

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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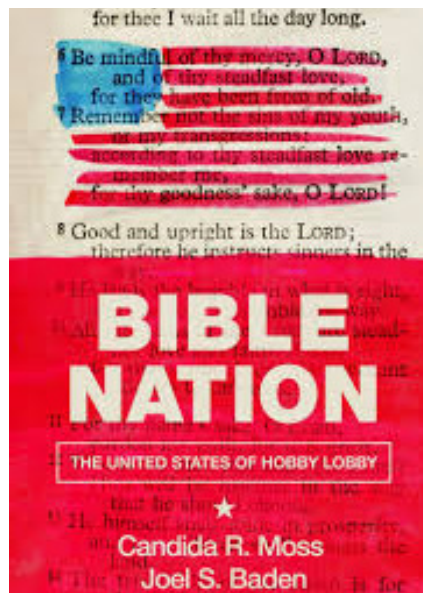
CANDIDA MOSS is Cadbury Professor of Theology at the University of Birmingham (U.K.). She spoke with Boisi Center associate director Erik Owens about her recent book *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby*, the Green family and the Museum of the Bible, and the uses of the Bible in American culture and history. The following interview has been edited for length, clarity, and content.

OWENS: Let's start by discussing how you came to this topic. You're a scholar of early Christianity and of the New Testament. What brought you to write about something that's not the typical scholarly sort of manuscript, but rather something that should have a bigger audience?

MOSS: I started writing this book when I was at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, and I was meeting with a friend from grad school. He was working on his second book, which was on papyri. He said he was having some trouble getting some of these papyri, because it turns out they had been acquired by the owners of Hobby Lobby. And I asked if he meant Hobby Lobby the crafting store? And he said yes.

I took out my laptop. At the time, in my head, I thought that maybe I could write a 1,500-word piece for *Slate* about how interesting it is that all the Christian philanthropists – not just the Green family but other families – were interested in collecting biblical manuscripts. It turned out to be a little longer than 2,000 words.

OWENS: Indeed. One of the things that is really interesting to me is the way that you bring together a view of a wide array of projects that the Green family is working on – the collection of manuscripts and papyri, the Museum of the Bible itself, the Green Scholars Initiative and the Bible curriculum.



One of the primary concerns that others have raised and that you raise in this book involves the depiction of what the “Bible” is – that just the simple expression of the idea that there is a singular thing called the Bible is itself problematic in its own way for scholars. Could you explain that to our readers?

MOSS: The Museum of the Bible says that it's a nonsectarian museum that speaks to Christians of all kinds, as well as Jews, and so already anyone who knows anything about the contents of the scriptures of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants knows that the contents of those Bibles are different. The obvious differ-

ence is between Judaism and Christianity, as there are different books, and the names that we use to refer to those books are different. So, when Christians refer to the Hebrew Bible, the entirety of your scriptures, as the Old Testament, that is reflecting a particular perspective on the role of those books vis-à-vis Christianity. That's one really big macro question.

I think the more problematic issue is the way that they talk about telling the story of the Bible. As a Bible scholar, that's really hard to do, because when you read the Bible, there are all of these places where you have to make a decision. Does Jesus give what we commonly refer to as the Sermon on the Mount on a mountain, as he does in Matthew, or on a plain, as he does in Luke? Or does he do it twice? You could say he does it twice. But if you're talking about Noah's ark – there are good scholarly reasons for reading the story as a composite work, because when you read the story of Noah's ark, does Noah take two pairs of animals onto the ark or does he take seven pairs of animals onto the ark? You have to make a decision. So the seemingly ideologically unencumbered act of just telling the story itself is deeply problematic.

OWENS: How does the Museum of the Bible itself depict the diversity of stories within the scriptural texts and the diversity of the canon itself?

MOSS: The simple answer would be it doesn't. The stories of the Bible are told by an animated story that is highly selective. It's about thirty minutes for the Hebrew Bible and twelve minutes for the entirety of the New Testament. It's interesting that they do that. Because you are animating, you have all kinds of aesthetic choices you can make. You're not bound by the appearance of actors.

For example, it's interesting not only that they focus on the history of the Bible from creation to David in the Hebrew Bible section, but when they depict Ruth and the story of Ruth, Ruth, who's a Moabite, has lighter colored skin. The other two Moabite women, who have been her sisters-in-law, who go back to the Moabites, have much darker colored skin. And that seems to me sort of thoughtless, at best, to make that kind of judgment to depict those outside of the promise to Israel as darker skinned and those within it lighter skinned. That seems subtly racist and the kind of decision they didn't need to make.

OWENS: It also seems in your conversations with Steve Green and with some of the others, that there's an emphasis on the idea that you're simply telling the story, meaning that – and you mention it in your book several times – that the story is solid – that he said the story is solid. It's something that's lasting, durable, coherent and can be conveyed. One of the many implications of that is that it does not require much interpretation. Could you talk about the way that interpretation is depicted in the Museum of the Bible or not?

MOSS: It's fascinating. There's the Bible, which, as you say, they describe as rock solid. The Bible is rock solid. When they say that, they mean that both in terms of the text, and its translation – all of those kinds of things are rock solid. But they also mean that the message and the ethos of the Bible is rock solid. Where interpretation gets brought up, interpretation is where things go awry for them. When the

Bible produces good things in society, it is the "Bible speaking."

OWENS: That's "being true to the Bible?"

MOSS: Yes, that's just the "Bible speaking." If people argue for slavery and cite biblical texts, that's people interpreting. It's not the Bible's fault that people do that. On the one hand, the Bible is this incredibly powerful thing – the word of

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God that can beckon people to it. But on the other hand, it's utterly powerless when it comes to being interpreted. That's just an inconsistent application of how you see the Bible working.

OWENS: How does that match up with the evangelical vision of the democratization of scripture or *sola scriptura* – that you can come to a relationship with God on your own, which would seem to suggest a widely diverse set of ways of coming to God through the scripture, because we're all different people, and yet here's a depiction of a singular message. How does that come across?

MOSS: Certainly, if you're going to say, "I'm just going to tell the story, I'm just going to tell the facts, I'm just going to talk about what everyone agrees on," you're already talking about privileging Protestantism because of *sola scriptura*, because of the idea that there's no tradition or oral lore that is needed to interpret the text. There are all kinds of places where you can see that we don't need an intermediary; we just need the text idea coming out. It comes out in a subtly anti-elitist way that claims that the use

of Bible commentaries or scholarship interferes with the way you come into contact with the text.

I think what it does do, though, – and in the spirit of full disclosure, I'm Roman Catholic myself – is provide a subtle denigration of those traditions that think that actually tradition is important and you need that to understand scripture.

OWENS: You mentioned an anti-elitism that is woven into some of this, and yet one of the big features of both the Museum of the Bible and the preceding work that leads up to it is the Green Scholars Initiative – a very explicit effort to bring scholars into these projects. Can you say a bit about the role of the GSI?

MOSS: Yes. They have removed the Green family name, so now it is called the Scholars Initiative since we published our article in *The Atlantic*. In our article, we discussed the trafficking of antiquities, and they have now removed their name as a means of distancing themselves. Steve Green told us that the Scholars Initiative was founded originally in order to tell the family what they had. They purchased a lot of antiquities, and they actually just didn't know what they were because they couldn't read them. One role of the Green Scholars Initiative was to identify these texts, to work on them and, in the process, to raise the value of those texts, because once you know what's on them and you've studied them and you've dated them, they have a higher value. That was one role.

The other thing that the Scholars Initiative has done – and I'm not sure that many of the scholars involved in this knew this at the time – was that the Museum of the Bible has done a really excellent job of leveraging its association with particular scholars and organizations in order to kind of acquire academic and scholarly credibility. When people have said, "oh, I'm concerned about the depiction of Judaism here or the depiction of Roman Catholicism there," their response has been, "the Vatican is on board." Surely there couldn't be anything wrong with this museum in terms of its

relationship to other denominations if we have these prestigious representatives from those traditions here?

In terms of scholars, scholarly credentials have been leveraged in the same way. Because we are academics, we have sold those credentials very cheaply because we believe in knowledge and accuracy. In the GSI, many of those scholars are my friends and I consider their work to be impeccable. But, they are now working for an organization that they cannot even publicly speak about, because they've signed nondisclosure agreements that prevent them from saying anything.

OWENS: One of the things that surprised me, as someone who is outside of the field of biblical studies, was how inexpensive the manuscripts or papyri were that you're speaking about here. At least in the parts of the book that I recall, I saw numbers like \$10,000 or \$25,000, which of course is expensive for a professor, but for a billionaire that's not a large amount. I was expecting millions of dollars for things. Is that a limited view on my part or is that how the field works when these are not dated themselves?

MOSS: Part of the issue is, if you don't know what's on the papyrus, it's difficult to appraise its value, which is one of the reasons they needed scholars to help them. Another reason they acquired so many things so cheaply was that they started buying in 2009, after a huge market crash. Nobody in 2009, except for the Greens, were in the "collecting" business. Universities, private collections, and museums were all financially struggling. It really was a buyers' market, and they went around and they bought a lot of things. Almost everything was purchased between 2009 and 2012.

OWENS: We should say a bit about the collection and the legal issues that have come in with the questions of provenance and transmission across state lines. Could you talk about what you've discovered and what has come up since you started working on this book?

MOSS: Anyone who wants to buy an antiquity – let's say a fragment of papyrus from Egypt – needs to prove that it had come out of Egypt before 1970, because of the UNESCO agreement. Almost all countries agree now that archeological artifacts are part of the cultural heritage of the country from which they have been taken. As such, they're the property of that country. 1970 has sort of been the line in the sand, although the Egyptians were declaring it illegal to take things out of Egypt since 1855, when the British were just taking mummies for their dining rooms.

This means that if you want to acquire something, you need what's called provenance – documentation of a legal chain

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of ownership. Certainly, for many items that have been in collections, it's difficult to find that – a legal chain of ownership. But that doesn't mean you don't need it. With the Hobby Lobby purchases, what happened was that, in 2011, they acquired a large cache of about 10,000, we were told, cuneiform tablets and bullae, and they started importing them into the U.S. They did know at the time that there was a possibility that these were not licit, and there were all kinds of red flags surrounding that purchase. It seemed that all of the people who were selling wanted plausible deniability.

Those artifacts originally came from Iraq, and that makes them highly sensitive because of the Arab Spring, because of Al-Qaeda. Who is profiting from the sales of these items? Even if you're not buying from terrorists yourself, if those

items were originally purchased by looters or members of illicit gangs, you are contributing to that problem. You are feeding the black market.

When they brought them into the country, they were shipped by FedEx through Memphis to various Hobby Lobby stores around the country. They were marked as hand-crafted clay tiles, which is not wrong. They are hand crafted, they are clay, and many of them are tiles. But they were valued as being about \$300, and that was an effort to skirt any kind of customs investigation, because they did not have adequate documentation for these artifacts.

OWENS: Are these items part of the Museum of the Bible's collection that they're showing to the public now or are they now separate?

MOSS: Those artifacts have been seized by the federal government, and they will try to repatriate them. In terms of what's in the collection – in particular, what's in the Museum of the Bible – when all of this happened: the Museum said they were a completely separate entity from the Green family. I almost felt sorry for the Greens, the way the Museum said Steve Green did not represent their morals. The Museum distanced themselves from the Green family. Although only superficially because Steve Green still cut the red tape at the museum's opening.

They have said that they have put all the provenance online. When you go online, you notice that there'll be a side heading like "Torah scrolls – we don't know where these are from." The artifacts they advertise as part of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which mostly people think are forgeries – they obviously don't know where they're from. So, saying we put the provenance online doesn't solve the problem, because they in fact haven't done that. They haven't been fully open.

We personally – Joel Baden and I – fought very hard about a Galatians papyrus fragment that had appeared on eBay.

They fought for years with us about how it was totally legal and that they had no idea how photographs of it had appeared on eBay. When we finally offered them the evidence in the book that their provenance documentation had been forged, then they pulled it from Museum of the Bible's collection.

Their approach now has been, "well, we've brought in these external people. You just have to trust us that it's fine." I'm a little past trusting them on this. I'd like to see real independent oversight.

OWENS: Let's step back a little bit. Writing as a scholar as you are, you've uncovered all of these fascinating aspects, and there's a particular scholarly discourse that does its business with anything, including with this museum. Yet, professional academics aren't the target audience for the Museum of the Bible, let's say. Do they succeed on their own terms in this museum in what they want to do? I know it's only been open three or four months, so we can't say in terms of cultural impact yet, but have they done what you think they want to do?

MOSS: They have several goals. I think they're very successful with their evangelical base. It is a dazzling museum. It doesn't have as many exhibits in it as I expected. I found that surprising. There's a lot of space to do more and a lot of underutilized space, so we'll see how the museum grows. If they were trying to convert people, I don't know how effective the museum would be, because it doesn't explain as much as you would think. If you go into their history floor, you are overwhelmed by beautiful manuscripts, but you're never really drawn along a story that explains what you're looking at. You're never told who wrote the Bible, the dating of any of the books in the Bible – in part because that might be conceding human authorship in certain cases. You might have to talk in greater depth about pseudepigraphy and whether or not the books of the Bible are written by who they claim to have been written by. Perhaps that was just too sensitive a topic for them.

The story they want you to get is a story in which the Bible is rock solid, the Bible has been perfectly replicated from antiquity to the present, and the Bible is a founding document of America. They certainly have a very big statement about how it is the founding document of America.

If what they want to do – and this is another stated goal – is influence American politics, influence how our government

or do you feel that they've recalibrated how they'd like to bring the Bible back to Americans – through the Museum of the Bible and through our schools? These are the two primary places – in Washington and in our schools – and they are metaphors for access to broader culture. How do you think this process is moving? In what direction is it headed?

MOSS: Certainly, they aren't done with the Bible curriculum. They've moved it



is run, I don't think it's the Museum of the Bible that's going to do that for them. However, they do have their fingers in a lot of pies, so I do think that they've been enormously successful – more successful than anyone would have guessed – and I would not be surprised if we see Green family objectives slipping into more GOP legislation.

OWENS: That provides a bridge to talk about the fact that the GOP recently put the need to teach the Bible in public schools as one of their Republican Party platforms. Regardless of who was responsible for slipping that in there, it clearly is a major goal of the Green family as well and a stated initiative of the Museum of the Bible to work on these sorts of curricula. You mentioned in broad terms that an initial attempt to get this curriculum into a school in Oklahoma City didn't work well for a variety of reasons and that they're now shipping it primarily abroad – in Israel but also among homeschoolers in the U.S. Is that a temporary setback,

under Museum of the Bible, Incorporated, so the whole system of Museum of the Bible initiatives include the museum but also a kind of covenant journey, which is like a birthright-style trip to the Holy Land that they run. They have indicated that they intend to pick the Bible curriculum back up. I don't know what kind of reception they will meet now. Education, including school education, has been one of their tent poles for about a dozen years. I don't expect them to give that up. They're very aware of the power of education.

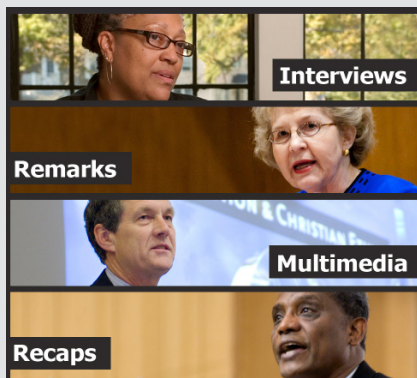
If you think of their wider goal – and I don't think this is an overstatement – to be making America Christian again, because they do believe it was founded as a Christian country – then educating America's citizenry as conversant readers of the Bible is an important part of that.

OWENS: Do you think that they are working with or against big movements in American culture with regard to the Bible? Do you think that they're mov-

ing with the wave that’s already going or are they pushing against a wave? Of course one can speak in different ways, but where do you think they fit in the “battles,” as they describe it, and as you see it personally?

MOSS: I think that they see themselves as fighting the rising tide of secularization in this country. That’s what they think is happening. And they are embroiled in a battle for the soul of this country. I think that they represent a very large group of people, though, that is not as embattled as it thinks it is, especially right now. And I think that particular combination – the sense that you’re the minority struggling against an increasingly aggressive and hostile majority – the same kind of rhetoric we saw in the culture wars in the ’80s – combined with the power and influence that they do have – is a very potent combination.

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