



Dear Colleague,

Due to the serious risks to public health posed by COVID-19, the in-person 2020 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature and the American Academy of Religion, scheduled to take place in Boston on 21–24 November, has been cancelled.

We are excited about a new opportunity for SBL and its members. **The 2020 Annual Meeting will be all virtual.** SBL and AAR together are committed to providing an innovative scholarly exchange so that every paper accepted has an opportunity for presentation. A virtual publishing exhibit hall, too, will provide you opportunities to explore the latest publications and resources and to schedule meetings.

A virtual meeting will create new possibilities. It will widen access for members without funding or resources to attend an in-person meeting, including international members, students, adjunct and contingent faculty, and independent scholars. It will open up possibilities for both synchronous (live) and asynchronous (recorded) participation. It will allow attendees to avoid the inevitable scheduling conflicts that prevent participation in sessions of interest. We are exploring options to allow some presenters to pre-record presentations. SBL members will have the opportunity to archive PDFs of papers and presentation slides to [SBL Central](#). These opportunities are exciting because they will add new forms and platforms for scholarly exchange in the future.

To be sure, there are details to work out for an all-virtual meeting. The meeting will most certainly need to be lengthened to more than four days; time zones will present a challenge for synchronous participation; we need to support participants for whom a virtual meeting will be a physical challenge; we recognize that a digital divide exists that hinders equal access for all as do the responsibilities of childcare; and we are concerned about privacy protections. We are taking all these issues into consideration and are in consultation with members and program unit chairs, as well as our peer organizations that face similar challenges. We will be reaching out very soon to all program session chairs and presenters that were accepted this spring regarding scheduling, presentation options, presentation best practices, and session guidelines. And all members will be hearing as soon as possible about further details for the 2020 Annual Meeting. SBL has [prepared an FAQ](#) that will be updated as more details are finalized.

The risks of COVID-19 have been recognized for months by Council and staff. The health and safety of members always comes first. Indeed, beginning in early March, staff became acquainted with technology and best practices, and their contingency planning for the Annual Meeting intensely explored alternatives and evaluated opportunities for a meeting that would support members, publishers, and affiliated organizations (including continuing with an in-person meeting, holding a virtual only meeting, and holding a hybrid in-person/virtual meeting).

For weeks I have wanted to write this but have been constrained by fiduciary responsibilities to you, the members of SBL. SBL and AAR had contracts with twelve hotels and the Hynes Convention Center. Because of the number of agreements and the legal issues involved, we proceeded with care, caution, and patience, as well as respect for our Boston partners today who will be our partners in the future. It was imperative that we did not make a premature decision or announcement, as that would have undermined our efforts. SBL staff has had to engage in conversations and leverage relationships across the city and state. It was a long process that exacted a tremendous toll on Council, but especially upon staff. That process was to ensure SBL reduced financial burdens and legal exposure.

A complication of the size of the concurrent meetings of SBL, AAR, and affiliated organizations is that the financial impact on a city is considerable, and you can appreciate the consequences its cancellation causes. We are grateful to our partners in Boston, but we regret that it adds to the economic burden of the pandemic. There are no winners. So we very much look forward to the 2025 Annual Meeting in Boston.

We heard from many of you who expressed trust and patience, and on behalf of Council and staff I am very grateful.

We look forward to seeing you virtually this year, working with you to plan the best meeting that we are able to produce in the next six months, and using these experiences to pave the way for a future that provides members more opportunities for scholarly exchange and professional development than ever before.

Sincerely,

John F. Kutsko
Executive Director
13 July 2020