

Why did the Museum of the Bible's scholars destroy ancient Egyptian artifacts?

Christian apologists say they found New Testament fragments in mummy masks. It's a dubious claim.

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An Egyptian funeral mask

When Josh McDowell decided to purchase a 500-year-old Torah scroll in 2013, he wasn't seeking a collector's item. McDowell is a Christian apologist well known in evangelical circles, especially for his 1972 book *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*. In that book and many others, he lays out his defense of the historical accuracy of the Bible and the pristine transmission of the text from the time of its original writing down to the present. McDowell regards the reliability of textual transmission as a crucial part of defending the Bible itself as the source of authority.

At speaking engagements around the world, McDowell brings his Torah scroll with him, holding it up, literally, as a witness to the accuracy and authenticity of the Bible's message. That today's text is identical to the text of a 16th-century scroll is evidence, for him, that God has provided for the perfect transmission of the biblical text across the centuries. "It helped me explain how scripture was truly reliable in ways I had never dreamed possible," McDowell wrote on his website.

Having seen how effective the Torah scroll was with his audience, McDowell hoped to acquire an ancient fragment of the New Testament—a scrap of papyrus containing a few words of the New Testament and dating from the centuries just after Jesus.

"Displaying such an artifact to thousands upon thousands of young people and adults alike," he wrote, "would bring them face to face with the reality of the written truth about Christ and his life-transforming message." The older a biblical manuscript is, McDowell reasoned, the more trustworthy it is.

Ancient manuscripts of the New Testament are hard to come by. Most are housed in libraries at places like Yale, Oxford, and the Vatican. Those that occasionally crop up on the open market are sold for extravagant prices by auction houses like Christie's or Sotheby's. McDowell needed a different avenue for acquiring one of his own, and he knew where to look: inside ancient Egyptian funerary masks, or mummy masks.

Mummy masks conjure up for most people the image of King Tutankhamen's funeral mask, which is richly decorated with gold, glass, and precious stones. But funerary masks were produced for nonroyal Egyptians as well, albeit in considerably more mundane fashion. Typically, layers of linen or papyrus were cut into strips, moistened with water, and glued together in the form of a face—essentially the same process that is used to make papier-mâché masks today. The compressed substructure, called cartonnage, was then overlaid with plaster, and the face of the

deceased painted on it.

For the ancient Egyptians, the funeral mask was a way to ease the transition into the afterlife and ensure a positive reception by the gods. For modern scholars, these masks are a potential trove of information about the history and culture of Egypt 2,000 years ago. If the papyrus strips have writing on them, they can be an invaluable source for reconstructing daily life in the ancient world. Some discovered papyrus strips have contained fragments of marriage contracts, financial records, and, in a few rare cases, bits of poetry, epigrams, historical chronicles, or philosophical works. What was trash—or, more accurately, recycling—to the people who made the masks is treasure for scholars.

The possibility of recovering ancient texts from the cartonnage of Egyptian mummy masks came to the attention of evangelical collectors and apologists like McDowell primarily through the work of Scott Carroll. Trained in ancient languages and history at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, Carroll has made a career acting as an agent for individual collectors, most recently for the Green family, which owns the Hobby Lobby company, possesses one of the world's largest collections of biblical artifacts, and is the force behind the Museum of the Bible which opened in November in Washington, D.C.

A self-styled Indiana Jones figure—during one of our conversations with him, his cell phone rang with the theme music of the *Indiana Jones* films—Carroll travels the world identifying and purchasing ancient manuscripts. In the late 2000s, in the early days of his work on behalf of the Greens, Carroll acquired some mummy masks in the hope of finding priceless manuscripts inside.

It was at an event associated with the Green family that McDowell first learned about Carroll and mummy masks. In 2011, Carroll gave students and faculty members in Baylor University's classics department a hands-on lesson in how these masks could be dissected. As the students worked through the papyri, they were duly astonished to find a Greek script from 2,000 years ago brought to light before their eyes.

To make the demonstration more impressive, Carroll had brought along a selection of other texts that he claimed had been discovered in the same way, including a fragment of the New Testament, billed in the department's newsletter as "one of the very earliest New Testament copies known." As McDowell wrote after witnessing the

show at Baylor, “If anyone could locate an ancient New Testament fragment for us, it was Scott Carroll.”

The Green family’s traveling exhibit of their collection—which was created by Carroll—displayed a mummy mask alongside a manuscript of the biblical book of Samuel from the fourth or fifth century CE. The promotional website for the exhibit promised “an archaeological tent site revealing how biblical texts are recovered from ancient Egyptian mummy masks.” At an annual Green-sponsored event for Christian students held in Oxford, scholars working for the Greens walked students through the process of recovering papyri from a mummy mask.

In 2012, Dan Wallace, a scholar at Dallas Theological Seminary, announced that he had seen the earliest manuscript of the New Testament ever discovered—a fragment of the Gospel of Mark from the first century—within decades of the Gospel’s composition, which is usually estimated at around 70 CE. Two years later, this account seemed to be confirmed by Craig Evans at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia, who mentioned the find at the 2014 Apologetics Canada conference. Both scholars are affiliated with the Green family, and both claimed that they were limited by a nondisclosure agreement in what they could say about the text.

News of the find circulated, along with a new bit of information: this remarkable text came, it was claimed, from the cartonnage of a mummy mask. The *International Business Times* website even published a picture of the mask in which the Mark fragment was purportedly found. (Carroll may have been involved in this as well: at the 2015 National Conference on Christian Apologetics, in a public conversation with McDowell, Carroll said that he too had seen the first-century Mark papyrus.)

In December 2013, McDowell held an invitation-only event called “Discover the Evidence” for Christian apologists and leaders, led by Carroll, at which two masks Carroll had acquired for McDowell were investigated. McDowell recalled that he had whispered under his breath, “Thank you, Lord!” when Carroll announced the discovery of biblical texts. The fact that these texts had been copied and recopied in antiquity, and that they had been preserved over the centuries, was seen by McDowell as a sign of divine intervention.

“It seems clear that God’s hand has been in all this,” he wrote about the event. “God had previously granted us a Hebrew Torah. Now added to that were seven papyrus fragments which would powerfully reinforce to young people and adults around the

world that God’s Word is supernaturally inspired and absolutely reliable.” In the expanded and updated version of *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* published in October of this year, he puts it more succinctly: “We believe that God has superintended the preservation of such an abundance of biblical manuscripts.”

In the early 1980s, scholars developed a new method for extracting the papyrus cartonnage from its overlaid plaster, a method that avoided damaging the painted surface. Although relatively easy and inexpensive, the process is time-consuming, taking about a week from start to finish. This may not seem long, but it doesn’t allow for a one-day presentation of the sort led by McDowell and Carroll. For their purposes, a faster method was needed. They used an older method, developed in the 19th century.

That process can be seen in a YouTube video, dated January 2012, and seemingly produced by or for the Green Scholars Initiative, the scholarly arm of the Green family’s Bible collection. The video features Carroll leading a group—including McDowell—in the dismantling of a mummy mask.

In a large sink full of warm soapy water, Carroll submerges and massages the mask, loosening the papyrus pieces so that they can be separated, dried, and examined for potential treasure. In the process, the funerary painting dissolves, leaving behind a soggy lump of plaster.

For those hunting only for early Christian manuscripts, the destruction of the mask is an easy trade-off. A tiny scrap of the New Testament is more precious than any mummy mask.

Evans, the scholar at Acadia, said the masks being destroyed this way are “not museum-quality.” But that judgment depends on what kind of museum one is talking about. The question also depends on the type of value one means: financial value and cultural value are not the same. It is certainly hard to imagine that in a non-Christian culture a one-square-inch piece of papyrus with a couple of Greek letters on it would be considered “museum-quality.” It also matters who is evaluating the museum-worthiness of the masks. Early Christian papyri are obviously valuable in the Christian West; it is not clear that they would be as valuable in Egypt, say, or more valuable than an intact mask.

The quality of the mask destroyed in the process seems not to have been a consideration for Carroll and colleagues. On Facebook in 2012, Carroll posted:

“Encountered a room literally filled with mummy masks, lined on the inside with papyri containing lost texts, and the outside of the masks were covered with imperishable gold—what’s on the inside is much more precious than what’s on the outside.”

For Carroll, the masks are mere containers and are therefore disposable. That they are religious artifacts in their own right, used in ancient sacred rites of burial—these are literally the faces of the dead, commissioned by their loved ones to transport them to the afterlife—is ignored.

In the scholarly world, the soap-and-water method of dissolving mummy masks is no longer used. “Even if practiced occasionally, particularly in scholarly collections even into the 1960s,” writes classical papyrologist Jaakko Frösén in a 2009 essay about the conservation of papyrus, “this method has been abandoned for obvious reasons as unethical.”

There was a minor stir in scholarly circles a few years ago when Carroll, at the time employed by the Greens, posted to Facebook his plans for a Saturday afternoon: “More mummy masks filled with ancient texts used in their construction are coming in. . . . I think I’ll dissolve them on the new stove to extract the papyri while I watch college football!”

Carroll is aware of the ethical issues involved. In the YouTube video he explains that some people are uncomfortable with the total destruction of masks. Defending the choice to destroy the mask rather than attempt to preserve it, Carroll appeals to an oft-repeated argument, drawing an analogy with traditional archaeology. Excavation is an inherently destructive process in which one layer of earth and artifacts must be removed in order to access the one beneath it. Researchers can photograph and document the materials, but they have little compunction about moving on to the next layer down. The comparison fails, however, because there are, in fact, methods for removing the papyri while still preserving the mask—methods that Carroll acknowledges in the video.

At the heart of the mummy mask project is a deep belief in the divine protection of the text of the Christian scriptures and in their inerrant transmission across the millennia. “You can open up the Bible and be pretty confident to say, ‘Thus sayeth the Lord,’” McDowell tells his audiences.

But those audiences are being misled about the meaning of the fragments and about their relevance to claims for inerrant transmission. Scholars who study the history of the biblical text know that we don't possess the original copies (sometimes called "the autographs") of the Gospels, Paul's letters, or other canonical texts, and that the original version of the New Testament is fundamentally unrecoverable. The diversity of the versions that we have of these texts is such that scholars regularly identify different families and types of texts.

While the agnostic scholar Bart Ehrman is being sensationalistic when he says there are more mistakes in the extant manuscripts of the New Testament than there are words in them, it is not true, as Steve Green claims, that the only textual discrepancies are spelling errors. Some important and even famous biblical passages have a controverted textual history: the last 12 verses of the Gospel of Mark appear to have been added to the original text some time in the second century; the story of the woman taken in adultery found in the Gospel of John, containing the famous words "He who is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone," appears first in the textual record in a fifth-century document; and the sole explicit New Testament reference to the Trinity, in the First Epistle of John, hasn't been found in any manuscripts written before the ninth century. Displaying an individual New Testament manuscript that is identical with a modern Bible does not offer any general evidence about the reliability of textual transmission.

Even more illusory is the notion that ancient pieces of the New Testament can be found in mummy masks. This is an illusion for a simple reason: the Egyptian practice of using recycled papyrus in mummy masks ended before the Christian era began. Egypt was a part of the Roman Empire, and the use of cartonnage in mummy masks continued through the seventh century CE. But every scholar we have spoken to, including the world-renowned papyrologist Roger Bagnall of New York University, affirms that there are no examples of cartonnage that uses recycled papyrus after the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus, which ended in 14 CE. After that point, mummy masks were backed with linen or other fibers. Given that the date of Jesus' death is typically located somewhere between 30 and 33 CE—well after the reign of Augustus—it would seem that there is simply no possibility that a mummy mask could contain any Christian writing whatsoever, for there was no Christianity when these masks were produced.

The fragment touted by Carroll and others as part of a first-century version of the Gospel of Mark remains unpublished. Only a handful of people have claimed to have

seen it, and many in the scholarly world doubt that it exists, though Green declares that he had authorized its purchase. The claim that it was discovered in a mummy mask has since been walked back. And while until recently the Museum of the Bible's website still referred to the potential for discovering biblical texts in mummy masks, current and recent employees have told us that the practice of purchasing and dismantling these artifacts is no longer part of the museum's practice.

What, then, of McDowell's remarkable discoveries? In a fundraising document written in the wake of the Discover the Evidence event, McDowell describes how Carroll had extracted papyri from the cartonnage and found seven biblical texts. McDowell even provides images of the fragments: they are from fourth-century manuscripts of Matthew, Mark, John, and Galatians, and a fifth-century text of Jeremiah. What he does not make clear, however, is that none of these fragments actually came from the two mummy masks that Carroll dissolved that day. They came, rather, from cartonnage used in book bindings from centuries later. (It is not even clear that these texts are what Carroll and McDowell purport them to be. A specialist in papyrology has questioned both the dates assigned to the manuscripts and their identification.) What did come out of McDowell's mummy masks was exactly what one would expect from Ptolemaic Egypt: economic texts, letters, and burial documents.

Carroll told us, "I can only say I know what I've seen." No one else has seen the materials, though. And to date, not a single Christian text has been published, formally or informally, that has come from a mummy mask.

McDowell is playing to—and banking on—the desire of Christians to have their faith confirmed. But in encouraging them to think that proof of the Bible's authenticity can be found within an ancient Egyptian mummy mask, he is misleading them. Instead of giving a scholarly presentation, he is providing a form of theater: an act of fraudulent colonialist archaeology offering inaccurate "evidence." This kind of fake news does Christian faith no service.

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