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Cultural Colonialism at the Museum of the Bible: Have they Found Redemption? Part One.

By: Kathryn Prinkey

Abstract: The Museum of the Bible (opened 2017) has been a popular topic in the news for its many collecting missteps. Most of these errs are associated with the Green Family Collection, donated by the Green family headed by Steve Green, whose father founded Hobby Lobby. The evangelical businessman collected for more than a decade with the intention of opening a ultheir specific narrative about the Bible has come under scrutiny. The Greens have purchased stolen and looted artifacts, bought forgeries, and even lied on U.S. Customs forms to import such materials. Although these actions are morally corrupt, and contrary to the Greens' evangelical background, the family serves as more than a story of malpractice and unethical behavior. By using their private wealth to exploit the antiquities markets in areas of political unrest, the Greens exemplify contemporary cultural colonialism. In part one, I explore the background of the Green family and Hobby Lobby and their connections to the Museum of the Bible. Then, I define and examine the terms “cultural colonialism” and “colonial matrices of power,” and their relevance to contemporary contexts.

Keywords: *cultural colonialism, colonial matrices of power, Museum of the Bible, Green Family, forgeries, looted antiquities*

Introduction

The Museum of the Bible (MOTB) opened in 2017 to much media fanfare. The museum was making headlines before its opening, and has remained almost a monthly topic among news sources like the *New York Times* and *The Atlantic*. These controversies center around MOTB's collection and its major donor family, the Greens: specifically, Steve Green, the son of David Green (b. 1941) who founded the Hobby Lobby (est. 1972) craft-store chain.

The museum itself houses an interesting array of artifacts. These range from a collection of letters written by the founding fathers or past presidents that all mention religion or the Bible, to ancient papyri that may be early writings of the Bible, Dead Sea Scrolls (which have been found to be forgeries), a replica of the Liberty Bell and more. The largest collection at MOTB is the "Green Family Collection," made up of thousands of biblical artifacts purchased by the family and then donated to the museum. But, this collection, and the Green family, have been under public scrutiny for illegal and unethical practices since at least 2011 when a federal investigation began on the Green family's importation of "clay tile samples."ⁱ Over the years, investigators have uncovered other dubious and nefarious practices at MOTB related to the Green family who have continually failed to properly check the provenance of artifacts before purchasing them. This irresponsibility has caused the museum to deal with fake provenance records, conflicting claims, and forgeries.

In 2020, whether trying to salvage their reputation or perhaps avoid another legal case, the Green family and directors at MOTB made the decision to carefully inspect their collections and return artifacts that do not have sufficient evidence of provenance.ⁱⁱ The museum's website has several pages explaining their commitment to provenance, but their mission statement remains quite vague: "Museum of the Bible is a global, innovative, educational institution whose purpose is to invite all people to engage with the transformative power of the Bible."ⁱⁱⁱ This

emphasis on transformation indicates the evangelical Christian goals of the museum, but, overall, the mission does not express a commitment to transparency or ethics.

Even with a renewed commitment to provenance, the Greens participate in cultural colonialism and replicate Colonial Matrixes of Power (CMP). The Green family and MOTB exemplify how certain power dynamics allow members of the elite, capitalist classes to exploit artifact-rich nations and become gatekeepers and producers of knowledge. Their continued disregard for authority and ethics, and their personal proselytizing mission resemble Euro-American colonial-imperial powers prior to World War II. In this article, I explore a series of malpractices and legal entanglements of the Green family and the Museum of the Bible as case studies of contemporary cultural colonialism.

First, I will explain cultural colonialism and CMP in relation to the antiquities trade more broadly. Next, I will provide background on the Green family, their collection, and the founding of MOTB, examining how they fit the profile of cultural colonizers. Then, I will review two case studies regarding the Greens' malpractices to prove their role as cultural colonizers and explain how they perpetuate CMP. The first incidence deals with illegally imported antiquities from Iraq, the original case that brought attention to the Green family's collecting. The second concerns their scandalous dealings with papyri.

Understanding Cultural Colonialism

“Cultural colonialism” typically refers to the processes through which a colonial power erases the culture of a colonized people. It is “the extension of colonial state power through cultural knowledge, activities, and institutions (particularly education and media) or the systematic subordination of one conceptual framework or cultural identity over others.”^{iv} A typical example is when the British Army invaded the Kingdom of Benin in 1897, dissolved the

kingdom and stole or destroyed thousands of cultural or religious artifacts significant to Benin history. In this case, the British both colonized *and* erased Benin culture. The British then displayed stolen artifacts in the British Museum representing them as “primitive” art.^v As in this example, cultural colonialism is ultimately about who controls the narrative about a people or an object’s history.

I update this term to apply to contemporary colonialism, sometimes termed “neocolonialism” or “neoimperialism,” in which capitalist corporations in developed nation-states exploit poorer peoples of developing nation-states for resources.^{vi} Although the exploiter is not an imperial nation-state, neocolonialist corporate-capitalists are often based in Western Europe and North America. Within this article, cultural colonialism specifically refers to the processes through which individuals or groups with corporate wealth take or claim cultural properties, such as historical artifacts or artworks. Typically, these individuals or groups reframe objects’ meanings to the benefit of their corporation or personal agenda. In cultural colonial processes, wealthy elites gain control over knowledge and become both creators and disseminators of it.

These processes produce and maintain what Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh call the “colonial matrix of power,” or CMP. CMP “is a complex structure of management and control composed of domains, levels, and flows.”^{vii} Colonialism and decolonization are deeply layered processes that involve social, economic, and institutional factors. Involved in these systems are elements of power, authority, and representation. The colonial relationships within the above factors create dynamic interplays between the (post)-colonized and colonizer to form CMP.

European and North American museums have always been sites benefitting from the processes of cultural colonialism. As Mignolo pointed out, “museums are not as old as universities. But their role in consolidating the enunciation and, therefore, the coloniality of knowledge and being is enormous.”^{viii} For example, the Louvre greatly benefited from the Napoleonic conquests of Egypt and Europe in the 1790s, from which he acquired hundreds of paintings and sculptures for its collections.^{ix} Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach interpreted that the Louvre, “dramatizes the triumph of French civilization” and “embodies the state” and “its ideology.”^x Thus, objects of Asian, African, and Native North and South American descent, within the contexts of such a museum, function as “triumphal possessions” attesting to the power of that European imperial state.^{xi} In other words, European museological processes and the “knowledge” that results are not apolitical, but largely indebted to colonial-imperial endeavors.

Cultural colonialism during the 19th and early 20th centuries targeted heavily the Middle East, and contemporary cultural colonialism, after World War II, is hardly different. The Middle East, specifically Iraq, remains an artifact-rich nation with many ancient sites of archaeological significance. However, Iraq is capital-poor (mainly due to conflict in the region), making it ripe for European and North American antiquities dealers to exploit.^{xii} The looting of the Iraq Museum in 2003 after the US invaded serves as a prime example. As Craig Parker framed it, “centuries after many remnants of these ancient cultural entities were plundered by European colonial forces in order to fill grand national museums, we are in the process of witnessing the 21st century version of cultural colonialism. Antiquities collectors allow the growth of an entire economy based on illegal activities.”^{xiii} Although the agents of cultural colonialism have shifted from purely Euro-American imperial nation-states to including Euro-American private

corporations, the demand for antiquities remains strong, promoting illicit trade at the expense of Middle Eastern countries.

Christianity and biblical archeology have also historically played a cultural colonial role, and continue to do so today. Edward Said explained that, “there has been some important recent work on the background in biblical scholarship to the rise of what I have called modern Orientalism.”^{xiv} Said connected the rise of “modern Orientalism,” in the 19th century, to a European need for scientized proof that the Orient was lesser to the West. Before the 19th century, “Asia had once represented silent distance and alienation [to the West].” However, in modern Orientalism, “Islam was militant hostility to European Christianity,” and to “overcome such redoubtable constants the Orient need first to be known, then invaded and possessed, then re-created by scholars, soldiers, and judges who disinterred forgotten languages, histories, races, and cultures in order to posit them as the true classical Orient that could be used to judge and rule the modern Orient.”^{xv} Thus, study, possession, and control of history and culture – cultural colonialism – became imperial practice. By controlling the narrative and portrayal of Islam and the Middle East, European institutions attempted to prove themselves better than the other through scientized discourses, such as archeology.

Understanding the Green Family and Museum of the Bible

The combination of the Green family’s evangelical Christian values, their capitalist wealth, and their relationship with MOTB make them an example of contemporary cultural colonizers. The founder of Hobby Lobby, David Green, came from a humble background as the son of a small-town preacher, and one of six children. Candida Moss and Joel Baden described that he worked hard to make the craft store chain, started with a 600-dollar loan, into a multibillion-dollar company.^{xvi}

What makes Green's company particularly unique is how it incorporates his devotion to Christianity. Hobby Lobby is closed on Sundays so that employees can attend church services, and in general, it pays above the minimum wage. Furthermore, Green contributes Hobby Lobby's success to God. For example, when the company started closing on Sundays, some of the stores remained open. Green claimed that "during this period when they were 'halfway obedient' sales started to slump." It was only after all of the stores closed that profit accelerated. Green believed that they "had done what we were supposed to do," so "things were going in the right way." Green also stated that as a child even though they were poor, his family gave at least one tenth of their income to the church. He noted that "we think that God would reward that."^{xvii} He believes that by donating half of Hobby Lobby's pretax earnings to charities, such generosity will be rewarded by God as success for the company.^{xviii}

The Green family develops their company's image through Christian missionary work. They choose proselytization over other forms of philanthropy because they believe that the Christian beliefs in redemption and eternal salvation are more impactful than medical or social programs.^{xix} As Moss and Baden explained, "the Greens focus exclusively on spreading the Good News: they have sponsored a free Bible app, multiple international evangelical Christian missionary endeavors, and programming that helps children understand the Bible even if they are unable to read." As Green stated, he "wants to know that [he has] effected people for eternity."^{xx}

Hobby Lobby's Christianity has also garnered it public scrutiny. In 2014, the company fought the Affordable Care Act's requirement for private businesses to cover birth control in their employee healthcare plans in the US Supreme Court.^{xxi} Hobby Lobby, led by the Greens, primarily argued that this law violated their religious beliefs, demonstrating how far the family is willing to go for their beliefs.

MOTB stemmed from the Green family's missionary work in the United States. David Green began collecting biblical artifacts in the mid-2000s, and after acquiring a few artifacts, the Greens set up traveling exhibitions in strip malls around the US to help spread the word of God. Through these exhibitions, the family met likeminded antiquities dealers and biblical scholars who helped them turn their idea for a "Bible Museum" into a reality.

Even during the economic recession of 2008, the Greens maintained their wealth and continued collecting.^{xxii} It was during this time that the Green family started using a Dallas-based rare-book broker and jeweler Johnny Shipman (b. 1964), who had made millions in the oil business, to acquire antiquities.^{xxiii} Shipman supported the Green's idea for a "Bible Museum" and started to find pieces for a museum collection. Originally, the museum was supposed to be in Dallas, indicating the close connection between the Greens and Shipman.^{xxiv} However, for unknown reasons, in 2010, the Green family issued a statement saying that "Johnny Shipman no longer represents the Green Collection, Mr. Steven T. Green or Dr. Scott Carroll."^{xxv}

Dr. Scott Carroll is a biblical scholar, now working outside of the US, who proposed that the "Bible Museum" should be made national.^{xxvi} In 2009, he was named the museum's Head of Acquisitions. He has been described as the "Indiana Jones" of biblical archaeology, because he offers guided trips for collectors to Israel to purchase antiquities and advises them on how to use these purchases to receive tax rebates.^{xxvii} Carroll markets himself as Indiana Jones with a:

"self-image as an impresario called by God to summon texts from the farthest reaches of the globe. His cellphone's ringtone was the theme from Indiana Jones. A promotional photo, captioned GREAT SCOTT! depicts him in shorts and a fedora, swinging through the jungle on a rope."^{xxviii}

However, Carroll was either fired or resigned from the museum project in May 2012. Like Shipman before him, Carroll's reason for exiting remains unclear. He left the Green family the only original party on the museum project.

Steve Green is the current patriarch of the Green family and the driver behind the collection and museum, continuing his father's legacy of collecting biblical artifacts. He has been the chairman of the board of directors at MOTB since 2004. While Steve Green has used his family's Hobby Lobby wealth to acquire thousands of biblical artifacts within just a few years, and the main MOTB collection is called the "Green Family Collection," Hobby Lobby is not named directly in relation to MOTB.

The museum moved its location to Washington D. C. on the National Mall, and opened in 2017. Today, the Green family's private collection totals more than 50,000 objects, "many of which, remarkably, were unknown to scholars and the general public before the Greens acquired them."^{xxix} The Greens have only been collecting for a short time, less than ten years, which makes their collection impressive. However, it also brings into question the provenance of their objects.

The majority of artifacts in the Green Family Collection come from countries in the Middle East, particularly those targeted by illegal antiquities trade such as Iraq and Syria. The Green family and MOTB's high demand for biblical artifacts helps to fuel such illicit trade. While other museums deal with provenance controversies, it is not to the extent of MOTB.

The continued neglect that the Green family has shown toward provenance may be because they are seeking specific artifacts to fit their personal beliefs about the Bible. Their all-out efforts to purchase any and all materials associated with the Bible that enter the antiquities market make the Greens seem like they are on a mission to *own* the story of the Bible. Steve Green explained in 2013 that his purchases reflect his feeling that he and his family "are storytellers first, and these items tell a story... We are buyers of items to tell the story. We pass on more than we buy because it does not fit what we are trying to tell."^{xxx}

To meet the Greens' desires, dealers are more likely to lie about provenance, steal objects, or make forgeries. The relationship between the Greens, antiquities dealers, and these countries resonates with the historically imbalanced CMP between Euro-American imperial nation-states and such countries. The Greens use their capitalist wealth to attain cultural properties from capital-poor countries that have also been ravaged historically by colonialism, war, and sociopolitical unrest. Within these contexts, the Greens consistently ignore policies protecting the rights of these countries to maintain their cultural heritages. The following case studies demonstrate the great lengths that the Green family goes for their collection with a specific emphasis on how their collecting practices reproduce CMP. In their endeavor to control the narrative of the Bible, the Greens act as cultural colonizers.

Endnotes

- ⁱ “United States Files Civil Action to Forfeit Thousands of Ancient Iraqi Artifacts Imported by Hobby Lobby,” last modified on July 5, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/united-states-files-civil-action-forfeit-thousands-ancient-iraqi-artifacts-imported>.
- ⁱⁱ Jane Arraf, “After ‘Missteps’ and Controversies, Museum of the Bible Works to Clean Up its Act,” *NPR*, last modified on June 23, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/23/877581382/after-missteps-and-controversies-museum-of-the-bible-works-to-clean-up-its-act>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Provenance,” Museum of the Bible, last accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://www.museumofthebible.org/provenance>; “The Mission,” Museum of the Bible, last accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://www.museumofthebible.org/the-mission>.
- ^{iv} Sarah Amsler, “Cultural Colonialism,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, ed. George Ritzer, last modified on August 1, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosc202.pub2>.
- ^v For a complete definition of primitive as it pertains to art, see: “Primitive Art,” MoMA, last accessed on January 14, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/terms/primitive-art>.
- ^{vi} Ian Buchanan, “Neocolonialism,” in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 326.
- ^{vii} Walter D. Mignolo, and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 142.
- ^{viii} Mignolo and Walsh, 199.
- ^{ix} Jeffrey Abt, “The Origins of the Public Museum,” in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, ed. Sharon McDonald. (Malden, Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 128-129.
- ^x Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach, “The Universal Survey Museum,” in *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts*, ed. Bettina Messias Carbonell, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, Inc. 2004), 61, 64.
- ^{xi} Duncan and Wallach, 52.
- ^{xii} Refer to The World Bank data map in which the U.S. and UK are in the two highest GDP brackets and Iraq is in the lowest. World Bank has additional data to show the major economic differences between Iraq and countries such as the U.S.: “GDP (Current US\$),” The World Bank, last accessed on December 22, 2021, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?end=2020&start=2020&view=map>.
- ^{xiii} Krayj Bārkar [Craig Parker], “*Qiṣṣat nahib ālāf al-āthār al-‘Irāqīyya* [The Story of Looting Thousands of Iraqi Antiquities],” *Al Jazeera*, last modified on May 22, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/cultureandart/2018/5/22/القصة-نهيب-آلاف-الأثار-العراقية>.
- ^{xiv} Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 18.
- ^{xv} Said, 91-92.
- ^{xvi} Candida Moss and Joel Baden, *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 3.
- ^{xvii} Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 5.
- ^{xviii} Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 6.
- ^{xix} See: Brian Solomon, “Meet David Green: Hobby Lobby’s Biblical Billionaire,” *Forbes*, last modified on September 18, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2012/09/18/david-green-the-biblical-billionaire-backing-the-evangelical-movement/>.
- ^{xx} Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 7.
- ^{xxi} *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, 573 S. Ct. 1 (2014).
- ^{xxii} Ariel Sabar, “A Biblical Mystery at Oxford,” *The Atlantic*, (June, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/museum-of-the-bible-obbink-gospel-of-mark/610576/>.
- ^{xxiii} Moss and Baden, *Bible Nation*, 22.
- ^{xxiv} Jim Schutze, “Holy National Bible Museum, Batman! What Does Hobby Lobby’s Split with Rare Books Dealer Mean for Proposed Dallas Site?” *Dallas Observer*, last modified on August 23, 2010, <https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/holy-national-bible-museum-batman-what-does-hobby-lobbys-split-with-rare-books-dealer-mean-for-proposed-dallas-site-7140679>.
- ^{xxv} Schutze, “Holy National Bible Museum, Batman!”
- ^{xxvi} “About Dr. Scott Carol,” last accessed on December 23, 2021, <https://www.godsancientlibrary.com/dr-scott-carroll>.
- ^{xxvii} Robert Mazza, “The Green Papyri and the Museum of the Bible,” in *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), 181-183.

^{xxviii} Sabar, “A Biblical Mystery at Oxford.”

^{xxix} Candida Moss and Joel Baden, “Can Hobby Lobby Buy the Bible?” *The Atlantic*, (January/February, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/01/can-hobby-lobby-buy-the-bible/419088/>.

^{xxx} Mazza, “The Green Papyri and the Museum of the Bible,” 180.

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