IDIOMS WHICH ORIGINATE IN THE BIBLE

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Abstract

The English language is extremely abundant in idiomatic expressions, which reflect the wisdom and the inventiveness of the English people, in an attempt to enrich interpersonal communication and to give birth to highly suggestive combinations of words. Our article has tried to focus on the idiomatic expressions which originate in the Bible, since the Bible has been enormously influential in the development of the English language. After Shakespeare, the King James Version of the Bible represents the most common source of idiomatic expressions in English. The King James Bible, which was first printed in 1611, was England's authorized version of the Bible, translated from the original languages – Hebrew and Greek – into English, at the request of King James I of England. From a linguistic point of view, this version of the Bible is the most representative of all, since many of its expressions are still in use even nowadays.

Key-words*: religion, belief, idiom, meaning, language*

Résumé

L'anglais abonde en expressions idiomatiques qui réfléchissent la sagesse et l'inventivité du peuple anglais, dans une tentative d'enrichir les communications interpersonnelles et de créer des combinaisons des mots extrêmement suggestives. Notre article a essayé de mettre au centre de l'attention les expressions idiomatiques ayant leurs origines dans la Bible, du moment où la Bible a eu une énorme influence sur le développement de la langue anglaise. Selon Shakespeare, la version du Roi James sur la Bible représente la source la plus connue des expressions idiomatiques de la langue anglaise. La Bible du Roi James, qui a été publiée pour la première fois en 1611, a représenté la version autorisée de la Bible en Angleterre, traduite des langues d'origine – l'hébreu et le grec – en anglais – sur demande du Roi James I d'Angleterre. Du point de vue linguistique, cette version de la Bible est la plus représentative, vu que beaucoup d'expressions qui s'y retrouvent sont encore utilisées, dès nos jours.

Mots-clés: *religion, croyance, idiome, sens, langage*

The impact that the Bible has had on numberless priest-ridden languages and cultures has brought about the dissemination of some beliefs or superstitions which have been derived from the Christian religion, many of them being later reflected in different phraseological expressions. The English language abounds in such expressions and phrases which relate to the Bible, as regards their origin. A great number of these expressions come from popular legends, various beliefs, superstitions and religious-inspired images, derived from the scriptural texts. Some phrases refer to ample biblical episodes, some real stories, where the characters, the action and the dialogue are always there.

We have tried to render a list, as comprehensible as possible, comprising words

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or phrases that belong to the religious domain, either we speak about God orwe refer to different expressions connected with the church, in general. Each entry contains a definition of the word or phrase, an example and a note on the origin of the idiom (some of them). We have had as a reference book *"Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English"*[1]. Here are some examples:

a doubting Thomas = someone who will not believe something without proof; e.g. *I know you are a doubting Thomas, never believing a word someone is telling you.* Note: this expression originates in the Bible and refers to Thomas who refused to believe that Jesus had been brought back to life until he saw Jesus for himself and touched his wounds.

a good Samaritan = a person who helps other people; e.g. *He has always helped the poor; he is a good Samaritan*. Note: this idiom comes from a story told by Jesus in the Bible.

a Job's comforter = a person who tries to be sympathetic but, in fact, says or does things which make you feel even more unhappy than you are already; e.g. *She is a real Job's comforter. She told me to relax, but she only succeeded in getting on my nerves.* Note: this idiom is based on a story from the Bible about Job. His friends pretended to comfort him but, in fact, they were criticizing him.

a man of God = a religious man; e.g. *I have always considered him to be a man of God.*

an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (saying) = someone who treats other persons badly should be treated in the same way; e.g. *I will get my revenge: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.* Note: this idiom originates in the Bible.

a red-letter day = a very special day which is remembered because something good or important happened; e.g. *The day I found out I was pregnant was a red-letter day.* Note: Religious holidays used to be printed in red on calendars.

a voice (crying) in the wilderness = a warning of a danger given by a person or a small group which most people do not pay any attention to; e.g. *Jane was trying to tell everybody there was a storm coming but they wouldn't listen. She was just a voice in the wilderness.*Note: this idiom comes from a description of John the Baptist in the Bible.

be in seventh heaven = be very happy; e.g. *She must be in seventh heaven as she has just won the lottery.* Note: in the Bible, there is the belief according to which there are seven heavens and God and the most important angels live in the highest or seventh heaven.

be out of the ark/ went out with the ark = very old or old-fashioned; e.g. *I think you should buy a new car; your car is really out of the ark.* Note: this idiom refers to a story in the Bible about Noah who built a large boat (an ark) to save his family and two of every type of animal from the flood.

cast pearls before swine (saying) = offer valuable things to people who do not appreciate them; e.g. *Mary thought that giving Jim an expensive gift would mean casting pearls before swine.* Note: this idiom originates in the Bible, where the term *swine* was used to describe *pigs*.

chapter and verse = the precise details of something; regulations; e.g. *I can't give you chapter and verse, but I know that it is a Shakespeare's sonnet.* Note: this

[1] *Oxford Idioms. Dictionary for Learners of English*, 2006.

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expression refers to books of the Bible, which are divided into chapters with numbered divisions called verses.

cover/ hide a multitude of sins = used to say that something is not as good as it looks; e.g.

A good make-up can cover a multitude of sins. Note: this phrase is used in the Bible. A *multitude* is a large number of things.

fall by the wayside = not be able to continue something that needs effort, discipline, etc.;

begin to be dishonest, immoral, etc.; e.g. *Many people went in for the annual marathon, but some of them have fallen by the wayside and only a few continued the race.* Note: this expression is taken from a story in the Bible in which the seeds that fell *by the wayside* did not grow.

feet of clay = a surprising fault in the character of someone who is admired and respected;

e.g. *Even the best competitors have their feet of clay.* Note: this phrase comes from a story in the Bible, where the king of Babylon saw an image with a head of gold and feet of clay.

forbidden fruit = something that you are not allowed to have, do, etc. and for this reason is more attractive; e.g. *I know now why you desperately wanted that large portion of dessert: because, for you, it represented the forbidden fruit.* Note: this idiom originates in the story of Adam and Eve in the Bible, in which Eve ate an apple when she wasn't allowed to.

gird (up) your loins (literary or humorous) = prepare yourself for action, hard work, etc.; e.g. *We have a lot of work to do this week, so gird up your loins and proceed.* Note: in the Bible, *to gird your loins* meant to pick up your robe and tie it about your waist so that you could run or move much more quickly.

good God/ God almighty/ God in heaven/ my/ oh God (spoken language) = used for expressing anger, surprise, etc.; e.g. *Good God! How can you say such a thing?*

God bless = used when you are leaving somebody, to say that you hope they will be ok, etc.; e.g. *God bless you, have a nice evening!*

God rest his/her soul/ God rest him/her = used to show respect when you are talking about someone who is dead; e.g. *My great grandfather, God rest his soul, was a brilliant mathematician.*

God's gift (to somebody/something) = (used with a deprecatory meaning) a person who thinks that he/she is particularly good at something or who thinks that somebody will find him/her particularly attractive; e.g. *He considers himself God's gift to women.*

God willing = used for expressing one's hope that something will happen; e.g. *We have spent our holidays in the Alps this summer and next year we are going to visit Italy for the first time, God willing.*

go the way of all flesh = die or come to an end; e.g. *Poor George! His mother has gone the way of all flesh!* Note: this idiom comes from the Bible.

go/ walk down the aisle (familiar speech) = get married; e.g. *I can't believe Mary will be the first to go down the aisle, as she has always said she would never get married.* Note: *the aisle* is the passage down the middle of a church between the two blocks of seats.

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have a (heavy) cross to bear/ bear/ carry your cross = suffer the troubles that life brings you; e.g. *I understand that you have had only misfortunes, but I guess we all have our crosses to bear.* Note: this idiom refers to the punishments used in the time of Jesus and described in the Bible.

hide your light under a bushel = not let people know that you are very good at something;

e.g. *I never knew John could play the piano so well; he has always been hiding his light under a bushel.* Note: this expression originates in the Bible.

holy of holies = a special place where only some particular people can enter; e.g. *This museum is the holy of holies. It contains some of the most valuable paintings in the world.* Note: In a Jewish temple, the *holy of holies* is the inner part, which only the high priest can enter.

honest to God = used to emphasize the truth of one's words; e.g. *I am telling you the truth, honest to God!*

in limbo = in a state of uncertainty; e.g. *We are in limbo now, not knowing what to do next.* Note: For Christians, *limbo* is a state that is neither heaven nor hell, where some souls live.

in the land of Nod = asleep; e.g. *As the children were in the land of Nod, we went on tiptoe so as not to wake them up.* Note: this idiom developed from the similarity between the verb *nod off*, meaning to fall asleep, and a place in the Bible called *the land of Nod*.

keep to, stay on the straight and narrow = live one's life according to strict moral principles; e.g. *She has given up drugs and now she is trying to stay on the straight and narrow.* Note: this expression comes from the Bible and it refers to the path to Heaven.

kick against the pricks = lay up trouble oneself by protesting when there is no use to do so; e.g. *He shouldn't kick against the pricks. By doing so, he would only manage to harm himself.* Note: this idiom refers to a story in the Bible, according to which an animal, such as an ox, may kick when it is pushed with a stick to make it move, but will still have to move.

kill the fatted calf = welcome home someone who has been away for a long time by giving a big party; e.g. *If my son returns from abroad, I will certainly kill the fatted calf.* Note: this phrase comes from the Bible and refers to a story in which a father arranges a big meal when his son returns home after a long time. A *fatted calf* is a young cow that has been given extra food in order to gain weight.

make bricks without straw = try to perform a certain activity without the necessary equipment or information; e.g. *I can't make bricks without straw, you know. You've told me to make a cake, but you haven't given me any sugar.* Note: this idiom is based on a story in the Bible, according to which straw was the essential material for making bricks at that time.

manna from heaven = some unexpected luck; e.g. *That inheritance came like manna from heaven, as I was penniless*. Note: *Manna*, in the Bible, was the food the Israelites found in the desert.

play God = behave as if you control events or other people's lives; e.g. *It is useless to play God when you know I will never let you control my life.*

put on/ wear sackcloth and ashes = repent, regret one's behavior; e.g. *He will never put on sackcloth and ashes, as he is too conceited.* Note: in the Bible, people

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wore *sackcloth* (a rough material) and put *ash* on their face and hair to show that a person they loved had died or that they were sorry for something they had done.

raise Cain/ hell = complain or protest noisily, as a way of getting what you want; e.g. *She will raise hell unless we obey her.* Note: this idiom comes from the story of Cain in the Bible, who was the first murderer.

reap the whirlwind = suffer as a result of one's actions; e.g. *Unless you behave well, you'll reap the whirlwind.* Note: In the Bible, a *whirlwind* was a strong wind that caused a lot of damage.

serve two masters = support two different parties, groups, etc. at the same time; e.g. *You must decide whether you are for or against John's candidacy for Parliament. You cannot serve two masters at once.* Note: this expression comes from the Bible.

so help me God = used when making a serious promise; e.g. *I'll avenge my brother's death, so help me God*. Note: In a court of law, a witness swears to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God."

sort out/ separate the sheep from the goats = separate the good people from the bad people;

e.g. *The final exam usually separates the sheep from the goats.* Note: In the Bible, it is said that on Judgement Day, God will judge everybody who ever lived and decide who was good (the sheep) and who was bad (the goats).

take somebody's name in vain = show disrespect when using someone's name; e.g. *We should never take God's name in vain*. Note: this idiom originates in the Bible.

take something as/ for gospel (familiar speech) = believe something without having any proof; e.g. *If I were you, I wouldn't take everything she said for gospel*. Note: According to the Bible, *gospel* is the life and teaching of Jesus.

the land of milk and honey = a place where people are very happy; e.g. *She imagined that going to Disneyland was just like entering the land of milk and honey.* Note: this phrase refers to the Promised Land, as described in the Bible.

the lion's den = a difficult situation in which you have to stand against people who are unfriendly or aggressive to you; e.g. *Every time she took an examination, she felt like she were entering the lion's den*. Note: this idiom comes from the story of Daniel in the Bible, who went into a lion's den as a punishment but was not injured by the lion.

the patience of a saint/ of Job = very great patience; e.g. *A teacher should be endowed with the patience of a saint.* Note: Job was a character in the Bible who lost his family, his home and his possessions, but still did not abandon God.

the prodigal son = a young person who leaves home and wastes his money and time on a good living, but who is later sorry about that and returns to his family; e.g. *When Jim arrived at the station, his entire family went to welcome home the prodigal son*. Note: this phrase comes from the Bible.

the promised land = a place where people expect to find happiness, wealth, etc.; e.g. *For many young people, the USA is the promised land*. Note: this idiom comes from the Bible and refers to the land that God promised the Israelites.

There but for the grace of God (go I) (saying) = used to say that you could have been in the same difficult situation that somebody else is in; e.g. *I never laugh at other people's misfortunes, I'd rather think there but for the grace of God go I*. Note: the word *grace* in this saying refers to the kindness that God shows towards humanity.

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the salt of the earth = a reliable friend; e.g. *To me, Sarah is the salt of the earth*. Note: this idiom originates in the Bible.

the scales fall from somebody's eyes = someone eventually understands the truth about something; e.g. *In the end the scales fell from her eyes and she realized that everything he had told her was nothing but a lie.* Note: this idiom is derived from the Bible and it refers to the story of St Paul who suddenly began to believe in Jesus and was able to see again.

The writing (is) on the wall (saying) = used when you are describing a situation in which there are signs that somebody/ something is going to have problems or is going to fail; e.g. *The writing is on the wall for John's restaurant unless he pays the entire mortgage.* Note: in the Bible, there is a story in which strange writing appeared on a wall during a feast given by King Belshazzar, predicting his death and the end of his kingdom.

till doomsday (familiar speech) = a very long time; for ever; e.g. *This project will take me till doomsday.* Note: *doomsday* is the last day of the world when Christians believe that everyone will be judged by God.

to God/ goodness/ Heaven = this expression is used after a verb to emphasize a certain wish, hope, etc.; *I wish to God you paid more attention to what I'm telling you.*

turn the other cheek = decide to remain calm and not to act aggressively when someone has hurt you or made you angry; e.g. *Would you turn the other cheek when someone attacked your fiancée?* Note: this idiom comes from a phrase used by Jesus in the Bible.

wash one's hands of somebody / something = refuse to deal with or be responsible for someone/ something; e.g. *I am very disappointed with him; I will wash my hands of him.* Note: this expression comes from the story of Pontius Pilate in the Bible, who refused to take a decision about what should happen to Jesus.

The countless English translations and editions of the Bible produced over the centuries have given us numberless idiomatic phrases and sayings which have fallen into everyday use. The Bible, like no other book in history, has influenced and transformed many lives. It has also had a strong impact on the development of the English language, especially with the King James Version. The language of the Bible is also reflected in literature, art and music, where a multitude of biblical themes, motifs and images appear. In our modern culture we commonly use phrases which have originated from the Bible. Many of these idiomatic expressions related to the Bible have changed over time, due to the continuous development of the language.

Whenever we make use of these phrases, we are not only quoting early Bible translations, but we are also utilizing concepts that were introduced in scriptural times, over 3000 years ago. Most of the expressions presented above are well-known words of Jesus from the Gospel records which bring on very important spiritual lessons.

In another train of thoughts, it is important to underline the fact that a great deal of idioms might be used outside a religious frame of reference, often with a change in meaning from their original biblical sense, and will be found frequently adapted to express a special effect. Sayings, on the other hand, are expressions which are used only in constructions where the religious application is relevant, maintaining their original biblical sense.

In conclusion, the phraseological domain of the biblical expressions in English is a very comprehensive one. Only correct knowledge of them would make us come to

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a better understanding of their meaning. Our article has tried to render fresh, accurate translations of some important idioms and proverbs found in the Scripture, in an attempt to provide clear explanations of their meanings, either they are used without a religious connotation or they occur within a biblical context.

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