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And the word was made flash

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Digitised scripture lessons

THE world's oldest Bible is in bad shape. The "Codex Sinaiticus" is scattered across countries and its vellum pages, having lasted more than 1,600 years, are in poor state. That is why, earlier this month, curators at the British Library in London announced an ambitious plan to digitise it. They propose to scan the entire text using a technique called hyperspectral imaging. Not only will this create a high-resolution copy, it will also allow scholars to examine the numerous corrections and variations in the text of the codex. The effort will take four years, and cost around £1.3m.

"Sinaiticus" is so called because, for most of its history, it resided at St Catherine's monastery on Mt Sinai, one of Christendom's oldest continuously functioning communities. The book, dated to the mid fourth century by scholars using carbon dating evidence such as the divisions between chapters and the sort of uppercase letters employed, was kept at the monastery until 1859. Since then, bits of it have been found up in Leipzig, St Petersburg and London, though the monastery still has a claim to continue to claim ownership of the lot.

As a result of the scattering, and also because of the delicate condition of the original manuscripts, most scholars have had to rely on imperfect transcriptions and facsimiles. According to Scot McKendrick, curator for classical, Byzantine and biblical manuscripts at the British Library, only four researchers in the past 20 years have been allowed access to those parts of the original that are in London.

That, however, is set to change. The digitisation project will make both high-resolution images and up-to-date transcriptions and translations of "Sinaiticus" freely accessible to all on the web.

The hyperspectral imaging technique that will be used to scan the Bible was originally designed for medical purposes, and was developed by Costas Balas at the Technical

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The British Library announced the plan to digitise the "Codex Sinaiticus". The technology used by FORTH-photronics. The technique is described in this [article](#) by Costas Balas *et al.* A full [transcription of the manuscript](#) is provided by the Catholic Encyclopedia.

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University of Crete. It works by looking at each image in very narrow bands of wavelength—specific shades of red, green and so on. However, the imaging spans more than just the visible part of the spectrum of light, going from the ultra-violet (light that has shorter wavelength than violet) to the infra-red (light with wavelength longer than red). Because both the ink used to write on the vellum and the vellum itself are transparent at various wavelengths, this technique will allow scholars to see all the layers of the manuscript in at least some wavelengths, and thus perceive the various rewrites it has gone through.

Dr McKendrick says that it is one of the first projects of its kind, and one the library hopes to emulate with other. It is only now, he says, that the technology has advanced to the point where copies can be as good, if not better, than the original. And the democratised access to the text will have a big impact on biblical scholars. Dr McKendrick says that even the privileged few who had access to the original could spend a lot of time examining it. Once the scanning is completed, the many will be able to do so for as long as they like.

To those who care about such things, this matters a lot. There is still disagreement between various Christian sects about just which books belong in the Bible. Some use the jargon, are canonical. In particular, both the western Catholic and Orthodox churches base their Old Testaments on the Septuagint, a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament. That means they include a group of books known as the Apocrypha in their Bibles, which Protestants do not. An accessible version of the "Sinaiticus" (which contains a partial copy of the Septuagint) should help to clarify which texts were considered canonical in the fourth century, and which were not.

In particular, it will illuminate the accidents of editing. For, even though the Bible is considered the word of God, it did have editors. "Sinaiticus", Dr McKendrick says, is considered to have been written by three different hands. One of these was a scribe who corrected the text in numerous places. The best-known correction, a correction by McKendrick, is at the end of St John's gospel, which had been missing its ending. The editor erased another scribe's writing of the title of the following book and left a missing line. It may seem like nit-picking, but in a work as heavily invested in meaning as the Bible, every word does indeed count.

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