

claiming to originate from oil companies, warned of the danger of using mobile phones in petrol stations. One e-mail contained fictitious examples of such explosions said to have happened in Indonesia and Australia. Another, supposedly sent out by Shell, found its way on to an internal website at Exxon, says Dr Burgess, where it was treated as authoritative by employees. Such memos generally explain static fires quite accurately, but mistakenly attribute them to mobile phones. Official denials, says Dr Burgess, simply inflame the suspicions of conspiracy theorists.

Despite the lack of evidence that mobile phones can cause explosions, bans remain in place around the world, though the rules vary widely. Warning signs abound in Britain, America, Canada and Australia. The city of São Paulo, in Brazil, introduced a ban last year. And, earlier this month, a member of Connecticut's senate proposed making the use of mobile

phones in petrol stations in that state punishable by a \$250 fine.

For Dr Burgess, such concerns are part of a broader pattern of unease about mobile phones. There is a curious discrepancy, he notes, between the way that such phones have become indispensable, and the fact that they are also vaguely considered to be dangerous. This is particularly noticeable in Britain. The country that led the way in banning mobile phones at petrol stations is also the country that has taken the strongest line on the safety of mobile-phone use by children. In January, Sir William Stewart, the government's expert on the subject, warned that while there is no evidence that mobile phones are unsafe, as a precautionary measure children should use them only when absolutely necessary. The safety of mobile phones would appear to be not so much the province of the hard science of physics, as of the soft science of sociology. ■

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, by Costas Balas at the Technical 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 manuscripts. It is only now, he says, that the technology has advanced to the point where digital copies can be as good, if not better, than the original. And the democratisation of access to the text will have a big impact on biblical scholars. Dr McKendrick points out that even the privileged few who had access to the original could spend only a short time examining it. Once the scanning is completed, the many will be able to examine it 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—which, to use the jargon, are canonical. In particular, both the western Catholic and the eastern Orthodox churches base their Old Testaments on the Septuagint, a Greek translation 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 "Sinaiticus" (which contains a partial copy of the Septuagint) should help shed light, as it were, on 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 many think of the Bible as 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 an editor, who corrected the text in numerous places. The best-known correction, according to Dr McKendrick, is at the end of St John's gospel, which had been missing its last line. The editor erased another scribe's writing of the title of the following book and wrote in the missing line. It may seem like nit-picking, but in a work as heavily invested with meaning as the Bible, every word does indeed count. ■

Phototheology

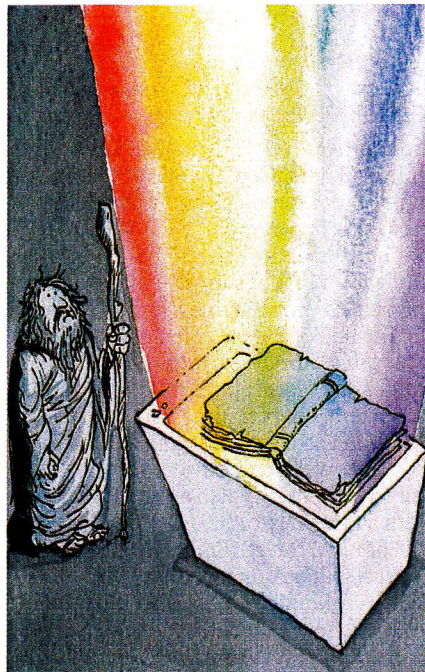
And the word was made flash

Digitised scripture lessons

THE world's oldest Bible is in bad shape. The "Codex Sinaiticus" is scattered across four countries and its vellum pages, having lasted more than 1,600 years, are in a fragile 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 book 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 overwritings in the text of the codex. The effort will take four years, and cost around £680,000 (\$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 monastic communities. The book, dated to the mid fourth century by scholars using contextual evidence such as the divisions between chapters and the sort of uppercase script that is employed, was kept at the monastery until 1859. Since then, bits of it have ended up in Leipzig, St Petersburg and London, though the monastery still has some of it and continues 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, cu-



lator 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-