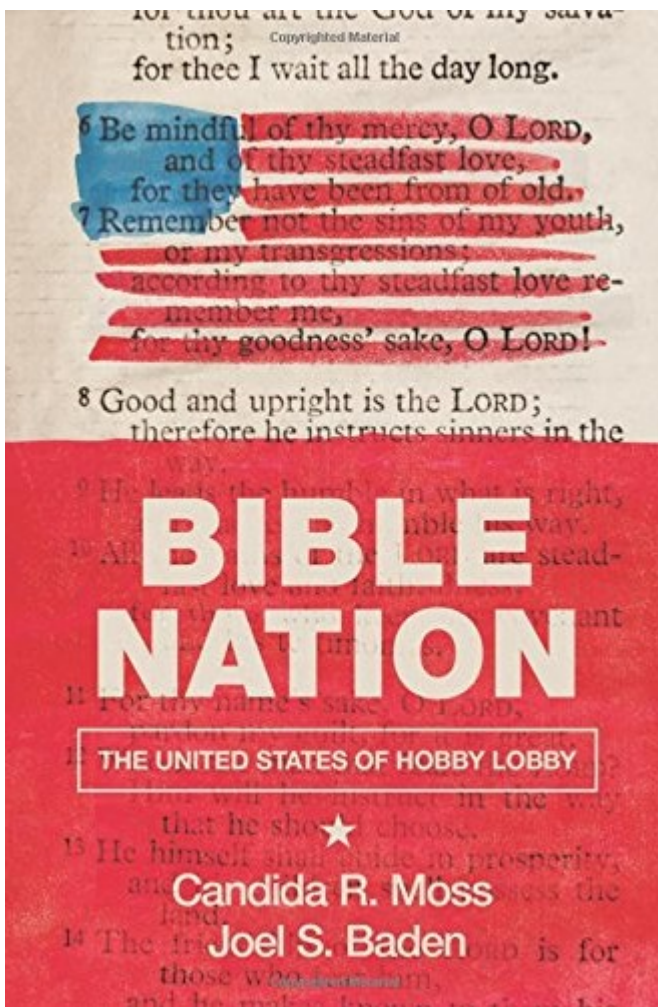


The museum of whose Bible?

The Green family's take on the Good Book is not as neutral as they let on.

by [David Weaver-Zercher](#) in the [October 10, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Bible Nation

The United States of Hobby Lobby

By Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden
Princeton University Press

What have Coptic papyri, letters of provenance, and import-export agreements to do with America's culture wars? More than you might think, suggest Candida Moss, who teaches theology at the University of Birmingham, and Joel Baden, who teaches Hebrew Bible at Yale Divinity School. In *Bible Nation*, Moss and Baden lay bare this link by examining the Bible-promoting efforts of the billionaire Green family, work that will culminate in the soon-to-open Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C.

This is not the Greens' first foray into the culture wars. In 2014, the Greens—parents David and Barbara and sons Mart, Steve, and Darsee—burst onto the national scene when they, with the help of their Becket Fund lawyers, prevailed over the Obama administration in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*, the Supreme Court case that exempted their mammoth craft store chain from Obamacare's contraceptive mandate. Long before this dispute reached its conclusion, however, the family was well known in Christian circles for its support of evangelical causes. Moss and Baden claim to have no issues with the Greens devoting their hard-earned cash to evangelistic efforts. What bothers them is the family's less-than-forthcoming and at turns unlawful scheme for promoting the Good Book, a plan that has sometimes been abetted by scholars who should know better.

The Greens' most obvious impropriety involves the acquisition of artifacts smuggled out of the Middle East near the end of the Iraq War. The illegitimacy of this pursuit, outlined in the book's first chapter, was not lost on federal authorities. This past July, in a case that received considerable press, Hobby Lobby agreed to pay a \$3 million fine and return thousands of artifacts to their rightful owners. In a statement released at the time, Hobby Lobby confessed it "did not fully appreciate the complexities of the acquisitions process." Moss and Baden are less generous in their appraisal of Hobby Lobby's tactics, which they interpret as a see-no-evil approach to advancing their religiously inspired agenda. When it comes to acquiring artifacts, they write, "what is lacking among the members of the Green organization is any sense of due diligence."

Ultimately, however, Moss and Baden are less interested in the intricacies of the antiquities trade than they are in the reasons the Greens want to stockpile antiquities in the first place. These items, the Greens believe, will help them tell the story of the Bible that they want to tell, one that assures ordinary Americans of the

Bible's historical veracity, its divinely guided transmission and translation (culminating in the King James version), and its overwhelmingly positive contribution to American society.

This story has been told many times, of course, but never has it been broadcast from a venue as formidable as the Museum of the Bible. Unlike the nearby Smithsonian museums, the MOTB is not a government-sanctioned entity, but Moss and Baden are surely right to worry that the museum's location will grant it an aura of authority that, say, the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, lacks. This is a problem, they say, given the curators' "selective use of scholarship and material evidence to support a particular interpretation of the text, coupled with the refrain that they are not, in fact, interpreting the Bible at all." Moreover, if the Greens get their way—they claim with straight faces that their story of the Bible is nonsectarian—the MOTB's narrative will soon make its way into America's public schools via a Hobby Lobby-funded Bible curriculum.

Some readers will object to Moss and Baden's assumption that they and their fellow university-trained historians have a more reliable story to tell about the Bible than the one the Greens plan to tell. Don't secular scholars start with their own set of assumptions about the biblical text? Are religiously committed people the only ones blind to and blinded by their foundational commitments? Moss and Baden could have addressed this objectivity question more thoroughly, but instead they return repeatedly to the low-hanging fruit of Greens' scholarly nescience. What one blurb writer calls a "driving narrative" might more accurately be called an extended harangue. Although Moss and Baden claim to treat their subjects with empathy, after a while it feels like piling on.

Still, the authors' larger concerns have merit, and by choosing to explore this particular front of the culture wars, they effectively cast light on issues that are American to the core: the belief that God blesses the faithful with financial success, the assumption that success in business verifies people as experts in realms they know little about, the notion that America is essentially and indisputably a Christian nation (and the public square ought therefore to reflect that essence), the dismissal of expert opinion when that opinion runs counter to popular belief, and the refusal of many people to examine their faith with a critical eye. In sum, *Bible Nation* illustrates what many nonevangelicals find so disturbing about America in the age of Trump, though it also reminds its readers that these untoward elements of American life long predated the election of our billionaire president. Surely they will outlive

him as well.