are pure

let us now praise fa-
mous men.

Every other idiomatic ex-
pression 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. A biblical
expression has genu-
ineuly entered idiomatic En-
lish, 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 Ju-
daism, 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 rele-
vant, maintaining their orig-
inal biblical sense, and stick-
ing 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
Christmas time) is Matthew
3:23: “If you 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 refer-
ce to religious context at
all.

A figure of 257 means
that we cannot 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 exag-
gerations 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 cause the 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.