

David Trobisch lends Green family's Bible Museum a scholarly edge

by [David Van Biema](#)

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(RNS) In 2006, New Testament scholar David Trobisch abandoned such lofty outlets as Oxford Press and the *Journal of Papyrology and Epigraphy* for a more mainstream venue: *Free Inquiry*.

In that secular humanist journal, Trobisch identified the likely editor of the New Testament as second-century Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna and suggested that Polycarp was also responsible for the inclusion of the book of Acts.

Trobisch shared the magazine's cover billing with atheist Christopher Hitchens and utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer.

None of this would be unusual—serious New Testament scholars constantly probe its cloudy origins, wherever that leads—if Trobisch were not now employed by one of the most famously conservative Christian families in America.

The Green family of Oklahoma City—the plaintiffs in the U.S. Supreme Court's Hobby Lobby case—financed the 430,000-square-foot Museum of the Bible set to open in 2017 just off of the National Mall in Washington.

It will showcase biblical artifacts from the 40,000-piece Green collection, one of the largest in private hands. As director of the collection, Trobisch does not run the museum (its director is Cary Summers), but in addition to enlarging, curating, and cataloging the trove, he participates in the crucial conversation about which items will go into the museum, and how.

A former Heidelberg University professor, Trobisch also acts as roving ambassador to the worlds of high academia and top-rate museums. His presence poses a conundrum to the Greens' many critics: As believers that the Bible is God-given and inerrant, could the family—and the museum that is their brainchild—be open to

dispassionate scholarship?

A tall, soft-spoken 56-year-old whose russet hair is now mostly gray, Trobisch splits his time between Germany, where his wife, son, and two grandchildren live, and a home in Springfield, Missouri. He is part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

He is a cradle cosmopolitan who grew up speaking four languages in Cameroon, where his parents worked as Lutheran missionaries.

Trobisch gravitated to New Testament criticism, the close study of ancient manuscripts for clues as to how the 27-book New Testament came together.

He met the Greens when he asked permission to look at their 850 ancient New Testament documents. Soon, he was advising the family on acquisitions.

“My strategy was to buy fewer items but only the highest quality,” he said.

In February, Trobisch was hired as director of the biblical artifacts collection. His responsibilities extend beyond researching and caring for the artifacts. He recently revamped the content in the Greens’ 400-item Bible exhibition “Passages.” He also created one-off exhibits in places such as the Vatican, and (very quietly) Cuba. Next up? Philadelphia (in time for Pope Francis’ visit), Berlin, Beijing, and Moscow.

One day in early April, Trobisch was alighting in New York after a three-week trip involving at least six countries on four continents, having discussed Green extension museums with professionals from Africa and Asia. He considered a Bible for sale in Istanbul, hired a curator in Germany, and helped open the latest Passages in Santa Clarita, Calif.

The museum’s burgeoning relationship with blue-chip institutions is partly attributable to Trobisch’s prestige and contact list. When several manuscripts—which had been deposited by the Bible Society at Cambridge University Library—were in danger of being auctioned, the Greens bought them and left them with Cambridge. There was no quid quo pro, but Cambridge owns the Codex Bezae, which Trobisch calls “the fourth most important manuscript of the New Testament.” The strengthened relationship increases the chances the Washington museum might someday show it.

Trobisch might have expected some philosophical friction with the Greens, who famously turn to the Bible for everything, including business decisions. But he says Hobby Lobby chain president Steve Green is open to new scholarship: "We agreed that if I say something about the Bible he disagrees with and I can show him the quote, he will concede. If I cannot support it by a quote, I will concede."

Green also has curiosity.

"He's a Bible freak," Trobisch said. "Like me."

Trobisch disagrees with some in "the media and my scholarly peers" that his employment by the museum represents a faceoff of "fundamentalism against sound scholarship." Instead, he said, it constitutes "two parties standing at opposite ends of the Christian spectrum talking to each other and working together. This almost never happens in the U.S."

Time will tell how that conversation will play out in the museum. Steve Green envisions the museum as "nonsectarian," saying, "The Bible can speak for itself."

Trobisch calls that a "theological belief: It might be true, it might not be true. But that's not what my team is concerned with."

Were the museum to be revealed to be "some kind of missionary activity," he said, "It would be an enormous disappointment. I could not identify or work for a museum that wanted to do that."

But he foresees harmony. Recently he and other scholars met the museum designers in Washington and discussed such questions as the Bible's use by the Founding Fathers, "who in public perception are treated as good Christians, but when you look closer, it doesn't hold up."

Ideally, he said, the museum would present a "story that is challenging, but that is not threatening, based on evidence we can show; and if we can't show it, we keep quiet about it."

For now he is enjoying himself.

"I spent 25 years in the university," he said. "You have really good ideas, and no money to support them. When I reintroduce myself to my scholarly friends, I say, 'If someone asked you to do this job, would you want to do it?'"

This article was edited on May 4, 2015, to clarify the nature of Cambridge University's collections.