

## Outside the Walls of Museum of the Bible: Interreligious Dialogue, Library Initiatives and Societal Solidarity

Sherry Klein

Department of Collections, Museum of the Bible, Washington D.C., US.  
E-mail address: sherry.klein@mbible.org



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### Abstract:

*Museum of the Bible (MOTB) is a non-profit organization established in 2010 by the Green Family containing considerable accessioned and library collections of artefacts and rare books. MOTB's efforts are consistently focused outside its walls and around the world with initiatives that invite dialogue between all back backgrounds and faith traditions.*

*MOTB exists to invite all people to engage with the Bible. Museum of the Bible acts as a catalyst to engage with the Bible by being inclusive and respectful to all, regardless of religion, cultural background or faith tradition. MOTB carries out its mission through curatorial exhibits, MOTB Radio Minute, scholarly endeavours, presentations, performances, artefact exchanges for exhibitions and events and initiatives that spark engagement and open discussion. Venues for these initiatives include museums, academic libraries, MOTB's performing arts center and religious and political institutions, including American Presidential Libraries. Museum of the Bible engages with an ever-growing number of diverse communities by way of its accessioned and library collections to intentionally create biblical engagement and interreligious dialogue. Various requests and contexts allow for an abundance of open discussions pertaining to the world's sacred and historical texts through initiatives of interreligious dialogue. This paper outlines some of these relevant library initiatives that Museum of the Bible actively engages in.*

**Keywords:** Bible, Museum collection, initiatives, invite

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As we come together in Wroclaw, Poland for the sake of gathering the world's knowledge databases into one World Congress, let us also discuss how we each approach interreligious dialogue as a united society of libraries and collections.

Museum of the Bible (MOTB) exists to invite all people to engage with the Bible. MOTB seeks to act as a catalyst of engagement for interreligious discussions. The Bible, as a book, spans the breadth of recorded history and has had more impact than any other book in history. Whether illuminated by candlelight or read from the You Version Bible App on your phone, the biblical narratives, history and impact remain constant. Many have claimed this book as their own, have contributed to its survival or necessary transmission through

persecution or have had their lives changed by it in some way. We tell the story of the Bible through an unbiased historical lens. It's not about a religious institution – it's about a book that transcends parameters of cultural borders and opens all discussions regarding sacred and literary texts.

Museum of the Bible began in the United States with the Green Family of Hobby Lobby, a large chain of stores in the USA specializing in arts and crafts, home décor and artwork framing. The Green family began buying an artefact or two and, when opportunities kept presenting themselves, it became evident that a larger story could be told with a collection of artefacts from around the world. Noteworthy collections were then brought together creating Museum of the Bible in 2010. The rare books and materials that make up this collection have been made available for open, accountable research which has already begun to be shared with the world in a significant way through scholarly initiatives, publications and exhibits. There is enough scholarly and cultural work to be conducted from this array of collections to keep all of us busy for generations to come, without exaggeration. Therefore, we invite each one of you in your libraries and collections to be a part of these initiatives as well by engaging in interreligious collaboration and generating participation and mentorships within your expert fields.

### **Museum of the Bible Collection Highlights (see website for featured video)<sup>1</sup>**

Museum of the Bible's collection begins with the earliest forms of writing and civilizations showing literary, law and business parallels worthy of intensive study between cuneiform tablets and the Torah, or Pentateuch. MOTB features historically significant ancient pottery, oil lamp eras and Egyptian and Coptic funerary artefacts of biblical relevance. Museum of the Bible is also able to show the shift and technological breakthroughs that have helped make the Bible the most read book in all of history. Mediums of writing are regularly exhibited and researched such as clay, papyri, animal skins, the Gutenberg Press and all eras of paper and content thereafter, to include the Lunar Bible. Unbaked clay and vellum palimpsests like the Codex Climaci Rescriptus (5<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) show re-usage and developmental thought among students and scholars just as in today's setting, providing helpful context and commentary.

A vast array of ancient documents, including an intact papyrus called P39 (P. Oxy. 1780) beautifully records the earliest passage in John ever found thus far. Likewise, a Greek Psalms codex called P. Bodmer XXIV (Rahlfs 2110) is an amazing artefact showing how the Psalms as a whole were used in Upper Egypt and is still the most complete Psalter found to date.<sup>2</sup> Museum of the Bible also has a 3<sup>rd</sup> Century Wyman fragment preserving the oldest known copy of Romans 5:1. This was a key passage during the Protestant Reformation. The Museum has the world's second largest collection of Dead Sea Scrolls which are the earliest surviving texts of the Bible found to date. These writings are being made available for research due to infrared imaging which makes the ink look as clear as the day it was written without damage to these priceless fragments.

Bible translation has had many advancements due to centuries of study by Church Fathers such as St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate and later the Council of Trent in 1545. Following these foundational works, the Medieval Era never fails to provide decadent and beautiful writings with illuminations for candlelight reading and showmanship of wealth among

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.museumofthebible.org/museum-of-the-bible-collection>

<sup>2</sup> [http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~pietersm/EditedTextofP.BodmerXXIV\(1980\).pdf](http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~pietersm/EditedTextofP.BodmerXXIV(1980).pdf)

families. Museum of the Bible features thousands of manuscripts, with one of particular interest called the Hours and Psalter of Elizabeth de Bohun. This is one of the most beautifully illuminated manuscripts produced in 14th-century England. The Rosebery Rolle, also from the 14<sup>th</sup>-century, contains a translation of the Psalms into Middle English that predates Wycliffian translation by some 40 years. The collection also features an undocumented copy of Wycliffe's New Testament in Middle English among other beautifully crafted rare books, manuscripts and psalters. These are just sketches of a much larger Medieval collection.

First editions and translations of nearly every Bible ever printed, including those during the Reformation, can be found within Museum of the Bible's collections. These include editions of the King James Bible, Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthews, the Geneva Bible, and other recognizable names. The story of spreading the Bible throughout the world is rich with drama and intrigue. Museum of the Bible holds original Acts and Monuments, fragments from the Gutenberg Bible and has the world's only complete Block Bible known to be in private hands. One other feature of our ongoing Reformation Era exhibit is a little-known letter written the night before Luther's excommunication.

From Museum of the Bible's Americana Collection, first editions of the Eliot Indian Bible and the Aitken Bible, which was the first complete English Bible printed in America and the only Bible printing ever endorsed by Congress in 1782, represents true patriotism in America. Letters and Bibles from presidents, including the manuscript of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" which draws extensively from biblical imagery are favourites among our exhibit guests. One of the world's largest collections of Catholic Bibles with American imprints during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has recently been added to our Americana collection. Also, signed Bibles belonging to American celebrities and historical figures, including Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Babe Ruth, a Hall of Fame baseball player and sports icon, as well as former presidents of the United States have also been featured in our exhibits and tours.

### **Museum of the Bible's Ongoing Library Initiatives**

At Museum of the Bible, we are committed to reaching out to every person and to every library or collection. As daunting as this sounds, we find that acting as a catalyst to invite all people to engage with the Bible invokes action. I am eager to share some of MOTB's initiatives regarding interreligious dialogue that demonstrate societal solidarity among our peers. I have broken these initiatives down into four core areas. These areas allow us to span the scope of our initiatives and help drive momentum outside our walls and around the globe.

1) **Scholar's Initiative Program**<sup>3</sup> is the research arm of Museum of the Bible. A select group of senior research scholars and their students from academic institutions around the world conduct primary research from MOTB materials and present new findings. Leading experts in their respective fields oversee established teams which include young new scholars. Scholar's Initiative breaks the mold of traditional research protocol by pairing both undergraduate and graduate students with established scholars for primary research on the collection's biblical texts and artefacts. Students from many cultures and their mentors are selected yearly for special intensive workshops to share and dialogue at the University of Oxford Logos program.

Museum of the Bible has acquired primary resources for the purpose of research and sharing of knowledge. MOTB does not try to control the outcome of these findings. Rather, we find

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.museumofthebible.org/scholars-initiative>

that when untampered data is presented openly it points to core intrinsic values for interreligious dialogue that can be shared and presented to further interreligious dialogue.

One of our most recognized initiatives is in working with the Dead Sea Scrolls. This collaborative work is a significant part of MOTB's antiquities research conducted on several continents. Museum of the Bible works alongside many scholars in this field through our Scholar's Initiatives. Key scholars working within the United States, Canada and Israel in the field of Dead Sea Scrolls were published alongside Dr. Emanuel Tov in *Dead Sea Scrolls Fragments in the Museum Collection*.<sup>4</sup> This joint publication is due to a large-scale collaborative initiative with Dr. Tov at the Hebrew University, Israel, Trinity Western University/Dead Sea Scroll Institute, Canada and MOTB's Scholar's Initiative in the United States.

Old Testament and New Testament studies are a vital part of how we talk about the Bible's history. Greek, Cuneiform, Hebrew, Aramaic and other dialects of these books around the world are being made available for the advancement of knowledge and for dialogue between sacred texts and passages. Experts in their unique fields are invited to share wisdom and valuation of materials for valid study and cultural understanding.

2) **Exhibits**<sup>5</sup> outside the walls of Museum of the Bible continue to be a vital aspect of engagement for initiatives. What begins as a traveling exhibit can prompt the spark that brings about dialogue and action intended to create a movement of engagement in others. Museum of the Bible sets up all our exhibits with the anticipation for next steps, initiatives and personal interaction. For example, in 2012 Museum of the Bible was invited by the Pope to exhibit at the Vatican and to work with the Vatican Library. This exhibit, called *Verbum Domini* (2012) and later *Verbum Domini II* (2014) led Pope Benedict to request that MOTB take the exhibit to Cuba. Museum of the Bible created an exhibit called *La Biblia*, which was designed to be able to speak to the greater Hispanic communities around the world, many of whom we are now able to engage with. From this formal request and amidst the venues of the Catholic and Protestant Churches of Havana and Santiago, an initiative driven by a Cuban organization called *GlaDios* requested that MOTB help find 600 Bibles for distribution. Through the work of our Americana Curator, Norm Conrad and an anonymous donor, 600 Spanish Bibles were delivered to this organization. *GlaDios* has since picked up the mantle of the exhibit, *La Biblia*, by continuing to teach the history of how we got the Bible by way of illustrated vinyl posters.

It is worth noting that Museum of the Bible has exhibited in areas whose demographics are primarily Catholic, including Vatican City, Cuba and Argentina. These venues have been beautifully installed and personally curated by MOTB to tell the story of these sacred texts and noteworthy materials. Long-term relationships and Bible initiatives continue to be formed from these impactful exhibits.

When exhibits work together with university librarians and professors, there is, without fail, a surge of interreligious dialogue due to initiative-generated projects. This intentional excitement provides a foundation for societal solidarity and functional momentum for that campus. For example, two of Museum of the Bible's exhibits, *Sacra Pagina* and *Passages*, are wonderful examples of this. *Sacra Pagina*, or *Sacred Pages*, was designed to travel specifically to university campuses and share the historical story and transmission of the Bible with

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.worldcat.org/title/dead-sea-scrolls-fragments-in-the-museum-collection/oclc/962730414&referer=brief\\_results](https://www.worldcat.org/title/dead-sea-scrolls-fragments-in-the-museum-collection/oclc/962730414&referer=brief_results)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.museumofthebible.org/traveling-exhibits>

students. Professors and Librarians were contacted first to recruit educational interest and curriculum credit for attendance. These two exhibits alone help create a stronger bond on each campus when talking about interreligious and scholarly pursuits pertaining to the Bible. Azusa Pacific University in California has openly welcomed us to talk with Rare Books Librarian, Ken Otto, about exhibiting and researching its Dead Sea Scrolls Collection as well as its complete collection of all the American President's signatures and nearly all their wives. At Claremont University in California we were also invited to set up a small Coptic exhibit through our Scholar's Initiative Program, which we were able to carry out seamlessly due to the relatively close proximity of our traveling exhibit called Passages for a year. A visual overview of our larger exhibits over the last 7 years can be seen on our website, [museumofthebible.org](http://museumofthebible.org). Please take a look at these rich experiences that have fostered many new relationships and initiative ideas.

Museum of the Bible has a floor in the museum called "Impact of the Bible" which includes the impact on America, civil rights and on the world. MOTB partners with many organizations which have relevant materials that represent culturally impactful movements pertaining to the Bible. Two examples among libraries are the Billy Graham Library<sup>6</sup> out of North Carolina showing significant impact on the Civil Rights movement and a private collection library out of Kentucky holding extensive collections for science, including works by Newton, Mundi and Galileo. In these partnerships, loans for materials are exchanged, rotated and exhibited. A few examples are Billy Graham's Bibles with his notes, as he is an American Preacher with enormous political and family impact since the 1950's, a ceremonious Indian Headdress given to him, and a pair of boots given to Dr. Graham by a soldier in the Korean war. From the private library, which we are working on acquiring, first edition printings by famous scientists are among the highlights. These types of artefacts invoke personal interreligious dialogue when discussed even outside of Museum of the Bible's walls and have deliberately prompted many to engage with interreligious dialogue at other venues and initiatives.

One exhibit that we are anticipating is The Bavarian State Library Special Exhibit called "Jesus Baby" in Museum of the Bible's lower level B1 area C opening October 1<sup>st</sup>, just in time for the Christmas season and our Grand Opening Events. Dr. David Trobisch has been working with Dr. Claudia Fabian, Head of Manuscripts and Rare Book Department at Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, München to bring this exhibit to fruition. We believe this will spark many to engage with the Bible and we look forward to seeing the impact and future requests for this exhibit.

It is important to note that this year marks the 500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation. Museum of the Bible's collection, in conjunction with and appreciation of other European Collections has made this 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary exhibition in Germany possible this past Summer 2017. MOTB receives numerous requests for Reformation exhibits and presentations on a regular basis.

3) **Digital Humanities** is the world-wide, ever growing initiative committed to the open sharing of collections and is of the utmost value to Museum of the Bible due to intercultural, academic and interreligious purposes. MOTB firmly believes in sharing its collections digitally through these open-access resources and is working diligently to be an integral part of this global initiative. Museum of the Bible is among the most technologically focused museums in the world, utilizing all mediums of technology including: innovative digital docents; a Radio Minute each day; virtual reality and audio-visual experiences; augmented

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<sup>6</sup> <https://billygrahamlibrary.org/billy-graham/>

reality curriculum; research conducted with multi-spectral imaging and infrared imaging; and a live time capsule called the Joshua Machine to enter your data for posterity when you visit us in Washington D.C.

Museum of the Bible actively seeks to engage with those who are active in the online, open-access digitization projects. We are currently in the process of openly sharing our collections for the mutual benefit of all. MOTB has talked with the American Theological Library Association to see how we can partner with them, we have begun working with Iimage Retrieval Inc to upgrade and add to our scanners, we have attended Relindial SIG's conversations, as well as others on digital humanities, and we have considered utilizing a global mobilized digitization initiative in order to begin working alongside multiple partners and open-access digital portals. In addition, Museum of the Bible is now entering into a partnership with the American Bible Society who, like MOTB, is committed to the pursuit of open access collaboration world-wide. Please reach out to us if you are interested in letting us be a part of what you are doing and in streamlining this initiative.

4) **Cultural Initiatives** naturally occur for Museum of the Bible when we reach out to others within the context of our other initiatives and collaborations. Museum of the Bible seeks to come alongside these culturally significant exchanges and experiences whenever resources are available. Conferences, lectures and performances are some other ways in which we regularly achieve this shared goal of interreligious dialogue demonstrating societal solidarity. For instance, MOTB currently has a minimum of 118 bookings for Museum of the Bible's Performing Arts Center in Washington D.C. beginning November 17, 2017. If you are interested in seeing our home operation and initiative based-learning, please come!

MOTB houses the Sofer Library, a catalogued collection representing the Talmudic diaspora and Hebrew studies located in the heart of the Midwest at the Beam Library of Oklahoma Christian University in Oklahoma. This library initiative actively seeks out ways to engage scholars, the local community and on-site students to these primary sources and to dig deeper into topics involving biblical studies, Semitic studies, linguistics and Talmudic studies. Students have taken the initiative of using the Sofer Library for select projects through their Honors' Symposium presentations and Sofer Library student workers create and lead brown bag lunches with topics pertaining to this library collection. This collection also led to a seminar series on Hebrew Studies specifically to engage in interreligious dialogue with the surrounding local community in 2017.

Museum of the Bible is a museum, not a library, therefore, we work closely with libraries to care, catalogue and preserve thousands of rare books and bibles. MOTB maintains and welcomes vital partnerships with libraries to engage with ongoing relevant conversations within local cultures, academic and historical projects. We are especially grateful for our local partner at the Beam Library on the campus of Oklahoma Christian University for their facilities and expertise.

Museum of the Bible partners with Every Tribe Every Nation (ETEN) to showcase the Illuminations Initiative and Exhibit. This allows anyone to look at, hold and read from every indigenous translation of the Bible ever printed, even from the most remote places. When you visit Illuminations in Washington D.C., you can hold in your hands and read the Bible from your native language, or from the language and region where your family is from. As more Bibles are translated into native tongues, they will be added in the years to come. ETEN has recorded this linguistic endeavour to be about halfway done as of June 2017 at just over 3000

translations.<sup>7</sup> Museum of the Bible currently exhibits indigenous Bibles and materials such as the Venezuelan Yanomamo Bible in the Ark Encounter, Kentucky and the Algonquin, or Eliot Indian Bible from Massachusetts, and a Western Aranda Australian aboriginal iconographic painting by Ruth Cook<sup>8</sup> in other exhibits outside of our walls. We take pride in recognizing and engaging with others through the native languages.

Museum of the Bible conducts ongoing research with African collections, specifically in the areas of Coptic studies, genizah materials and Faiyum discoveries such as the beautiful Faiyum mummy portraits. We also feature the Miracles of Mary, processional crosses and other Ethiopic texts for exhibits and for study. MOTB works with Dr. Mersha Alehegne from Addis Ababa University in Ethiopia and Curt Niccum from Abilene Christian University, who will be leading the Ethiopic Psalters Initiative this year from the Graduate School of Theology in Ethiopia. This initiative has an abundance of rich cultural and historical potential. Recently, a family from Ethiopia visited one of our Ethiopic galleries. While visiting with them we learned that these sacred materials are still important to their culture today and that they would share with others in their country that we are honoring and accurately exhibiting their customs and sacred texts. Museum of the Bible believes that all sacred materials around the world have a place for engagement with the Bible. Contextual themes and cultural richness of these materials and customs provide a wealth of information and dialogue that will never run dry.

### **Interreligious Dialogue and Societal Solidarity among World-Wide Engagement**

Outside the walls of Museum of the Bible, we intentionally reach out to others through our collections with an unbiased lens to help weave together the ongoing story of history's interreligious dialogue. There is both an academic side and a humanitarian side to every initiative between societies and all are inherently intertwined. Museum of the Bible strives to function as an ongoing catalyst to invite all people to engage in interreligious conversations, particularly those surrounding the Bible. Within communities, we serve as a catalyst to openly share and come to understand the cultural heart in order to bring together interreligious diversity. Museum of the Bible listens to find out exactly what the other partner or community's intrinsic values and objectives are for an initiative, exhibit or a combination of both. MOTB dedicates our efforts to being a catalyst for biblical/cultural research and we help conserve sacred texts and artefacts such as Abilene Christian University's Waynai Bible, the largest Bible in the world, which we have just completed its conservation on for a greater use.

While interreligious dialogues are not without complication, the fact that we have challenges amidst these conversations at times should not deter us from having continued dialogue and exchanges on interreligious matters. Solidarity of purpose among societies is a beneficial cause for all of humanity and serves to inspire and enrich clear communication and understanding for all involved. Museum of the Bible recognizes intrinsic, or essential, values of a community as the driving force behind every society and every individual. It is vital to all initiatives to tap into these intrinsic values to reach the heart and to stir a movement.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.everytribeeverynation.org/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://www.dropbox.com/s/k4y2mqoztra6y7g/36\\_Cook\\_Last%20Supper.tif?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/k4y2mqoztra6y7g/36_Cook_Last%20Supper.tif?dl=0)