

Confidential memo about annual meeting venues  
and the challenges of meeting near the SBL hotels

To: ASOR board members  
From: Andy Vaughn, ASOR executive director

As many of you have heard, AAR (the American Academy of Religion) and SBL (the Society of Biblical Literature) decided that they will hold concurrent annual meetings starting in 2011 in San Francisco. It is anticipated that the combined meetings will draw between 12,000 and 13,000 attendees per year. AAR and SBL are also forecasting for growth in those numbers over the next decade. ASOR asked to be a part of the conversations for holding concurrent annual meetings, and we were told that it was too complicated to include a third party before the agreements were in place. ASOR then requested that we be included in searching for hotel space before new contracts were signed, but AAR and SBL decided that it was not in their interests to include us in their searches. AAR/SBL completed their searches for hotel space through 2021 before ASOR knew which cities were selected after 2013. ASOR thus faces challenges in locating good space after 2013 that is in close proximity to the SBL hotels and to the convention center.

ASOR is in a decent situation in 2011, 2012, and 2013 because we booked our meeting space before AAR finalized its decision to rejoin SBL. In fact, in 2013 (Baltimore) ASOR actually beat out AAR and SBL for a rate at a hotel that AAR wanted to book (the Baltimore Sheraton). Unfortunately the fact that ASOR got a better deal caused some problems down the road (see above). The agent for AAR/SBL (Experient) decided to book the subsequent years without letting ASOR know what cities were being considered. We were aware of the process, and I sent several emails to AAR and SBL in which I asked them to consider including ASOR in the selection process. They declined to include us, and they proceeded to book their space so that we would not get in the way. By signing such a large contract (2013–2021), Experient was able to put pressure on various cities to make concessions, and they also allowed AAR to get out of two contracts that had been signed previously. The penalties for breaking these contracts are typically in the six figures, so these were major concessions. The bottom line is that Experient played hardball, and they needed to do that in order to get AAR/SBL what they needed. Unfortunately this left ASOR in a situation where we were (are) trying to find leftover space. In some cities this has worked well, and in other cities it is more challenging.

The following is a list of the cities where AAR/SBL have signed contracts from 2011–2021:

- 2011: San Francisco (ASOR signed at Westin St. Francis @ @165/night)
- 2012: Chicago (ASOR signed at Chicago Marriott Magnificent Mile @ \$164/night)
- 2013: Baltimore (ASOR signed at Sheraton Baltimore @ \$145/night)
- 2014: San Diego (ASOR signed the Westin San Diego @ rate of \$139/night)
- 2015: Atlanta (ASOR signed at the Intercontinental Buckhead @ rate of \$149/night)
- 2016: San Antonio (ASOR has not been able to find space—see below)
- 2017: Boston (search ongoing)
- 2018: Denver (search ongoing)
- 2019: San Diego (search ongoing)
- 2020: Boston (search ongoing)
- 2021: San Antonio (search ongoing)

For the years 2011 through 2014, we have been able to meet fairly close to the SBL meeting. In San Francisco we are about a 15-minute walk from the SBL hotels. In Chicago (2012) we are several miles away, but Chicago was hard to anything something closer. In Baltimore (2013) we are very close the convention center but not to all of the SBL hotels. In San Diego (2014) we are about a fifteen to twenty minute walk from the SBL hotels and convention center. In Atlanta (2015), we are about 4 miles from the SBL hotel. In short, it is getting harder and harder to meet close to the SBL hotels because they will have a meeting of about 12,000 to 13,000 people. There simply are not enough hotels in most cities.

Starting in 2016, we will face severe problems in finding a hotel that is near to the downtown area in a couple of the cities. The problem is particularly challenging in San Antonio (2016 and 2021). We may also have a problem in Boston. **I would like to receive feedback from the board on how important it is for ASOR to hold the annual meeting in a downtown location for the years when it is hard to find a suitable property.**

It is helpful to give some details on the challenges that we face in San Antonio in 2016. The only option close by to the SBL hotels is the Westin (we met there in 2004). The problem with that hotel is 1) that the meeting space is not large enough for us now and 2) SBL has 250 rooms per night already booked. We have only been offered 150 sleeping rooms per night, and then we'd have to utilize 2 or 3 overflow hotels for the other rooms. After viewing the property, I decided that this is not a good fit because our group would be split between three hotels (and possibly four hotels), and we'd have to pay for meeting space. The following are the remaining options:

- a. Crowne Plaza: This hotel is okay, but it has some problems. The hotel is about a mile from the SBL hotel (it was about a 15 minute walk for me). It also is sort of isolated with the nearest restaurants being three or four blocks away. You have to go five blocks to have a large concentration of stores and restaurants. The service was okay but not great. The hotel looked dated and needed renovations. The meeting space can work, but it was not ideal (small rooms with columns). It is only downtown option though. The rate is \$159 for now, which is also not great compared to the SBL rates.
- b. Resort hotels outside of San Antonio: Hyatt Hill Country or Westin La Cantera. Both of these resorts were truly spectacular hotels. They have excellent service. Both of them have golf courses on site and extensive spas. They also have large pools and other resort activities. Both properties have shuttle buses that can transport attendees to nearby malls and restaurants for dinner. The rates are about the same as the downtown hotels for now, but I think that they might come down. In my opinion, our attendees would like these hotels, and these hotels would facilitate the type of feeling/ experience from the annual meeting that we want to create.

I did not feel that I could sign the contracts for 2016 without getting input from the board because the resort location outside of the downtown area would be a departure from the previous guidance that I have received. It is my recommendation that we separate ourselves more and more from the SBL venues because we really do not have any choice. I think that the resort hotels present ASOR will an excellent opportunity to have our attendees have a great experience. I also think that we can negotiate for the hotels to pay for transportation to the downtown area on one of the nights, and they can also provide transportation to nearby restaurants on other nights.

If we do not go with one of these resorts in 2016, I am not comfortable with any of our other options. The Crowne Plaza can work, but it is not a great venue for us unless it undergoes renovations.

I hope that this memo has not been too long. I have tried to summarize what is admittedly a complicated situation so that we can have a constructive conversation.

I look forward to our discussions at the board meeting.

Thanks,  
Andy