

Scholars and believers: Growing pains at the SBL

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 5, 2011](#) issue



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A few years ago, the world's largest body of biblical scholars adopted these words as a motto: "Foster biblical scholarship." Scholarship might seem an obvious focus for the Society of Biblical Literature, but as the SBL has grown in membership—it has seen a 30 percent increase since 2001—and added diverse scholarly approaches, tensions have simmered over the degree to which religious apologetics fits, if at all, into an organization devoted to critical research.

The issue bubbled to the surface last summer when Ronald Hendel, a professor of Hebrew Bible and Jewish studies at the University of California at Berkeley, wrote in a popular magazine that he was quitting the SBL. "The views of creationists, snake-handlers and faith-healers now count among the kinds of biblical scholarship that the society seeks to foster," wrote Hendel. While scholars tended to dismiss that claim as hyperbole, many agreed with Hendel that a "battle royal" is taking place in the SBL "between faith and reason."

The SBL put Hendel's column from the *Biblical Archaeology Review* on its website and invited member comments. Nearly 100 responses were posted, including replies from Hendel, before the online discussion was closed.

That debate was a tumultuous start for the SBL's new executive director, John Kutsko. Writing to SBL's 8,700 members in August, Kutsko acknowledged that Hendel "raised sincere concerns, widely shared in varying degrees." He also noted that the diversification of research may have prompted questions about whether an "intentional slippage of scholarly rigor" was afoot.

Kutsko, who holds a doctorate from Harvard in Hebrew Bible and previously worked for United Methodist-related Abingdon Press, added: "In regard to personal faith commitments consciously or unconsciously trumping critical inquiry, that has been a historic challenge in our field (how could it not be?)." SBL members typically teach at secular universities or at colleges and seminaries with ties to Protestant, Catholic or Jewish communities.

At the organization's annual meeting in November, which drew 4,800 registrants to downtown Atlanta, the SBL Council, a 14-member board, took some steps affirming the primacy of critical scholarship.

The board placed more prominently on its website a vision statement that describes the SBL as "a learned society devoted to the critical investigation of the Bible from a variety of academic disciplines." Besides offering "intellectual growth and professional development," the statement says, the SBL strives to "advance the academic study of biblical literature and its cultural contexts." Kutsko said it was important to emphasize the words *critical* and *academic*. A longer procedure is required to alter the mission statement, "Foster biblical scholarship," but the board is expected to consider new wording at future meetings.

The board also elected John Dominic Crossan as SBL vice president for 2011 and president for 2012. A longtime SBL member and best-selling author, Crossan has been the leading voice of an independent group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar. The Jesus Seminar created controversy two decades ago when it declared that, in its scholarly judgment, less than 25 percent of the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels were actually uttered by him.

Crossan's friends said that by tapping him for the post, the SBL showed that it shares historical-critical standards of research with the Jesus Seminar and its parent,

Westar Institute. Crossan retired early from DePaul University in 1995 to focus on writing and speaking. Crossan's election will continue a recent string of SBL presidents "clearly committed to critical scholarship," including the 2011 president, Carol Newsom of Emory University, said Stephen Patterson of Willamette University in Oregon. "What Crossan brings is a track record of public scholarship," he added.

The Westar Institute will hold its fall meeting this year in Berkeley—just before the SBL meeting in San Francisco—to launch a Bible seminar series that aims to counter religious conservatives by presenting a "more critical, informed and thoughtful approach to the Bible." The Westar Institute has not decided whether to hold its fall meetings in official conjunction with the SBL.

The SBL gatherings—which after a three-year hiatus will be held concurrently with the meetings of the American Academy of Religion—already attract special-interest "affiliate" groups. Most participants stay for the SBL (and AAR) programs, at which they can choose from dozens of simultaneous research presentations, buy discounted books, interview for faculty vacancies and contact colleagues.

Evangelical and church-based scholars appear to find the scholarship at SBL meetings a fairly comfortable fit, especially for those who welcome the intellectual challenge.

"The SBL has provided space for Mennonite scholars and Friends to meet over the past 25 years," wrote Mary H. Schertz in her online response to Hendel's critique of the SBL. The annual meeting is "the exactly right venue to carry on the conversation about the interdependency of historical critical and confessional reading," she said. But in another online comment, Leo Perdue of Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas, wrote: "Some evangelicals are excellent scholars, but the radical true believers really bother me."

The Evangelical Theological Society, which for decades has met just before SBL's November meetings, has a clear doctrinal identity. The ETS, which had 623 registrants last year, regards the Bible as inerrant and declares on its website that it serves Jesus Christ and his church "by fostering conservative, evangelical biblical scholarship."

An evangelical group that drew more notice at the Atlanta meeting was the Institute for Biblical Research, which reported that 1,000 persons attended its closing session. The IBR had about only 30 members in 1975 but has grown rapidly lately. The

number of dues-paying members now nears 500 scholars, said president Lee McDonald in an e-mail. Some IBR members teach at schools such as Princeton, Yale, UCLA and Harvard and take part in SBL programs and committees, he said.

"While there may be some fairly conservative scholars who at times want to advance their missionary agendas at SBL meetings, I think these are few in number," McDonald said. "I can say without contradiction that most of us have been stretched in good ways by this relationship. I have learned more from those who challenged my assumptions than from those who shared them."

Darrell Bock of Dallas Theological Seminary, an IBR member, warned at a well-attended session on the historical Jesus in Atlanta that scholarship may be harmed when voices are excluded or ignored in the academic arena. "When detractors are consistently skeptical, this approach equates skepticism with thinking critically," Bock said, "when in fact thoroughgoing skepticism may be no more self-critical than thoroughgoing belief is." Such division "ultimately marginalizes the many scholars in the middle who might like to respectfully engage a broader spectrum," he said.

Cordial engagement was part of that session, at which Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University and Robert J. Miller, editor of the Jesus Seminar's *Fourth R* magazine, responded to papers by Bock and by two other evangelical professors.

Crossan, who a year ago joined Levine and Stephen Patterson in a panel discussion at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, said he advises scholars to set reasonable ground rules for debates. "I would prefer not to debate whether [a Gospel account] should be taken literally or metaphorically, because I won't change [another person's position] and they won't change [mine]," he said. In his debate in New Orleans with Anglican scholar N. T. Wright, Crossan noted that Wright "takes the resurrection of Jesus literally and I take it metaphorically"—in which case, Crossan suggested, the conversation should focus on comparing "what his understanding means for him and what mine means for me."

Whatever the range of disagreements, some observers think that the percentage of conservative scholars in the SBL might increase as the SBL and the 10,000-member American Academy of Religion resume holding joint meetings this year and continuing through 2021.

After attending the separate AAR and SBL meetings last fall, Rodney Clapp wrote in his January 11 "Soundings" column for the *Century* that "the center of gravity in

publishing has arguably shifted to houses with evangelical bases or connections." The largest book-selling booths now belong to Eerdmans, InterVarsity Press, Baylor University Press and Baker Academic and Brazos Press, said Clapp, himself an editor at Baker and Brazos.

That trend is due partly to the increasing number of students from evangelical backgrounds who are doing doctoral studies at nonevangelical institutions, suggested Craig Keener, who teaches at American Baptist-related Palmer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania.

Keener cautioned in an interview that if the SBL were to create a litmus test designed to prohibit evangelicals from participation, that would hurt progressive evangelicals who already risk being faulted as "too liberal" by their conservative associates. "But I'd be surprised if that happened; litmus tests are more characteristic of fundamentalism," he said.

But a certain amount of regulation is required, Old Testament scholar John J. Collins of Yale wrote in a recent book, *Foster Biblical Scholarship*, which contains essays honoring Kent Richards, the longtime SBL executive director who retired last year. The quarterly *Journal of Biblical Literature* "is not a blog where anyone can post his or her own opinion," and program units at the annual meeting still need committee approval, he said. And Collins echoed some internal concerns about SBL's oversight of its print and online journal of book reviews.

"It is the essence of critical scholarship that no position is exempt from challenge if evidence and argument warrant it," said Collins, a past president of both the Catholic Biblical Association and the SBL. He said there has been "a resurgence of conservative believers who demand 'a hermeneutic of assent' to counteract the dominant hermeneutic of suspicion in biblical studies.

"It is not the business of the historical critic to disprove the supernaturalist interpretation [but] only to explain the events as far as possible in historical terms," Collins said. "The confidence of an earlier generation in the historicity of the exodus, or even the patriarchs, now seems to many to be a clear example of the distorting effect of the will to believe."

In that same vein, an article by a doctoral student published in the Winter 2010 *Journal of Biblical Literature* laments that the field of study on the empty tomb in the Gospel of Mark is "overgrown with faith-based scholarship." Richard C. Miller, a Ph.D.

candidate at Claremont Graduate School, wrote that too often researchers seek to understand Mark's ending in terms of early Jewish beliefs about resurrection. He said resurrection was described in Jewish writings as a collective eschatological event, not as an event to exalt an individual.

"Most scholars have failed to classify properly how Mark's 'empty tomb' narrative would have registered in its Mediterranean milieu," he wrote. Miller argued that the Gospel story ends with a missing body in a way that is similar to other ancient fables about hero-sages whose remains were not found—often confirming that the person was not a mere mortal. Miller, who holds master's degrees from Princeton Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, was asked whether his *JBL* article might strike some readers as "combative." Responding by e-mail, Miller said, "I am not against faith. I simply think that the Bible is deserving of a discursive space that handles its texts with the same measure of dignity accorded other great literary works of antiquity."

Scholars often question whether accounts of the life of Jesus in the Gospels are historically accurate. Each Gospel storyteller "was far more interested in the theological significance carried by the story than in historical accuracy," wrote L. Michael White of the University of Texas in his *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite*, published last year. In his book's preface, White, an SBL board member, wrote that "the majority of New Testament scholars are, in fact, believing Christians," some conservative and others not. The more skeptical scholars are not attacking Jesus or Christianity but are raising questions "as a direct result of taking the Gospels seriously," he asserted.

Current tensions within the SBL, which was founded in 1880, are stirred not only by liberal-conservative divisions but by the increasing diversity of voices. In his tenure as executive director of the SBL, Richards sought "more voices in the scholarly conversation, not fewer," observed Gail O'Day, dean of Wake Forest University School of Divinity. Student members were given a larger role, and a yearly international meeting overseas became well established through Richards's determination, she wrote in the book honoring him.

"SBL has been experiencing two kinds of growing pains," said Kutsko, Richards's successor. "One is the growing membership itself—international membership has more than doubled in the last ten years to a total of 2,600. But growth is good, especially when you see so many disciplines in the humanities experiencing

decline."

The second growth factor, said Kutsko, is the multiplying specializations in academic studies and the variety of approaches to scripture besides that of historical-critical research. The field has seen the rise of such subfields as feminist and gay perspectives, postcolonial studies, postmodernist interpretations, and studies on how the Bible is received in different cultures—evidence of an enormous "methodological variety," he said.

The "big tent" configuration allows for many kinds of networking and collaboration, said Kutsko. The complaints raised by Hendel and the ensuing online debate within the SBL over the relation of faith and scholarship "was not only healthy as a form of communication but as an indicator of our vitality," he said. "I was delighted to watch this conversation."