Farewell and Thanks

You are all too kind. I had expected a roast, which was why I agreed to do this. A roast would have been less embarrassing for me to listen to.

Actually, the real reason I agreed to this is to thank you. And to ask a favor.

I believe in institutions and what organizations can do. To be entrusted with my discipline’s learned society has made these last twelve years an extraordinary privilege.

Membership organizations are not people, but people are their cell structure. You don’t belong to SBL, you belong with others who form SBL. There is a difference. Community, an aspiration more important than ever, is about living with our deepest differences. The SBL community is like the biblical canons that include the books of both Ruth and Ezra, the theologies of both Peter and Paul. We are a library with both the *Communist Manifesto* and *Atlas Shrugged*. Sometimes the academic and ideological differences become the focus instead of understanding them, even appreciating them.

Because of that, in the midst of this amazing privilege that I have enjoyed, there have been some hard days. A few. Here and there. One evening, on one of those days, I was driving home from work and I saw a billboard for a plumbing company. The billboard pictured a cartoon toilet with doleful, expressive eyes saying, “I’ve seen things, terrible things.” We have all had days like that.

But they are not the norm, nor should they be. We cannot let them be. That is the favor I am asking of you. Biblical scholars have a unique perch and perspective. Few texts are used the way our subjects are. In so many complementary and contradictory ways and by so many. What an opportunity for us.

Had staff, Council, a thousand volunteers, and I become discouraged by difference over community, we together could not have launched Bible Odyssey, or a new learned society for scholars of the Qur’an, or an updated Bible translation. We did that together. The favor I am asking is to keep doing that.

We also do *this* together—the concurrent Annual Meetings. With AAR. What a perfect example and extension of our community. What we do in this concurrent annual meeting is unique. Difficult. Important. And I could not have had a better partner in helping to keep this crazy thing together than Alice Hunt. We are friends and colleagues, and that makes a difference for the organizations. Because, while organizations are not people, they assume their character.

A word about Council. I have heard dozens of horror stories from other executive directors about how their boards behave. I was always sheepish in their company, admitting that I looked forward to Council meetings. Over the last twelve years, I worked with about fifty Council members and five Chairs. We got things done together with those with whom we would never have otherwise crossed paths. Council, you made this work *meaningful*. 
There are 1,100 volunteers every year that serve on committees, editorial boards, and program units. You have made this work possible.

But to the staff of SBL. Fifteen people who do the work of 150. I have a confession. I wanted to maintain some in-office work because I couldn’t bare not seeing you. To everyone: The SBL staff are the ones you should be celebrating today. They have made me look good and this work seem easy. They have made SBL look great. They will keep doing that. I have another favor to ask: please acknowledge them today.

It is said that people do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. I hope you know how much I have cared. Thanks for a dozen years of fostering biblical studies, religious studies, and theology. I plan to keep doing that, too.

Thank you all so very much.

John