

A Statement from the Council of the Society of Biblical Literature
November 2010

Since this past summer there has been a lengthy and healthy discussion on the nature of our Society and its various procedures and practices. This discussion played out at considerable length on the SBL website, and the SBL offices and members of Council received many individual communications on the issues raised.

Our Executive Director, John Kutsko, in a communication addressed to the entire SBL membership welcomed the discussion, invited further contributions to the conversation, and helpfully framed the issues as covering the following areas:

- SBL Mission Statement
 - A concern for identifying our work as “critical” scholarship
 - The need to define the responsibilities of scholarly participation and membership in a learned society
- SBL Membership
 - Standards
 - Levels of, and criteria for participation
- SBL Meetings
 - Rules, standards, and guidelines for participation at the Annual Meeting
 - Defining those rules at each level of administration
 - Program Units and Chairs (approval)
 - Organizers (selection)
 - Presenters (qualifications)
 - Presiders (order)
 - Affiliate organization participation guidelines at the Annual Meeting
- *Review of Biblical Literature* editorial policy

In the still ongoing conversations opinions have been diverse and constructive. We have received contributions in the form of motions, proposals, suggestions, and opinions. As the chief body with governance oversight of the Society the Council of the SBL has welcomed the discussion and taken all contributions with utmost seriousness. We believe that the issues raised provide the opportunity to clarify and refine our practices and policies as a learned society in a period when the academic world and our own disciplines have undergone considerable change and will continue to do so.

The Council of the SBL is entrusted by our Constitution to be “responsible for determining the general policies and program initiatives of the Society and shall report to the membership.” We are hereby making such a report on the discussion and response to issues raised. This is a progress report. We have some actions of Council to report to you, but we are planning to further deliberate on a number of matters and welcome ongoing conversation. Various SBL Committees and Editorial Boards have also undertaken discussion and revision of operational policies within their own arenas.

1. Proposals to add the word “critical” to the stated mission of the SBL “to foster biblical scholarship” have received support and opposition in communications to Council.

Council has begun a discussion of both the Mission and Vision statements of the Society. Any change in our Mission statement would require an amendment to our Constitution which must be approved by Council and “proposed at least a year in advance and circulated to the members of the Society at least six months prior to the Annual Meeting at which final action is to be taken.” Council has already set aside agenda time at its April meeting to continue this discussion. In the meantime, we are proposing a rearrangement of materials on the SBL webpage stating our strategic vision (available at the Business Meeting and thereafter on the website). These statements, already adopted by Council in 2004, include the statement that SBL members “share a mutual interest in the critical investigation of the Bible,” and as the first bulleted item under our strategic vision: “Advance the academic study of biblical literature and its cultural contexts.” Although discussion on the possibility of amending our brief mission statement will continue, the members of Council believe the Society is now operating under the mandate to ensure that our programs and practices continue to be both “critical” and “academic.”

2. The Program Committee had already begun a comprehensive review of its procedures and policies before this discussion arose. Their revised guidelines will be available soon and will address issues such as approval of new program units, makeup of program unit steering committees, responsibilities of presidors to oversee appropriate discussion, and guidelines for appropriate papers and presenters.

3. Many participants in the discussion this fall have expressed concern for the increased number of program units scheduling more than two sessions and for individuals appearing multiple times on the program. These practices, given the size and complexity of the Annual Meeting, make scheduling to avoid conflicts very difficult. Hence, Council will continue to consider these issues in conversation with the Annual Meeting Program Committee and has taken one initial action:

- *A person is limited to participate in no more than two regular program sessions as a presenter, panelist, or respondent.*

4. There has also been considerable discussion about the criteria for the participation of students as paper presenters for the Annual Meeting. Council has also taken the following unanimous actions:

- *All students without a doctoral degree are required to submit to the Program Unit Chair the full text of the paper they are proposing to read.*
- *The number of sessions a student without a doctoral degree can participate in will be limited to one.*

Council would also like to remind members who serve as teachers, mentors and advisors that our Regional Meetings often represent an excellent opportunity for students to present papers.

5. A number of expressed concerns have related to the policies governing the status of Affiliated Organizations. Council has taken the following initial action to insure that approval of such organization is carefully reviewed.

- *All organizations seeking “Affiliate” status with the SBL must receive approval from the SBL Council.*

Council will now proceed to develop criteria by which such approval may be gained. Those will be made available when completed and in the meantime we welcome any helpful suggestions on those criteria.

6. The *Review of Biblical Literature* editorial board has adopted new guidelines to ensure that it will remain a serious peer reviewed critical publication: In order to ensure and even improve the quality of all reviews published, *RBL* established the policy and practice of having every review vetted not only by SBL staff but also by a member of the *RBL* editorial board. The *RBL* editorial policy will be available on the SBL website in January.

The members of the SBL Council would like to express thanks to all members who have participated in this important discussion. We have taken that discussion with great seriousness and believe it goes to the heart of our identity and practices as a learned society. We will be continuing our own deliberations, monitoring the work of our committees and editorial boards, and taking additional actions to make our Society responsive to its member’s needs and concerns.

Respectfully submitted,

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