

washingtonpost.com

Scholars plan to reunite ancient Bible _ online

Advertisement

By RAPHAEL G. SATTER
The Associated Press
Monday, July 21, 2008; 7:16 PM

LONDON -- The oldest surviving copy of the New Testament, a 4th century version that had its Gospels and epistles spread across the world, is being made whole again _ online.

The British Library says the full text of the Codex Sinaiticus will be available to Web users by next July, digitally reconnecting parts that are held in Britain, Russia, Germany and a monastery in Egypt's Sinai Desert.

A preview of the Codex, which also has some parts of the Old Testament, will hit the Web on Thursday _ the Book of Psalms and the Gospel of Mark.

"Only a few people have ever had the opportunity to see more than a couple of pages of the (Codex)," said Scot McKendrick, the British Library's head of Western manuscripts. The Web site will give everyone access to a "unique treasure," he said.

Discovered at the Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai by German Bible scholar Constantine Tischendorf in the mid-19th century, much of the Codex eventually wound up in Russia _ just how exactly the British Library won't say, citing lingering sensitivity over the circumstances surrounding its removal from the monastery.

The British Library bought 347 pages from Soviet authorities in 1933. Forty-three pages are at the University Library in Leipzig, Germany, and six fragments are at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg. And in 1975, monks stumbled on 12 more pages and 40 fragments stashed in a hidden room at the monastery.

Biblical scholars are thrilled at the news that the Codex Sinaiticus _ divided since Tischendorf's trip to the monastery in 1844 _ is finally being put back together, albeit virtually.

In the past, anyone wishing to examine the document first hand would have had to approach the British Library "on bended knee," said Christopher Tuckett, a professor of New Testament studies at Oxford University.

"To have it available just at the click of a button is fantastic," he said. "You could do in two seconds what would take hours and hours of flicking through the leaves."

Handwritten in Greek more than 1,600 years ago _ it isn't exactly clear where _ the surviving 400 or so pages carry a version of the New Testament that has a few interesting differences from the Bible used by Christians today.

The Gospel of Mark ends abruptly after Jesus' disciples discover his empty tomb, for example. Mark's last line has them leaving in fear.

"It cuts out the post-resurrection stories," said Juan Garces, curator of the Codex Sinaiticus Project. "That's a very odd way of ending a Gospel."

James Davila, a professor of early Jewish studies at St. Andrews University in Scotland, said the Codex also

includes religious works foreign to the Roman Catholic and Protestant canons _ such as the "Epistle of Barnabas" and the "Shepherd of Hermas," a book packed with visions and parables.

Davila stressed that did not mean the works were necessarily considered Scripture by early Christians: They could have been bound with the Bible to save money.

The Codex itself is a fascinating artifact, representing the best of Western bookmaking, Garces said. The parchment was arranged in little multipage booklets called quires, which were then numbered in sequence.

"It was the cutting edge of technology in the 4th century," he said.

The British Library bound its quires into two volumes after their purchase from the Soviets, one of which is kept on show in a climate-controlled, bulletproof display case. Visitors can peer at the ancient book, but only see two pages at a time.

By next July, the entire Codex will be available for free _ along with transcription, translation and search functions _ on the Internet.

On the Net:

Codex Sinaiticus site: <http://www.codexsinaiticus.org>

© 2008 The Associated Press