

Council Report: John Strong, Chair
2012 Annual Business Meeting
7:30 am – 8:30 am, 18 November 2012
Chicago, Illinois

Good morning colleagues!

A few minutes ago, you heard from John Kutsko, SBL's Executive Director, about all of the good work that has been going on this year to foster Biblical scholarship. All of it is exciting, but what strikes me is how diversified and international we are becoming. The International Meeting is growing; the Quran Initiative is taking off; the International Cooperative Initiative (ICI) is expanding. All of these things, as well as the other work of the Society, point to a vibrant, growing Society that is carrying out its role of fostering Biblical scholarship in the global community in the 21st century.

My role today is to update the SBL membership on another topic that has taken up much of SBL Council's attention this year, the ongoing labor dispute between the Hyatt Hotel and the UniteHere labor union.

First, let me state up front that SBL is concerned with issues of justice. One need only take a cursory glance through our program book, and one will see SBL members wrestling with issues of justice in their Biblical scholarship, and in so doing, fulfilling our primary service of carrying on open conversations on ethics. Beyond these conversations, our members act on these issues through their personal choices. The individuals who make up the SBL Council, and John Kutsko, our Executive Director as well, are also counted among those SBL members, whose scholarship explores how the Biblical texts call us to justice. In our role as council members, we continue to seek to be ethical in the decisions and policies we make for the Society, in order to provide a safe haven for open conversations. Let there be no mistake that SBL Council, its

Executive Director, and the SBL Staff, want to see the hotel workers who have served us so well during this conference receive fair living wages, be protected in a healthy environment, and make for themselves and their families a satisfying, enjoyable life through the benefits of their employment.

With that affirmation, I must also reiterate what has been stated in our correspondence with SBL members throughout this past year. Specifically, the Executive Director, the SBL Staff, and the Council are limited by federal and state laws to operate for the benefit of SBL members in the achievement of SBL's stated mission: to foster Biblical scholarship. It would be both unethical and illegal if we were to appropriate SBL members' dues and fees for any cause other than fostering Biblical scholarship. Simply stated, SBL members have freely paid dues to SBL from the money their labor has earned in order to foster Biblical scholarship in their own work. Clearly, if SBL Council were to behave inappropriately with members' dues and fees, if, for example, we spent their assets on political campaigns or luxury items, we would be breaking an ethical and legal trust. Bear in mind as well, our members are diverse in countless ways—religiously, ethnically, politically, and in the types of ethical causes in which they invest their money, talents and energy. Accordingly, there is no ethical litmus test that our members must pass, nor should there be, if our mission is to provide a safe haven for open conversations.

Applying this ethic and these legal constraints to the present labor dispute, SBL Council has recognized that it must remain faithful to and focused upon its mission to foster Biblical scholarship. Out of faithfulness to this ethic, SBL Council has operated unanimously from the very beginning of the year, even before registration was open, to consistently follow four policies:

- We will inform members of any labor disputes, and allow them to follow their consciences in their choice of hotel.

I want to add to this, by way of clarification, that SBL signs contracts having done due diligence, and we sign in good faith. We do not sign with hotels that have a record of mistreatment of or conflict with their workers. In order to gain the best savings for our members, however, we sign contracts five to seven years into the future, which means that during the period of time from when a contract is signed to when the Annual Meeting is held, labor contracts with our hotels will expire and new ones will have to be negotiated. Inevitably, disputes will occur. When this happens, we will let our members know, and allow them to choose a hotel which is not in dispute with its workers.

- In light of this first point, when there is a dispute between workers and a hotel, SBL has and will continue to negotiate with the hotels to lower attrition rates in regard to the number of hotel rooms, food, and other services. This is done knowing that a certain number of our members will choose not to stay at a hotel in which there is a dispute, and so, by lowering attrition rates, SBL will not incur any penalties caused by lower usage.
- In consideration of our members' ethical commitments and choices, we will limit the meeting space in hotels involved labor disputes.
- Fourth, as stated above, SBL has negotiated its current contracts in good faith, and we will keep our word. We will honor our signed contracts.

Not to honor our contracts, I hasten to add, would result in major penalties, totaling to hundreds of thousands of dollars, and paid to the very hotels being targeted by the boycott, in this instance, the Hyatt. For SBL, these penalties would place the organization in a precarious financial situation. Moreover, the integrity of the

organization would be ruined. What hotel would sign a contract with us if we had a history of renegeing on contracts that were signed in good faith? Such actions, if taken, would constitute inappropriate behavior on the part of Council, a dereliction of duty on the part of the organization's trustees.

With this in mind, in October SBL Council passed a motion making the above stated points Society policy, guiding SBL's operations.

This past year, there has been tension between SBL Council and the AAR Board on this issue. Still, SBL Council is committed to meeting with AAR, and we continue to work to make the joint Annual Meeting a success for all of our members. Together with AAR, we have signed joint contracts extending through 2021. In an effort to strengthen this joint effort, in June, sub-committees of the two governing bodies met in a special summit, the outcome of which was congenial and positive, with hope for more, closer collaborations. SBL recognizes that it serves our members best when it serves them together with AAR.

While the labor dispute has been challenging for SBL Council, for the Executive Director, and for SBL Staff, we recognize that our problems in this regard are really only "collateral damage," and individual workers struggle daily to secure for themselves and their family a living wage, a healthy work environment, and a satisfying life. The SBL Council, in its efforts to establish sound venues for open conversations that foster Biblical scholarship, knows that the texts we study and the papers we write call for justice.

I look forward to seeing you all again next year in Baltimore, and let us all hope that 12 months from now, the world will be a more just place for all.