yahweh or his hapless human victims. Segal lists six such incidents (page 137) and concludes that the narratives indeed favor the Israelites over their out-of-control deity. But is it possible that Segal just can't accept that there were people, including the authors of these texts, who actually believed that Yahweh's collective punishments of the Israelites were justified because he is, after all, the creator of the world and liberator of the Israelites, so he must, by definition, always be right?

As I reread the passages about Yahweh's most egregious acts of violence against the Israelites, I have to conclude that Segal has erred in his judgement. For example, in the first mass punishment incident listed by Segal, the Israelites make and worship a golden calf and, as a result, about 3,000 of them are slain and Yahweh then sends a plague to deal with others (*Exodus* 32:1-35). The Bible says in this chapter (verse 25) that the people were unrestrained (or, in some translations, naked), and were thus shamed among their enemies. This is, indeed, strong condemnation of the Israelites by the Bible narrative itself. Segal (page 146) says that Yahweh, after hearing Moses' pleas on behalf of the people, promises to punish "only" those who sinned against him (*Exodus* 32:33). Segal italicizes the word "only," but here he is relying on a translation that adds the word "only" without any basis for doing so in the original Hebrew Bible text. Yahweh actually says in this Bible verse that he will punish those who have sinned against him, perhaps implying "only" those who have sinned, but leaving it open for interpretation either way. I see nothing to support Segal's view that the Bible narrative is critical of Yahweh and sympathetic to the people. Segal points out that the golden calf is thought by the Israelites to be Yahweh, not some foreign god, which should reduce the severity of their transgression. The text explains that the Israelites built the calf out of fear and this, says Segal, makes the narrative sympathetic to them rather than to their avenging god. Reading through these passages in detail doesn't convince me that Segal's conclusions are correct. If the narrative is not overtly condemnatory of the people, it seems, at best, to be studiously neutral and descriptive.

The other appalling examples of mass collective punishment cited by Segal occur when the Israelites complain about the bland manna they are compelled to eat (*Numbers* 11), when they resist invading Canaan after learning of the great size and strength of the defenders of the land (*Numbers* 13-14), when they demonstrate hostility to Moses after the rebellion of Korah (*Numbers* 16:41-50), when they complain about the food and lack of water (*Numbers* 21:4-9), and when they worship Baal (*Numbers* 25). Segal argues that the Bible is really showing sympathy toward the Israelites in these various cases by making clear that their disobedient acts arise out of justified fear or ignorance rather than evil intent, or by showing that Yahweh reduces the level of punishment after Moses pleads with him. It seems to me, however, that Segal fails to comprehend the mind set of those who believe that disobedience to the deity is, by definition, evil, that no human failing is a legitimate excuse, and, furthermore, that any mitigation of punishment of the guilty or on the innocent is a sign of Yahweh's mercy, not an indication that Yahweh had erred.

So despite Segal's fascinating presentation, the core of his argument fails. Perhaps he finds Yahweh's actions so appalling that he assumes that any reasonable person, including an author of the Bible texts, must find likewise. However, one can find, even today, Jews and Christians who think that Yahweh's murderous and even genocidal actions described in these texts are totally justified and correct. So why would we assume that the Bible authors, millennia ago, must have thought otherwise?

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