

AAR wants return to joint meetings with biblical scholars: SBL officials greet news favorably

by [John Dart](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

The annual pre-Thanksgiving joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature had a record registration in 2006 of over 11,000, and last year's meeting in San Diego drew about 10,200 scholars, students and publishers.

But the 2007 meeting was to be the last concurrent one for the two organizations except for 2011 in San Francisco. The AAR board had concluded that the meetings were getting too big and were limiting program innovation. Besides, some said, most AAR academicians teach about all kinds of religions, whereas the SBL, with its mixture of seminary scholars and professors at secular universities, focuses on biblical research.

However, acknowledging that the separation was a "contentious subject," the AAR board in April decided that the organization should return to the old arrangement. A major factor was its internal survey of AAR members last year showing that between 70 and 75 percent, depending on the question, wanted to meet with the SBL.

Moreover, the AAR board announced that in scheduling future independent meetings in late October or early November, it encountered "scheduling and logistical problems." An AAR spokesperson said this year's November 1-3 meeting in Chicago was shortened because of Election Day on November 4.

"Members wanting to be with their children around Halloween is a potential problem," she added. Another possible disadvantage was that parts of two weeks in the academic calendar will be affected at the next several AAR meetings, whereas the Saturday-through-Tuesday-meetings before Thanksgiving cause minimal disruption.

SBL officials, who met April 26, greeted the news favorably and reaffirmed the organization's "continued interest in meeting" concurrently in the same city "as soon as it is possible" given its contractual agreements. "We are already scheduled through 2012 (Chicago) and 2013 (Baltimore)."

The ratio of registrants at the joint meetings has been roughly 60 percent AAR members and 40 percent SBL members. Publishing houses and other exhibitors at the meetings lamented the earlier AAR decision to meet separately, in view of the added expense of two meetings.

If the SBL is agreeable, the AAR board said, it would welcome back the jointly sponsored book exhibits, a common employment interview center and the freedom to attend each other's sessions, programs and receptions, according to Jack Fitzmier, AAR executive director.

Ironically, AAR and SBL have national offices in the same building in Atlanta. The SBL was not involved in the initial decision by the AAR, nor was it involved in the latest discussion. But SBL leaders called the traditional collaboration "a good idea."

"It brings together people from diverse disciplines and backgrounds to exchange ideas and build relationships," wrote Kent Richards, SBL executive director.