The Museum of the Bible is utterly inoffensive. The Bible is not.

Can artifacts and interactive exhibits ever do justice to scripture's wildness?

by Adam Hearlson in the February 14, 2018 issue

The interior of the Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. Photo by Alan Karchmer for Museum of the Bible

I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit,

there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family." —Yehuda Amichai, "Tourists"

About halfway through my wander through the expansive Museum of the Bible, I got hungry. What better place to eat than Manna, the museum's restaurant, headed by renowned chef Todd Gray? Standing in line with other hungry wanderers, I heard the restaurant manager say, "I have something special for you today. I didn't want to tell anyone until I was sure we had it in our hands, but today, as a treat, we have real manna."

Considering that scripture is pretty clear about the shelf life of manna, I began to wonder what exactly I was about to eat. I was not alone. As each person approached the small dish of manna, they asked, "So, what is it?"

"It is manna," the manager cheerfully said.

As a scholar and lover of the Bible, that lunch-line experience was confusing. For one, the word *manna* literally means "What is it?" which only compounds the absurdity of the meal and the manager's statement. Second, the insistence that we can—with the help of an Iranian supplier and modern shipping—have real manna like the Israelites once ate raises the question of what real is. The deep desire for the authentic at the Museum of the Bible produced a glossy ersatz experience.

Eating manna at Manna perfectly captured the challenge of making sense of the Museum of the Bible. What is it? indeed.

The easy explanation is that the Museum of the Bible is a privately funded exhibit designed, according to its mission statement, to "engage people with the Bible." At 430,000 square feet, it is the largest privately funded museum in the city. It stands only a few blocks from the Capitol and a host of Smithsonian museums. Like the Smithsonian, the Museum of the Bible suggests appropriate donations but does not require them.

The result of nearly a decade of work by Steve Green, president of the craft chain Hobby Lobby, and scholars from around the world, the museum seeks to provide a nonsectarian opportunity for understanding the Bible that appeals to novice and scholar alike. As Cary Summers, president of the museum, put it, "We want a big enough umbrella so that anyone can come in and learn something."

It *is* a big umbrella. The main three exhibit floors—focused on the Bible's history, narrative, and impact—aim to give visitors a sweeping account of the formation of the Bible, an outline of the stories in the Bible, and a sense of how the Bible has been significant in the history of the United States and the world. Perhaps overly concerned with fulfilling such a comprehensive program, the museum is dense with artifacts from the past three millennia. Packed among the artifacts are dozens of interactive opportunities, reenactments, and film reels to engage people not immediately riveted by cuneiform tablets or medieval prayer books.

The third floor, featuring the Bible narratives, provides a welcome respite from the cacophony of the other floors. Unfortunately, it trades the noise for an extra helping of goofiness. The Old Testament narrative tour, for instance, is a mashup of an evangelical sermon and Disney's Haunted Mansion, complete with an ominous voice telling me to walk through the secret doorway that had just opened behind me.

Still, despite the combination of noise and goofiness, the curatorial imagination at work is impressive. At the very least, the museum is the product of talented professionals. The museum succeeds in its intention to stand in the company of the Smithsonian museums a few blocks over. As Summers hoped, visitors—novice and scholar, conservative and liberal—will likely learn something new and interesting.

But I still couldn't shake the question: What is it?

Considering Green's own public evangelical views and his company's legal fight on religious grounds to avoid covering contraception for its workers as prescribed in the Affordable Care Act, the nonsectarian nature of the museum's goals have been doubted by outside observers. While the museum's partnerships with the evangelical elite, biblical scholars, the Vatican Library, and the Israel Antiquities Authority have had a moderating effect on the museum's message, the presence of such influential partners as the Vatican and the state of Israel does little to support the idea that the museum is apolitical. It has an agenda, and it is an old one.

In an interview at the museum, Green admitted that part of the inspiration for the museum was that Americans "know less and less every year" about the Bible. Likewise, Summers told me, "all the major surveys show that biblical literacy is degrading. We have more Bibles in circulation than ever in history, but we are the most ignorant generation about Bible knowledge. This is according to Pew studies, Barna studies, and others. The timing of this museum is really quite unique, and we

hope that this will help turn that around, so that people at least understand a book that is impacting their life daily, even if they didn't realize it." The Museum of the Bible is a monument to an old religious anxiety that can unite the evangelical right, the Vatican, and Israel under a single cause: biblical literacy.

The most compelling work on the concept of biblical literacy has been done by scholar Christy Lang Hearlson (full disclosure: my wife). In her work, Lang Hearlson argues that anxiety about biblical literacy on this continent is at least as old as the "Bible cause" of the 19th century. In response to concerns about the declining moral state of the country, Bible societies sprouted across the United States to provide Bibles to anyone who wanted one. If people had access to the Bible, the societies surmised, the disturbing moral trends of the times might be brought to heel. As a result of these societies, many of which still operate, Bibles became ubiquitous and accessible as never before.

Yet even with a Bible in every home and hotel drawer in the country, anxieties about the country's moral trajectory persisted. People had access to the Bible, but they either did not read it or couldn't understand it when they did. In tracing the rise of the literacy anxiety, Lang Hearlson notes that in the 20th century, the term *biblically illiterate* became a catchall for referring to general ignorance of the narratives, themes, doctrines, and moral claims of the Bible. Biblical illiteracy, especially among the young, was diagnosed by Christian leaders, conservative and liberal alike, as a leading cause of the country's moral decline.

Since the middle of the 20th century, Lang Hearlson argues, jeremiads on biblical illiteracy have been supported by survey data. Religious folk from across the theological spectrum use polls to confirm their impressions about Americans' familiarity with the Bible. Gallup polls, Barna research, and to a lesser extent Pew studies have become the preeminent sources of information on the topic. Yet upon close inspection, most of these quantitative surveys are inconsistently and confusingly phrased and seem designed to discover and confirm perceptions of declining biblical literacy.

The Museum of the Bible assumes we are living in a time of unprecedented biblical ignorance, and its mission is to halt this trend. Yet the leaders of the museum, like the leaders of the Bible cause, haven't paused to test their assumptions about literacy. The narrative of declining literacy seems to be based on the experience of white Americans only, ignoring the situation of blacks—who under slavery were

prohibited from reading the Bible—and of immigrants from non-Christian countries.

An additional problem with the biblical literacy movement, Lang Hearlson argues, is its historic connection to xenophobic and racist assumptions about the link between biblical literacy and American citizenship. Biblical literacy is assumed to be a precondition for participation in the democratic experiment. Civic health is connected to religious health. These assumptions disregard the many people who do not know anything about the Bible nor count it as authoritative but still participate fully as citizens. Located a stone's throw from the Capitol, the Museum of the Bible seems dangerously positioned to reproduce 19th-century ideas about the necessity of biblical literacy for the success of democracy.

Like previous experiments, the Museum of the Bible is an attempt to get the Bible into the hands of the people. This time, rather than placing Bibles in hotel drawers, the activists have created an immersive experience guided by new media strategies that have produced a Disneyfied version of the Bible—a glossy facsimile of a world long past. It is utterly inoffensive, but that is part of the problem. The museum goes to great lengths to get people to engage the Bible, but it presents a Bible that has been tamed of its wildness. The Museum of the Bible is safe, where the Bible is not.

Consider, for example, the section of the museum that explores the Bible's influence on the United States and the world. The exhibits here recognize that the Bible is not a record of something that happened in the past; it is a shaping force in the present. Yet the museum is unwilling to take a stand on what the Bible might advocate in the world. Not only does it avoid discussing current fights within the church on issues like abortion and gay marriage, it observes a misguided neutrality on slavery, noting that slave owners and abolitionists alike used the Bible to support their political decisions. The Museum of the Bible goes to great lengths to be apolitical, but this itself undermines the nature of the Bible.

The museum assumes that you can engage the Bible safely, as information, without taking sides. Lovers of the Bible, conservatives and liberals alike, know that the Bible is not neutral. The central claim of the church that regards the Bible as authoritative is that it matters to your life today. It is not simply part of the past, it is integrally connected to now. Moreover, the biblical characters, letters, and poems that we love are not simply written on a page to be read, they are set into the niches of our heart. They become parts of us. The world of the Bible is in its own strange way our inner world, as well as an influence on the outer world.

The museum is a monument to an old anxiety about declining biblical literacy.

Walking around the museum, I couldn't shake the feeling that Green and his team have built an expensive solution to a misunderstood problem. The glowing screens, multimedia narrative experiences—including a virtual flight over Washington, D.C.—and a restaurant dressed to look like a Middle Eastern souk are an attempt to capture someone's attention long enough to convince them that the Bible is important and worth engaging. The museum serves partly as a tourism bureau for the Bible, a shiny advertisement for the wonders of the book, and partly as a sampling of the attraction. Like most tourist attractions, the novelty wears off quickly, and the advertisement bears only passing resemblance to the experience of the locals.

The Bible museum imagines that we can all be biblical tourists, but the Bible demands that we become locals. Locals have a complex relationship with this strange book. They are regularly aggravated by it even while they are utterly devoted to it. They know where to find the secret and secluded meadows. Nonnarrative genres—the oracles of the prophets and the poems of the Psalms—get only passing attention in the museum, but locals know that many of the book's treasures are hidden in those spots. Locals are aware of the book's terrible moral failures (the museum doesn't tell the story of the Levite's concubine) and know that the book is often dull and routine (the lists of Leviticus don't lend themselves to a virtual reality show). A relationship with the Bible requires more than just knowing the facts that count as literacy.

On my way to the Museum of the Bible, I saw an African American man being searched by police in the 30th Street station in Philadelphia. Transit police opened his bag and spread out its contents on a bench for every passerby to see. Each article of clothing was closely examined and the bag was turned inside out. The gross indignity of the display of power and my own silence in the face of men with guns and dogs embarrassed me. All too typical of our world, everyone in the station watched quietly while a black man was publicly embarrassed by the police. After searching the contents and finding nothing, the police walked away and the man repacked his bag and waited quietly for his train.

I rode to the Museum of the Bible with a troubled heart, hoping that a place so concerned with scripture might offer some insight into the daily lives of people suffering social oppression and of people comfortable with their own complicity. It

didn’t. The museum had a story to tell, a story that was safely removed from the everyday reality of our world. I went to the Museum of the Bible looking for a living word and found it beautifully preserved behind glass.

A mile and a half from the Museum of the Bible, Nat Turner’s Bible sits in another newly opened museum. The symbolic significance of that one book feels more powerful than any entire floor of the Museum of the Bible. It has a realness that overwhelms the glossy artificiality of the Museum of the Bible.

Turner’s Bible in the National Museum of African American History and Culture is dangerous. It sponsored dreams of freedom for African American slaves, it condoned and prescribed violence, it curated visions of hope, and it dictated paths of lament. It didn’t matter to the slaves who encountered it whether they knew what a Galilean village looked like or knew the difference between a Tyndale Bible and a King James Bible. Turner’s Bible, with its smudged fingerprints and its cover torn off, feels alive and active. I look at that Bible and I am terrified, intrigued, and overwhelmed. In awe, I ask, What is it? And, How do I get more of it?

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