

KING JAMES STILL REIGNS AT 400

Holyhead, Wales, U.K.—When people talk about the influence of the King James Bible on the English language, they are usually thinking of the many idioms that have come into the language with a biblical origin—such as “out of the mouths of babes,” “fly in the ointment,” and “thorn in the flesh.” But ask yourself the question: “How many such items are there?” The mind goes blank! You might think 50, or a hundred, or a thousand or more.

I had no idea either, so when the 400th anniversary loomed, I used it to do a proper count. I read the whole work through, 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.

I made two discoveries. First, there are not as many as some people think: I found only 257. And second, most of the idioms don't 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—by Wycliffe (1388), Tyndale (1526–30), the Bishops' Bible (1568), the Geneva Bible (1560), or the Douai–Rheims (1582, 1609–10). By my count, only 18 expressions are stylistically unique to the King James version:

- 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

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COMMENT »

DAVID CRYSTAL

are pure

■ let us now praise famous men.

Every other idiomatic expression is shared with at least one earlier translation. In many cases, an idiom is found in *all* of them—such as “milk” and “honey” or “salt of the earth.”

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 people who are only nominally religious, or who practice a religion other than Christianity or Judaism, or who have no religious belief at all. It will be used outside a religious frame of reference, often with change in meaning from its original biblical sense, and will be found adapted to express a special (often playful) effect.

Quotations, by contrast, are expressions that are used only in settings where the religious application is relevant, maintaining their original biblical sense, and sticking closely to a translator's language. A clear example of a verse that has resulted in a common idiom is Matthew 15.14: “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.” A clear example of a verse that is known only as a quotation (especially at Christmastime) is Matthew 1.23: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel.”

Real idioms, like “the blind leading the blind,” are used thousands of times every day without any reference to religious context at all.

A figure of 257 means that we mustn't exaggerate the influence of the King James Bible on English. It's true to say that no other literary source has matched this version for the number of influential expressions that it contains. But it's not true to say that the language of this version “shaped” the English language. The exaggerations are widespread. The King James Bible has

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been called “the DNA of the English language.” It’s a striking metaphor, but hugely misleading. DNA is in every cell we possess; but the style of the King James Bible is by no means in every word we write.

THROUGH THE AIR

The King James Bible didn’t originate, but it certainly popularized. It gave the idioms a widespread public presence through the work being “appointed to be read in Churches.” No other translation reached so many people over so long a period. It was auditory consciousness that did it. Literacy levels were still very low in the 17th century, and for most people their encounter with the Bible would have been “through the air”—via church homilies or the powerful words of itinerant preachers. Reading aloud was facilitated by punctuation, which was more an aid to speech than a guide to grammar. The rhythm of the language had a direct influence on the way its phrases entered modern idiom.

To see this, we have to understand first that one of the important functions of rhythm is to aid auditory memory. Virtually all the idioms that show the influence of the Bible are short: The average length of the 257 expressions I found is 4.3 words. When we examine individual instances, we can see the way in which usage has favored that norm.

Take "fly in the ointment." This does not 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 Wycliffe ("flies that die, lessen the sweetness of ointment"), Geneva ("dead flies cause to stink, and putrefy the ointment"), and Bishop's ("a dead fly doth corrupt sweet ointment"). What's 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."

LITERAL AND PLAYFUL

The result of this largely auditory process 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 use them, either literally or playfully. We find them in nuclear physics, court cases, TV sitcoms, recipe books, punk rock lyrics, and video games, and adapted in all kinds of imaginative ways.

The banking crisis produced Am I my Lehman Brothers' keeper? Political confrontation produced Bush is the fly in Blair's ointment. A blog about the search for bin Laden was headed "Seek and ye shall seek."

No other work has generated so many variations. Adaptations are legion. Seek sources on the Internet, and you will easily find them. In this sense, the influence of the King James Bible is without parallel.