

# The influence of the Bible on the English language

The following article is the text of the 2011 London Newman Lecture given by Professor David Crystal, Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Bangor – given at the St. Alban’s Centre, Holborn, London (10.3.11).

In 2004, in Chapter 11 of my *The Stories of English*, I wrote this:

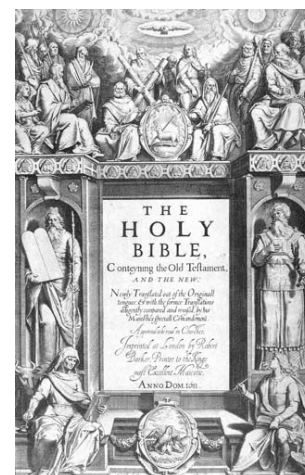
The King James Bible – either directly, from its own translators, or indirectly, as a glass through which we can see its predecessors – has contributed far more to English in the way of idiomatic or quasi-proverbial expressions than any other literary source.

But just how many expressions, exactly? Like everyone else who has written on the influence of the King James Bible on the English language, I had listed a few dozen examples – out of the mouths of babes, how are the mighty fallen, fly in the ointment, and so on – but I had no clear sense of just how many such items there were in the Bible as a whole. Nor, it seems, had anyone else. And when I asked people how many idioms like these they thought appeared in the Bible, I received answers ranging from a hundred to a thousand.

It was time to do a proper count. But that would mean reading the whole Bible through, from beginning to end, and such a challenge needs special motivation. This was provided by the year 2011, the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, and by Oxford University Press, who wished to capture the moment by a series of new publications – notably, Gordon Campbell’s quartercentenary edition and his accompanying historical account of the work’s compilation and later publishing history: *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*. So I read the whole work, looking out for any phrase that I felt had come to be a part of modern English, whether people were aware of the biblical connection or not. My book *Begat: the King James Bible and the English language*, reported the result.

I made two discoveries. First, there are not as many of them as some people think. In fact, I found only 257. Of course, there’s no magic in this figure. It’s perfectly possible that another reader, with a different set of linguistic intuitions, might make a different judgement about what counts as an idiom – in which case the total might rise or fall a little. But not by much. And second, most of the idioms do not originate in the King James translation at all. Rather they are to be found in one of the translations that appeared in the preceding 130 years – Wycliffe’s translation (the first into English, in 1388), Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament and the first six books of the Old (1526-30), the Bishops’ Bible (1568), the Geneva Bible (1560), or the Douai-Rheims (1582 New Testament, 1609-10 Old Testament). By my count, only 18 expressions are stylistically unique to the King James Bible:

east of Eden  
know for a certainty  
how are the mighty fallen  
a still small voice  
the root of the matter  
to every thing there is a season  
much study is a weariness of the flesh  
beat their swords into plowshares  
set thine [your] house in order  
be horribly afraid  
lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven  
get thee behind me  
suffer little children  
no small stir  
turned the world upside down  
a thorn in the flesh  
unto the pure all things are pure  
let us now praise famous men



Frontispiece to the King James Bible 1611

Every other idiomatic expression is shared with at least one of the earlier translations. In many cases, it is found in all of them – such as milk and honey or salt of the earth.

How does Douai-Rheims stand compared to these other versions? Is there evidence in this solidly Protestant Bible of a Catholic influence on present-day idiom? Yes there is. Gordon Campbell draws attention to the scholarly background of the Douai-Rheims translators, along with the kind of insights obtained from their use of the Latin Vulgate. Their Old Testament was published too late for it to have had as much influence as their New Testament, but Campbell illustrates several clear links. And I've found a clear connection between Douai-Rheims and the present day with respect to idiomatic expressions.

There are 27 instances where an expression appears in the KJB and one of the other translations. Of these, 1 is in Tyndale, 5 are in the Bishop's Bible, and 10 are in Geneva, but 11 are in Douai-Rheims:

white as snow (Numbers)  
whips... scorpions (1 Kings)  
tell it not... publish it not... (2 Samuel)  
woe is me (Psalms)  
of making many books there is no end (Ecclesiastes)  
sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof (Matthew)  
what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder (Matthew)  
many are called, but few are chosen (Matthew)  
render... unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's (Matthew)  
whited sepulchres (Matthew)  
see through a glass darkly (1 Corinthians)

The KJB translators must certainly have read their Douai-Rheims Matthew, and the scattering of other parallels suggests that they saw some of the Old Testament material too. Coincidence might account for one or two cases of identity, but not eleven.

Even more interesting are the cases where we have a modern biblical idiom that does not appear in the KJB. There are just seven of these, and three of them are found in exact form in Douai-Rheims only:

the way of all flesh [the others all have 'earth' for 'flesh']  
let your light shine [the others say 'let your light so shine']  
charity covers [covereth] a multitude of sins [Tyndale, Geneva and Bishops all have 'love' for 'charity';  
Wycliffe has 'charity' but talks about 'the' multitude of sins].

I conclude that there has been a limited but definite Douai-Rheims influence on modern English idiom.

It's important to appreciate that my survey made a clear distinction between an idiom and a quotation. If a biblical expression has genuinely entered idiomatic English, we will expect to find it in the everyday speech or writing of native-speakers who are only nominally religious, or who have no religious belief at all. It will be used outside a religious frame of reference, often with a change in meaning from its original biblical sense, and will be found frequently adapted to express a special (often playful) effect. Quotations, by contrast, are expressions which are used only in settings where the religious application is relevant, maintaining their original biblical sense, and sticking closely to the translators' language. A clear example of a verse which has resulted in a common idiom is Matthew 15.14:

Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.

A clear example of a verse which is known only as a quotation (especially at Christmas time) is Matthew 1.23:

Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.

The distinction works well enough, but there will always be a few cases which fall between these two types, attracting a certain amount of playful adaptation. 'Give us this day our daily blog', for example, headed a 2010 report about the Pope's wish for the Catholic Church to have more online presence. Does this mean that 'Give us this day our daily X' has become an idiom in English? I've found very few other examples of it, and all have been in a clearly religious context. And that's the important point. Real idioms, like fly in the ointment, are used thousands of times every day without any reference to a religious context at all.

A figure of 250 or so means that we must not exaggerate the influence of the King James Bible on the English language. I was right to say, in my quotation above, that no other literary source has matched this version for the number of influential expressions that it contains. Not even Shakespeare coined or popularised so many idioms. But the exaggerations are widespread. In an article in *The Tablet* (3 April 2010) called 'England's Gift to the World', MP Frank Field (the director of the 2011 Trust established to coordinate the anniversary celebrations) quoted Melvyn Bragg to say that the King James Bible is 'quite simply the DNA of the English language'. A striking metaphor, but a hugely misleading one. DNA is in every cell we possess; but the KJB is by no means in every word we write.

Only a limited number of King James phrases have entered the language. And there are actually many features of its style that are no longer used or liked in English. Not used? consider a sentence such as 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die', where much of the grammar is obsolete. Not liked? I suspect that many readers of this essay were taught in school that it was 'bad grammar' to begin a sentence with And. But what do we find in the opening Chapter of Genesis? Thirty-one verses. All but two of them begin with And - 'And God said... And God made...'. Only the opening verse ('In the beginning God created the heaven and earth') and verse 27 ('So God created...') do anything different. The influence of the source languages is evident here, of course, but it is not only that, for initial 'and' has been a feature of English syntax since Anglo-Saxon times.

There are of course other ways in which we might discuss the notion of KJB 'influence', such as its thematic content, imagery, and rhythmical style. These are difficult to quantify, but it's plain that, as churches in the first half of the 17th century gradually replaced their Bishops' and Geneva Bibles with the new version, writers began to use the KJB as a source of inspiration. Milton was one of the earliest, many of his lines showing a clear influence, at times to the point of exact phrasing, as in 'She gave me of the tree, and I did eat' (Paradise Lost, Book X). There's no question that the content of the Bible has had a huge influence on the imaginations of poets, novelists, and dramatists. I didn't explore that, which is more a subject for literary critics than linguists. I was looking only at KJB idioms. Melvyn Bragg's *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible* provides that broader perspective.

The King James version also entered auditory consciousness too, for it was frequently read aloud - a practice aided by the punctuation, which is more an aid to speech than a guide to grammar. Did the rhythm of the language in the King James Bible have a direct influence on the way its phrases entered modern idiom? There are several good examples. But we have to understand first that one of the important functions of rhythm is to aid auditory memory. We remember a text we have heard in short grammatical 'chunks' - and if the number of content words (i.e. meaning-carrying words, excluding the words that show the structure of the sentence) in those chunks exceeds five, most people have difficulty. This is a regular experience, when we try to repeat the Response to the Psalm in Mass without reading it from a mass sheet. As long as the response is five short content words or less, we have no problem. Anything over this, and we struggle to remember it. Compare these - I underline the content words:

The Lord is my light and my help (Lent 2, year C) - three content words, no problem.  
I will walk in the presence of the Lord in the land of the living (Lent 2, Year B) - five content words, still no problem  
Your ways, Lord, are faithfulness and love for those who keep your covenant (Lent 1, Year B) - seven content words strains our ability

Most responses are mercifully short.

The same principle applies to biblical idioms. Virtually all the idioms that show the influence of the Bible are short: the average length of all 257 expressions is 4.3 words - well within that comfortable chunking length. And when we examine individual instances, we can see the way in which usage has favoured that norm. Take 'fly in the ointment'. This does not in fact turn up in any biblical translation. King James has:

Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour

Compare this with the three others:

Wycliffe: flies that die, lessen the sweetness of ointment  
Geneva: dead flies cause to stink, and putrefy the ointment  
Bishop's a dead fly doth corrupt sweet ointment

What is the difference? The other translations separate the critical words, flies and ointment. King James brings them together: flies cause the ointment. This puts them into the same chunk of working auditory memory: they are more likely to be retained by the listener. And it is then a relatively short step to adapt the phrasing to one of the commonest rhythmical patterns in English:

flies cause the ointment > flies in the ointment > fly in the ointment

Compare: bee in the bonnet, head in the sand, stain on the character, and hundreds more. It doesn't happen straight away. It took nearly a century before we find the first recorded instance of fly in the ointment.

The relatively small total of 257 shouldn't surprise. We need to recall that the aim of the translators, as they say in their Preface, was not to make a new translation, 'but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one'. They had little choice in the matter, as the guidelines for their work, which had been approved by the King, required them to use the Bishops' Bible (in the 1602 edition) as their first model, making as few alterations as possible; and, when this was found wanting, they could refer to earlier versions. Unlike Shakespeare, they were not great innovators. However, that total does mean that we mustn't exaggerate the influence of the KJB on English. It's true to say, as several commentators do, that no other literary source has matched this edition for the number of influential idioms that it contains; but it isn't true to say that the KJB originated all of them. Rather, what it did was popularize them. It gave the idioms a widespread public presence through the work being 'appointed to be read in Churches'. The work was never 'authorized' (despite its popular name) in any legal sense, but no other translation reached so many people over so long a period as the KJB.

The result was that an unprecedented number of biblical idioms captured the public imagination, so much so that it's now impossible to find an area of contemporary expression that doesn't from time to time use them, either literally or playfully. We find them appearing in such disparate worlds as nuclear physics, court cases, TV sitcoms, recipe books, punk rock lyrics, and video games, and being adapted in all kinds of imaginative ways to suit their new settings. The banking crisis produced Am I my Lehman Brothers' keeper? A political confrontation produced Bush is the fly in Blair's ointment. No other work has generated so many variations. The adaptations are legion. Seek sources on the Internet, as I did, and you will easily find them, and that's what I chiefly illustrated in my book and in my talk. In this sense, the influence of the KJB is without parallel.

**David Crystal**