

Museum of the Bible returns stolen Gospels manuscript

The museum is investigating the origins of 3,000 artifacts in its collection.

by [Mark A. Kellner](#) in the [September 12, 2018](#) issue



A Greek manuscript of the four Gospels dating to the 1100s. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the Bible.

The Museum of the Bible is returning a medieval New Testament manuscript to the University of Athens after learning the document had been stolen from the Greek institution.

One year ago the Green family—owners of the craft store chain Hobby Lobby and principal sponsors of the museum, which opened in November in Washington, D.C.—agreed to pay a \$3 million fine for illegally importing artifacts from Iraq. The Greek manuscript of the four Gospels dating to the 1100s is currently on display through an agreement with the University of Athens and will be formally returned on October 1.

The return of the New Testament manuscript follows an investigation the museum is conducting on the origins of more than 3,000 items in its collection. Sending the Gospels manuscript back to Athens would be “the first return of an artifact because of a provenance issue,” said Michelle Farmer, a spokeswoman.

The item, known as “Manuscript 18,” had gone missing from the University of Athens library in 1991. It turned up seven years later at a Sotheby’s auction in London, where it was purchased by an unknown bidder. Hobby Lobby president Steve Green, owner of one of the world’s largest private collections of biblical texts and artifacts, bought the manuscript in 2010. The Green family donated it to the museum in 2014.

Jeff Kloha, chief curatorial officer, who holds a doctorate from the University of Leeds in England, said the manuscript has been digitized and put online for public viewing. He noted that MOTB is seeking accreditation from the association of museums and that it is following standards set forth by the American Alliance of Museums and the Association of Art Museum Directors.

“We want to act in an ethical way, a nice way to help a sister institution,” he said. “This is an opportunity for us to act responsibly and demonstrate we’re a museum” that adheres to standards.

Spyridon Lambros, a 19th- and early 20th-century Greek historian who taught at the University of Athens for 23 years, donated the manuscript to the school. Manuscript 18 was entered into a database at the Institute for New Testament Textual Research at the University of Münster, Germany. That listing drew the attention of Theodora Antonopoulou, a professor of Byzantine literature at the University of Athens. Her research showed that the manuscript had been appropriated from the school without its permission.

After the 2017 agreement by the Green family to return thousands of artifacts that U.S. federal officials said were illegally imported, as well as pay the \$3 million fine, some academics argued the incident would tarnish the MOTB’s reputation. But others noted the difficulties of provenance inherent in assembling collections of ancient artifacts. —Religion News Service

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