

# SBL SOCIETY OF BIBLICAL LITERATURE

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From: John F. Kutsko, PhD

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To: Princeton Theological Seminary Faculty and Administration

RE: Tribute to The Rev. Dr. James Charlesworth

I am writing from my current perch as Executive Director of the Society of Biblical Literature, but my vantage goes back two decades. I do not recall when I first met Jim, and that is what first strikes me most. It feels like I have known him my entire academic and professional career.

Two decades ago I was a publishing director and an active acquisitions editor. I can recall conversations with Jim that go back long before we worked on his 2008 volume *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide*. That fact strikes me because of the collegial relationship we have always had. Our relationship began not because of a publishing project—which, frankly, is typically when scholars strike up relationships with academic editors—but from regular conversations that seemed surprising to me, since I was not of his stature. That Jim would have engaged in conversations with me and express interest in my work speaks to his generous spirit and his vision for a capacious academy that is personal and relational.

I was also a bit in awe of his bibliography. Having cut my teeth in reference publishing, I considered his contributions peerless. For example, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* illustrates a type of scholar-editor that is a unique breed—requiring detail, breadth, leadership, and diplomacy in disciplines that fixate on balkanized specialization and independent scholarship. Jim can edit the long-lived reference work, produce the monograph, write the often-elusive “academic trade” book, then speak to the public in media forms that many scholars avoid. Some of these genres and activities have not always been rewarded or valued in the academy, but Jim had the confidence to do them anyway.

In addition to being generous, he is generative. His work and contribution to the field is creative, defying the narrow and narrowing interests that increasingly define a CV. It is hard to define his limits when his works cover Pseudepigrapha, Apocrypha, Dead Sea Scrolls and Qumran, the historical Jesus, and theological reflection. Jim is curious (a trait

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I consider fundamental to scholarship); he looks at the forest as well as the tree and connects dots for a narrative that interests both colleagues and the public.

I have a theory on why he writes broadly about a larger narrative. His scholarship is infused by his theological and pastoral training. He is a minister. He wants to connect and make connections—with his subject and with his audience. He is enthusiastic about his subject, respects his audience (academic or public), believes it matters, and cares enough about the audience to tell these stories in new and engaging ways.

The academy needs to demonstrate the hermeneutic of surprise as much as the hermeneutic of suspicion. The new desideratum in higher education and research funding is public scholarship. Jim got there first. His longest-lasting legacy may not be in a specific work but in providing an example so that he will not be the last.

Sincerely,



John F. Kutsko  
Executive Director