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Between Two Masters: Reconciling Faith and Scholarship at the Museum of the Bible

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Abstract

The Museum of the Bible was opened in 2017 as an evangelical project funded by the billionaire Green family of Hobby Lobby ownership. The Washington, D.C. museum is an immense organization with multifaceted exhibits displaying the Bible's history, stories, and significance in the United States. The museum is the evangelist project of the billionaire Green family of Hobby Lobby ownership. Much of the collection was begun by family members starting in 2009, without adequate acquisition policies. As a result, the museum has faced legal, ethical, and scientific controversies for the past decade. Despite its controversial reputation, the museum has begun to amend and rebuild proper policies according to industry standards. The museum also represents breakthroughs in sharing an accessible history of the Bible and bringing engagement to museums.

Development in the museum's decision-making challenges if it can be trusted to present cultural heritage accurately. My investigation methodology includes visits to the museum, interviews with curators, and an analysis of related news and literature. I offer that the museum cannot fully reconcile its recent museological efforts with the shadow of its ideological roots. While the museum may do good things, its background is still biased, and thus, the museum cannot currently commit to prioritizing academic integrity. The Museum of the Bible is a model for understanding the competing interests influencing museums today. At the end of this thesis, I speculate how the Museum of the Bible could indicate future turns in the museum world.

Introduction

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.
—Matthew 6:24

During his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's record of the New Testament, Christ addresses the conflict of devoting oneself to opposing forces, "No man can serve two masters."[1] This popular saying suggests that one cannot fully commit to both priorities, as their values will inevitably clash. In the example "Ye cannot serve God and mammon" he focuses on the inherent tension between faith and material gain, leading to the inevitable favoring of one 'master' over another.

Through this thesis, I argue that the Museum of the Bible has struggled to serve its two 'masters': God and academia. Due to its evangelical founding, the museum has not struggled for the monetary resources told of in the initial saying. However, the museum initially faced scrutiny for its poor ethics in owning cultural heritage.[2] By being stuck between these two priorities, the museum is a model for understanding the instability and unreliability of existing ethics in the ever-changing world of museums and their collections. This thesis discusses the background of rich ideological influence on the museum through the Green family, the billionaire owners of Hobby Lobby craft stores. The Greens are Protestant Christians who opened the Museum of the Bible in Washington, DC, after years of collecting antiquities with weighty biblical heritage. The museum focuses on the Bible's history, stories, and impact on America. Much of the collection was begun by family members starting in 2010, without adequate acquisition policies. As a result, the museum has faced legal, ethical, and scientific controversies for the past decade. At the same time, the museum represents breakthroughs in displaying the complex history of the Bible. It has also made significant progress in amending its policies to industry standards. Considering both failures and achievements, can the Museum of the Bible be trusted to present cultural heritage accurately? I offer that the museum has grown towards being an ethical institution but cannot fully reconcile and move beyond the shadow of its evangelical roots. As educators, storytellers, and collectors, museums are responsible for accurately presenting cultural heritage without bias. At the end of my thesis, I speculate how the Museum of the Bible could indicate future collection risks and corporate influence in the museum world.

The Green Family

The idea of creating a Museum of the Bible comes from its founding family, the Greens of Oklahoma. David Green, born amidst the southwestern United States in 1941, is the founder of Hobby Lobby, a nationwide craft and home decoration store.[3] The organization is worth billions today, and as avidly evangelical Christians, the Greens are vocal about their philanthropy to other Protestant causes across the globe.[4] In one of his many books, *Giving It All Away… And Getting It All Back Again: The Way of Living Generously*, Green brags about giving up to fifty percent of company profits to charity. Going further than that—he takes great joy in it:

> My personal faith directs my efforts and fuels my passion for generosity. Since I believe there's a real heaven and a real hell, I want to direct as many people toward heaven and away from hell as I can. I want them to know the peace that's available through knowing Christ. God has given us the resources and the partnerships to reach them. I truly believe there will be millions of people in heaven because of this effort.[5]

For the Greens, charity means giving to global evangelical Christian organizations. Some of their most lauded projects include Every Tribe Every Nation (founded by Mart Green) which aims to "eradicate bible poverty" by translating the Bible into all languages.[6] The family also supports Every Home for Christ, an organization focused on broad evangelizing. Their mission is to "inspire and empower the Church to carry Christ to their world."[7] Their charity also goes beyond giving money. In September 2012, as spurred by David, Hobby Lobby filed a lawsuit in a local US District Court. Backed by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the First Amendment of the Constitution, the lawsuit was in retaliation against President Barack Obama's 2010 Affordable Care Act (Obamacare), which specified the contraceptives provided in employer-funded healthcare plans.[8] In just two months, the case went from local Oklahoma courts to the US Supreme Court. It resulted in a 5-4 verdict that allowed Hobby Lobby to refuse its 21,000 (at the time, now 46,000) employees insurance coverage for contraceptives on a religious basis, even though the company was public and for-profit.[9] This is an example of how their ideology goes further than others, to the point where they are enacting large social changes based on doctrine.

This case launched the Green family from being rags-to-riches Oklahoman business owners to a dynasty of evangelical American celebrities.[10] They began to appear at talk shows, author books, make political endorsements, and speak at religious conferences. The family follows a dynastic pattern where most family members are in some way involved with Hobby Lobby or other evangelical pursuits. The family's self-described first generation— 'G1'—is David Green and his wife, Barbara. Their children form 'G2': Mart is the Hobby Lobby Ministry Investment Officer, Darsee is the Hobby Lobby Vice President of Art/Creative, and her husband, Stan, is the Hobby Lobby Executive Vice President. The youngest, Steve, is the President of Hobby Lobby. Many of the ten members of 'G3' have also worked at Hobby Lobby at some point in time. Additionally, while 'G4,' is still quite young, they are considered candidates for future Hobby Lobby employees by David Green.[11]

A newer form of evangelical philanthropy for the Green family has been collecting antiquities, which David Green was reported as doing dating back as early as November 2009.[12] One of the first mentions of the 'Green Collection,' as it was known, cites over 30,000 objects worth an estimated $20-40 million. The 2014 article, from the New York Times, states that this preliminary yet large portion of the collection was purchased in just six months.[13] During the same period the collection was publicized, David Green announced his plans to display the collections in a museum context, "'The goal is to create a museum around the story of the Bible,' Mr. Green explained. 'No book has been persecuted as much or loved as much. Its incredible story needs to be told.'"[14]

Valuable bibles appear to be the bulk of these rapid acquisitions, with other ancient textual artifacts being collected on a smaller scale. Museum biographers Baden

and Moss describe the period of early collection as a “shopping spree,” in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis as people were eager to willing to sell artifacts privately and below market price.[15] Their collecting was so rapid that it was believed to have raised the market price of antiquities. As reported in *The Guardian*:

> $70m was spent on 55,000 objects between 2009 and 2012 … The market in a hitherto arcane area of collecting skyrocketed. “Fortunes were made. At least two vendors who had been making €1-2m a year were suddenly making €100-200m a year,” said one longtime collector.[16]

Scott Carroll, a New Testament scholar and contemporary of the Greens, was one of the catalysts for the expansive start of the Green collection. While his relationship with the family began in the early 2000s, he became the full-time director of the Green Collection in 2009. Carroll received a doctorate in Ancient Studies from Miami University of Ohio and spent his career collecting manuscripts for private owners and teaching at a small Christian university. Carroll is described as “flamboyant” and eccentric in his collecting style, which he freely shares on his social media profiles.[17] According to his students, “he could identify the origins and date of a papyrus, not by the usual scholarly methods…but by smelling and even tasting it.”[18] Carroll generated a rapid collecting pace for the Green collection, backed by Steve Green, who says “At first we had nothing, we had no artifacts, so we needed everything, so we were buying everything that was presented.”[19] With hindsight, the legal issues of early acquisitions appear to have occurred under Carroll’s leadership, likely due to the emphasis on collecting quickly rather than with regard to quality or ethics.[20] In 2012, Carroll left the collection. His contributions would later be discounted by former museum President Cary Summers, who “agrees that much of the material purchased during the Carroll years was worthless and poorly vetted.”[21]

Scott Carroll’s misled direction over the Green Collection was attempted to be ameliorated with the hire of David Trobisch in 2014. Trobisch carried a respected scholarly reputation as a textual scholar, but one without credentials for collecting ancient artifacts. While his hiring shifts the collection to appear more scholarly, it is alleged that further collection malpractice occurred after Carroll’s departure. It is also important to note that despite the cultural guidance of Caroll and Trobisch—and according to both—the final decision on each acquisition was made by the Green family.[22]

In 2011, the Green Collection was made into a traveling exhibit called *Passages* that was shown in six United States cities, including Charlotte, NC.[23] *Passages* went on until around 2016, presumably when the collections were moved to the museum's future site. *Passages* and the Green Collection were initially publicized on websites under the same name but removed in 2016. At no point was the ‘Green Collection’ ever an independent legal identity. Instead, it was owned by Hobby Lobby, which the Green family closely holds. Eventually, the collection became renamed the ‘Museum Collection’ even though no legal transfer of ownership occurred.[24] Some of the collection now lives in the Museum of the Bible, but some of the Green Collection still exists privately in Oklahoma City, OK.[25] The museum also keeps off-site collections and other related staff in Oklahoma City. Regardless, the museum remains the world’s largest private biblical antiquity collection and is certainly the most accessible for American consumption.[26]

The Museum of the Bible

The Museum of the Bible was established as a non-profit organization in 2010.[27] Their initial tax forms declare the reason for being tax-exempt: “To bring to life the living word of God, to tell its compelling story of preservation, and to inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible.”[28] The museum’s purpose seems overtly evangelical for a cultural heritage institution, but religious, charitable, and educational institutions fall under the same category of 501(c)(3) tax exemption. The mission changed slightly over the years but reached its current state, verbatim, in the 2019 filing:

> The Museum of the Bible is an innovative, global and educational institution whose purpose is to invite all people to engage with the transformative power of the Bible. We do so through four main initiatives: our permanent museum in Washington, D.C., traveling exhibitions, education and research.[29]

One aspect of the Museum of the Bible that makes it appealing to many Christians is its repeated claims to be nonsectarian. This was continuously echoed in my interviews with curators Brian Hyland and Amy Van Dyke, who described how the museum’s curators come from different backgrounds, checking and balancing one another’s work for bias.[30] While being non-biased is a prominent idea in how the museum markets itself, its truthfulness in practice falls short.[31]

In November 2017, the Museum of the Bible opened on 400 Fourth Street SW, in Washington DC. The 430,000-square-foot museum project began in 2012 by purchasing the former warehouse space, only two blocks from the National Mall.

The museum is now seven floors plus a basement. Floors four, three, and two contain permanent exhibitions covering the Bible's history, stories, and impact. Additional space houses three dining/café spaces, a children’s experience, four special/temporary exhibits, an archaeology workshop, and four additional paid experiential attractions. In their review of the museum, Gannon and Wagner describe the Museum of the Bible as “a leviathan: a mighty, untenable, and beautiful beast that is not easily translated or understood.”[32]

The suggested path through the museum is to progress from the Bible’s history on the fourth floor to the stories and impact on the third and second floors. Special and temporary exhibits on the first, fifth, and basement levels can be visited after. During my two-day visit to the museum, I visited the permanent exhibits, the special exhibit on loan from the Vatican Museums and Library, the Washington Revelations Experience, and the People of the Land special exhibit.

One of the most striking features of the museum is its use of facsimiles. During our interview, Lead Curator of Art and Exhibitions Amy Van Dyke warned me to keep an eye out for the facsimiles in certain sections.[33] Notably, there are copies of Michelangelo’s Pietà, the Gilgamesh flood tablet, the Hammurabi Stele, multiple Dead Sea Scrolls, significant numbers of papyri, the Rosetta Stone, and the Liberty Bell. Throughout the museum, copies, images on glass, and models are clearly labeled. Their inclusion is often explained to create a more comprehensive context for other artifacts. For example, the Hammurabi Stele facsimile builds a background of written law in near regions before biblical texts. However, the museum’s reliance on facsimiles could also weaken the strength of its actual collections and sensationalize the experience of the museum while removing focus from the actual owners of the objects.

The Museum of the Bible certainly does not need to exaggerate its actual collections. Some of the highlights include two Nebuchadnezzar barrel cylinders, a signed letter from Martin Luther, Elvis Presley's Bible, a first edition King James Bible, a Herodian stone from the temple mount that visitors can touch, the Codex Climaci Rescriptus, and the countless authentic historical bibles, coins, and ceramics.

The "History of the Bible" on the fourth floor highlights the museum's scholarly efforts with impressive artifacts and a visual display of biblical history. Visitors move through different eras from the time before the Hebrew Bible into the Reformation. The exhibition spaces are designed to evoke these periods with desert- or cathedral-like settings. The objects are varied in type, from early fragments to rare bibles across cultures, which can appeal to scholars from multiple disciplines. For less academic visitors, the glass-protected artifacts are alongside tactile displays for visitors to feel different materials, such as parchment, leather, pottery, and printing type. Technology is skillfully integrated into the exhibition with video narration of scripture and interactive touchscreens where visitors can access detailed images of artifacts, learn more about the translation process, read translations, and take quizzes. From a scholarly perspective, some critics observe issues with narrative clarity and editorial consistency.[34] Some content is too dense for non-scholars or visitors without a Christian background, while controversial histories, such as biblical canonization and translation debates, are only shallowly examined. The final section, funded by the illumiNations initiative, emphasizes the museum's interest in proselytizing by focusing on Bible translation efforts. As a conclusion, it reinforces that the museum's interest is in ideology, which, while compelling, detracts from the promised nonsectarian presentation of biblical history.

On the third floor the "Stories of the Bible" is a dramatic experience, split into three sections: The "Hebrew Bible Experience," the "World of Jesus of Nazareth," and the "New Testament Theater." The "New Testament Theater" was an uncomplicated theater playing a short film. The show I attended was a dramatization of Luke 24, "The Road to Emmaus," that had around a thirty-minute runtime. In my opinion, it was reminiscent of Mel Gibson's 2004 "The Passion of the Christ" in its theatricality. The film also ended by upholding the message of Christ's Second Coming, revealing its intention towards a Christian audience. Along with the theater, viewers can walk through the "World of Jesus of Nazareth," a reconstructed living history experience complete with interactive actors. While beautiful, there is not much to learn in the Nazarene village, especially without the actors present. The "Hebrew Bible Experience" is a stimulating and interactive audiovisual experience of biblical stories. Visitors are guided through a series of rooms with wall-to-wall projected animations, narrated stories, sculptures, and theatrical lighting evoking a theme park attraction. It is almost overwhelmingly intense. My first 'experience' was accompanied by a toddler who almost immediately started crying during the startling story of Cain and Abel. Inevitably, the exhibit is entertaining, but its place of belonging in a museum is less clear. Visitors unfamiliar with the narrative of the Old Testament might not understand the relationship between stories, or that it favors a Christian version of the text with the book of Ruth coming after Judges, alluding to the coming of the New Testament.[35] While there is an emphasis on visitors finding personal meaning in the stories, it seems to want to deepen existing Christian sentiments rather than educate all people. Overall, the "Stories" floor of the museum

prioritizes entertainment and engagement over educational depth or interactions with objects. The experiences seem designed for visitors with prior knowledge of the Bible, and the narrative intensity could alienate visitors without a Christian background.

Concluding the trio of permanent exhibits, the “Impact of the Bible” floor examines and historicizes the Bible’s influence in American society. The exhibit begins with early North American settlement through most of U.S. history. Poignant issues of colonization, racism, and sexism are not ignored. The Bible was used as evidence to support and oppose ideology at different times in history. Still, the museum presents ideas as either misuse or correct application of the Bible without full contextualization. For example, two distinct presentations of the Bible could be used to support slavery or abolitionism, depending on which verses were selected. Rather than creating a discussion about how the vast history of the Bible can be interpreted according to society at a certain time, the Museum of the Bible applies current Protestant beliefs that dictate which stances are right and which are wrong. In his essay, Terrence Johnson describes:

> The MOTB’s exhibits fail to invoke a critical reflection on race, scriptural interpretation, and social oppression. Instead, they offer a sanitized narrative of the violent abuses of the Bible and the ongoing afterlife of the duplicitous ways white Christians have historically appropriated the Bible to shape cultural norms, political beliefs, economic policies, and moral commitments.[36]

The rest of the floor displays the Bible’s global influence on everyday life. Small sections show the Bible’s influence on subjects like media, government, science, art, health, and education. This section takes a social history approach rather than one based on valuable artifacts.

During my visit to the museum, there was also a small temporary exhibit on this floor called “Billy Graham’s Canvas Cathedral” that discussed his legacy and Southern Baptist faith. On the second floor, I also attended the “Washington Revelations” experience, which costs an additional $9.99. The six-minute attraction is a simulated aerial tour where visitors ‘fly over’ Washington, DC, to discover biblical motifs in the city’s architecture. There is also a special exhibit on the first floor, “Treasures from the Vatican Museum and the Vatican Library,” curated by the Vatican. This space is especially attractive to Catholics, as the Vatican has never loaned objects to a foreign institution.[37] However, I was struck by the fact that every object in the small gallery was a facsimile, which was quite unsatisfactory. There is also a special exhibit space on the fifth floor curated by the Israel Antiquities Authority. Like the Vatican, the IAA is famously strict with the display of its objects, never before sanctioning a semipermanent exhibit in a foreign country.[38] Unlike the Vatican gallery, the IAA exhibit, entitled “The People of the Land: History and Archaeology of Ancient Israel,” is excellently curated by IAA scholars with meaningful artifacts. The objects are much more varied in that they include other cultures, such as Islamic oil lamps, depictions of Roman gods, Jewish mikveh, ossuaries, and other artifacts that don’t contribute strongly to a Protestant interpretation of the Bible. Overall, the special exhibits around the museum are incredibly varied in message, content, and experience. I appreciated the variation in messages but did not feel they contributed to a cohesive idea of the museum’s purpose. In addition, Museum of the Bible employees lead guided tours, so the protestant perspective of the museum still holds the final interpretive word.[39]

Significance of Biblical Representation

The Green family's interest in creating a museum dedicated to understanding the history and meaning of the Bible is well-based. The Bible is the most often published and owned book in the English-speaking world—yet only accessible to us through translation across time and culture.[40] The text is described in the introduction to the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) as "several collections…of books that were written in cultures different from our own not only in time and space but also in character."[41]

The original manuscripts were written over the span of a thousand years—mainly in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. Jesus and his followers spoke Aramaic and were likely not literate.[42] No original manuscript survives today. The process of reading and understanding the Bible thus begins with translations of copies. It might sound simple, but the process is as influenced by current culture and context as the original writings were themselves influenced by the culture of the past. Additionally, canonical texts are still subject to interpretation. For example, as a Protestant, David Green might interpret the Bible differently than the Catholic Pope would.

It is important to note the significance of text in Christianity. As an exclusivist religion, belief in Christ is essential to one being right with God. This belief is constructed based on knowledge—first transmitted from Christ to his Apostles, then disseminated through the New Testament. This transmission of knowledge through the authoritative written word is unique to Christianity compared to religions that came before, like the polytheistic Greeks and Romans. The knowledge of scripture—God's word—is the prerequisite for belief.[43]

With ongoing translation and interpretation, Biblical scholarship delves deep into the text. Scholars are often divided into traditional or critical camps depending on whether or not the truth of the Bible is assumed. Within the two camps, researchers attempt to identify common influences and source materials of the text, perform rhetorical and literary analyses, and compare historical, chronological, and geographical sources.

Evangelical Misrepresentations

While the Museum of the Bible repeatedly claims to present the book from a nonsectarian perspective, the Green family's Protestant perspective is an open secret. Even the idea of focusing on the text and transmission of the Bible, rather than its interpretation and diversity, reflects Protestantism. One of Martin Luther's Protestant axioms was *sola scriptura* (Latin 'by scripture alone'), the belief that Christianity should be based on the text of the Bible.[44] By focusing on the text only, rather than Catholic traditions or Jewish oral law, the Museum of the Bible excludes biblical interpretations that do not align with Protestantism. Another visible impact of *sola scriptura* in the Museum of the Bible is found in the centrality of the KJV. In the museum, the KJV is treated as the culmination of scripture, rather than one endpoint among many pluralistic interpretations. Earlier texts that do not directly support the legitimacy of the KJV, such as the famous Gnostic Gospels, are not displayed. If any disagreeing texts are displayed, they are shown as examples of how the Bible was misinterpreted, rather than demonstrating the varied perspectives from early Christianity to today. Scholars typically

value these texts as “an invaluable resource for recognizing and understanding the diversity of thought in early Christianity; they problematize in important ways traditional notions of a direct line of pure faith from Jesus to the present.”[45] By neglecting to include these texts in the museum, the Museum of the Bible reinforces the authority of the KJV as the singular form of the Bible. In the museum, there is also a notable exclusion of Muslim and Latter-Day Saint views, though both recognize the Bible in some way. It is unclear whether or not the Green family is collecting items they ideologically disagree with. If they are collecting such objects, this information has not been shared with the public or published. If this is the case, the family controls the narrative of biblical artifacts, as they essentially have a monopoly over their presentation. This is described as “safeguarding” biblical artifacts due to their influence and capital.[46]

In a dramatic moment from the early days of the Green Collection, David Green is recalled as lashing out after Scott Carroll presented an ancient manuscript inconsistent with the Protestant tradition, saying “You will not use this collection to undermine the King James Bible!”[47] This moment makes the implicit Protestant presentation of the Museum of the Bible obvious. Although the collection is presented as nonsectarian and does not directly exclude other faiths, there is a couched Protestant agenda. It seems to be to quietly proselytize and use the power of *sola scriptura* on visitors to show the supreme teaching of the Bible. Baden and Moss describe the Green’s evangelical efforts as “an attempt to return the country to its properly Christian roots.”[48]

To these accusations of Protestant partiality, the Green family consistently repeats their efforts to make the museum nonsectarian. Unfortunately, it comes to a point where they seem willfully ignorant about the presentation of the museum as underlyingly Protestant. In interviews, Steve Green has been surprisingly deferential about his Protestant bias.[49] The problem is that the Museum does not admit its bias and instead proposes to visitors that it is nonsectarian, simply delivering the text of the Bible rather than a Protestant interpretation.

The Museum of the Bible’s evangelical approach aligns with Christian nationalism by portraying the Bible as a sacred text, essential to defining American identity and history. By centering Protestant interpretations like *sola scriptura* and the KJV, the museum implicitly positions Protestantism as the foundation for American values. This narrative supports the idea that the U.S. is—or should be—a Christian nation rooted in biblical teachings. Additionally, by excluding diverse theological perspectives such as Gnosticism or Islam the museum discourages a pluralistic understanding of the Bible’s role in history. Instead, specifically curated objects uphold a uniformly evangelical agenda. This presentation encourages a narrative that intertwines religious conviction with patriotism, and a vision of America where Christianity and nationalism are one. When visiting the museum, it is blatantly presented. To exit the museum, visitors must shuffle through the gift shop. The display at the front of the gift shop—the museum’s last message to visitors—is a collection of U.S.-themed biblical souvenirs.

Academic Failures

A Legal Perspective

Hobby Lobby stepped into uncertain collection ethics in July 2010, when Steve Green and a Hobby Lobby consultant, likely Scott Carroll, traveled to the UAE to inspect around 5,500 objects offered for sale by a few Israeli and UAE antiquities dealers.[50] Also in July, Hobby Lobby's in-house council consulted Patty Gerstenblith, a law professor specializing in cultural heritage at DePaul University.[51] She created a presentation for Hobby Lobby covering the legal issues related to antique collecting, specifications on due diligence and provenance research, and legal requirements for cultural property importation. In a later memorandum, Gerstenblith summarized her advice about the acquisition:

> I would regard the acquisition of any artifact likely from Iraq … as containing considerable risk. An estimated 200-500,000 objects have been looted from archaeological sites in Iraq since the early 1990s; particularly popular on the market and likely to have been looted are cylinder seals, cuneiform tablets … Any object brought into the US and with Iraq declared as country of origin has a high chance of being detained by US Customs.[52]

Notably, the memorandum "was received by In-house Counsel but was not shared with Hobby Lobby's President, Consultant, Executive Assistant, Internal Department, outside customs brokers, or anyone else."[53] Scott Carroll revisited Israel around the same time to meet with the dealers. A loose provenance statement was acquired stating that the objects were "legally acquired in the late 1960s by [Israel Dealer #3's] father, from local markets."[54] The consultant also evaluated the price of the objects, which were offered for $2.1 million. A generous appraisal was estimated at over $11.8 million, but Carroll reasoned that Hobby Lobby could negotiate the price down to $1.6 million.

On December 8, 2010, Steve Green signed a purchase agreement for the 5,500 objects on behalf of Hobby Lobby. The invoice falsely stated that the objects originated in Israel. On the same day, Green authorized the total payment of $1.6 million to be wired to seven personal bank accounts associated with five different people, including the Israeli and UAE dealers. However, significant developments took place before the purchase. In November 2010, Scott Carroll began coordinating the import. The UAE dealer also began shipping artifacts to Hobby Lobby in November, before the purchase agreement. The first package was labeled "ceramic tiles" and shipped illegally—without customs papers. The package successfully made it to Hobby Lobby via international post. After the purchase agreement, six more packages were sent by the UAE dealer, falsely labeled as "Tiles (Sample)," and addressed to various addresses associated with Hobby Lobby. From December 26 to January 5, 2011, the UAE dealer shipped eight more packages to Hobby Lobby via FedEx with false invoices and shipping declarations. A FedEx warehouse in Memphis, Tennessee processed the group of packages. Three made it through to Hobby Lobby, but five were inspected and detained by Customs. Each was falsely labeled as some kind of clay tile, undervalued on the invoice, and the country of origin was falsely listed.

In March 2011, CBP sent seizure notifications to Steve Green and Hobby Lobby's executive assistant. Hobby Lobby responded in May with an administrative petition for the return of the objects—citing the informal provenance statement. In September of that year, they filed a supplemental petition explaining the separate wire transfers—claiming that it was done to directly pay the individual object owners. This was inconsistent with the provenance statement, which only cited Israeli Dealer #3. In July 2015, CBP amended their seizure notifications to Hobby Lobby, doubling down on their legal authority to seize the objects. Hobby Lobby responded in 2015 by requesting a referral of the case to the US Attorney's office, where the case was finally examined.

In June 2017, the United States Attorney for the Eastern District of New York Bridget Rohde had many existing codes of US legislation to work with. The confusing aspect is with the name of the case, "United States of America, Plaintiff, against Approximately Four Hundred Fifty (450) Ancient Cuneiform Tablets; and Approximately Three Thousand (3,000) Ancient Clay Bullae, Defendants *in Rem*." The key term, *in rem,* is Latin for "against a thing," meaning that the court can direct the case toward property.[55] This follows one of the first codes that Rohde enacts upon the objects—wherein anything imported into the US illegally is to be seized and forfeited to the United States.[56] Even if the 3,450 antiquities were not illegally acquired, the seizure of the items was still acceptable as supported by four additional statues.[57] The aforementioned codes establish the procedure of casual importation into the US, the stipulations for international shipping documentation, and that false documentation makes an import illegal. Atop these charges, Rohde also invokes The National Stolen Property Act and the Iraq Stabilization and Insurgency Sanctions Regulations.[58,59] These additional charges are more specific to illegal objects in a foreign country and illegally acquired Iraqi cultural heritage after destabilization in the Middle East. Against the charges, the Defendants in Rem—as is frequently said about museum objects—speak for themselves. A warrant of arrest was created for the objects as defendants, which were forfeited to the state.

From the legal jargon of the report, it feels like Rohde threw the book at the situation, coming down with many incriminating charges. However, this is a white-collar crime. As reported in an additional press report alongside the case, the Eastern District of New York's U.S. Attorney's office stated that Hobby Lobby resolved the settlement by consenting to the object forfeiture and paying $3 million.[60] The company is also said to have "accepted responsibility for its past conduct," agreeing to bolster its internal collections procedures, to consult adequate council, and to submit quarterly acquisitions reports for the next eighteen months.[61]

In a more direct atonement, a statement was released on the Hobby Lobby Newsroom website, in which Steve Green accepts responsibility and voices his regrets. He minimizes the impact of the initial illegal acquisition by drawing attention to Hobby Lobby's cooperation with the government and even emphasizing the company's high acquisition standards. Green is quoted as saying:

> Our entire team is committed to the highest standards for investigating and acquiring these items. Our passion for the Bible continues, and we will do all that we can to support the efforts to conserve items that will help illuminate and enhance our understanding of this Great Book.[62]

An Ethical Perspective

The purpose of museum ethics is manyfold. Codes ensure the preservation of cultural artifacts, which is essential to establishing the museum as a meaningful and trustworthy educational institution. Without collections that are valued and taken care of, the museum cannot function as a nonprofit. More importantly, though, cultural artifacts are widely recognized as contributing to the universal heritage of humankind and should be protected. Museums also impact their local community and economy by bringing visitors. Vice-versa, museums are affected by their local communities, especially by board members. The museum's relationship with the public is a key part of its identity. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) currently defines a museum as:

> A not-for-profit, permanent institution *in the service of society* that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. *Open to the public*, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and *with the participation of communities*, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.[63]

As the definition repeats, public interest is always maintained in a museum. The definition also stresses how a museum should function—ethically. Ultimately, the responsibility of the museum's actions falls to the director. In the case of the Museum of the Bible, CEO Steve Green is responsible for the museum's collections.[64]

Some museums unintentionally function as symbols of their nations.[65] For example, the Smithsonian Institution museums (just a few blocks away from the Museum of the Bible) are representative of the United States' national identity. A museum's collections and exhibitions can be used to develop and frame a nation's identity. Politics are inherently involved in this process, and as identities are constructed a museum can veer into propaganda. Museums can be used to define or reaffirm cultural ideas. At the Museum of the Bible, this is reflected in the emphasis on religion in America's founding and development. The claim to legitimate government sanction is strengthened by the Museum of the Bible's proximity to the Smithsonian institutions, about two blocks away.

Archaeology and collection in general began to professionalize around the 19th century. It was mainly an amateur pursuit. While excavations were often methodical, they followed a 'finders keepers' approach, where the excavator assumed ownership of the item. This mainly followed existing power structures wherein colonizers took over the property and artifacts of the land their nations colonized. Artifacts are a key part of cultural destruction, also often being taken violently and during wars. Many of these objects are in large museums today without their often-violent histories being reconciled. The ethical considerations of collecting objects have been a topic of contention in the twenty-first century. Specifically, antiquities from the Middle East have required delicate consideration since the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq.[66] The Museum of Baghdad was treated as "collateral damage"[67] by the military and an estimated 13,000 objects were lost.[68] In the wake of further instability in the Middle East, ISIS has opportunistically destroyed, looted, and trafficked cultural property. Various government authorities report that the funds generated from the looting and smuggling are used to fund further violent activity.[69]

Scholar and museum administrator George Brown Goode proposed the first museum ethics in 1892.[70] The American Alliance of Museums (AAM) introduced the first formal code in 1925. In 1970, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held a landmark conference to discourage the illegal international cultural property market. It's established standards were ratified by the United States in 1983. Following this, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) published its ethical code in 1986.[71] The dates of these code implementations are surprisingly modern, reflecting a lack of formal museological study until contemporary developments.

The 1970 UNESCO Convention is the most significant standard for collections today because it mandates a global significance of provenance. Practically, this means that objects must have documentation of provenance describing the chain of discovery and custody within the legal limits. As many antiquities move across borders over the years, the provenance must prove that the item was only transported to another country when cultural heritage laws were not in place. If not, the object is liable to be confiscated by the government under the National Stolen Property Act. However, provenance records before the issue was publicized (pre-1970) are uncommon and often poorly documented, thus creating a challenge for collectors.

Scholars have yet to come to a consensus on how to consider collecting. In the 2006 publication*, Who Owns Objects?* UK scholars discuss provenance when collecting antiquities from many perspectives. James Ede, an antiquities dealer, argues for an open antiquities market and systems to correctly provenance new finds.[72] Famous collector George Ortiz is passionate about the right of people to collect antiquities.[73] In response, John Boardman argues that museums over-value and over-collect antique objects, calling for more international enforcement from source countries and archaeologists than individual dealers.[74] Coin collector Ursula Kampmann highlights the difficulties of provenancing mass-produced objects and criticizes the assumption that dealers are guilty when working with unprovenanced objects until proving their innocence with a recorded provenance.[75] The book presents a scope of stances, but there is agreement that objects are valuable to their local communities and must be taken care of. The essays establish a pressing need for cross-departmental interactions in collecting objects, a continued aesthetic and social appreciation for objects, and clearer international legislation and enforcement of ethical collecting.

Current ICOM standards are frequently updated in response to the varying ethical responsibilities of museums. Their current ethics publication is framed around basic ethical standards. In the section "Museums that maintain collections hold them in trust for the benefit of society and its development," ICOM stipulates that museums should only acquire objects with valid titles, make "every effort" (AKA due diligence) to determine provenance, and be especially careful when dealing with culturally sensitive material.[76]

The Museum of the Bible implemented a formal acquisition policy in 2016, seven years after the collection was begun. Many other reputable museums deal with provenance issues in the collections, but as stated by Moss and Baden, "this is quite different from a purchase made in 2011, when issues of cultural heritage were well known and international laws were in place."[77] Although it was late to be adopted to the museum, it follows industry standards that ensure all new acquisitions meet provenance

and legality requirements. As per most ethical codes, the museum reports its collection policy online, which addresses the acquisition, care, and use of collections. As outlined on their website, the Board of Directors and the Chief Curatorial Officer hold collection power. [78] The new acquisition policy institutes a comprehensive investigation into the museum's backlog of collections to ensure the entire collection is compliant. The museum is also showing a new interest in transparency on its collections website, which has a section for each object on its provenance.

A Scientific Perspective

Another long-term consequence of the museum's lack of early collection standards is its failure to the scientific community adjacent to museum work. In 2010, as soon as the Green family began collecting, they also started the Green Scholars Initiative, which eventually became the Museum of the Bible Scholars Initiative (SI).[79] The program, which still exists, facilitates and supports international research into the languages and material culture of the Bible. The SI's first major research project focused on the museum's collection of thirteen Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a large collection of ancient Jewish manuscript fragments discovered in caves near the Dead Sea by Bedouin in the 1940s.[80] The scrolls date from the 3rd century BCE to the 1st century CE, and their content indicates that the Hebrew Bible was not standardized until around 70 CE. Since their discovery was recent, the recovery and scholarship of the Dead Sea Scrolls have been held to modern archaeological standards, and thus made difficult. The publishing and ownership of the scrolls has been a drawn-out and contested process among interested scholars and nations. One of the largest issues for many independent scholars in researching Dead Sea Scrolls and fragments is because of concerns about their provenance. Many initial discoveries were made by nomadic Bedouin who brought the scrolls to market with local antiquities dealers. Understandably, neither party performed excavations up to scholarly standards. As a result, the provenance cannot be confidently stated for almost any of the scrolls.

Most Dead Sea Scrolls are now owned by the Israeli government and displayed in the Israel Museum.[81] Several small collections also belong to other museums, libraries, and universities. Dead Sea Scrolls also frequently emerge in the international antiquities market. It has been commonly understood among scholars that any Dead Sea Scrolls acquired after the 2000s, especially those privately owned, are illegally owned or a forgery.[82] An international, self-selected study among Dead Sea Scroll scholars in 2020 surveys their awareness of provenance issues and policy.[83] The authors are from the International Society of Biblical Literature and undertook the creation of the study to challenge how scholars approach unprovenanced objects. The paper generally establishes a trend that scholars are concerned about objects without provenance but without a consensus about how to interact with such objects, or how pre-existing international policies affect their work. In the case of the Museum of the Bible, *Bible Nation* indicates a lack of understanding of provenance by museum employees. Moss and Baden report that:

> Emails we sent to various Green Collection curators requesting the details of the provenance of items in the collection that had already been displayed or

advertised went unanswered for weeks, if they were ever answered at all. The scholarly guild has repeatedly been promised that the artifacts would be published, but they are years overdue.[84]

Between November 2009 and October 2014, Steven Green collected sixteen Dead Sea Scroll fragments in four lots from separate private collectors.[85] This collection became the first project of the Scholar's Initiative, where the Museum of the Bible collaborates with universities, colleges, and seminaries. Museum of the Bible curators published their physical, textual, and contextual analyses of the fragments with Brill in 2016.[86] Notably, no scientific analysis of the physical material was performed. Almost immediately, the scientific community noted physical anomalies and dissimilarities with known Dead Sea Scrolls. In April 2017, the Museum of the Bible sent five fragments to Germany's Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing. During the long analysis period, the illegal importing charges with the US Attorney's office were released (June 2017), and the museum opened its DC space (November 2017) with the questionable Dead Sea Scrolls on display. The report was received in October 2018, concluding that mineral deposits on the scrolls and writing support samples were inconsistent with known authentic Dead Sea Scrolls—evidence that they are forgeries.[87] The five studied fragments were removed from view, and the museum contacted another company, Art Fraud Insights LLC, for a more thorough investigation.

The new Advisory Team consisted of cultural heritage scientists, conservation scientists, provenance researchers, and an independent forensic researcher.[88] Their investigation began in February 2019 and was released in November. The samples were all physically assessed, then six sections were further evaluated with further imaging and chemical testing. One key conclusion deduced was that fifteen of the sixteen samples were leather instead of parchment. This is inconsistent with most Dead Sea Scrolls, as at least 86% of the population of known scrolls are parchment.[89] Further, physical analysis of the ink application suggested that it was applied to already deteriorated leather, such as the ink running into deep cracks, skipping high grain points, flowing off torn edges, and extending beyond the grain onto delaminated areas atop aged mineral deposits. A chemical analysis of the leather also showed that it was likely prepared using lime depilation (invented in the 4th century CE) instead of the 3rd century BCE to 1st century CE technique of enzyme depilation. The samples also appeared to be coated with animal hide glue to stabilize the deterioration of the surface before the ink was applied. The theory proposed by the report was that the scrolls were modern forgeries created on ancient leather with the intent to pass as authentic.[90]

The Museum of the Bible announced the results in March 2020 and removed all of the scrolls from view.[91] Today, Dead Sea Scroll facsimiles are on display and clearly labeled as such. Their 2016 publication was retracted in August 2020 but remains available with a disclaimer stating that "the publication's editors are divided on the question of whether the report proves beyond doubt that the fragments are inauthentic."[92]

There are cascading implications to the fact that the museum has published Dead Sea Scrolls without provenance. By presenting unprovenanced scrolls as valid, the research of truly authentic artifacts is contaminated with the inconsistencies of forgeries. Misinformation can spread, and the initial context of artifacts can be lost among the pollution; as Bonnie et al describe, "information regarding patterns and

connections between individual fragments and scribal hands is lost without secure provenance."[93] Further, interacting with unprovenanced antiquities in any capacity involves complicity in the illicit antiquities trade on all levels: from publishers and senior scholars to undergraduate students.[94] One of the most egregious aspects of the Museum of the Bible's involvement with these forgeries is that young scholars were involved with this legally and ethically suspect material through the Scholars Initiative.

The Scholars Initiative is another problem area for the Museum of the Bible. It adds an attractive academic veneer to the museum, toting prominent names in religious scholarship like Emmanuel Tov, editor-in-chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls publication project, and Dirk Obbink, the now-disgraced former head of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri Project.[95,96] The SI was structured around these big names in scholarship who oversaw the publication, but the research legwork was undertaken by significantly less experienced university and college faculty and students. *Bible Nation* describes the faculty researchers as somewhat randomly selected among schools in the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.[97] Faculty who were not trained in papyrology were suddenly tasked with researching valuable unpublished artifacts and teaching their students to do the same. Giving access to unpublished artifacts to undertrained students was seen as an insult to the papyrology community, as the field is grounded in the research of a limited supply of artifacts. From the Museum of the Bible's perspective, this choice was likely motivated by the desire to increase the trustworthiness of their unpublished collections and to encourage student interaction with artifacts. However, the evangelical and corporate structure facilitating this research interferes with the tradition of academia. Firstly, faculty, graduate, and undergraduate students are bound by a non-disclosure agreement restricting their ability to access information outside of class, share information in other papers or at conferences, or publish outside of orchestrated SI publications.[98] When transparency of information is restricted, academic discourse in the humanities is weakened. Corporate funding also increases the bias in research, like how academic food and drug research is often biased by pharmacological funding. In the case of the Museum of the Bible's Scholars Initiative, the bias in scholarship supports its Protestant interpretation of the Bible.

Progress

In speaking to Brian Hyland, the museum's associate curator of medieval manuscripts, he describes the museum like a Rorschach test: "As people come in, they see things very differently, and it reflects as much of their background as anything that we've done deliberately."[99]

Any surface-level research of the Museum of the Bible—especially from academic sources—reveals its prominent faults. They have been extensively covered in books, such as *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby*, *Does Scripture Speak for Itself?: The Museum of the Bible and the Politics of Interpretation*, and *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*. However, visiting the museum, understanding its institutional history, and speaking to curators reveals that positive change might be happening. The museum's past is easily criticized, but on a deeper look, its successes are apparent as well. Museum reviewers Gannon and Wagner list a few:

> The design of the space is stunning, the technology is remarkable, and the antiquities on display are some of the rarest in the world. The exhibits, as installed, reflect the museum's efforts to be nonsectarian and taken seriously as a national institution alongside nearby Smithsonian museums.[100]

The museum's exhibits are excellently designed to support its collections, with mini architectural compliments and technological interactivity to support different types of learning. From an accessibility standpoint, the museum is commendable. It could function as an entertaining day for children, a space for teaching high school or undergraduate students, or be a quiet space for older audiences to contemplate the objects.

While it introduces the issue of balancing faith and scholarship, the Museum of the Bible also fills a recognizable gap in the sector for serious and religious museums, regardless of how truly nonsectarian it is. I discussed with Amy Van Dyke how the Museum of the Bible has been able to "infuse the soul back" into religious artifacts more than other museums.[101] By presenting the Bible in a full context, viewers can appreciate how the text has influenced history. Rather than being presented in a sanitized and anthropological art context, the objects are presented as one part of a rich and meaningful Christian history. For example, a Gutenberg Bible fragment could easily be overlooked in a large museum with more eye-catching objects. In the Museum of the Bible, however, it is given the space to have an impact on viewers. A pivotal moment like the Gutenberg Bible's production also influences the rest of the chronological exhibition and is referred back to by later objects.

Within the shadows of the Museum of the Bible's collection failures, there have been serious efforts to rebuild its reputation. In the 2017 book *Bible Nation*, it is stated that "no one associated with the Greens or [the Museum of the Bible] has ever suggested that they would consider returning or removing from the collection even a single item to its previous owners or country of origin."[102] Since then, the museum made significant progress in its repatriation efforts. In a 2021 press release, Steve Green (Chairman of the Board) made a press release announcing that after internal collection reviews, over 8,000 objects were repatriated to Iraq and around 5,000 were repatriated to Egypt.[103] Green also shared that the few thousand artifacts from the 2011 Customs case were still in Iraq Embassy storage in the U.S., and the museum assisted in coordinating and shipping of the objects to the Iraq Museum in Baghdad. ICOM emphasizes the importance of repatriating objects, stating that "Museums should be prepared to initiate dialogue for the return of cultural property to a country or people or origin" and "take prompt and responsible steps to coordinate its return," especially when objects have been transported in violation of international and national agreements.[104]

I also discussed the museum's global efforts with Amy Van Dyke, who shared her experiences in international museum relations with the IAA and the Vatican, as well as budding relationships with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Ethiopian Orthodox community, and the Coptic community in Egypt. She states, "All of these relationships…help us to tell that bigger, broader story of the Bible's history and hopefully try to bring in some unity as well. While we may interpret the Bible differently in some ways, it is still the same. It's still these foundational core to our sacred beliefs."[105] While the Museum of the Bible has a uniquely American perspective—assisted by its location off the National Mall, it also recognizes the global

appeal of its collections. Both perspectives are important, as international and national laws, object interpretations, and perspectives affect one another.

The Museum of the Bible's story is part of a wide-reaching conversation about the place of museums in society, and how the Bible contributes to national identity. Museums today are increasingly held accountable for their collections and how they present history. The challenge for the Museum of the Bible is to balance its founding mission of religious transformation with respecting its cultural heritage.

Conclusions

Alternate Models

The corporate funding of the Museum of the Bible is not entirely unique. The intersection between business and the academy has fascinated both sides. Entrepreneurs want to influence culture, and museums need the money. In her study of historical relationships between museums and corporations, Victoria Alexander says "Museums have become crucibles of conflicting factions where tempers flare and ideals crash."[106] In the case of the Museum of the Bible, boundaries are blurred even further with the intersection of business, scholarship, and faith.[107] Another example of a corporate-funded collection is the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. Crystal Bridges is a public non-profit founded by billionaire Walmart heiress and philanthropist Alice Walton in 2005. Their mission is to "welcome all to celebrate the American spirit in a setting that unites the power of art with the beauty of nature."[108] In comparison with the Museum of the Bible, Crystal Bridges does much less to orient its objects to any certain ideology, besides maybe a nationalist one. Even this bias is a slight one, though, unifying its diverse collection rather than constructing a singular narrative of what American art is.

While the Museum of the Bible's provenance of existing collections seems weak upon interrogation, it is not far behind other large museums in terms of progress. Another museum to compare is the Metropolitan Museum, which has had scandals related to looted objects even more recently. In 2022, the museum was served six warrants from the Manhattan District Attorney's Office concerning dozens of allegedly looted objects worth tens of millions.[109] The series of issues sparked the museum to establish new cultural property practices and review existing acquisitions. Additional provenance researchers were hired to achieve this purpose.[110] The Met's decision to rigorously pursue strong provenances for their collections is notably late when considering the more than 150-year institutional history. In comparison, the Museum of the Bible has enacted ethical collection principles and repatriation efforts relatively early in its lifespan.

Another point of comparison for the Museum of the Bible is Ken Ham's Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, and Ark Encounter in Williamstown, Kentucky. These attractions are explicitly sectarian, with the Creation Museum declaring that it "shows why God´s infallible Word, rather than man´s faulty assumptions, is the place to begin if we want to make sense of our world."[111] The museums offer the apologetic and pseudoscientific perspective of Young Earth Creationism that interprets the creation

account in Genesis literally as having taken place only 6,000 years ago. Both museums are also experience- and message-forward, rather than an environment where historical objects facilitate interpretations. Ham's museums are often equated with the Museum of the Bible due to their seemingly similar goals. This is not helped by the fact that in 2012 a Green Collection exhibition was hosted at the Creation Museum. Steve Green commented, "We are like-minded."[112] Despite this professional connection, I see the Museum of the Bible as distinct from these experiences—it does not shelter itself in like-minded communities. It certainly would have been feasible to base the museum in the Green's home base, Oklahoma City. Rather, the museum holds itself to higher standards by being located in Washington, D.C., surrounded by the renowned Smithsonian museums. However, this also encourages its Christian Nationalist agenda by bringing itself closer to political arenas in the country.

With its location, the Museum of the Bible asserts itself as a more academic and respectable institution. As Moss and Baden state, Moss and Baden state, "Where the Greens differ from the average person is in reach. They have the resources to influence law-making, education at high school and university levels, and the broader public perception of the Bible."[113] Its proximity to respected museums and claims of non-sectarianism is likely why the Museum of the Bible faces more scrutiny—it holds itself to a higher standard. The museum's attempt at academic integrity makes it approachable to scholars and the wider public, who might be put off by Ken Ham's theories. Personally, I also feel that the Museum of the Bible—despite its failures—has a glimmer of hope for redeeming its public image to the academic community because it is held at a higher standard.

Implications

In wider culture, the Museum of the Bible is like a litmus test for contemporary museums. From its early collecting days to its broad impact today, the museum could shed light on current and future concerns in the museum sector. As time progresses, increasing numbers of artifacts will get lost, decay, and go into private collections. The Museum of the Bible's muddled collections indicate that it will never be easy to collect antiquities, even in the information age. Today, provenance is becoming more imperative to ethical collecting—but that interest does not retroactively give objects provenance. Museums must continue to navigate the market and international standards if they want to build their collections. To protect and respect the cultural heritage remaining, museums should create more conversations with sources of ethics, like ICOM and the AAM to develop beneficial ways to collect.

The Museum of the Bible's recent creation also indicates a possibility for more corporate influence in museums. This interference consequently comes with biases and ideologies that impact which stories are being told. It is not easy for museums to tell a comprehensive narrative—of art history, of the Bible, or of a social movement—but it should be undertaken from a diverse and nonbiased perspective that allows for dissent, controversy, and multiple perspectives. Amy Van Dyke told me about the importance of this presentation:

> [Museums] are the probably the most trusted authority on history that we have nowadays, especially considering that fact that the internet is rife with lies and

> there's AI and we don't trust the news… people don't even trust their school systems anymore… But people trust museums still…We're in a moment where museums can really have an impact on people. We can educate people…we're able to really bring them into a world of knowledge that they may not have known before.[114]

The Museum of the Bible has attempted to make a nonsectarian, passive approach to presenting the Bible, but it has not been successful, and biases are present. Lathan and Simmons point out that some museums feel a social responsibility to address controversial issues rather than passively or "safely" presenting them. If the Museum of the Bible took this approach, acknowledging its ideology, it could stimulate more dialogue among visitors.[115] Due to its complicated history, it might not be possible for the Bible to be presented without discourse. Rather than hide the complexities, the Museum of the Bible should embrace question-asking.

At the same time, corporate funding should not be allowed to turn museums into vehicles for cultural or political agendas. As museum visitors, we should all question what is being presented at museums, how it is told, and why. In being reliable sources and protectors of cultural heritage, museums must also be transparent about their biases, collections, and scholarship. While the Museum of the Bible has undoubtedly stained its reputation with its legal failures, jumbled collections, and problematic Scholar's Initiative, transparency across all fronts will help the museum regain lost trust. The museum has shown that it can be transparent—when pushed by the U.S. Government—in the first case, but it should demonstrate a willingness to conform to ethics by publishing its full collections and reforming the Scholar's Initiative to allow for a free exchange of information.

Recap of Findings

In conclusion, the museum is a fascinating case study into the complexities of balancing faith and scholarship in the twenty-first century. It began as a deeply evangelical project, leading to legal, ethical, and scientific concerns. However, the museum has taken steps to reform, adopting stronger ethical practices and working toward accessibility and academic integrity.

The museum's story reflects broader challenges in the museum world, especially when private institutions have specific ideological goals. However, I support the Museum of the Bible as a battleground for the space between academia and religion. In today's political polarities, the museum rests in an uncomfortable spot for those on both sides, but museums are the spaces to confront these issues. Whether the museum is a somber space for religious contemplation or an academic treasury, the artifacts prompt viewers to weigh their personal values. Lathan and Simmons describe the key value of objects in a museum

> No other institution uses physical, material things to inspire, teach, preserve, etc., in the way museums do. Libraries do not. Archives do not. Disneyland does not. Of course there are similarities between museums and these institutions, but when it comes down to it, the meaningful physical resource is at the crux of what makes a museum a museum.[116]

With centering the discussion of the museum objects, prioritizing ethical collecting becomes key to the museum's success. The Museum of the Bible must continue scrutinizing its collections to ensure their compliance with national and international laws and ethics. I encourage the museum to cherish its relationships with the Vatican and the IAA, as they make space for other perspectives in the museum. The museum should also examine how its mission and interpretations have a Protestant bias.

Today, the museum is struggling to respect its two masters, faith and academic rigor. Ethical standards have gone unchecked in favor of an ideological message, and thus, the museum's presentation of its cultural heritage must be taken with a grain of salt, as this thesis has demonstrated.

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[65] Latham and Simmons, *Foundations of Museum Studies: Evolving Systems of Knowledge,* 59.
[66] The 'Middle East' is a rudimentary geographical sphere that crosses modern geographic and state borders—much like antiquities do. In this paper, the term includes Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and Iraq.
[67] Gaimster, "Recent UK Measures against the International Illicit Trade in Cultural Objects: Examining the New Regulatory Framework" in *Who Owns Objects?*
[68] Susannah Rutherglen, "The Sack of Baghdad: The U.S. Invasion of Iraq Has Turned Cultural Icons into Loot and Archaeological Sites into Ruins," *The American Scholar* 75, no. 3 (2006): 33–40.

[69] United States Government Accountability Office, “Protection of Iraqi and Syrian Antiquities,” Report to Congressional Requesters, Cultural Property (U.S. Government Accountability Office, August 2016), https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-16-673.pdf.
[70] George Brown Goode, *The Principles of Museum Administration* (York: Coultas and Volans, 1895).
[71] International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, 2017.
[72] Ede, “Who Owns Objects? A View from the Antiquities Trade” in *Who Owns Objects?*
[73] Ortiz, “Overview and Assessment After Fifty Years of Collecting in a Changing World” in *Who Owns Objects?*
[74] Boardman, “Archaeologists, Collectors, and Museums” in *Who Owns Objects?*
[75] Kampmann, “Who Owns Objects? A View from the Coin Trade” in *Who Owns Objects?*
[76] International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums,* 9.
[77] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation,* 42.
[78] Museum of the Bible, “Leadership.” The current CCO of the Museum of the Bible is Jeffrey Kloha, who has held the role since summer 2017. He previously worked as a New Testament professor at a seminary in St. Lewis, where he received his Master of Divinity and Master of Sacred Theology, Bible/Biblical Studies. Like other Museum of the Bible employees, Kloha is a respected scholar but not trained in collection. Kloha, “Jeffrey Kloha” (LinkedIn).
[79] *Moss and Baden, Bible Nation,* 174.
[80] Israel Antiquities Authority, “Discovery and Publication,” The Leon Levy Dead Seas Scrolls Digital Library, accessed September 9, 2024, https://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/learn-about-the-scrolls/discovery-and-publication?locale=en_US.
[81] The Israel Museum, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, accessed September 9, 2024, https://www.imj.org.il/en/wings/shrine-book/dead-sea-scrolls.
[82] Kipp Davis, “Caves of Dispute: Patterns of Correspondence and Suspicion in the Post-2002 ‘Dead Sea Scrolls’ Fragments,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 24, no. 2 (2017): 229–70.
[83] Bonnie et al., “Professional Ethics, Provenance, and Policies.”
[84] *Moss and Baden, Bible Nation,* 60-61.
[85] Museum of the Bible, “Dead Sea Scroll Fragments,” Museum of the Bible, accessed September 9, 2024, https://www.museumofthebible.org/dead-sea-scroll-fragments.
[86] Tov, Davis, and Duke, *RETRACTED: Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*.
[87] Oliver Laughland, “Museum of the Bible Says Five of Its Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments Are Forgeries,” *The Guardian*, October 22, 2018, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/22/museum-of-the-bible-dead-sea-scrolls-fragments-forgeries-fake.
[88] Collette Loll, “Museum of the Bible Dead Sea Scroll Collection Final Report,” Scientific Research and Analysis (Washington, D.C.: Art Fraud Insights, LLC, November 2019), https://www.museumofthebible.org/dead-sea-scroll-fragments.
[89] Tov, Davis, and Duke, *RETRACTED: Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*.

[90] Loll, “Museum of the Bible Dead Sea Scroll Collection Final Report,” 7.
[91] There is no credible suspicion that the museum was responsible for the forgeries or knowingly displayed them with the intent to deceive. At worst, the museum was ignorant about its collections but has not wantonly misled visitors with forgeries.
[92] Tov, Davis, and Duke, *RETRACTED: Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*.
[93] Bonnie et al., “Professional Ethics, Provenance, and Policies,” 273.
[94] *Moss and Baden, Bible Nation,* 95.
[95] Israel Antiquities Authority, “Discovery and Publication.”
[96] Obbink would later be accused of stealing multiple valuable papyri from the Egypt Exploration Society, which he sold to the Museum of the Bible in 2010. See Higgins, “A Scandal in Oxford.”
[97] *Moss and Baden, Bible Nation,* 66.
[98] Ibid, 73-75.
[99] Brian Hyland, Interview by the author, May 22, 2024.
[100] Gannon and Wagner, “Review of Museum of the Bible.”
[101] Van Dyke, Interview by the author.
[102] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 59.
[103] Steve Green, “Update on Iraqi and Egyptian Items,” Museum of the Bible, January 27, 2021, https://www.museumofthebible.org/newsroom/update-on-iraqi-and-egyptian-items.
[104] International Council of Museums, *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*.
[105] Van Dyke, Interview by the author.
[106] Victoria D. Alexander, *Museums and Money: The Impact of Funding on Exhibitions, Scholarship, and Management* (Indiana University Press, 1996).
[107] Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 20.
[108] Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, “About Crystal Bridges,” Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, accessed March 17, 2024, https://crystalbridges.org/about/.
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[113] Ibid, 186-187.
[114] Van Dyke, Interview by the author.
[115] Latham and Simmons, *Foundations of Museum Studies: Evolving Systems of Knowledge*.
[116] Ibid, 99.