

Can Hobby Lobby Buy the Bible?

In just the past six years, the evangelical owners of Hobby Lobby have amassed one of the world's largest private collections of biblical antiquities. Why?



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IN NOVEMBER 2017, the Museum of the Bible will open in Washington, D.C., two blocks from the National Mall. Like many of the city's other museums, it is designed to attract hordes of visitors each year, and it will be vast—eight stories tall, and covering 430,000 square feet. Despite its location and size, however, it isn't a government institution. It's private, backed by the family of David Green, a wealthy businessman from Oklahoma City, better known as the founder of the Hobby Lobby retail chain, and it will house artifacts from the family's stunning collection of biblical manuscripts, Torah scrolls, Dead Sea Scrolls, and cuneiform texts. The Greens' collection is one of the largest private collections

of such artifacts in the world, comprising some 40,000 objects—many of which, remarkably, were unknown to scholars and the general public before the Greens acquired them. And the Greens made their first purchase only six years ago.

That's a startling pace of acquisition, especially given the fraught and specialized market for biblical antiquities, and it raises difficult questions about how the Green family has acquired its artifacts, and why.

THIS PAST AUGUST, we sat down with David Green's son Steve, who is the president of Hobby Lobby. We met in the lounge at the Redbury Hotel, in Los Angeles, where we found him dressed in what one might call billionaire-casual: polo shirt and jeans, his hair brushed back. He seemed utterly relaxed. Not once during our time together did he check his phone or watch. He had the air of a man who knew that people would wait for him. Everyone we had spoken with about him had described him as decent, down-to-earth, easy to talk to, and generally pleasant. And it was true. He exudes the southwestern charm of George W. Bush, and speaks with much the same accent and speech patterns. He's the kind of guy you might want to get a drink with—if he drank.

Hobby Lobby rose to national prominence in 2014, after the Greens won a Supreme Court case exempting the company from providing insurance coverage for some forms of birth control, as required by the Affordable Care Act. Fundamental to the case was the Greens' religious commitment as evangelical Protestants. Steve Green doesn't distinguish between business and belief. "God's given us the ability to be very successful in our business," he told us, "and I think to some degree it's providential." Hobby Lobby, he explained, is not just a business. It's a business that enables a ministry, and at the center of that ministry is the Bible. "We want to share this book with people all over the world," he said. "And the more resources we have, the more we're able to do that."

Steve Green, the president of Hobby Lobby, at the future site of the Museum of the Bible, two blocks from the National Mall, on February 12, 2015. The museum is scheduled to open next year. (Mandel Ngan / AFP / Getty)

Hobby Lobby brings in a yearly revenue of roughly \$3.7 billion, according to *Forbes*. You can do a lot to promote the Bible with that kind of money. And the Greens do: They create films with biblical themes, they own a chain of Christian bookstores, they support the development of a Bible curriculum for schools, they sponsor trips to Israel, they donate to Christian charities. They once spent \$70 million to prop up Oral Roberts University when it was struggling. But the most expensive, extensive, and time-consuming project in their portfolio is the Museum of the Bible. Steve Green may be the president of Hobby Lobby, but he devotes half his time to the museum.

The Greens didn't originally intend to build a museum. Nor did they originally intend to collect biblical artifacts. But in the mid-2000s they began collaborating with Johnny Shipman, an eccentric Dallas businessman who walked around town in a full-length fur coat, carried a firearm, and, as a Baptist, felt called to build something greater than himself: a national Bible museum. Shipman enlisted the

support of Scott Carroll, a former academic with a doctorate in ancient studies who had made a career out of helping collectors track down and acquire items, especially rare manuscripts. Shipman had the idea, Carroll had the expertise—and the Greens, Shipman recognized, had the money.

A few years later, the Greens made their first purchase: a very early English translation of the Book of Psalms. Soon they were making acquisitions all over the world, and in 2010, they decided—as Steve Green delicately put it to us—to “take more ownership of the project.” Shipman was out; Dallas was left behind.

The Greens have amassed one of the world’s largest private collections of biblical artifacts—in only six years. Their acquisition pace raises difficult questions.

Almost from the beginning, the Greens made it a priority to acquire ancient biblical manuscripts: fragments of papyrus and parchment, in Greek or Syriac or Coptic, that constitute the oldest surviving evidence of the transmission—the copying and recopying and translating—of the Bible. Most of their other artifacts—biblically inspired artwork, ritual items of Judaism and Christianity, even Elvis Presley’s personal Bible—testify to the Bible’s use and influence and popularity. But the Greens recognized that ancient biblical manuscripts do more than that. These manuscripts provide the best evidence we have for the early wording of the Bible, and the family now owns more than 1,000 of them.

THE SUDDEN APPEARANCE in private collections of significant numbers of previously unknown artifacts raises red flags for those who follow the antiquities trade. Over the past 25 years, there has been deep concern regarding the flow of illegally acquired antiquities out of the Middle East. The always-strong market for biblical or other religious items means that the looting of archaeological sites is a constant threat, which has typically been controlled by powerful central governments. But in the wake of the Gulf War and the series of destabilizing crises that followed in the region, government controls have become

insufficient. We now have what Edouard Planche, a United Nations specialist on this topic, describes as “massive looting of cultural property in the region.” And that leads to questionable acquisitions.

The rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS, has brought heightened attention to the antiquities trade. That’s because the group considers the looting and trafficking of antiquities a valuable source of revenue. “Such funding,” the UN Security Council recently declared, “is being used to support recruitment efforts and to strengthen operational capability to organize and carry out terrorist attacks.” In May, when U.S. forces assassinated Abu Sayyaf, a senior ISIS officer, and then raided his compound in Syria, they found it stuffed with hundreds of ancient Iraqi artifacts.

For these reasons, the issue of provenance—the record of how an artifact was discovered, and who has owned it since—has become crucial in the study of antiquities, especially for newly announced artifacts. In 1970, UNESCO drafted a landmark convention calling on member nations to delegitimize the sale of cultural artifacts. If an item can be shown to have been removed from its country of origin before 1970, collectors can generally be secure that its purchase is legal. Records of sale, however, are not always well maintained (if they are maintained at all)—and, of course, they can be forged.

A fragment of the Dead Sea Scrolls, from the Green Collection. The family owns one of the largest private collections of Dead Sea Scroll fragments in the world. (Ardon Bar Hama)

Some scholars, awakening to the scope of the Green Collection in recent years, have pressed for information about the origins and the purchase history of certain items. But the Greens have privacy agreements with sellers and brokers that make the purchase history of many items in their collection unclear to outsiders. This is legal, and not uncommon; most private collectors keep the details of their purchases secret. The practice exists partly to protect sellers who might have personal reasons for concealing their identities, such as financial hardship. But it also protects the unscrupulous.

Consider the case of one of the Greens' biblical manuscripts: a Coptic fragment of the New Testament's Book of Galatians, which in 2014 was proudly displayed at the Vatican in an exhibit of Green Collection items. While touring the exhibit, Roberta Mazza, a papyrologist from Manchester University, recognized the fragment as the same papyrus that had been offered for sale on eBay in 2012. Scholars had found that offering suspicious: The seller claimed the piece had come out of Egypt, which, if true, could have made selling it a violation of Egypt's strict cultural-heritage laws. When Mazza—and others, including us—asked

representatives of the Green family about the provenance of the piece, she was told that they had bought the manuscript in 2013 from a “trusted dealer” who had provided them with a clean provenance, tracing the fragment back to a collection housed at the University of Mississippi in the 1950s. However, even the director of the Green Collection, David Trobisch, said he and a colleague had been unable to locate photographs of the fragment in the university’s records; we have yet to find any reference to it in an auction catalogue; and nobody has been able to account for its appearance on eBay.

When asked how they have acquired so much so fast, the Greens say that they bought most of their artifacts at auction from families, many of them European, who were hit hard by the financial downturn in 2009 and wish to remain anonymous. When we asked Trobisch for any information he could provide about an Aramaic incantation bowl from the middle of the first millennium A.D. (of a type that is suspected to have been widely looted from Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War), he provided general reassurances but no specifics. “I looked at the files,” he said. “There is nothing unusual that sticks out.” Later, he added, “Anytime anything comes up, we follow up very carefully, as much as we can.” Similarly, when we asked Lance Allred, the curator of cuneiform objects, about the provenance of an inscription from Iraq, he said, “The cuneiform acquisitions all happened before my time here.” Later he followed up by telling us that he couldn’t help us figure out the inscription’s provenance. “To research it,” he said, “would require quite a bit of work on my part.”

If the Greens want to present their collection to the public, they have to be prepared for public scrutiny.

It’s not just scholars who are paying close attention. For the past four years, items imported by the Greens have been under investigation by the federal government, ever since customs officials in Memphis seized a 2011 shipment of a few hundred cuneiform tablets that the Greens had bought from an Israeli dealer. In confirming the seizure and investigation to us, Cary Summers, the president of the Museum of

the Bible, described the problem as primarily bureaucratic. “There was a shipment, and it had improper paperwork,” he said. Perhaps—but the shipping label used to send the tablets to the United States reportedly described them merely as handcrafted clay tiles worth about \$300, which obscures both their historical significance and their true worth. Summers points to the Greens’ relative inexperience as collectors at the time the tablets were seized. “It was naïveté,” he said. “If you don’t know what to look for, what questions to ask, you don’t even know how to do due diligence.”

An architectural rendering of the Museum of the Bible (Museum of the Bible)

It isn’t that the Greens are looking to make illicit or inauthentic acquisitions. “That’s a headache we don’t want,” Steve Green told us before news of the investigation broke last year. But unprovenanced artifacts beget unprovenanced artifacts. Once it is known that buyers are willing to purchase items with dubious or nonexistent provenance, the market for those items expands, which in turn encourages the kind of looting that we’re witnessing today in the Middle East. The connection between a scrap of papyrus and on-the-ground violence may be difficult to see. But it exists.

And that is where the real danger of hiding provenance lies. The pace of their acquisition alone suggests that the Greens may not have taken every possible step to investigate the provenance of what they have bought, a risk that they acknowledge. “We do what we can,” Steve Green told us, responding to the question of whether his family has knowingly acquired problematic artifacts. “But there is the risk that after the fact, you find out that it wasn’t appropriate for us to buy it.”

As its opening approaches, the Museum of the Bible is becoming less a family venture and more like the British Museum or the Getty—institutions that increasingly experience challenges to the international legality of their holdings. If the Greens want to present their collection to the public, they have to be prepared for public scrutiny.

STEVE GREEN HAS A MANTRA: *We aren’t collectors, we’re storytellers.* In his conversation with us, he made it clear that he envisages the Museum of the Bible as a place that will tell the story of a sacred book that has traveled down the centuries essentially unchanged since the time of its composition. Green describes the museum’s mission as “nonsectarian,” and language in the museum’s recent nonprofit filings reinforces that idea. “We exist to invite all people to engage with the Bible,” the most recent filing we were able to obtain reads. “We invite biblical exploration through museum exhibits and scholarly pursuits.” But in its first nonprofit filing, in 2010, the museum made a stronger claim: that its primary exempt purpose was “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.”

In material terms, there is no such thing as the “original” Bible. There is no dusty old book under glass at the Vatican, no equivalent of Shakespeare’s *First Folio*, that serves as the source for all our modern editions. Instead, the Bible as we know it today is a composite of many individual texts, an accumulation of editorial judgments made by scholars and religious leaders over the past two millennia. Three nearly complete Greek texts of the Bible survive from antiquity, dated to the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.—but they are not identical. They differ from one

another in thousands of ways, both small and large. Consider just one obvious difference between two of these books, Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus: The former ends the Gospel of Mark a dozen verses earlier than the latter does. Additionally, hundreds of flimsy scraps of biblical papyrus survive from antiquity, many of which predate the major codices, and each of which offers a slightly different rendering of the text.

An architectural rendering of the Museum of the Bible (Museum of the Bible)

Many of these differences are the result of human error: In copying an earlier text, a scribe missed a word here, misread another there, or decided to correct obscure grammar and word choices and clarify what he saw as the true meaning of the text. Whether you classify the differences among the many fragments of the New Testament as mistakes, well-intentioned clarifications, or corruptions, the sheer diversity of the evidence makes it awfully difficult to discern what the authors of the Bible actually wrote down.

In academia, the study of these variant manuscripts is known as textual criticism. For most of the time that their field has existed, text critics of the Bible have aimed to peel back the layers of accumulated variants and uncover a pristine, original version of the text—which may explain why the field has held such appeal for

evangelical-Christian scholars. But in the 1960s, the Harvard scholar Eldon Jay Epp highlighted the idea that the “original text” of the New Testament was simply out of our reach, because the random and fragmentary nature of the manuscripts that survive makes it impossible to reconstruct the authors’ actual words with any certainty. Epp’s ideas opened the door to a new kind of textual criticism—one that emphasizes, rather than attempts to eliminate, the diversity and complexity of the manuscript evidence. It’s an approach that has grown in popularity since Epp’s day—and has been propounded, to the chagrin of many evangelicals, in mass-market form by the best-selling writer Bart D. Ehrman. The existence of thousands of fragments of contradictory material is, according to this perspective, a faith killer. How can Scripture be inerrant when we can’t even know what it originally said?

Pages from the Codex Climaci Rescriptus, a rare volume of Old and New Testament texts that Steve Green bought from Sotheby's in 2009 (Museum of the Bible)

Most evangelical text critics, however, continue to see early manuscript fragments as deposits of faith. Each discovery of ancient New Testament papyri, they feel, allows us to inch ever closer to the earliest proclamations of Jesus and his followers. The earlier a fragment can be dated, the argument goes, the more likely it is to preserve the original words of the divinely inspired biblical authors, and the more significant it therefore becomes to lay Christians: from God's lips to their ears, skipping the 2,000 years of history and human error in between. "The more we learn about this book, the better off we are," Steve Green told us. "If this book is not what it is, I want to know about it. But what we keep finding is that, boy, it validates what the book says. So the more we study, the more we know, the better off I think the world is, the faith community is."

THAT BELIEF—that the more we learn about the Bible, the more we can investigate how accurately it has been transmitted over the millennia—may account for a program launched in the summer of 2010: the Green Scholars Initiative. Designed to facilitate the academic study of the artifacts in the Green Collection, the program has focused on early biblical manuscripts. For the past five years, a growing group of scholars has taken part in this project.

For papyrologists on the lookout for unpublished texts to work with, it's an exciting opportunity. The initiative doesn't just provide scholars with access to rare and previously unknown materials that wouldn't otherwise be available for study. It also provides them with access to the most-advanced technologies for pursuing that study, funds their travel to conferences and colloquia, and all but guarantees an eventual outlet for publication. But rather than make its holdings available to any scholar who might want to use the collection for legitimate research, as is the usual procedure, the Green Scholars Initiative carefully selects individual scholars to work on its material, seemingly without regard for traditional scholarly standards. Highly qualified scholars seeking publication rights to precious, never-before-seen papyri have been denied permission unless they agreed to join the Green Scholars Initiative, while scholars who had never before touched an ancient manuscript have been recruited to participate. In 2013, the then-director of the initiative, Jerry Pattengale, stated that "no religious requirement for involvement" was in place. But

it's worth noting that almost all the institutions with which the initiative's scholars are affiliated are explicitly Christian, and most are evangelical.

The Greens have potentially figured out a way to make one story of the Bible seem like *the* story of the Bible.

Scholars who join the initiative must sign a nondisclosure agreement, a common practice in the business world, but one that is unusual in the humanities.

Researchers who are selected to work on Green manuscripts almost always do so in collaboration with undergraduate and graduate students—many of whom have had little training in the languages of the papyri they are asked to study. One scholar told us that her students turned to Wikipedia in researching their texts. Whatever range of skills they may have brought to their projects, it was striking how similarly the students described the lessons they took away. “It’s impressive how well the biblical message has been preserved,” one told us. Another said, “The consistency of biblical writings is incredible.”

We believe that this is the story the Greens want to tell the world, and that they have established the Green Scholars Initiative—in effect, a privately funded parallel academic universe—to help themselves tell it. “We needed to have scholarly credibility with what we have, with what we were saying,” Steve Green told us, explaining the aims of the initiative. “We wanted to pretty much undergird all that we did.”

IN A STRIP MALL in Santa Clarita, California, about 30 miles northwest of Los Angeles, in what was once a large hardware store, you can find *Passages*, the traveling exhibit of Green Collection artifacts, now at its final stop before being folded into the Museum of the Bible in Washington. On a sunny morning this past summer, we pulled into the parking lot, just past a Jack in the Box, and made our way to the door. Although we were 10 minutes early for our appointment, our tour guides were waiting for us: Lauren McAfee, the director of community engagement for the Museum of the Bible, and her husband, Michael McAfee, its director of Bible

engagement. Both in their late 20s, they share a youthful upscale-hipster look, confidently straddling the line between studious and glamorous. They were personable and immediately likable. For Lauren, at least, it might run in the family: She is Steve Green's daughter.

Everyone associated with the Museum of the Bible is quick to point out that it will provide a very different experience from that of *Passages*. Having walked the construction site and seen the detailed renderings of the museum, and having toured the labyrinthine exhibit spaces of *Passages*, we can confirm that, at least in terms of visitor experience, the two will be worlds apart. But until the museum opens, *Passages* is the closest we can get to what it will be like. Most of the artifacts on display in *Passages* will appear in the museum, after all, and the two institutions theoretically share the same goals: to tell visitors about the Bible's history and impact on the world.

As the McAfees led us through the exhibit, chatting happily about the collection, we couldn't help noticing its emphasis on the King James Bible—the famous English translation published in 1611, often known as the Authorized Version. At the heart of the exhibit is a replica of the room in which the translation was supposedly carried out, with a dozen editions of the King James on display. It is certainly true that the King James deserves its share of attention. It is the most influential English translation of the Bible—and *Passages* was first created, in 2011, to celebrate its 400th anniversary. But it is also true that some Pentecostal Christians—the tradition of the family's patriarch, David Green, and the one in which Steve Green was raised—consider the King James to be the only valid English translation, and infallible. Scott Carroll, the scholar who worked with the Greens when they first began amassing their collection, recalls telling David Green that one of his family's newly acquired ancient manuscripts provided evidence that a section of the Gospel of John in the King James translation might not have originally been part of the Bible. Green was less than pleased. “You will not use this collection to undermine the King James Bible,” Carroll says Green told him.

The artifacts on display in *Passages* don't hit you over the head with any particular faith claims or theological positions. But the exhibit presents a very narrow story, progressing with great purpose on the road toward the Reformation, and especially the English Reformation, culminating with the King James Bible. The main story that *Passages* tells about the Bible, in short, is a Protestant one.

A replica of the press on which Johannes Gutenberg printed his famous Bible. The replica is on display at *Passages*, the traveling exhibit that showcases artifacts from the Green Collection. (Museum of the Bible)

IN NOVEMBER 2014, AT a promotional event for the Museum of the Bible held at the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, in Dallas, President Bush declared that the museum “will be an important part of our capital.” We'd take that a step further: By virtue of its size, scope, and, above all, location, the museum will almost certainly become the national Bible museum.

We'll find out what the museum will be like only when it opens, of course. But there's no denying that the Greens' burgeoning collection of biblical antiquities—vetted by handpicked scholars and displayed in a huge museum just blocks from the National Mall—will allow them to tell a very specific story, should they so choose.

The thousands of artifacts they have so rapidly acquired could become merely the pictures that accompany this story, which, put simply, is this: The text of the Bible has essentially never changed, and its authority is timeless.

There's nothing inherently wrong with this message. From a faith perspective, it's no better or worse than any other. What's striking, though, is that the Greens have potentially figured out a way to make one story of the Bible seem like *the* story of the Bible.

The Greens want to influence Americans and bring them back to the Bible. They're unlikely to promote their socially conservative views openly in the museum, but its exhibits may give them a prominent, seemingly authoritative platform from which to push back against what they see as the secular tide in American politics. "I hope the museum becomes a beacon for *all* people to engage with the ideas and beauty of the Bible," Steve Green wrote in a statement to *The Atlantic*. And that, he made clear to us in our conversation, includes this country's political leaders. "They need to know," he said, "that this book speaks to every area of life and it has advice: It advises how a good government should be ... Our Founding Fathers unabashedly looked to the Bible in building this nation, so why wouldn't it be right for our legislators to know our history of our government?"

Green acknowledges that people will differ about what that history is. "But that," he wrote, "is a major reason why museums have an important place in our society—to spur thought and ideas about historical and cultural events."

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