To visit Steve Green's office on the outskirts of Oklahoma City one must drive down what seems like a very long stretch of road, along which a new Hobby Lobby headquarters building appears out the window every 30 seconds or so. Real estate. Marketing. Human resources. Finally the executive offices. The size of this company—and its impact on Oklahoma—becomes obvious on this drive. The numbers on this privately held business reinforce the point: Hobby Lobby and its affiliates employ 28,000 people, have combined sales of $3.3 billion, and operate retail craft stores at more than 600 locations.

But Steve Green, who helped his father build the company and is now president, has more than business on his mind. These days he spends about 75 percent of his time, he explains in his soft Oklahoma drawl, on a philanthropic project. He's creating the Museum of the Bible.

Green and his family have spent the last five years gathering what is now one of the world's largest collections of Biblical artifacts, featuring 40,000 antiquities—everything from one of the largest private collections of Dead Sea scrolls, to Torahs that survived the Holocaust, to Elvis Presley's personal copy of the Good Book. They then spent $50 million to buy the Washington Design Center, a hulking brick structure just blocks from the National Mall, to house the collection. Now the sound of construction can be heard on the first floor of the building, and the Green family hopes to open the doors of a powerful new museum in 2017.

Philanthropy sat down with Steve Green to talk about the museum and what he wants visitors to learn there.

Philanthropy: Why is the Bible so important to you and your family?
Green: Our family has had a love of the Bible passed down for several generations. My father was a minister. My grandmother worked in youth camps. My parents grew up in Christian homes and were given a love for the Bible, and they taught us to have a love for God's word. As a company we have supported Bible distribution around the world. My brother has a Christian book supply store. So it was just a natural fit for us to put up a Bible museum.

Years ago I committed to reading the Bible daily. It's exciting to glean a new understanding of a verse you didn't see before. And then there are times when you read through it and you say, "Well I don't know what that's all about." It's a never-ending journey.

Philanthropy: Why did you choose Washington as the location for the museum?
Green: We originally were looking in Dallas. But we commissioned a survey, and it showed that we would be best attended in D.C.

Philanthropy: What do you want people to leave the Bible museum feeling and knowing?
Green: We want to invite all people to engage with this book. We want them to understand it better. You know, over 90 percent of the homes in this country have a Bible. But I think we're probably less familiar with it today than ever, because we don't teach it as we once did. This book claims it's for all people. So it's an invitation for all people to come and learn about and engage with it, and hopefully they will leave with a curiosity to want to know more.

Philanthropy: Tell us about your favorite item from the collection.

Philanthropist and Hobby Lobby president Steve Green is designing a museum in downtown D.C. to bring the Bible alive for everyone—believers and nonbelievers, scholars and novices alike. Here he stands in the basement of the construction site.
are coming out that scholars never knew were available. And it’s been said that a very small percentage of what could be dug up archaeologically has been. How much more evidence is there out there that is yet to be discovered? I suspect there’s a lot that we don’t even know about today.

**Philanthropy:** You’ve also started a research arm of the museum, the Green Scholars Initiative, which allows academics to study your collection. What do you hope they will discover?

**Green:** Recently, with the Codex Climaci Rescriptus, Tyndale House at Cambridge University announced a new discovery. A scanning technology called multispectral imaging reads at different stops on the light spectrum, trying to pull up underlying layers of text out and making the top text go away. We had Cambridge analyze those scans, and they found some of the earliest astronomical drawings that are known. So there’s no telling what could be discovered. Some of the items have never been studied.

**Philanthropy:** Tell us more about what the museum will look like for visitors.

**Green:** The first floor, which tells the history of the manuscript, goes into the languages and is more scholarly. The second floor covers the impact the book has had. It will be interesting for people to realize that this book has affected their lives in ways they’ve never thought about. Many of our universities were influenced by the Bible. Much of the influence for our hospitals and medical system was from the Bible. The sciences we know today were largely birthed out of a Biblical worldview. Our nation’s founders were grounded in Biblical principles. Applied Biblical principles are good for the economy. In many areas of our lives, this book has had an impact.

The third floor presents the narrative of the book—it’s for the person who doesn’t know anything about it yet. We just want to try to tell what this book says. There is a beginning and an ending, and all of these stories put together make up a bigger story.

**Green:** It’s hard to narrow it down. The Codex Climaci Rescriptus is a significant item. This text from roughly the fifth century shows how the Bible was translated and loved from early on. It’s one of the earliest relatively complete manuscripts of the Bible in the world.

The Aitken Bible tells us a little bit about the founding of our nation, and gives us some insight into our founders—that Congress itself would commission Robert Aitken to print this book when the British weren’t allowing exports of any Bibles to America. There are just a handful of Aitken Bibles; roughly 30 of them are known.

These artifacts give us a window into how the Bible was valued and appreciated, from ancient times to the founding of our nation. To hold some of them is just a thrill. It’s a fairly small world, Bible collecting, and so word has gotten out of what we’re doing. It’s exciting, the items that have come our way that we’d never imagined having the opportunity to purchase when we started.

**Philanthropy:** It’s surprising that these artifacts aren’t locked away in a museum already.

**Green:** We will present thousands and thousands of items that have been in private collections for centuries. Some things
So from the scholarly to novices, we have something for everybody.

**Philanthropy:** What will the history floor teach museumgoers?

**Green:** The history floor starts with the archaeological evidence, which is a fairly new science. Archaeology has really developed just in the last 150 years. After presenting the archaeological evidence we go into the manuscript evidence. I think the takeaway for the person who’s willing to let the evidence lead him is that the Bible is an accurate historical representation. But it’s up to the visitor to make that decision.

**Philanthropy:** What kind of artifacts would a visitor see on the impact floor?

**Green:** The Thomas Jefferson letter will be one, in which he argues that the principles that should be cherished most are those that protect the citizens from civil authorities through religious freedom. Georgetown and Baylor are working together on a study that shows when religious freedoms are applied in a nation, it’s good for the people. It’s good for the poor; it’s good for women. So the principles of the Bible, when applied, have been good.

There are those who would say that the Bible has been the scourge of the earth. When man has misused the Bible, for his own ill intent, he has created wars and the like. But we don’t blame the book for when man has misused it.

**Philanthropy:** And maybe Elvis Presley’s copy of the Bible will show the Bible’s impact on rock ‘n’ roll?

**Green:** The Smithsonian says one of the most popular items from its collection is the ruby red slippers from the *Wizard of Oz.* So it could very well be an Elvis Presley Bible that draws the most attention in our building. When you see how broadly this book has been applied, from people like Elvis Presley to Presidents to sports figures to people of all walks of life, you realize this book has had a part in lots of lives.

**Philanthropy:** You’ve brought some people to work on this project who might not share your theological view of the Bible. How are you working together with them?

**Green:** In the scholars we have worked with, as well as the design firms, we’re not looking for theological agreement. Because it’s really not about what I believe; it’s about what the book says. We want scholars who are willing to give an accurate record of what an artifact is; it doesn’t matter what their beliefs are. Just give us the information. That’s what I have to try to do as well—not bring in my beliefs. Because it’s not about a faith; it’s not about a religion; it’s about a book. What does this book say? What does it say about itself? And what is the evidence for it? That’s what we’re trying to do with the museum. It’s not evangelical. It’s more informative. It’s more of a journalistic look, not an opinion piece on the Bible.

**Philanthropy:** How will the museum make the Bible come alive for people?

**Green:** There will be live docents who will be dressed in character. There will be a Nazareth village—to try to recreate what it was like in the town that Jesus grew up in. When you see a wine press, when you see a synagogue, you can say: “OK, I can put myself in the context, and it makes some of this make more sense. I understand these stories better.”

Each of the floors has a theater that helps tell the story in a creative way. On the narrative floor, the New Testament story is told in the theater. On the history floor, there are video vignettes that transport the visitor to the sites where some of these archaeological discoveries were made. We use animatronics—William Tyndale, accused of heresy for translating the Bible into English, tied to the stake, speaking his last words. It makes it more than just a Tyndale Bible under a glass case. When visitors know the story they have more appreciation for the artifact.

**Philanthropy:** A few articles in the press have taken a skeptical tone toward the museum, often expressing antagonism toward faith in the public square. Do you feel as if you have to prove yourself to those people?

**Green:** This is a book that has strongly influenced our world. Even the atheist Richard Dawkins argues that it ought to be part of our education for literary culture. In his book *The God Delusion* he gives over 100 examples of phrases in our language that came from the King James Bible.

I was on CNN and the segment before me was a report about someone acting as a good Samaritan. If you don’t know what the Good Samaritan story is, you just lost the context of that report. So for somebody to say we shouldn’t know the Bible doesn’t make sense. We ought to know it, and if it is done appropriately—here are the facts, you do with them what you will—it’s hard to see why anybody would object to that.

**Philanthropy:** What is the museum’s financial status?

**Green:** We just started our fundraising effort. We believe there will be broad interest from a lot of different people—of the Jewish faith, the Catholic tradition, the Protestant tradition. I think many will be saying, “Can we come together on what we agree upon? That this book has had an impact, and we ought to know about it.”

We just want to let people know what we’re doing, and that if you are interested in coming along and being a part, we’ll let you do that. That’s new for us. We’re normally on the giving side, not the asking side.

Also: the museum will charge an admission. So there will be cash flow there. There is a broad love for this book.

**Philanthropy:** Where do you think this museum fits into your legacy?

**Green:** We have been involved in philanthropic ventures for years. We grew up tithing. It’s been a part of what we do as a family. There are a lot of things the family has done that we are excited about.

But this is one that is more visible. The museum isn’t about an individual or a family. The Bible is the hero.