

Inside the Museum of the Bible

The new museum wants to ignite passion for the Word through high-tech wizardry and scholarly detachment. Can it do it all?

Martyn Wendell Jones | October 20, 2017 - *Christianity Today*



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

Two blocks south of the National Mall in Washington, DC, a stately brick building with a recessed entrance faces Fourth Street. On either side of the entrance, two bronze doors the height of upended school buses stand adorned with the text of the Gutenberg Bible. They are perhaps the largest-scale homage ever made to the printing plates that brought Scripture into the age of mechanical reproduction, and, as with the original plates, the text on them protrudes backward. It is as though the doors are waiting to come unhitched and fall through a perfect 90-degree arc onto the street, indelibly impressing the city with the Word of God in the Latin of the Vulgate.

Each stacked line of text weighs roughly 380 pounds and was individually affixed to the doors. They don't close, however; their function is purely decorative, and the recessed entrance plaza remains open year round. Beyond these doors opens an enormous hall paved with marble tiles.

Mr. Green Goes to Washington

[In an interview with CT](#), Hobby Lobby president and Museum of the Bible founder Steve Green shares about the museum's origins, its controversies, and his dreams for how it could impact the world.

Looking up, a visitor might see a sprawling digital canopy of trees, one of five possible scenes playing on a ceiling-mounted 140-foot-long LED display. The light emitted by the false sky

intensifies in surrounding glass walls and polished floors; bystanders are awash in illumination. At the end of the hall, a floating staircase winds up into the air without the aid of steel supports; docents clad in Ancient Near Eastern garb shuffle by to assume stations in the world of the distant past.

On November 17, Museum of the Bible (MOTB) will open its doors to the public for the first time, claiming to be the most cutting-edge museum in DC. Lavish exhibits, futuristic technology, and hitherto-unseen artifacts await visitors on the upper floors, as do lingering questions about the museum’s perceived association with antiquities smuggling. But the most enduring questions surrounding the museum will undoubtedly concern its intent. As its leadership has walked back the apologetic messaging of its early days in favor of a more open-handed mission of “engaging” all people with the Bible, skeptics may smell a ruse while some Christians may wonder if the museum is holding back.



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

Founded as an organization by Hobby Lobby president Steve Green in 2010, MOTB is the newest addition to DC’s legendary and vast museum community. MOTB professes to “invite all people to engage” with the impact, narrative, and history of the Bible “through museum exhibits and scholarly pursuits.”

There is no precedent for an operation quite like this one. The purchase, partial demolition, and rebuilding of the property cost half a billion dollars. The 430,000-square-foot space has been outfitted with technology so advanced that a staff of 100 technologists had to develop platforms

simultaneously with content. Permanent exhibit floors contain, among other items, fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the museum's own replica of the Liberty Bell. On the roof, there is a biblical garden next to a cafeteria in which one can buy biblical foods (and hot dogs).

Beyond the museum's main location and its traveling exhibits, which have since 2011 visited Jerusalem, the Vatican, Cuba, and Germany, the operation comprises two other important components. One is the Scholars Initiative, the museum's research arm. Senior scholars in the program mentor students and younger colleagues in the study of artifacts and texts. They are given unique access to these items through the museum, which houses lodging facilities for visiting scholars alongside a lecture hall equipped to broadcast their talks around the world. Last year, too, prestigious academic publisher Brill released *Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*, the first volume in a new series that will carry the name of MOTB and present the Scholars Initiative's results.

The second component is a high-school Bible curriculum, developed by MOTB and already being used by over 100,000 Israeli public-school students as well as American private-school students. The long-term hope is to adapt the curriculum for use in American public schools, a complicated process with myriad legal complexities that attests to what Director of Collections David Trobisch calls the museum's ever-expanding "global vision."

I visit DC in late July to see the museum for myself. MOTB president Cary Summers meets me, and we don hardhats and safety vests to enter the worksite outside the building. A 40-year member of Gideons International and a deacon in his hometown Southern Baptist church in Springfield, Missouri, Summers has an air of genteel politeness. I find his casual idiom and mild drawl immediately endearing.



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

We stop for a moment to survey the exterior. First built in 1923 to store refrigerators, the original four-story brick shell has been transformed. When MOTB rebuilt the property, it dug out an extra level below an existing basement and added a two-story glass superstructure. The upper floors of the museum extend over the office building at its east end, like an L-shaped Tetris piece. The museum reaches DC's legal height limit of 130 feet, but including the basement levels, it contains eight floors' worth of space. The glass superstructure lights up and "can be seen at night throughout all of Washington," Summers tells me as we go inside.

"We're building in about half the time any museum this size has ever been built [in DC]," Summers adds. "During the major construction period, we had 24-hour [shifts,] seven days a week." Actual construction began in early 2016, meaning the museum went from a giant crater encircled by the historical brick façade to a finished building in about a year and a half.

On the ground floor, a rotating exhibit from the Vatican Museum and the Vatican Apostolic Library sits next to a space that will contain two exhibits at the November opening: one from the Jewish History Museum of Amsterdam and the other from the Bavarian State Library. Jewish and Catholic contributions to MOTB give the exhibits a degree of interfaith imprimatur; rotating exhibits will likely change on a six-month basis. "We have a whole list for the next three years of incoming libraries that will be showcased here," Summers says.

The world-renowned Israel Antiquities Authority is another partner with MOTB, agreeing in 2015 to showcase archeological discoveries at the museum. In November, they will display items recovered from a first-century ship discovered in the ruins of Caesarea Maritima, including gold currency and what Summers calls "bronze heads from Rome."

International and interfaith involvement is not limited to partnerships with outside organizations. Summers will later show me a thick information packet containing the academic profiles of more than 100 scholars from around the world who helped to develop the content of the museum's displays. N. T. Wright, Father James Martin, Dead Sea Scrolls expert Emanuel Tov, and American historian of religion Mark Noll are some of the names I recognize. Though aiming to achieve "the highest level of academic credibility," Summers says, "we're not speaking from any one voice"—a choral metaphor that echoes in conversations with other staffers during my visit.

MOTB uses its second, third, and fourth floors to house the permanent exhibits these scholars helped develop around three themes: an Impact of the Bible exhibit, an immersive Narrative of the Bible experience, and a more traditional History of the Bible section.

Around us on the first floor, columns of Jerusalem stone border the LED-lit entrance hall, its marble floor proceeding through gradations from a dark brown to a light cream to represent the movement from ignorance "into information dealing with the Bible—sort of a psychological thing," Summers says. The marble comes from Tunisia and Holland.

The amounts of money behind these lavish building materials are huge, the aggregate of donations large and small. MOTB took in \$156 million in private donations in its 2015 fiscal year, placing it 93rd on Forbes’s list of the largest US charities.

Museum visitors will be asked for a \$15 suggested donation upon entry, but in keeping with a time-honored Washington tradition, admission will technically be free. Everyone who enters will receive a digital guide—or “digital docent,” as Summers refers to them. (Traditional costumed docents will also roam the museum.) These handheld touchscreen devices are central to the experience of MOTB, as Jeff Schneider, vice president of information and interactive systems, will later tell me.



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

Something between a traditional audio guide and a tagalong human expert, the digital docent is meant to help visitors create durable memories out of the raw stores of information in the museum. At registration, guests configure variables such as level of depth of information, time constraints, and stated interests and then receive a custom itinerary. The digital docent keeps track of the visitor’s progress through the museum while making real-time adjustments based on pace and can identify areas of high traffic for visitors to avoid.

Deploying the high-tech tour guides required developing an indoor navigation system that can locate any digital guide within four inches of its actual location in the museum—a technology that “didn’t really exist” when MOTB began to develop it and that opens new possibilities for museum accessibility, Schneider says. The digital guides can translate English-language placards on the fly and can reproduce signage text onscreen in large fonts or even read it aloud. Augmented reality also gives children a gamified, Pokémon-GO style experience of their parents’ itinerary that involves robots and a quest to dispel encroaching fog.

Other novelties in the museum’s design will go unnoticed by all but a few. Pry loose any of the magnetized wooden panels that make up the exhibit floors and underneath you will see part of a metal housing grid containing miles of cords and cabling for the museum’s displays. Workers can easily open up this grid to make low-cost wiring changes, enabling MOTB to accommodate new exhibits at speeds and scales unfathomable at many museums. While I am in DC, I will hear rumblings of other museums holding off on major changes to first see how these new approaches to old problems work for MOTB.



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

To reach the technological apotheosis of the museum, however, we climb into the glass superstructure of the fifth floor, where a performing arts theater with 472 seats spreads across three levels. Cloth shapes of varied sizes rib the ceiling and walls, creating three-dimensional surfaces on which 17 4K projectors cast ultra-high-definition backgrounds, static images, and footage. For opening week, the theater will run 12-minute shows involving dramatic readings of Scripture, augmented by a score and wrap-around visuals. “It hits all the senses in an amazing way,” Schneider says. Simply testing the theater’s capacities required the use of virtual reality.

In the non-virtual world, I find myself under a canopy of artificial olive branches. “This whole area acclimates you to the time of Jesus,” Summers says. We are in Nazareth Village, an immersive walkthrough experience on the New Testament side of the third-floor Story exhibit. “Even on the olive trees, you can see the olives up there—they’re all hand done, handmade, hand glued,” he says. “Every part of Israel had distinctive rock formations, so we built 14,000 stones.” I draw my fingers over the uneven ridges of an artificial stone wall. “Every rock is handmade, hand painted, because we wanted the exact color and feel of the rocks of Nazareth, which are quite different from the rocks in Tiberius, which are quite different from the stone and rocks found in Jerusalem.”

We came here after visiting the Impact floor, where a 254-foot woven scrim hangs like a billowy wall behind a translucent plastic tarp. I caught glimpses of Martin Luther King Jr. and Billy Graham in an exposed length of the tableau before nearly stumbling into the museum’s blanket-covered Liberty Bell, a 3,200-pound replica forged at the same foundry as the original in Philadelphia. “The whole issue of slavery we address here,” Summers told me. “You know both sides used the same Scripture to justify [and condemn] slavery.” Though the museum will forthrightly describe this and other contradictions in the social history of Scripture, Summers and Executive Director Tony Zeiss say MOTB will largely avoid contemporary cultural flashpoints.

In Nazareth, we are far from such issues. Every 90 minutes the sky above the ancient town changes from day to night, and the little oil lamps that sit on windowsills and ledges flicker to life. At one end of the town, one can look out over the Sea of Galilee, painted on a curved wall using techniques of perspective to create an illusion of depth and continuity with the rocky outcrop that borders the wall.

We leave the past to enter the History floor, which Summers describes as “the heaviest artifact floor.” Alongside exhibits dedicated to the display of the museum’s permanent collections, one-third of which are classified as Judaica, this floor features a working lab where visitors can watch demonstrations of highly specialized research methods.

Around us, I envision the inventory that Summers lists for future display in the exhibit: “manuscripts that date back from the oldest manuscripts . . . 240 Torah scrolls, Dead Sea Scrolls, medieval manuscripts . . . a Gutenberg press is in here . . .” A working Israeli scribe “is moving over here for one year” to write “a Kosher Torah scroll” for five days a week while explaining the process to visitors. He will also train other scribes, who will become purveyors of the same tradition.

The materials and artifacts on this floor come primarily from two sources: the museum’s own collections and the Green Collection, which lends items to the museum. Owned by Hobby Lobby, the Green Collection has become a lightning rod for controversy. Steve Green, Hobby Lobby’s president, bought the first item for the collection in 2009, and today it is one of the largest collections of privately owned biblical artifacts in the world. The rapid, fairly recent, and large-scale acquisitions have fueled speculation about illicit antiquities trading in violation of the UNESCO 1970 Convention and further sanctions imposed on the trade of Iraqi antiquities in the 1990s after the Gulf War.

“The antiquities trade runs on layers of ‘plausible deniability’: not asking too many questions, leaving things implied but not said, opaque business practices, lack of regulation,” Donna Yates, an antiquities crime expert and Glasgow University lecturer, blogged after [the government brought a civil forfeiture complaint against Hobby Lobby](#) that targeted thousands of artifacts smuggled into the US in 2011 with falsified customs forms.

Cultural property lawyer Rick St. Hilaire described a civil forfeiture to me as “a legal action against property that is alleged by prosecutors to have been involved in unlawful activity.” Importantly, a forfeiture “is directed against property and not a person.” Government lawyers have alleged criminal activity “to argue that the defendant artifacts need to be forfeited,” and the federal prosecutors in the Hobby Lobby case “deliberately singled out the shipper, not the importer, as the party who violated federal criminal law.”

Most of the targeted items were clay bullae and cuneiform-covered cylinders, and the forfeiture required them to be returned to Iraq. When I spoke with Yates over the phone, she told me they likely came out of Iraqi soil between 2003 and 2008, when large-scale unrest in Iraq drove so many desperate civilians to loot archaeological sites that the crowds were visible in satellite imagery. Hobby Lobby also paid a \$3 million fine as part of a settlement with the government over the smuggled items.

Though the forfeiture complaint made no mention of MOTB, the Green Collection donated items to the museum collections after MOTB was formed in 2010, and critics insinuated that illicit items might have been among those donated. “I do think that there are looted antiquities in the Museum of the Bible,” Yates wrote in the wake of the government’s case. “I can’t prove it to an extent that would let some country make a return claim, but please understand: There is no legit source of these kinds of artifacts.”

When I asked Summers about this accusation, he said that absolutely none of the illicit items targeted in the forfeiture complaint were donated to MOTB. I also spoke with Trobisch, the collections director, about the provenance of the items on display.

“We don’t collect [archaeological] artifacts,” he told me. “We look for books; we look for copies of texts,” which he said have a provenance and ownership history that is far easier to ascertain. Artifacts in MOTB can “create atmosphere” for visitors, but “they don’t have to be genuine.”

Trobisch told me MOTB has no interest in collecting items of actual archeological value and often uses reproductions in place of originals to generate the same visual interest. “[Vetting] is a very straightforward process,” he said. “I came on three and a half years ago, and there wasn’t a single item that we accepted where there were questions. If there were questions, [the item didn’t] come through.”



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

He said they turn down “something between 40 and 50 percent” of items offered for donation to MOTB or that the Green Collection is interested in acquiring. “Everything that [goes] through the vetting process . . . has been vetted to the highest possible standards,” and any item chosen for display in the museum undergoes a second round of scrutiny. The process involves specialists at the top of their fields, and Trobisch solicits multiple opinions to make sure there is no reasonable doubt about a given item’s history.

Questions about provenance will likely remain. In a recent twist, MOTB-funded researchers suggested that nearly half of the museum’s Dead Sea Scrolls fragments [may be forgeries](#). When I asked Trobisch about the likelihood of publishing the full provenance of everything in the

museum, he told me the MOTB intends to “make the database of all items in our care accessible in electronic form,” but that the project “will take more time.”

There is another axis of criticism concerning MOTB. “The Greens want to influence Americans and bring them back to the Bible,” [wrote](#) Joel Baden, a Hebrew Bible professor at Yale, and Candida Moss, a New Testament professor at Notre Dame, in *The Atlantic*. “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.” Baden and Moss released a book in October about the Green family’s conservative religious activism and philanthropy.

Given Summers’s past consulting work for the Creation Museum in Kentucky, which MOTB once visited with a traveling exhibit about “dragon slayers who appear in a medieval book of hours,” it seems reasonable to ask whether MOTB intends to take up Ken Ham–style cultural apologetics. Trobisch responded with an anecdote: After finishing a site tour, a potential donor once asked where the design team was planning to put a “decision room” where visitors might commit their lives to Christ. After discovering that none was planned, the man withdrew his donation.

“The Bible is the center,” Trobisch said, and by this, the liberal New Testament scholar indicates what he shares in his approach with the more conservative Greens, who hired him. But he also said, “We are not going to tamper with anything that is descriptive” in the museum’s exhibits, reiterating that each exhibit received input from diverse scholarly voices.

When I raised the prospect of conservative evangelicals being challenged or even discomfited by what they find in MOTB, however, Summers demurred. Zeiss, the executive director, was more candid, saying that he had high hopes for challenged visitors “to be enlightened” in their encounters with unfamiliar sides of the Bible.

But sprinkled throughout my conversations with MOTB leadership are tiny tells. Summers described a virtual “flythrough” survey of scriptural references on monuments and buildings around the capital in a theater on the second floor as a way to convince “skeptics,” as though there are those who think that the Bible has never played an important role in American public life. Zeiss—reported in *The Charlotte Observer* to have been under consideration for the role of secretary of education in President Donald Trump’s cabinet before he came to MOTB at the end of 2016—described the need to “bring the Bible back to the center of discussion,” as he claimed it was at the time of America’s founding. “Today, that standard isn’t on everybody’s mind, because they don’t know about it.”

In the words of its mission statement circa 2011, MOTB’s original goal was to inspire confidence in “the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible,” placing it firmly in the heritage of apologetics-oriented evangelical cultural attractions. Today, Trobisch and others refer to the museum’s currently stated purpose, which is to invite all people, regardless of background, to “engage” with the Bible. There will be nothing in the museum “that would offend someone who is unchurched” or LGBT people, Trobisch said. Zeiss also avowed, “We don’t take any political

or cultural positions.” Even so, it’s hard to imagine that vestiges of the original intention will not remain.



Image: Courtesy of The Museum of the Bible

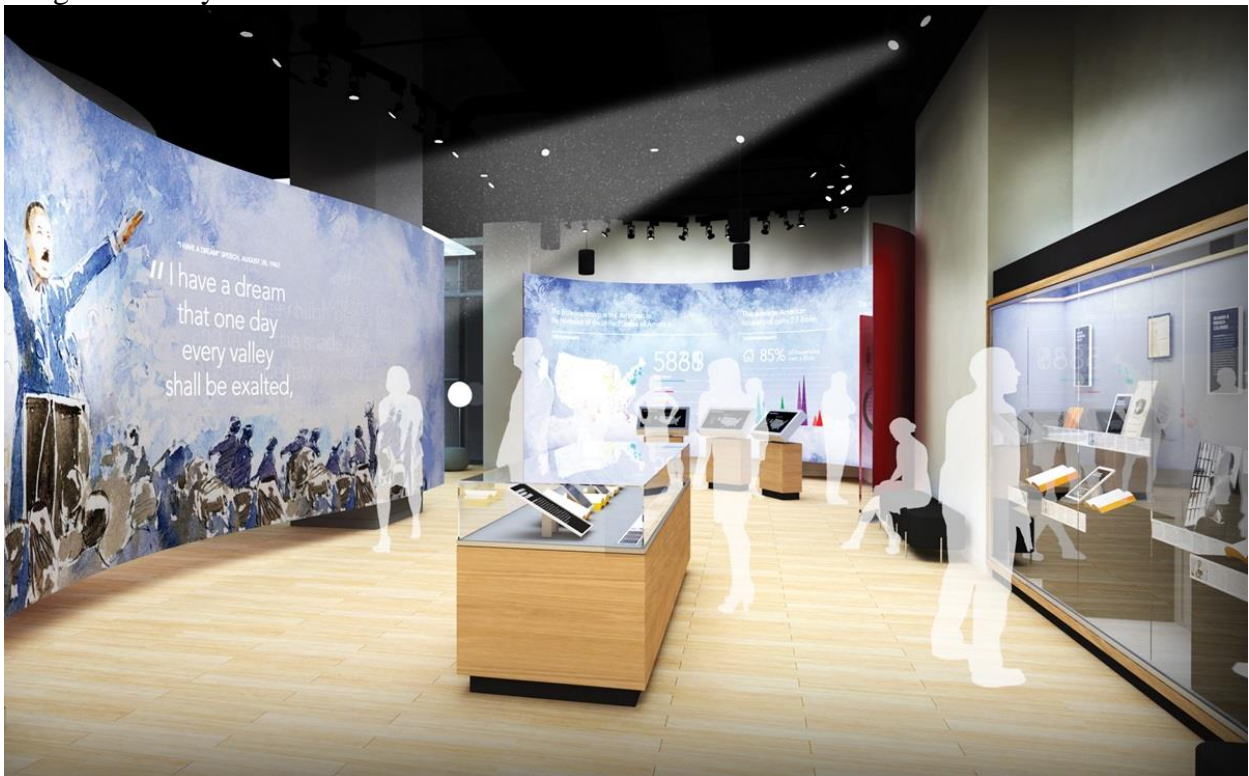


Image: Courtesy of The Museum of The Bible

And what about MOTB's prominent location, with the dome of the Capitol visible from its upper floors? "If we all had to wave a magic wand, we'd be in Dallas, because it's close" to Hobby Lobby's headquarters in Oklahoma City, Summers told me. "I brought in a third party . . . to find the best site in America" where the museum would see the largest number of annual visitors. The third party determined that DC was the best option, but even so, "we kept looking elsewhere."

Two days before I visited MOTB, I visited another Washington museum: the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. I was curious to see its first faith-themed exhibit, titled "Religion in Early America."

In a single room, curators have gathered Martha Washington's personal Bible, George Washington's inauguration Bible, and two books of Thomas Jefferson's. One is his famous *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, a denatured version of the New Testament that excludes virtually everything but Christ's moral teachings. The other is an English Bible from which Jefferson clipped passages to include in his other book.

Its pages are so cleanly disfigured they appear to have been die-cut. They hang open like blasted sails, texts attesting to Christ's miracles printed next to the excised spaces that contained his sermons.

This is the Bible of Washington, DC. It isn't the Bible George Washington spontaneously kissed at his inauguration, the vellum three-volume Gutenberg Bible housed in the Library of Congress, or even Jefferson's *Life and Morals*. Rather, it's the tattered and abandoned source document for Jefferson's redaction. Politics tends to encounter the Bible as Jefferson did, through the cut-up method, appropriating what is useful for its purposes and leaving the rest behind.

All of which offers another way to view MOTB. The much-documented rise of the "nones" presages an era of widespread unbelief in American culture, a crisis of religious identification to which some respond with calls to back away from the public square to conserve and strengthen what remains of authentic Christian life and practice. For those who mourn the erosion of a robust American Christianity—as well as those who celebrate it—the great brick edifice of MOTB may appear in a certain light as akin to a tomb.

For all its assurances of prioritizing "engagement" with people of all backgrounds, the museum can't engage an audience that doesn't cross the threshold in the first place. Zeiss told me that 1,100 groups have already signed up for tours, and he expects the museum will become a place of "pilgrimage" for American churches. But it's too soon to tell how many people of other faiths—or people for whom faith is a matter of indifference—will join them.

Museums exist to preserve stories of our past that we don't want to be forgotten. They are as often engaged in the work of reclamation and advocacy as that of preservation and display. Green, Summers, and those presiding over this country's newest and most state-of-the-art museum clearly intend to tell the story of the importance of the Bible for American society. The

technology, collaborations, and scholarship at their disposal equip them to do this better than anyone.

But what exceeds the museum's purview is also the root of its existence: the private relationship between Scripture and the individual believer. The museum will almost certainly engage the audience that shares the beliefs and values of its founder and leadership. But in an age of disaffiliation and religious apathy, its exhibits may for many stand as a lavish tribute to a book that once shaped the world and now sits in a glass case. As for those nonbelievers who care to enter, could mere "engagement" with the Bible draw them closer to its subject? God has certainly done it before. In any case, the giant bronze doors will remain perpetually open toward Fourth Street, waiting for people to enter and see for themselves.

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