

Museum to feature treasure trove of biblical artifacts

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April 1, 2011

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A new multimillion-dollar, high-tech, interactive museum of the Bible was announced Thursday amid 130 artifacts of the Good Book at a private exhibition at the Vatican Embassy.

The exhibit was a sample of Jewish, Roman Catholic and Protestant treasures from the future museum's 10,000 manuscripts and texts, one of the world's largest biblical collections.

Some were as old as pages of the gospel in the Aramaic of Jesus' time; as political as the only Bible edition ever authorized by the U.S. Congress; as treasured as first editions of the majestic King James Version (KJV), displayed near the king's own seal.

These will form the basis for "a public museum designed to engage people in the history and the impact of the Bible," said museum sponsor Steve Green, an evangelical businessman and owner of the Oklahoma City-based craft chain Hobby Lobby.

The Green family has amassed the world's largest collection of ancient biblical manuscripts and texts including his favorite: the 1782 Aitken Bible authorized by Congress.

While the location, architecture and even the museum's name are still in the works, 300 highlights of the Green Collection will go on tour beginning at the Oklahoma Museum of Art on May 16. The traveling exhibit, called Passages, will move to the Vatican in October and New York City by Christmas.

The announcement was made at the Vatican Embassy to highlight Catholic contributions to the best-loved English text, the 400-year-old KJV, which draws about 80 percent of its majestic language from an earlier translation by a Catholic priest.

Meanwhile, scholars at 30 universities worldwide are burrowing into rare texts from the collection and pioneering technology that enables them to bring out the ancient words in the most faded and printed-over manuscripts, said Scott Carroll, director of the collection and research professor of manuscript studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Carroll's primary focus has been finding and authenticating ancient manuscripts that can deepen -- or alter -- "our understanding of the word of God. The Bible didn't come from the sky as tablets handed to Moses on Mount Sinai and then wind up in a hotel desk drawer," Carroll said.

"The Bible is not in a lockbox. It changes across time," he said, pointing to the earliest known manuscript fragment of Genesis, a section of the Dead Sea Scrolls, a Jewish Torah (the five books of Moses) from the time of the Spanish Inquisition, and more.

Passages will also address the dramatic struggles behind the texts, as translations are a matter of life, death and eternal fate to believers. The illustrated frontispiece of one King James Version shows the king flanked by people who would be burned at the stake within 10 years.

"Translating a Bible is a soap opera of moving political and spiritual parts," Carroll said.

There are already U.S. museums centered on the Bible. The Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky., was established by conservative evangelicals to walk people through a literal reading of the Bible. The same group is launching a Noah's Ark theme park, set to open in 2014 in northern Kentucky.

And the Museum of Biblical Art in Manhattan was established by the American Bible Society, which has a Christian evangelizing mission.

Green and Carroll say their museum, opening by 2016, has no theological agenda.

"Think of the great new science museums that take you inside how things work, or the Folger Library's public and scholarly center for Shakespeare," Carroll said. "This will be our approach to the Bible. It's a museum, not a ministry."

Highlights of the Green Collection include:

-- The Codex Climaci Rescriptus, one of the world's earliest surviving Bibles. Using a new technology developed by the Green Collection in collaboration with Oxford University, scholars have uncovered the earliest surviving New Testament written in Palestinian Aramaic -- the language used in Jesus' household -- found on recycled parchment.

-- One of the largest collections of cuneiform clay tablets in the Western Hemisphere.

-- The second-largest private collection of Dead Sea Scrolls, all of which are unpublished and likely to substantially contribute to an understanding of the earliest surviving texts in the Bible.

-- The world's largest private collection of Jewish scrolls, spanning more than 700 years of history, dating to the Spanish Inquisition.

-- Previously unpublished biblical and classical papyri, including surviving texts dating to the time of the now-lost Library of Alexandria.

-- The earliest-known, near-complete translation of the Psalms to (Middle) English.

-- A number of the earliest printed texts, including a large portion of the Gutenberg Bible and the world's only complete Block Bible in private hands.

- Early tracts and Bibles of Martin Luther, including a little-known letter written the night before Luther's excommunication.
- Numerous items illustrating the contribution of Jews and Catholics to the King James translation of the Bible and other historical effects.