

# We are Storytellers First



**"I AM NOT A COLLECTOR."** This statement is found in almost every interview with Steve Green, president of Hobby Lobby, a nationwide chain of arts and crafts stores, and owner of the most significant collection of biblical books, manuscripts, and artifacts in the United States. Green has no Bibles or biblical artifacts at home, except for those he and his family read. The question as to why he might keep such items at home even slightly bemuses him. "I don't consider them mine," he said recently. He does have some baseball cards he collected as a boy, but nothing else. This is "not a hobby," he stressed.

Green acquires differently from collectors who keep a wish list of all the books on a certain subject or theme; when offered a rare Bible that is not yet represented in the collection, he is just as likely to decline it as he is to acquire it. So what, then, is the purpose of the Green Collection?

"We are storytellers first, and these items tell a story," Green answered. "We're buyers of items to tell the story. We pass on more than we buy because it doesn't fit what we are trying to tell."

In less than four years, the Green family—with Steve as the point person—has acquired approximately forty thousand items. These works span two millennia of world civilization and encompass Bibles, but also religious and political history, liturgy, commentaries, sermons, sacred literature, and all aspects of religious and spiritual life. Included are approximately 2,000 cuneiform tablets, Dead Sea scrolls, multi-thousands of papyri, 750 Western

Dead Sea Scroll fragment,  
Genesis 32, Palestine, 1st century BC  
(Green Collection Scroll 124).

---

**Billionaire collector  
and businessman  
Steve Green has  
set his sights on a  
national museum  
devoted to the Bible**

**BY SANDRA HINDMAN**





Leaf from the Codex Climaci Rescriptus, Uncial 0250, palimpsest of the Bible in Syriac, Greek, and Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Sinai, Egypt, c. 5th–9th century (Green Collection MS 149). Courtesy of the Green Collection.

European manuscripts, 4,000 Torah scrolls, 900 coins, incantation bowls, papers and autographs, a block book, 200 incunables and early imprints, and a sizeable collection of printed books. The Green Collection is unmatched in Dead Sea fragments, biblical papyri, biblical manuscripts, and Torah scrolls. Just as the time span is vast, so the balance of interests embraces different peoples and religions. Christopher de Hamel, consultant at Sotheby's and librarian of the Parker Library at the University of Cambridge, described Green's enterprise this way: "It is hugely exhilarating to watch, rather like meeting Henry Huntington in 1910 or Henry Clay Folger in 1925, just as their visions for public collections were beginning to unfold. What is perhaps unusual about the collection, compared say with Huntington or Folger, is that it is conceived as a public and didactic collection from the outset, not a private cabinet subsequently opened to the world."

The idea of a museum did indeed precede the first purchase. In 2009, Green and his family began helping a Dallas businessman form a Bible museum. At that time, an undetermined location in the city was to house the museum, and the Greens started to acquire works for it. The first opportunity that presented itself was a rare purple vellum manuscript of the Book of Luke, but the acquisition fell through because the owners couldn't agree to sell. However, another opportunity came along that very year. In December 2009 at Sotheby's in London, the Greens bought their first manuscript for £217,250, because they thought it had a "significant story to tell." It is known as the Rosebery Rolle of c. 1400, preserving the earliest, most extensive surviving texts of the scripture in Middle English. Richard Rolle's text, translation, and commentary of the Psalms were completed in 1340, predating the famous Wycliffite English translation of the Bible by about forty years, and it remains one of the highlights of the collection. Energetic acquisitions followed, including the entire collection of some twenty thousand books and artifacts Gene Albert assembled for the Christian Heritage Museum in Hagerstown, Maryland. When asked about his most exciting purchase, Green cited the 2010 purchase of the Codex Climaci Rescriptus, a palimpsest manuscript on vellum in Palestinian Aramaic, dating from the fifth through the ninth centuries. This manuscript is an extremely valuable early witness to the Greek Bible over which was copied a Syriac text. Originally discovered in the 1890s and long housed in Westminster College, Cambridge, the manuscript attracted little attention until recently. Now there is a major project underway to recover the original text through advanced computer technology that allows for complex imaging of texts, a project likely to result in a significant publication. When pressed to choose favorites, Green picked the Aitken Bible, the first complete Bible printed in America by Robert Aitken, in response to a shortage of Bibles for use in the early colonies and authorized in 1782 by the United States Congress. First editions are rare, with no more than eleven known in private hands.

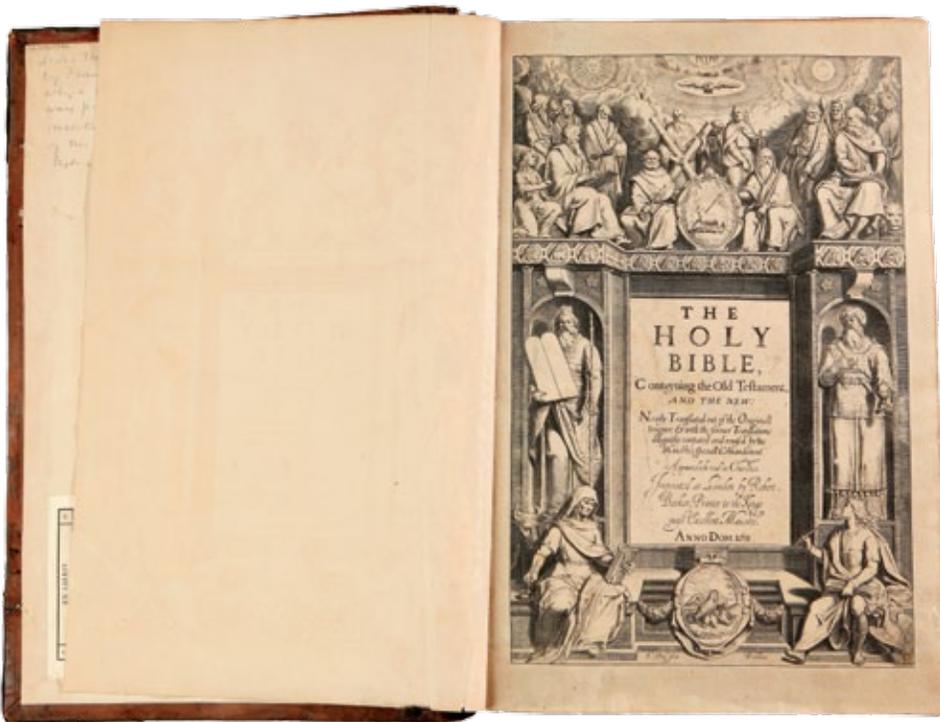
Green's sudden emergence on the market and his voracious

activity during the first years created quite a buzz in the community of rare book dealers and auction houses. At the same time, he was quietly and systematically selecting a museum venue. Initially, he identified ten metropolitan areas as potential sites, later narrowing it down to three: Dallas (the original planned site), New York, and Washington, D.C. The Greens teamed up with the American Research Group to survey populations in these respective areas and narrowed it down to Washington, D.C. primarily because they decided their widest audience would be in the nation's capital, home to so many world-class museums. In July of 2012, the Green family provided a generous gift to The Museum of the Bible, the 501c-3 charity that purchases for the Green Collection, to secure a property. For a reported \$50 million, the group acquired the Washington Design Center on 300 D St., SW, two blocks from the National Mall. The museum itself is as yet unnamed.

The museum will open in March 2017, and a full redesign will use no less than an impressive 300,000–400,000 square feet of total space, of which half will be used for exhibit space. Designed to cover three floors, the museum will develop three themes, one per floor: the history of the Bible, the impact of the Bible, and the story of the Bible. The story of the history of the Bible will begin with biblical archaeology, continue with manuscript evidence from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and follow the Bible's history up to the present day. The floor on the impact of the Bible aims to show how the book has influenced every area of life—government, science, education, literature, and art. The Bible's story—the actual narrative—is told on another floor.

"Being in D.C., government will be a big story, and America will be a big story to show the Bible's impact on America and how it influenced the founding of this country," Green said. Faced with consistent reports on declining museum attendance worldwide, the Greens have hired various specialists to focus on finding ways to make this new project work effectively. Seven design firms are tackling different physical and technical aspects of the museum, and a team of twenty scholars will oversee the content of the three floors, headed by an expert for each category (history, impact, story). Gordon Campbell, professor of Renaissance studies at the University of Leicester and author of the recent *Bible: the story of the King James Version*, has charge of the history floor. "The collection on display will be world class, and its presentation will use cutting-edge technology," he said.

Innovative technology is key to the museum's planners. For example, preliminary plans show a gallery devoted to the Middle Ages and tentatively called "Spreading the Word" that will display an interactive hologram of Saint Jerome. The Greens are working with a number of developers to generate interactive hologram technology, but the idea is that there will be a real scholar behind the scenes who answers questions. To date, no museum in the world does



Great “HE” King James Bible, first edition of the King James translation, printed by Robert Barker, London, England, 1611 (Green Collection Bible 1442).

A lunar Bible—a microfiche copy of the King James Bible which traveled to the surface of the moon on Apollo 14, February 5, 1971 (Green Collection Bible 3832).



this, although the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, Illinois, inspired the Greens for its application of some of these storytelling technologies. All of this may seem a little Disneyesque, but the technology is being used primarily to put the objects in conversation with the visitors. Green noted, “Our challenge is to tell the story, and we do that through the technology. A person has a better understanding of the artifact the more they know about its story, and if we can tell that story in an engaging way, that makes the artifact more appealing.” St. Jerome will be the focal point in the gallery described above, and he will remain a constant in the exhibition, but positioned around the space will be objects, primarily medieval and Renaissance manuscripts, which will rotate over time.

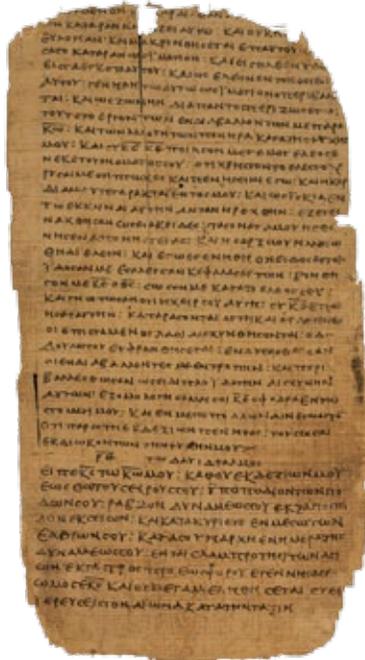
A laboratory display in the museum that exploits advanced technology especially excites the Greens; it is designed to show how early text fragments are recovered from mummy cartonnage. This procedure is already in use with remarkable results by affiliates of the Green Scholars Initiative (GSI), the research arm of the Museum of the Bible. Ancient Egyptian mummies were often made of recycled papyri. By dissolving the cartonnage, the original papyri contained in the infrastructure has revealed ancient biblical texts—some of the earliest known biblical fragments of the New Testament—as well as other epic works. A typical mask will yield up to one hundred papyri fragments, many of which are substantial and some of which will join together. Jerry Pattengale, executive director of the GSI

and assistant provost at Indiana Wesleyan University, said, “For the cartonnage project, we are careful to dissolve only masks that are quite damaged and have so greatly decreased in artistic value and merit that they are no longer desirable for display in museums as objects in their own right (moreover, the outer surface of the object remains intact in the process).” Visitors will be able to participate in the actual procedure, and others can watch from outside the glass box in the museum.

“Our goal is that when you come here you experience it for a long time thereafter, because of the things you take home with you. A trip to our museum is only a step of a long journey of discovery,” said Cary Summers, the museum’s chief operating officer.

The Green family’s commitment to religious education is evident not only in the conception underlying the museum but in many other projects as well. The Greens have been singled out for their philanthropy to religious institutions—e.g., preventing the bankruptcy of Oral Roberts University through a gift of \$70 million, purchasing a campus in Northfield, Massachusetts, for C. S. Lewis College, and contributing funds for the renovation of Zion Bible College (now Northpoint Bible College). With Robert E. Cooley, president emeritus of Gordon–Conwell Theological Seminary, Green has begun shaping a public school curriculum on the Bible. The four-year curriculum takes the same model as the museum; following a general introduction, there is a year each devoted to the history, impact,

Leaf from Bodmer Papyrus XXIV, containing Psalms 108:16-109:4 (LXX numbering) in Greek, Egypt, mid-2nd century AD (Green Collection MS 170).



The Rosebery Rolle, containing a pre-Wycliffite translation of the Psalms and Canticles into English by Richard Rolle, Yorkshire, England, c. 1400 (Green Collection MS 148).

and story of the Bible. Like the museum, it is designed to be non-sectarian. “It’s not about a religion or a faith tradition,” he said. “It’s about a book. There’s no other book that’s impacted the world like this one.” He imagines that public schools that adopt this curriculum will organize field trips for students to the museum, where their studies and the story of the Bible would come alive through access to an exceptional collection.

Before the museum opens, an ambitious exhibition program has already made Green’s collection available to the public. Highlights are on view in a living history attraction called *Passages*, which is now in Colorado Springs for its fourth venue. This latest venue includes life-like holograms of Julia Ward Howe and Abraham Lincoln engaged in conversation, a preview of what is to come in the Washington, D.C. museum. The high-profile purchase of the autograph manuscript of Howe’s *Battle Hymn of the Republic* for nearly \$800,000 at Christie’s in December 2012 prompted this particular display. That buy also emphasizes the Greens’ current attention to their Americana holdings in anticipation of the opening of the museum. (Another acquisition similarly fits this bill: the purchase in 2012 of the first Bible taken to the moon in 1971, a fascinating story in itself and one that merits a museum context for its retelling.) From October 2013 to May 2014, an exhibition called the *Book of Books* on Judaism and Christianity opens at The Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem. Another exhibition, planned for January 2014, is *LA BIBLIA: El camino de Dios en el*

*camino del hombre* (*The Bible: The Way of God in the Way of Man*), at the Catedral De La Habana in Cuba. And, from April to June 2014, *Verbum Domini II: God’s Word goes out to the Nations* will be on display at the Vatican in the Braccio De Carlo Magno wing at St. Peter’s Square.

Modest and down-to-earth, Green is, nevertheless, a man on a mission. For the collection and the museum that will house it, he is not afraid to think big. The same holds true for his plans for the privately held and family-run Hobby Lobby, which is on target to double its number of stores (now 550 in 42 states) in years to come. Although Green admits that he now spends nearly 75 percent of his time on his Bible projects, he is not too busy to focus on new opportunities for the expansion of his business. With a present reported net worth of \$4.5 billion for the family (*Forbes* listed his father David Green, chief executive officer of Hobby Lobby, as the seventy-ninth richest man in the United States this past March), the family will be able, after the planned expansion of Hobby Lobby, to channel even greater wealth into their wide-reaching project to spread the word of the Bible. Clearly it’s something they are passionate about; as Steve Green said, “Hobby Lobby is fun, but this is fun too.”

**Sandra Hindman** is professor emerita of art history at Northwestern University, author, co-author, or editor of eleven books and numerous articles on medieval manuscripts and early printed books, and owner of Les Enluminures in Paris, Chicago, and New York. She has worked with Steve Green to help build his collection.