Introduction

Bibles are no strangers to Washington DC’s National Mall. When the Smithsonian Institute’s Museum of the American Indian opened in 2004, for example, one of the permanent exhibits included a wall of bibles. The installation showcased the complex history of Christian colonialism by starkly juxtaposing the bibles with guns and (broken) treaties. Visitors were invited to meditate on how biblical translations by ambitious missionaries – often well-meaning and inspirational – were accompanied by violence and deceit, even as the translated messages also became resources for Indigenous resistance to colonizers. But none of the bibles on that wall would have included the apocalyptic pronouncement and warning from Jesus found only in a much older bible, Codex Washingtonianus, held across the Mall at the Smithsonian Institute’s Freer Gallery of Art. “The measure of the years of Satan’s authority has been filled up,” Jesus says here, “But other dreadful things are coming.” Codex Washingtonianus is part of a collection some biblical scholars have dubbed an “American treasure trove,” and this saying of Jesus is known as the “Freer Logion” because of its exclusive appearance in this manuscript. This bible is the most famous of those displayed in a special exhibit that opened at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in 2006. Entitled “In the Beginning: Bibles before the Year 1000,” the installation was created in partnership with the Bodleian Library in Oxford and included significant early Hebrew and Christian biblical texts. The press release announcing the exhibit
extolled the particularity of each bible on display. “Each one has a tale to tell,” it read, “and opens up a landscape populated with colorful human stories.”

Elsewhere on the Mall, the coverless, worn bible of nineteenth-century enslaved preacher and rebellion leader Nat Turner is on display at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). Its small size – only about four inches long by three and a half wide – marks a strong contrast to the cavernous underground exhibit hall in which it has found a home, within an impressive museum installation treating enslavement and freedom in Black history in the United States. Having lost its beginning and end, Turner’s bible no longer stretches from Genesis to Revelation but instead opens with the fourth chapter of Leviticus. Legend has it that Turner was holding this bible when he was captured, and historical records tell us stories of how its contents fired the religious visions that animated his violent revolt against white slavers. In between its possession by Turner, who was valued as property at $375 and was hanged in 1831, and its present location on the National Mall, this bible was gifted by the Virginia courthouse responsible for Turner’s execution to a white family whose ancestors had died in the revolt. The bible’s travels raise stark moral questions that lay bare the persistent legacy of racism and white supremacy in American Christianity. Its context now in the NMAAHC underscores the necessity of tackling difficult issues of ownership – of bibles, of bodies – in our country’s history and present, questions that come into view most clearly when we foreground dynamics of race and oppression, privilege and power.

Another bible featured on the National Mall invites us to reflect on the complex, and at times ambiguous, dynamics of scripture and society among our nation’s founders. Thomas Jefferson’s The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth, popularly known as “The Jefferson Bible,” is now owned by the Smithsonian Institute and in 2011 formed the basis of a celebrated exhibit at the National Museum of American History. Jefferson’s bible is significant not only for its famous original owner but also because of its distinctive production method, a literal cut-and-paste in which Jefferson used a razor to eliminate from his bible anything too supernatural for his rationalist taste and glue to compile a gospel narrative of Jesus without
the Good News that the founding father deemed unbelievable. Jefferson’s handmade bible is the definition of bespoke, made as it was principally for Jefferson’s own use. Its contents differ starkly from those of Turner’s bible, both literally and figuratively. Turner’s bible tells a story of his fight for freedom, hope for a miracle, while that of Jefferson, an enslaver, reveals that he had enough free time and material resources to free his bible from miracles so as to make biblical morality compatible with his vision of himself as a modern, rational man. The histories of these two personal bibles, especially in their differences, promise to complicate and enrich our discussions, narrations, and understandings of US history more broadly.

But what of the Bible? Can the bibles of Nat Turner and Thomas Jefferson tell us anything about the Bible? What of the bibles at the Museum of the American Indian whose ownership is murky and whose legacies are difficult? What of the unusual but very early Freer Codex with the unfamiliar words of Jesus? Can all of these bibles, and any others that have made their way over the years to “America’s front lawn” – whether in protests, proselytizing efforts, or presidential inaugurations – be meaningfully classed together as “The Bible”? The short answer is no. The Bible does not exist. There are only bibles. For centuries, humans have made, circulated, and read bibles of many shapes and sizes, in differing languages, with varied lists of texts, with variant words, with particularized constraints on interpretation and practices of encounter. Those bibles each tell a story of a relationship between a textual object and a person or people. The more interesting answer, though, is “no, but . . .”

No, but . . . the Bible does exist in the realm of the imagination. The Bible exists as a social construct, a cultural icon, a conceptual category that can variously offer affiliation and designate boundaries, platform political aims, and provide ideological resources. The Bible is continually made and remade, discursively. In the chapters that follow, we will only refer to this cultural icon as “the Bible,” while all particular bibles will not be capitalized. We do this to underscore that each of these bibles has its own history, distinct from other bibles, and is connected to, yet different from, the Bible as cultural icon.

There is a relatively new bible now on display among DC’s institutions of national public memory: the one produced by the privately owned,
aspirationally named Museum of the Bible. Founded, funded, and led by the Oklahoma-based Green family, the white evangelical owners of Hobby Lobby with a combined personal net worth of over $7 billion, the Museum of the Bible (MOTB) opened in 2017 only a couple of blocks from the National Mall. Located among the Smithsonian museums, this 500-million-dollar institution purports to guide visitors through a selection of forty thousand Bible-related artifacts and a series of interactive, immersive experiences intended to recreate the narratives, lands, and even foods of the Bible. Over 1 million people visited the MOTB in its first year of operation, its guest list including national and international religious leaders and a host of government officials. This institution has made waves in the national press, notably because of its material and financial connections to the Hobby Lobby antiquities smuggling scandals and revelations that some of the MOTB’s most popular biblical artifacts are in reality modern forgeries.

As in any museum, the visitor experience at the MOTB is impacted by the decisions of donors who have selected the institution for their contributions, of curators who have chosen which material to display, of designers who have created experiential opportunities to educate as well as entertain, of artists and content consultants who have fabricated visual and auditory materials, of educational programmers who plan and host events. We are interested in how these elements and more combine in the MOTB, as a privately funded endeavor in a public arena, to produce the Bible. There are a lot of bibles inside the MOTB. But the Museum of the Bible, in its very name, trades on the fantasy that there exists a single bible, the Bible. We find it analytically productive to approach the museum itself as a sort of bible, one you can walk through page by page. By design, the MOTB must cut and paste what it will include, like Jefferson did. With use, the MOTB’s cover is wearing off as its bible, like Turner’s, animates political discourse and advocacy. As with Codex Washingtonianus, the museum’s bible has its own distinctive Jesus. And, like those bibles in the Museum of the American Indian, this museum’s bible deserves analysis for whose interests it serves and protects.

The chapters that follow explore the contours of the museum’s bible, not only what it says but also where it came from and how it works – and for whom. We argue that the MOTB produces and advertises a white
evangelical bible, one which authorizes white evangelical privilege in the United States, authenticates the usable pasts that animate white evangelical aspirations, and protects white evangelicals from critique. The museum’s bible limits visitors’ moral horizons in ways consistent with trends in white evangelicalism more broadly. Systems are obscured from view. Reckonings with racist pasts are made uncomplicated as this bible unburdens white Christian visitors from critically examining their tradition’s complicity in and perpetration of harm. This museum’s bible writes evangelical Christian insiderness into both country and cosmos.

Further, we read the MOTB as an institution that not only produces and markets this particular bible but also claims ownership over the Bible as it collapses or obscures important conceptual distinctions between the museum’s bible and the Bible as cultural icon.

The MOTB is housed in an old refrigerated warehouse built in the 1920s that later served as the Washington Design Center. The MOTB’s renovations have transformed the building into a monument to its bible – conceived as the Bible – with multistoried golden “Gutenberg
Gates” welcoming visitors at the entrance. A large, elongated LED screen adorns the lobby’s interior ceiling, supported by shiny pillars of polished white Jerusalem stone. The screen’s rotating images of biblical art and stained glass windows make the museum feel a bit like a modern cathedral, or a tech-savvy megachurch sanctuary, sitting as it does alongside a Bible-themed coffee house and a gift shop. This first floor is where those visitors who pass security purchase entrance tickets to the museum. Once free to enter, the MOTB now charges admission of between $9.99 and $24.99. Floor 1 is likely not where most visitors spend the bulk of their time, as none of the permanent exhibits occupy this space. But the combination of opportunities on the first floor illustrates the particularities of this museum. One can wander from a room dedicated to a Vatican-sponsored special exhibit that features mostly replicas, to a virtual reality experience with spinning stools and headsets that take you to places in “biblical” Israel, to the MOTB’s Bible-themed amusement arcade and playscape for the youngest of its visitors, and finally to the MOTB shop.

Let’s, for a moment, envision a trio of activities available here that helps us highlight further the constructedness of the visitors’ experience in the MOTB. The first of the three is inside the Vatican Museum-curated exhibit room. Here we find a replica of the fourth-century Codex Vaticanus encased in glass available for visitors’ cursory inspection as they stand between art-covered walls that recall the Vatican’s magisterial interiors. Codex Vaticanus is one of the three oldest biblical codices written in uncial (upper-case) characters. The manuscript is important to scholars interested in biblical textual criticism who endeavor to construct critical editions of the Septuagint (Greek translations of Hebrew scriptures) and the New Testament. Yet, unlike in the Sackler Gallery’s “In the Beginning: Bibles before the Year 1,000” exhibit that featured Codex Washingtonianus, here the installation is not built around an actual artifact. Rather, it’s a reproduction. The replica works to invoke the presence of a famous biblical artifact – likely for the purposes of respectability and the creation of an aura of antiquity and thus perceived authenticity – but does not produce the thing itself. A Bible Museum should, the logic would go, include a very old important witness to the biblical text. And so here one has been fabricated, revealing the
curators’ and designers’ ability to transcend constraints that would have been created by limiting the museum’s scope to its own collection of artifacts.\textsuperscript{16}

Available nearby is our second activity worth reading in tandem, inside the children’s experience called “Courageous Pages,” which feels a bit like a Christian Chuck-E-Cheese.\textsuperscript{17} Here museum guests both big and small can stand between two spring-loaded pillars for a memorable photo op,
pretending to be a heroic Samson pushing the pillars apart with super strength. In the biblical story, found in Judges 13–16, Israelite judge Samson is a violent, vengeful, riddle-telling trickster whose antics finally lead him to capture by his enemies, the Philistines. He pushes the pillars apart in Judges 16:30: “Then Samson said, ‘Let me die with the Philistines.’ He strained with all his might; and the house fell on the lords and all the people who were in it. So those he killed at his death were more than those he had killed during his life” (NRSV). We emphasize here the gruesomeness of this bloody biblical murder-suicide to underscore the strangeness of including a reenactment of the moment in a playful children’s exhibit. It makes sense, of course, when one considers that religious insiders regularly sanitize biblical stories to transform them into morality tales that are palatable and useful for teaching desired values. In this case, Samson is meant to teach the value of courage, no matter the consequences.

Our final stop on the first floor of the MOTB is the gift shop. Here, all visitors are also consumers – and potential owners. A great number of books are available for purchase, some bibles, some books about the Bible written by mainstream scholars, and several books authored by various members of the Green family. But the gift shop is not principally a bookstore. One could also buy a paperweight depicting a half-clothed Vashti from the story of Esther, a four-ounce glass jar of “biblical nuts in honey,” expensive fine jewelry imported from Israel, a MOTB-branded fanny pack or tie, a replica of a Dead Sea Scroll, or one of many trendy home decor items bearing the words “God is love” that would look just as comfortable in a Hobby Lobby store.

We have thus moved from admiring a replica of Codex Vaticanus to imitating Samson in his moment of death to purchasing a bible-themed souvenir that is commodified, transportable, possessable. The combination illustrates well the point that the designers’ and curators’ choices in this museum were not dictated by actual artifacts – bibles – from the bottom up, but rather by a broader series of concerns involving effective storycraft, bids for respectability, and persuasive marketing. The museum thus crafts a bible that feels natural to some populations of visitors while presenting itself as offering unmediated access to the Bible. We highlight and interrogate this unacknowledged role of the museum as producer of this bible in the chapters that follow.
Climbing the stairs one level, we find what the MOTB calls the Impact of the Bible floor, comprised of a threefold installation series: “Bible in America,” “Bible in the World,” and “Bible Now.” A thrill ride named Washington Revelations completes the exhibit hall. Next up is the Stories of the Bible floor, with a special effects-filled Hebrew Bible/Old Testament experience, a “reconstructed” ancient Galilean village called “The World of Jesus of Nazareth,” and a Hollywood-style theater featuring a film about the New Testament. The museum’s fourth level is dubbed the History of the Bible floor and is advertised as using ancient artifacts and modern bibles to show how we got the Bible most visitors recognize and to track its worldwide distribution. Above that is a floor with a large Tabernacle-shaped theater. The opening ticketed show in this “World Stage Theater” was Amazing Grace: The Musical and the theater serves as a daytime venue for the museum’s regular “Public Readings of Scripture Experience.” Next door is a small installation curated by the Israel Antiquities Authority. On the museum’s top floor is the MOTB’s restaurant, called Manna, a Bible-themed garden, and a covered deck with spectacular views overlooking the US Capitol at one end and the Washington Monument at the other.

Yet the MOTB is more than its DC exhibits. The institution advertises a research arm and education initiatives. It also originally had its own press imprint, through evangelical Christian publishing house Worthy Books, and it continues to put on a regular speaker series, develop a robust social media presence and online store, and host events in its for-rent event spaces ranging from film screenings to political organizing to podcast recordings to concerts. Social media posts reveal that evangelical film production and distribution company Pure Flix put on its first showing of God’s Not Dead: A Light in the Darkness at the MOTB. A MOTB executive at that time, Tony Zeiss, appears in promotional material filmed inside the museum saying: “We are very, very pleased that this film was first screened at the Museum of the Bible. My take is it’s gonna be wonderful affirmation for the faithful and it’s going to bring hope to those who are a little less faithful.” Christian rock band Newsboys and then Vice President Mike Pence with Second Lady Karen Pence were in attendance as well. In January 2020, coinciding with that year’s anti-abortion March for Life rally, the MOTB was host to an
“Evangelicals for Life” gathering, an evangelical antichoice conference put on in part by the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.23 Around the same time, the Christian Broadcasting Network filmed inside the MOTB to interview Fox News anchor and Liberty University graduate Shannon Bream about her book *Finding the Bright Side*.24 That same month, Colorado Christian University’s annual president’s dinner25 took place in a MOTB event space, an event in which Trump-appointed Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos made inflammatory comments comparing contemporary pro-choice policies to the proslavery movement during Abraham Lincoln’s presidential tenure.26 The Green family has also made use of the MOTB as a filming location, this time for a Bible study published by Lifeway, the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention. The bible produced by the MOTB is constructed not only through its exhibits but also by the constellation of political and religious actors that fill its spaces, aligning their own policies, ideologies, actions, and money with *The Bible* by their very presence in the MOTB.

In its relatively short existence, the MOTB has changed its mission statement several times. In its first filing as a nonprofit in 2010, its mission statement struck a decidedly fundamentalist Christian tone: “To bring to life the living word of God, to tell its compelling story of preservation, and to inspire confidence in the absolute authority and reliability of the Bible.” As Candida Moss and Joel Baden have documented, the original statement was changed two years later.27 That updated mission – “to invite all people to engage with the Bible” – borrowed language from the American Bible Society (ABS), a large and long-standing Christian ministry of bible distribution. As evangelical scholar of American history John Fea has pointed out, the updated mission statement remained evangelistic in aim and practice without the obvious proselytizing of the original statement.28 Though the 2012 mission statement reflected a public relations drive to present the MOTB as an educational resource and hub of research, it still demonstrated the evangelistic goals that led to the MOTB’s founding. Since then, the museum has changed its mission statement once again, a fact that was revealed when the *Washington Post* reported that the MOTB threatened to sue the mayor of Washington DC.29 Frustrated by the city’s Covid-19 closures, the MOTB reportedly