

Can Scripture “Speak for Itself”? A Look Inside the Museum of the Bible

By Jill Hicks-Keeton | November 17, 2017



(Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty)

This weekend, the privately funded Museum of the Bible will open its doors to the public. Situated just blocks from the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., its state-of-the-art corridors guide visitors through a selection of its 40,000 Bible-related artifacts and a series of interactive experiences intended to recreate the narratives, lands, and even foods of the Bible. Given its physical location among D.C.’s Smithsonian museums, the Museum of the Bible (MOTB) will likely become the nation’s single most influential interpreter of biblical texts for the millions of visitors it anticipates roaming its halls.

The museum has not been without **controversy** on several fronts. Its founders and funders, the Green family, run the successful Hobby Lobby craft store chain. Their evangelical faith and conservative politics have been no secret: They won a Supreme Court case in which they objected to providing their employees with mandated contraception on religious grounds. And yet, they have increasingly tried to present the museum as a neutral enterprise, one that will not privilege their own point of view, even as **evidence** to the contrary has overshadowed those claims.

This tightrope dance of neutrality is also reflected in how the museum talks about its key mission: to have visitors engage with the Bible. The MOTB is participating in a long tradition of interpreting the Bible. In its extensive and immersive exhibits, the museum retells biblical stories with additions, omissions, and glosses. Its curators do what museum curators everywhere do: they make editorial decisions and implicit claims—in this case, claims about

which biblical verses, books, or collections matter most. Its exhibits attempt to develop coherent readings out of disparate biblical works whose meanings are not self-evident or pre-determined.

The problem with this is that the MOTB denies its participation in such a tradition. In Executive Director Tony Zeiss's **words**, their plan is that "the Bible will speak for itself." For biblical scholars like myself, this claim not only raises eyebrows but also sounds alarm bells. **Candida Moss and Joel Baden**, for example, have raised important concerns that the very notion of an **unmediated** Bible—as if God dropped it straight out of the sky to humans and its meaning is immediately apparent—is rooted in Protestant faith claims around *sola scriptura*, the theological idea that the Bible is the full revelation of God and needs no intermediary tradition that impacts its meaning or interpretation.

Museums, though, do not function as passive conduits of information. Curation is by nature selective, and the placement and organization of artifacts, with explanatory placards, necessarily entails an interpretive process. No scholar would accept the premise that a text, including the Bible, can "speak for itself." The Bible is always mediated—not least because its books were composed in languages most lay people do not read (ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and because even scholars have access to none of the original documents. The Bible's collected contents represent a variety of sometimes competing voices from diverse and distinct socio-historical contexts over a period of about a thousand years. "The Bible" is itself not a stable category. Jews use a different Bible than that used by Christians, and Christians do not all have the same Bible. There is no single understanding of "the" Bible, and assuming there is obscures both the variety of biblical canons in use today and also the myriad of scriptural texts that thrived in antiquity.

With press pass in hand, I visited the museum earlier this week with one question in mind: What does the MOTB's Bible say? In other words, how does the MOTB, despite its claims to the contrary, speak for and represent *a particular kind of Bible*?

In addition to its **cafe**, rooftop garden, theater, and space for rotating outside exhibits, the museum is organized into three main floors: "Impact of the Bible," "Narrative of the Bible," and "History of the Bible." None of these categories is neutral.

On the "impact" floor, the Bible's influence on music, literature, language, and other cultural products—along with their producers—is pitched as positive. Impact is celebrated. The message seems to be that the Bible's impact is always good, and that the Bible is responsible for wonderful things in Western culture. The Bible, for example, made Elvis's music possible, according to one placard in the music section. A quotation from Presley himself affirms his reliance on the Bible. (Even the King pays homage to the "King of Kings" it seems.)

Just around the corner from the "language" section, visitors can virtually "try on" a Bible-themed T-shirt as part of the museum's celebration of the (Christian) Bible's impact on fashion. Garments featuring faces of Jesus and glittered crosses adorn stark white runway models. Though not on the "impact" floor, the MOTB's translation exhibit, titled **illumiNations**, is perhaps the clearest example of the museum's naïve affirmation of the Bible's impact. The MOTB website explains that this exhibit "celebrates the almost universal accessibility of the Bible, showcasing Bibles in over 2,000 different languages." While one placard in the adjacent "history" section acknowledges that the Bible sometimes figured in Western colonial projects, the expansive, shiny **illumiNations** display invites participation in, rather than interrogation of, the notion that everyone everywhere should have access to a Bible in their "heart language," a phrase that derives from **evangelical missionizing efforts**.

The "Narrative of the Bible" floor's exhibits are fundamentally exercises in biblical interpretation, filled with immersive experiences. A Disney-like, though at times quite artful, "Hebrew Bible/Old Testament" section is separated from a "New Testament" exhibit by a reconstructed **Nazareth village** meant to illustrate what life in Jesus's world would have been like. As visitors enter the Hebrew Bible exhibit, they hear the variety of names by which this collection of texts is called by different stakeholders—Tanakh, Old Testament, Hebrew Bible, Septuagint—but then the exhibit collapses all of these into one narrative, told through booming voiceover and at-times beautiful special effects as visitors move through a maze of rooms representing and figuratively re-creating moments of the biblical narrative from creation to the return from exile. Such a project cannot avoid harmonizing, that is, collapsing distinctions, resolving ambiguities, and doing interpretive work. In this harmonizing project, the MOTB must choose among competing understandings of the meaning of the biblical stories. The creation narratives from Genesis 1-3 are told, for example, with an emphasis on the inception of "original sin" (though this language is not

used explicitly), which represents a Christian theological vision of the meaning of the inaugural Genesis stories. Jews do not read these texts in the same way. The exhibit's Exodus story, by contrast, focuses on the Jewish tradition of Passover to such a degree that a non-biblical line from the later Jewish *Haggadah* is heard in the voiceover: "Why is this night different from all other nights?"

The exhibit devotes much more time and space to the story of Ruth the Moabite than her tale consumes in the Bible. Ruth is the woman famous in the Christian tradition for becoming the great-grandmother of David, from whose genealogical line Jesus was believed to have come. The stories of David through Ezra, by contrast, are summarized in just one stop on the journey. This move effectively eliminates a diversity of voices that are found in the books of the Bible that relay these narratives. The books of Samuel and Kings, for example, cover some of the same narrative events as those told in the books of Chronicles, but they tell them from different, sometimes competing perspectives. The MOTB narrative elides these intra-canonical differences by rushing through a large swath of biblical material.

Perhaps the most glaring extra-biblical interpretive move, though, comes through the mouth of Ezra at the conclusion of the exhibit. In a scene meant to recreate his reading of the Law to the assembled returned exiles in Jerusalem (Nehemiah 8), Ezra is portrayed as reading not the Law but the Bible—starting in Genesis 1:1 where modern Jewish and Christian Bibles begin. Scholars argue over the messy details of when, where, how, and in what order the books that now appear in the Jewish Tanakh and Christian Old Testaments were written, collected, and deemed authoritative. The MOTB, by contrast, seems invested in showing that the Bible *as modern people know it* traveled with—and gave hope to—the people of Israel's God in their exile and return. This is a problematic claim on two fronts, particularly in the face of the MOTB's self-presentation as an objective institution informed by current scholarship: This idea about the Bible represents neither what the Bible says nor what scholars say about the Bible.

A similar critique could be made of the New Testament exhibit, a seated film experience. In contrast to its stated purpose to present "the narrative" that the New Testament tells, the film presents a story that is not recognizable from the New Testament documents themselves (and one that would also strike biblical scholars as troubling). The film collapses into a single character, for example, three figures that scholars do not identify as one individual: the disciple John (traditionally "John the Apostle"), the author of the gospel of John ("John the Evangelist" or "John the Beloved"), and the author of the book of Revelation ("John the Divine"). The museum curates a unified character—a sloppy conflation of three biblical figures—as the framing narrator of the New Testament, apparently in order to unify the narrative. This "John" opens the film by reading from John 1 ("In the beginning was the Word") and closes it by quoting the book of Revelation, understood by evangelical Christians to be a realistic portent of final things to come. This museum's Bible takes a multiplicity of voices and forces them to speak from one mouthpiece.

The film's dramatic music turns toward the triumphant as the film portrays, through the apostle Paul, the spread of the message of Jesus around the ancient Mediterranean. With the story of Paul, the film takes creative liberties to include extra-biblical tradition. Nowhere in the New Testament, for example, is Paul's death mentioned. Yet the film portrays Paul as a Christian martyr, thereby adopting a church tradition about the apostle that developed outside of texts that became canonical.

The museum's first two floors communicate MOTB's particular vision of what is in the Bible and why it matters—and how it has positively affected people throughout history. Visitor buy-in: check. Only then do visitors reach the third floor, the history section, and the exhibits that contain the majority of the actual ancient artifacts. In other words, the museum is designed in such a way that guests are exposed to the MOTB's distinctive take on what the Bible says—what it means—*before* viewing the major artifacts. Whether intentional or not, the museum provides an extensive interpretive frame for visitors before they ever see a MOTB-curated manuscript.

The "History of the Bible" floor is the exhibit that struck me as most saturated with input from biblical scholars. The interpretive placards that accompany ancient manuscripts make attempts to recognize diversity and messiness that biblical scholars *insist* on when thinking about history and scripture together. The exhibit is not without problems, however. It is sure to be critiqued, for example, for its implicit assumption that the Christian, Protestant Bible is normative. A diversity of canons is recognized, but that diversity is articulated (accidentally, I suspect) in language that implies deviation from a desired norm. Other traditions are framed as "still" using some books not found in the Protestant canon. The

books in the Catholic Old Testament that have no counterpart in the Protestant canon are labeled “additional” books, when in reality it was the Protestants who removed those books during the Reformation rather than that Catholics *added* them.

It is on the history floor that the MOTB’s attempt to let the Bible “speak for itself” is most visually apparent. Punctuating the entire floor are prominent overhead purple banners containing only the English text of select single verses from biblical texts. Many of the chosen verses have something positive to say about the “word” of God, such as in Psalm 33:4, Isaiah 40:8, and John 17:17. In the context of a Bible museum, any visitor who didn’t know better would think that each of these verses was a self-referential claim—that is, that in these sentences the Bible is staking claims about its own endurance and goodness. Yet none of these verses in their historical and literary contexts refer to the Bible as modern people know it—and certainly not any version of a Christian Bible. Isaiah’s “word,” for example, refers to a limited prophetic utterance. When the gospel of John says “word,” it means Jesus himself—not a text at all.

Steve Green, chairman of the board of the MOTB and president of Hobby Lobby, **has commented** to *The Washington Post* that the MOTB “has fence posts — limits. It doesn’t overtly say the Bible is good — that the Bible is true.” Instead, he says, the MOTB’s role is “to present facts and let people make their own decisions.” Yet visitors to the MOTB do not encounter an unmediated Bible. Their experience is conditioned by what the MOTB gives them to see. The purple banners of biblical texts surround the visitor with particular ideas about the Bible. The Bible is the word of God. The Bible is inspired. The Bible is true. These are faith claims—not facts.

The MOTB is impressive. The parting of the Red Sea exhibit, for one, conveys a sense of meditative wonder as visitors walk through a room illuminated on all sides by dazzling blue lights. On the whole, the museum’s exhibits are creative and fun and beautiful. At times they are downright inspirational. And therein lies the worry: The MOTB makes claims about the Bible that are related to Christian faith without acknowledging their assumptions. The MOTB should acknowledge they are making an argument for a positive view of the Protestant, and often evangelical, Bible. Only with all the information, including the MOTB’s ideology, can visitors go and “make their own decisions.”

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