

# Understanding Faith

PTS Faculty and Students Foster Church/Academy Dialogue at AAR/SBL

by Heather Roote Faller

“Being a part of the Society of Biblical Literature is a way of demonstrating scholarly accomplishment, and it’s part of our faculty’s vocation,” says dean of academic affairs Darrell Guder. “If we go by St. Anselm’s phrase ‘faith seeking understanding,’ we look at three things—what is faith, what does it mean to seek, and what does understanding look like?” As Christians, Guder says, members of Princeton’s faculty presuppose faith in their scholarship, and academic rigor is part of their integrity and their witness to that faith.

The most recent national gathering of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) took place in Philadelphia in November. For the past 35 years, the two professional societies have been meeting jointly. The Society of Biblical Literature, founded in 1880 and now counting 6,000 members worldwide, is a group that fosters biblical scholarship, focusing on the literature and history of the cultures of the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, as well as on contemporary interpretation of the Bible. The American Academy of Religion, founded in 1909 and including 7,500 members worldwide, covers the study of all religions, ancient and contemporary.

At the November meeting of SBL, the community of scholars recognized PTS’s Eisenberger Professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis and director of Ph.D. studies Dr. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld by electing her president of the Society of Biblical Literature. As tradition dictates, she will serve as vice president for the coming year, and president in 2006-2007. As president, she will be a member of the council, which is a volunteer governing body that makes long-range plans and oversees the work of the paid staff. Being president is an honor recognizing scholarship and contribution to the work of the society, and furtherance

of biblical scholarship in general. “I checked out the list of past presidents, including Patrick Miller and Bruce Metzger, and I think I’m not in their league,” says Sakenfeld. “But people tell me, don’t compare, you have to be yourself.”

By all accounts, Sakenfeld has contributed much to both the society and the field. Her dissertation, which became the book *The Meaning of Heseb in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry* (Wipf & Stock Publishers), has become a standard resource on the topic. She has also served as chairperson of the National Program Committee of the SBL, a position that Brian Blount, the Richard J. Dearborn Professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Seminary, now holds.

“Through the society and my own work I have tried to further the place for women in leadership and biblical interpretation,” says Sakenfeld. To that end, in the 1990s she helped bring 12 international women feminist scholars to give papers at the society. Together with her colleagues Sharon Ringe and Phyllis Bird, she guest edited a book of essays by these scholars, as well as other work that they solicited, called *Reading the Bible as Women: Perspectives from Africa, Asia, and Latin America* (Semeia 78).

Along with Sakenfeld’s reputation as an outstanding scholar and her contributions to the society, every colleague mentions her ability to listen to others and create consensus. “Dr. Sakenfeld has been a leader in so many settings, and it’s great to see her leadership honored,” says Ross Wagner, associate professor of New Testament at the Seminary. “In every setting, she’s able to listen to everybody, to respect all points of view, and to help a group arrive at a decision that’s good, even when there’s controversy. She’s calm and respectful.”

## Faith Seeking Understanding

Listening to others is a key mission of both societies. “It’s a discipline to be in dialogue with other scholars,” says PTS’s Charles T. Haley Professor of Old Testament Dennis Olson. “SBL is part of the academic communal discernment process. Both the Seminary and the academic guild are seeking truth.... It’s helpful to be in dialogue with people from other traditions, whether Jewish, Christian, or secular traditions, as a check and guide.” When the goal is genuine dialogue, voices from outside the tradition are not only valid; they’re invaluable.

Olson draws a comparison between this dialogue with those outside the faith community and a narrative in the Bible.



PTS colleagues Katharine Doob Sakenfeld and Choon-Leong Seow

In Numbers 11, God tells Moses to disperse his authority to 70 elders. But in Exodus 18, it’s Jethro, the Midianite father-in-law, an outsider, who tells Moses to do so. Olson says, “There’s wisdom from outside the community. It has to be tested, and discerned, but it’s there.” The biblical narrative itself suggests that God’s truth can be heard both within and from outside the community of faith.

Princeton Seminary professors participate in SBL and AAR in many ways, from serving on committees, to presenting papers, to responding to the work of other scholars. The variety of papers presented by Seminary faculty is considerable. At AAR, PTS’s James

**Illustrating the opportunity for student involvement in AAR/SBL, and the diversity of topics discussed, these PTS students participated in AAR/SBL's March Mid-Atlantic Regional Meeting in Baltimore.**

**Brennan Breed**, M.Div. student, SBL, "To See with Another's Eyes: Job's Pedagogical Use of Ambiguity"

**M. Blake Connelly**, Th.M. student, AAR, "She Who Leads: Utilizing Womanist and Feminist Technologies to Challenge Sexism within Current Southern Baptist Convention Theology and Policy" and, at SBL, "It's the End of the World as We Know It and I Feel Fine: Exploring Apocalyptic Themes in Mark 13:24-37"

**J. Blake Couey**, Ph.D. student, SBL, "Amos 7:10-17 and Royal Attitudes toward Prophecy in the Ancient Near East"

**David J. Downs**, Ph.D. student, SBL, "The 'Offering of the Gentiles' in Romans 15:16"

**Todd French**, Th.M. student, AAR, "Altruistic Sensibilities in Early Christian Hagiography and Possibilities of Disinterested Giving in the Self-Centered Programs of Holiness Seeking"

**Douglas Hume**, Ph.D. student, SBL, "The Jerusalem Community and the Promises of God: Ethics, Eschatology, and Dynamic Community of Act 1:1-8:3"

**William R. Mangrum**, Th.M. student, AAR, "Why Thomas Merton's Thoughts in Solitude Should Matter More"

**Amy Peeler**, Ph.D. student, SBL, "What's Apocalypticism God to Do with It? 1 Corinthians 13 as Apocalyptic Discourse"

I. McCord Professor of Theology and Science, Wentzel van Huyssteen, presented his paper on the concept of emergence and human distinctiveness. At SBL, assistant professor of Old Testament Eunny Lee gave a paper on Qoholeth's ethic of enjoyment, and Beverly Gaventa, the Helen H.P. Manson Professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis, presented a paper with Wagner on the gospel and congregation in Romans.

Van Huyssteen, who has served on the steering committee for the Religion and Science Group of the AAR for many years, gave a paper on "Emergence and Human Distinctiveness: Limiting or Delimiting Evolutionary Explanation?" His paper dealt with the question of how God is related to human evolution, and the problem of divine action and free will. "Our culture today is deeply shaped by contemporary science," says van Huyssteen, "so this is indeed a mainstream discussion, and should be part of what we teach theologically, since we believe that God ultimately is the Creator of this world."

Blount presented a paper based on his book *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture*. "It used to be that scholars had to separate themselves from their background. They've realized now that we can't, and shouldn't, do that," says Blount. In his book, he compares the situation of the church in Revelation to that of the American church during the 1960s. "For John, being a witness to the Lord Jesus Christ puts you in a comparable situation to that of being a witness to civil rights," he says. In his work, Blount looks at issues important to both church and culture, and, as chair of SBL's program committee for the last four years, he encourages as many perspectives as possible to be presented at the society's meetings.

Olson presented a paper focused on the tension between centralized authority and the dispersing of authority in the Pentateuch. "These are precisely the kinds of issues and tensions that leaders and community ministers need to think about to lead and exercise genuine authority," says Olson. "They need to steer the community and to be faithful to a vision of what God is about in the world, but at the same time to disperse authority and allow the whole community to think together about how it should move forward. There's

a theological point here, that God is finally the sole authority, but that the Holy Spirit works through a networked community."

Wagner also offered a paper in a session on Paul's theology titled "Working Out Salvation in Philippians." There were quite a few PTS students in the audience. Wagner, who is on the steering committee for the Pauline group, argued that salvation for Paul means being united to Christ. "The community of faith as a whole begins to embody the life of Christ in its interactions with each other and the world," says Wagner. This understanding of Paul's theology leads to a deeper understanding of what faith in Christ requires. "We talked about what concrete practices the church needs to embody, such as ministries of mercy and self-giving," he says.

For PTS professors, faith commitments shape their scholarship, and their scholarship shapes their faith. But how does the church hear about what the scholarly societies are discerning about the texts and practices of faith? How does what happens at the academic societies get back to the larger church?

### Understanding Forming Leaders

PTS professors bring their tested ideas back into the classroom. They return excited about a new angle on a topic, with new energy and new resources. "Because of something I learned at SBL," says Sakenfeld, "I may say something different in Old Testament 101 than I would have otherwise." Students and future pastors benefit from the most current scholarship, and from professors who are energized by collegial study. Sakenfeld continues, "For example, people used to say that there were five books in the Psalms, but that the individual psalms were randomly arranged. Through scholarly exchanges at SBL, we began to realize that there was more of a plan than we'd imagined, but we wouldn't have noticed these features with our traditional assumptions."

The academic societies can shape leaders in larger ways, too. They can even shape their careers. Van Huyssteen's first visit to the U.S. from his native South Africa was to attend a meeting of the AAR in Atlanta, Georgia, in November 1986. "The American Academy of Religion is a catalyst," he says. Building communities of scholars is what AAR and

SBL are all about. Now van Huyssteen is bringing his students into the community.

Last fall, students in van Huyssteen's seminar on the challenges of interdisciplinary theology read Swedish scholar Michael Stenmark's book *How to Relate to Science and Religion* (Wm. B. Eerdmans). Stenmark attended the AAR conference in Philadelphia, where van Huyssteen connected his students with the scholar. "I introduced a group of my students to him at AAR," says van Huyssteen. "Then the students sent their papers to him to read, and he wrote back. They were thrilled."

This kind of exchange can change students' hearts as well as their minds. M.Div senior William Barnett, one of van Huyssteen's students who attended AAR, says being at the conference and meeting Stenmark helped "humanize" the scholarly discourse he engages in the classroom. "Later in the seminar, when I sat down to make my own critical assessment of Stenmark," he says, "I could not simply treat his position abstractly, but had to place it within the context of the generous character and cordiality he exhibited toward us, and I was challenged then to exhibit the same generosity in my responses to his work."

It's that kind of generous and respectful conversation that shapes Barnett, and others at the conference, as much as the new ideas they learn. "For students headed into ministry, an experience like this at AAR exemplifies the spirit of conversation we might have with those with whom we disagree, in our own churches and beyond them," says Barnett.

### Leaders Transforming Communities

Students like Barnett are formed by the classroom exchange, and in turn they bring an informed and tested faith to those they serve. Recently, the societies have become more purposeful about making the link between the church and the academy stronger.

"The number of program units at our society's professional meetings that are theologically oriented, that focus on the reception of the text and what difference the text makes to the church and the world, is on the increase," says Sakenfeld. "This correlates to a change in emphasis within academic biblical scholarship itself. There continues to be interest in the Bible as a book about the distant past, and to understand that it's not a book of our time and culture, but there is also interest in the fact that it is a foundational book, and scholars want to contribute to that dialogue."

In addition, SBL is currently developing more regional programs, one-day conferences in major cities to bring the broader public into interaction with these topics, so that SBL can be a resource for the church and the other Abrahamic faiths. "This is a way to say that biblical scholarship isn't the enemy of faith, and has something important to contribute," says Sakenfeld. "This program will reach leaders who want to be prepared to discuss current events theologically with their congregations."

And PTS professors are working to bridge the gap as well. Many offer their expertise, honed at SBL and AAR, at continuing education events in local churches. Van Huyssteen teaches continuing education classes and speaks at churches on the topic of science and religion. Olson teaches courses for interim pastors based on Moses as a model, one who saw the people through a transition and then turned over leadership to another. Wagner gives courses on the Book of Philippians. Wagner says, "It's not ultimately about our ideas, but about communities that are transformed by God."

All the professors encouraged alums to attend any SBL/AAR events they can. "What's exciting

about SBL is the interactions: Christian educators talking to scholars, and theologians talking to pastors, the diversity of the community," says Blount. It's important for church leaders to be part of the community. Wagner says, "Pastors need to continue to educate themselves about what scholars do with the Bible, and also be discerning about how to appropriate and apply scholarly discussion. Alums should hold us accountable to doing scholarship that's relevant to the church." The business of interpreting God's word belongs to the priesthood of all believers: pastors, scholars, students, and all the faithful.

And that is the goal for PTS professors and scholars: the transmission of knowledge from the community of scholars, to the community of the Seminary, to the community of the church. ■



Photo: Erin Dunitigan



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Wentzel van Huyssteen (below) and Dennis Olson (above) at the AAR/SBL meeting in Philadelphia

The next annual meeting of AAR and SBL will be November 18–21, 2006, in Washington, D.C. For more information, go to AAR's web site at [www.aarweb.org](http://www.aarweb.org), or SBL's web site at [www.sbl-site.org](http://www.sbl-site.org).