

The Role of the Society in Making Public Statements

The mission of the Society of Biblical Literature is to foster biblical scholarship. It is committed to its core values, including collegiality, respect for diversity, critical inquiry, inclusivity, and tolerance. As a society of scholars, we aspire to provide a model for engaging critically and respectfully all aspects of religious discourse in the context of civil society. Among a membership that is socially diverse and increasingly international, individual members may espouse intensely-felt opinions on ethical issues that can be diametrically opposed to the opinions of other members. This is a positive state of affairs and an opportunity to exercise the core values of the Society. As a learned society, its role is to encourage the expression of these opposing viewpoints in public fora (including digital, or social media), and to provide a safe space for discussion in which everyone is encouraged to put forward their reasoned opinions while being offered respect and collegiality, and being protected from all forms of hate speech. The Society encourages its members to engage with the major issues that face them in their particular place and moment in history, and aims to provide resources to foster deep discussion of these issues, and critical engagement with them, from a variety of standpoints and perspectives.

As a 501c3 organization, the Society of Biblical Literature is constrained from offering public statements on political issues that do not directly engage our mission. Hence the Society as a whole cannot hold a general ethical position on critical issues in current religious discourse; its members can, and should act according to their consciences. The Society exists to foster the development of responsible ethical and political positions by its diverse members, especially on issues that touch on our profession and expertise. Were the Society to espouse particular ethical and political positions and issue public statements on them, it would situate itself over against its own members who hold divergent opinions.

The Society will act according to its core values in its own functioning, in its governance, and in the decisions that its Council and staff take on behalf of its members in organizing events. The Executive Director of the Society of Biblical Literature represents Council's deliberations and discussions and serves as its designated spokesperson. These duties include setting standards for and ensuring appropriate conduct in these jointly-held common spaces, whether they be at an annual meeting, during work on a committee, in the publications of its Press, or in the digital spaces of the social media that appear under the name of the Society of Biblical Literature or are linked to it. The Society will sponsor policies for the presentation of scholarly work in these venues that ensure the legal and ethical treatment of individual scholarly works and items of cultural heritage. The Society reserves the right to act to protect the civil rights of its members and their safety in these venues. The Society also stands in solidarity with its members in the academy in support of their academic freedom, and their right to conditions of work free from intimidation that allow them to perform the duties of their profession responsibly. These issues are central to the core values of our Society, which we seek to preserve in our common activities as a Society, and in our individual professional contexts.

This policy was approved by the SBL Council December 2015.