



**Universidad**  
Zaragoza

# Undergraduate Dissertation Trabajo Fin de Grado

## “LET THERE BE LIGHT”

*IDIOMS AND BIBLICAL ENGLISH: THE DAWN OF ‘BIBLICAL IDIOMS’,  
IDIOMS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION,  
AND ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATIONS TO SEVERAL ‘BIBLICAL IDIOMS’*

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**ABSTRACT**

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The British Isles have a huge history of ‘invasions’ and coexistence with different people from different parts of the mainland who spoke different languages, such as Celtic languages, Latin, and French. These languages established in the Isles are the roots of what today is the English Language. These tribes also brought with them Christianity, an important element within Western Culture. The demands for the use of the vernacular language, of the already-established people in the Isles, to understand what was being said in sermons at church led to the translation of the Bible, and English would be eventually spoken in mass and not in Latin as it was the established norm at that time. The access of the population to the sacred scriptures made people began to use some of the expressions and the figurative language portrayed there in their everyday lives. This Biblical Language transformed into idioms, and they are being used today in non-religious-context occasions, without the acknowledgement, by part of some population, of those words.

Students of a second language must bear in mind that learning idioms is important for fluency and naturality when speaking a language. Translators must have a huge baggage of cultural knowledge of (both) languages: source and target, in order to produce good translations, in this case of Idioms. In this final degree dissertation, the roots of Biblical English and the origins of several idioms based on Biblical English will be explored. The importance of learning idioms in second language acquisition will be highlighted; and to conclude alternative translations to a selected range of Biblical Idioms will be provided.

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**RESUMEN**

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Las Islas Británicas tienen una gran historia de ‘invasiones’ y coexistencia entre gente de diversos lugares provenientes de Europa continental que hablaban diferentes idiomas, como las lenguas Celtas, el Latín o el Francés. Estos idiomas que se establecieron en las Islas son las raíces de la lengua Inglesa que conocemos hoy en día. Estas gentes, a la vez, trajeron consigo el Cristianismo, ingrediente principal en la cultura occidental. Las poblaciones antes establecidas en las islas, querían entender lo que se decía en los sermones de la iglesia y, gracias a sus continuas demandas para que se usara la lengua vernácula en temas religiosos, llevaron a que finalmente se tradujera la Biblia y a que la misa, por fin, se realizara en inglés y no en Latín como se hacía hasta el momento. El acceso de la población a la Biblia ha llevado a que, expresiones utilizadas en estos textos se han transportado al lenguaje del día a día. Ciertas citas, y frases provenientes de la Biblia han quedado en la lengua como modismos y se utilizan en contextos no religiosos, ante el desconocimiento por parte del hablante de los orígenes de esas expresiones.

El estudio de los modismos de una segunda lengua es, aunque costoso y requiere un amplio conocimiento cultural de la lengua que se estudia, interesante ya que hace que a la hora de hablar haya fluidez y naturalidad, y a la vez que se puedan expresar mejor ciertas situaciones o sentimientos. Los traductores también necesitan de un amplio conocimiento cultural de las lenguas a traducir para poder llevar a cabo una exitosa traducción de los modismos; tarea difícil en ciertas ocasiones, pero que si traducido o interpretado bien supondrá un éxito de traducción. El objetivo de este trabajo académico es explorar como ha llegado a surgir el inglés Bíblico y el origen de ese lenguaje figurativo usado en la Biblia. También se pretende analizar la importancia del estudio de los modismos por parte del estudiante de lenguas extranjeras. Y por último pretende ofrecer una traducción alternativa, a una selección de modismos religiosos, a las más usadas o conocidas.

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**INTRODUCTION**

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Idioms are an interesting feature of languages; some are funny, others shocking, some can be strange, and some can even echo liturgy. There are many sources from where they originated, some are as ancient as the Anglo-Saxon times, others derived from literature, and some others were born in the Bible. Unbeknownst to many people, the Bible is also a source of idiomatic language, as the English language has plenty of idioms that have derived from biblical English and they are used in non-religious contexts.

The study of idioms, in general, is a *‘necessary evil’* whenever someone decides to study a foreign language. Figurative language is the result of the mingling of all the ingredients that shape the culture of a country. Regardless of being difficult, since they require to be learnt *‘by heart’*, and once being mastered, it makes the speaker to sound more natural and fluent when speaking a language, in this case, English. The translation of idioms is a *‘can of worms’* for the translator, as well as for the second language student (SL student). Huge cultural baggage of the source language (SL), as of the Target Language (TL), is necessary to transport the correct meaning for that figurative language that is being translated. Regardless of being, sometimes, a puzzling task, it is interesting and entertaining at the same time.

This essay aims, first, to explore the roots of Biblical English and the origins of several idioms that are based on biblical English. Then it focuses on the importance of learning idioms for second language acquisition (SLA). Finally, this essay aspires to provide different translations for a selected range of ‘Biblical Idioms’ rather than the most known, or regular ones

The topics this essay covers are discussed into three different sections: *theoretical framework*, *methodologic framework*, and a *conclusion*. The theoretical framework deals with the different sources consulted in order to build up this essay. The methodologic framework, deals with

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the history of the different tribes that came to inhabit the Islands, covering from the arrival of Celts to the Norman invasion. The languages and the religion they brought with them. The final decision of translating the Bible into English, and how these sacred scriptures have influenced the English Language, The importance of learning idioms for SL students, and the different strategies translators might apply when there is the task of transporting figurative language into a different language, English in this case. Within this section, a table with several Biblical idioms has been incorporated providing regular translations and alternative translations, examining at the same time the strategy used to translate.

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**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

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Figurative Language is a weighty element of language that in many occasions, native speakers take for granted. In this case, native speakers of English, who do not pay too much attention to these phrases regardless of how much they use them while speaking. Idioms are a salient asset in language, and they are constantly changing and shaping it. They are also part of the culture of a society, esteeming from diverse sources of *popular culture*: films, literature, history, including religion. It has been discovered that there are many phrases that today are used as idioms that come from one of the different translations of the Bible. One of them is The King James Bible, or the Authorised Version, as it is also known. As Pruitt (2019, para. 16) puts it “from Handel’s *Messiah* to Coolio’s *Gansta Paradise*, the King James Bible has inspired a wide swath[e] of cultural expressions across the English Speaking world over generations”. Before going further into this biblical idiom analysis —wider research on these idioms, other kinds of idioms and their meanings has been done. Concurrently, it has been considered why this figurative language should be studied by non-native students of English, and prove alternative translations to a selected groups of Biblical Idioms, instead of the most common or known ones.

English has not always had the shape it has nowadays. The English language that it is known today is an evolution from Old English and its many influences from the different languages of the several nations that invaded the island: Old Norse, Latin, and French. The English language was not the official language on the Island until the approximately the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It gradually became spoken by the upper classes during the Middle Ages. Having English been influenced by other languages brought by people who came to the island, and that left an imprint on the language. Idioms are a reflection of these linguistic influences together with historical events, taken on the



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Isles. All these events became reflected in the language creating indirect ways of speaking, or figurative language: ‘idioms’ as they are labelled nowadays.

**IDIOMS AND BIBLICAL LANGUAGE**

To begin with, Jack (2007) explores the origin and meaning of some of these idioms existing in the English language. In his work he selects those idioms which he considers being the most common or used, and groups them according to different categories such as nautical, military, political, sportive, biblical, and literary, among others.

Kozlowski (2016) explores the Dickensian legacy of words, which were in use for over a century. Dickens coined “four million words” since he considered that the English Language lacked words he needed to express the different feelings or situations his characters encounter. As Kozlowski remarks “No wonder his autobiographical hero, David Copperfield, admits, “I wallow in words” ” (2016, p.8). These words are an image of the culture, the history, and the customs of the people from that age. Since they have a figurative meaning these cognates can also be regarded as idioms. Literature is a world that has a wider use of language, and is, perhaps, William Shakespeare the most prominent figure in terms of coining words that later on have remained in the English Language. Crystal and Crystal (2004) have been immersed in different studies regarding the language the Bard used. Father and son have manufactured a dictionary with all those words the most known English writer, who is believed to have created and used in his literary works. Many of those words attributed to him remain in the language that people use today such as 'unfriend', 'undo', among many others. Considering that reading Shakespeare is difficult, even for native speakers of English, one can think that the language used in those works is idiomatic and metaphoric. Literary works are also a main source for idiomatic expressions. The works by William Shakespeare, or those written by Charles Dickens, are perhaps among the most distinguished ones.

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Nonetheless, it is perhaps, a compilation of different books, which has been the most influential work for the English Language: The Bible. It is important to have in mind that the Bible was not originally written in English and that the different translations undertaken have left an important imprint on the English Language. Crystal (2010) explores the biblical phrases and sentences from the different translations of the Bible, from Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic to English, across time, which have influenced the English language unimaginably. Some of them have not only eventually ended up becoming idioms or proverbs, but also are currently used in non-religious contexts, being modified, as well, depending on what the speaker wants to convey with them. The language from Old Testament is explored following the order of the different books that appear in the Bible. Conversely, the language explored in this work by Crystal taken from the New Testament is grouped thematically. Those phrases from the New Testament that caught the eye of the population were less likely to transform into idioms since playing with the biblical language was considered blasphemous. Therefore, the New Testament has been less prominent idiomatically speaking. It is then considered to be a proverbial influence: "This is why so many well-known New Testament passages have remained under the heading of quotations [and] the effects obtained have not influenced the character of the language as a whole" (Crystal, 2010, p. 133). The lessening of the consideration of offenses when playing with biblical language changed the panorama. Biblical idioms are as prominent, as other figurative languages, in non-religious contexts. However, people might not notice their biblical origins. For instance, BBC's *Line of Duty* (2012-2021) portrays a wide use of this biblical language in a non-religious setting, in this case, the Police Forces. To illustrate this paper, it has been decided to choose that biblical figurative language instead of the typical idioms, which have been explored more often academically.

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**STUDYING AND TEACHING IDIOMS**

Being idioms a prominent part of the language and given a significant role when studying a foreign language, Irujo (1986) acknowledges not only that Idioms are an abundant feature of the English Language, but also a difficult issue to learn. She guides second language teachers by presenting different materials and activities that can be used in class to teach idioms. In the same line, Bromley (1984), apart from suggesting different activities to do in class to learn idioms, — such as the creation of a dictionary by the students, she also adds the possibility of learning idioms through children’s literature. She encourages teachers to make their students read this kind of literature considering that idioms may appear. She considers this option a good and entertaining one. Cooper (1998) acknowledges that idioms are becoming more and more essential when studying a second language. He also considers that the age of the students is also a basic feature since it seems that the age of nine years old is the time when children start to understand figurative meanings, and he encourages teachers to use idioms in class whenever there is the opportunity. Along with Bromley, he considers reading children's literature a good activity to learn and understand idioms. Likewise, Kang (2013) mentions some current idioms, which were built up by Biblical proper nouns, place names, and animals working as synecdoche. He finds crucial the study of the culture that has influenced the language, and important for the students to consider since the Bible is “the treasure house of English words, idioms, allusions, and mottoes” (Kang, 2013, p.56); at the same time, the Bible itself is a source of enrichment of the English Language. Kang points out that the translator needs to become proficient in the SL and TL and their pertinent cultures. For him "no one can really master the language without understanding the related social-cultural” (2013, p. 56). He remarks that the Bible has much to do with the formation of the ideology and culture of the Western World. It is a Book of culture and a place where one can find myths, and

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legends, among many other cultural things significant to our contemporary western societies. Furthermore, McGrath (2002) explores the origins of the King James Bible and how it became an essential element of British society and at the same time a “landmark in the history of the English language, and an inspiration to poets, dramatists, artists, and politicians” (McGrath, 2002, p. 1). Moreover, Geană (2018) renders a linguistic corpus of phraseological expressions derived from elements present in the Bible, not expressions that appear as such within the sacred book. She gives a short explanation for each of the chosen expressions for her corpus and provides an example of each of the idiom conforming to the corpus.

Opposing, there is Pinnavaia (2012) who, after having conducted a study of biblical idioms in the British National Corpus (BNC), claims that idioms are not as frequent as the majority of scholars say to be present either in written or spoken English. She chose 25 idiomatic expressions from the BNC, belonging to both the Old and New Testaments and she concluded that biblical idiomatic expressions are not popular among the English-speaking population, and that these expressions are more common in written texts rather than in spoken language. She points to the complexity of the grammatical structure of this figurative language for the lack of popularity of these expressions to be used. Nevertheless, the majority of scholars think contrary to what Pinnavaia claims, and this study seems to lack accuracy. The facts that idioms are widely used in language can be observed daily in the regular lives of the population. For students of a second language who do not have the opportunity to be in much contact with, English, in this case, every day, television is a good source of this figurative language. Regardless of whether the scripts actors follow have been previously written, their speech wants to imitate the naturality of the spoken language.

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Subsequently, Abel (2003) examines how native speakers and learners of the English Language gather the meaning of idioms through a study group and the subsequent analysis of the results. For her, idioms can be classified as ‘decomposable’, or ‘non-decomposable’, i.e., the meaning of some of them can be inferred by analysing the phrase structure, normally those constructed by (verb, article, noun). However, there are other idioms whose meaning cannot be inferred. Thus, idioms are classified by their literal or figurative meaning. Making this distinction, a different approach to teaching idioms could be developed. Conversely, in terms of a humoristic way Ochoa and López-Socasau (2004) explore several Spanish idioms and their literal translation into English. They also represent, or try to imagine, what the hearer, a native speaker of English, could understand when being addressed by one of these literal-translated idioms through pictures. They do not intend to explain the meaning or give an etymology of those idioms; nevertheless, they want to make fun of the difficulties that idioms have whenever they are translated, and imply, at the same time, that languages work differently. Yet these authors just wanted to make the reader ‘*have a whale of a time*’ they introduce the main problem translators might confront every time they need to translate idioms: the difficulties existent in a language when these phrases are needed to be transported into another language. In the same line, D’Angelo (2016) presents a few idioms in English with their corresponding idioms in Spanish and an example of their use in English. D’Angelo also adds a picture for the description of the meaning in a comical way and its literal translation into Spanish. She groups the idioms, she chose, thematically: animals, the human body, objects, the sky, daily situations, and actions and attitudes. Concurrently, she deals with different kinds of exercises related to the idioms in a mini-book of her creation, and a glossary with the idioms she handles, alphabetically ordered, and their equivalents in Spanish given.

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**THE TRANSLATION OF IDIOMS**

Lastly, Gutierrez-Díez (1995) finds an initial problem dealing with the classification of idioms. He signals a terminology problem to translate from Spanish to English different 'idiomatic expressions'. He makes the distinction between: '*modismo*', '*dicho*', '*proverbio*' and '*refran*'. Nevertheless, he just distinguishes two classifications in English: 'idiom' and 'saying', whereas idiom would be '*modismo*', and '*saying*' the rest of idiomatic expressions. He considers the Spanish terminology confusing and that the translator has the right to introduce terminological corrections in translations. He suggests different guidelines from different taxonomies of translation that can be used to translate 'idioms' and 'sayings' from English to Spanish or from Spanish to English. On the same line, Bueno (2006) considers that literal translations must be avoided when dealing with idioms, since they are misleading, and the original meaning might be '*lost in translation*'. She considers an important asset the fact of knowing very well the history and the culture of the TL to produce an optimum translation. She also suggests at the end of her article a list of different strategies, useful, for the translation of idioms. Nonetheless, language is something '*alive and kicking*', and it changes, evolving constantly. Given that idioms are the result of the variability of the language the translation strategies described might vary, according to what the translator needs to translate. Whatever the technique translators choose will be a good choice as long as the figurative meaning of the idiom is kept. Negro-Alousque (2010) suggests several strategies to translate idioms similar to the previously mentioned scholars have done. Nevertheless, it seems that Bueno and Negro-Alousque do not agree regarding literal translation. Perhaps it is the way of labelling the strategies that leads to a misleading discordance between them: what Negro-Alousque labels '*literal translation*', Bueno labels it '*equivalence*'.

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**METHODOLOGIC FRAMEWORK****THE DAWN OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND BIBLICAL ENGLISH**

Whatever means of communication can be a linguistically source of inspiration, i.e. ways of speaking, expressions, similes that catch the people’s eye because of their rhythm, their meaning, the words chosen, are sources of figurative language. These expressions start to be spread from mouth to ear until they begin to be used in everyday language: they become idioms and proverbs. Despite the amount of different literary works, or authors, being a great source of inspiration for the development of the English language, there are essentially two —one work and one author, which are *‘head and shoulders above’*. McGrath (2008, p. 1) acknowledges that “The two greatest influences on the shaping of the English Language are the works of William Shakespeare and the English translation of the Bible that appeared in 1611”. Even though former translations of the Bible are also important for the English language nurturing “the King James Bible [...] has contributed far more to English in the way of idiomatic or quasi-proverbial expressions than any other literary source” (Crystal, 2010, p.2). Unbeknownst to many people, the biblical language is a huge source of inspiration for idiomatic language.

Idioms and proverbs fill in the language up, especially the spoken language and they conform an important asset for speakers of English. As Jack (2007, p. xiv) puts it “these phrases appear in conversation all over the English-speaking world every minute of the day and we take them for granted”. The nature of the English-speaking language is less constrained than written English, thus, it has the liberty to be more figurative rather than direct. Furthermore, these idioms and expressions “have traceable origins and some even emerge from a particular event of history” (Jack, 2007, p. xv).

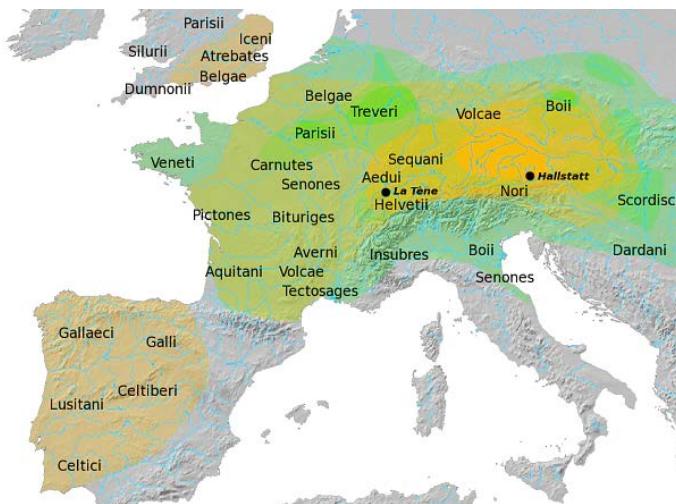
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## THE CELTS

English has not always been the dominant spoken language in the British Isles. The first settlers within the island are believed to have come from central Europe, the Hallstatt territory (Fig. 1), around 1.000 BC. These people were known as the Celts and they spoke Celtic languages. These languages were diverse and spoken in a vast part of Western Europe. Sadly, they have been disappearing with the passing of time, and "today Celtic languages are found only in the far corners of France and the British Isles; in the areas in which once were dominant they have left but little trace of their presence" (Baugh & Cable.2002, p. 30).

**Figure 1.** *Map of Hallstatt & La Tène Cultures*



*Note.* From [worldhistory.com](http://worldhistory.com)

The British Isles (Fig. 2) were invaded by different nations, namely the Romans, the Germanic Tribes of the Angle-Saxon-Jutes, the Scandinavians, and the Normans. All these people brought with them not only their language but also their culture from their places of origin. This ‘new’ language and culture left an imprint on the Celtic population already living on the island. Language, the same as people, mingled in these territories and by the year 43 AD the Romanisation of the island began. There had previously been a couple of attempts on the part of the Romans to conquer the island, but they were not successful. Regardless of the efforts by the Celts not to be conquered



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by the Romans, the Celts failed. Latin was established as the official language within the island for the government and upper classes, relegating the Celtic languages to be used by the laity. Together with language, religious beliefs were also taken by the inhabitants of the British Isles.

**Figure 2.** *The UK as seen from space*



*Note.* From BBC.CO.UK

**CHRISTIANISM FORGES ITS WAY**

The Roman Empire had already become more flexible in terms of religion and by the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity started to be more visible within the Empire. It was Emperor Constantine ( ?- 337 AD) (Fig. 3) who seemed to be appealed by a monotheistic religion. Christians had previously been persecuted and slew by the Roman cohorts but from the year 313 AD onwards Christian worship started to be tolerated and consequently not punished by the Roman government. After having part of the British Isles been conquered by the Romans, the Celtic population started to be in contact with different people such as merchants, traders, artisans, and people who started to come from other parts of the Empire. It was these people who started, around the 1<sup>st</sup> century, to spread the story of Jesus and their pagan deities time before Christianity was better regarded in the Roman Empire.

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**Figure 3.** *Emperor Constantine Bronze Statue in York (UK)*



*Note.* From [Zoomviewer.toolforge.org](https://zoomviewer.toolforge.org)

**THE BIBLE**

The Germanic invasion meant a huge change in the history of these islands, not only because the Celtic language was virtually erased from the territory but also because the language they brought became the foundations of what we know today as the English Language. By the same time, around the 5<sup>th</sup> century, some, considered sacred, scriptures had already been spread within the Western World. These scriptures were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and they talked about the history of Israel and its population. Christianity was born from Judaism and the early Church kept on including scriptures that they considered inspiring for them and the people, in the later so-called 'Holy Bible'. The structure of this sacred book is quite complex since it is a compilation of those different scriptures, called books, from which the authors are unknown. They come from a variety of cultures, making it more complex and mysterious at the same time, to understand. It has two main sections which contain and structure those scriptures, 66 in total, chosen by the Church to form this book: The Old Testament and the New Testament.

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The Old Testament, also known as the Hebrew Bible, originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, is formed of a total of 39 books grouped in 5 different sections labelled Law, History, Poetry, Minor Prophets, and Major Prophets. The Old Testament narrates the "history of the people of Israel over about a millennium, beginning with God's creation of the world and humankind, and contains the stories, laws, and moral lessons that form the basis of religious life for both Jews and Christians" (Pruitt. 2020, para. 4). The New Testament, originally written in Greek and Aramaic, is formed of 27 books grouped in 4 different sections labelled as Gospels, Acts, Epistles, and Prophecy. The New Testament "records Jesus' life, from his birth and teachings to his death and later resurrection a narrative that forms the fundamental basis of Christianity" (Pruitt. 2020 para. 11)

Christianity had already gained adepts after the fall of the Roman Empire, and it was introduced in the British Isles by St Augustine around the year 597 A D. As it has been mentioned before, details about Christianity had already been introduced many years before by different people who traded in the territory. However, the coming of St Augustine (Fig. 4) seemed that people started to pay much more attention to it. Born in Rome, he reached the coasts of Kent and he was well received by the Briton king Ethelbert I (860-865). Apparently, the King liked this religion Augustine brought, and he converted to Christianity. Thus, the evangelisation of the Kingdom of Kent began. Augustine founded Christ Church (Canterbury) as his Cathedral and became the 1<sup>st</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury.

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**Figure 4.** *Statue of St Augustine in Canterbury (UK)*



*Note.* From [Catholicexchange.com](http://Catholicexchange.com)

### **THE VIKING RULE, THE ARRIVAL OF THE NORMANS AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE LANGUAGE**

By the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Isles were under Viking rule, Danish more specifically. The Danes caused unrest on the island. They were not peaceful times as many battles for obtaining power over the territory took place. However, the Danish people were confined to a territory, later on, called 'The Danelaw', agreed in the Treaty of Wetmore in 878. An old Roman Road called 'Watling Street' was the divisor line of the two territories the Danish and the English (Fig. 5):. Nevertheless, the Danes were adaptable people, and "in spite of certain customs [they] continued to observe, they assimilated to most of the ways of English life [...] many of them [the Danes] early accepted Christianity" (Baugh & Cable, 2002, p. 68). The language kept on mingling: Old English and Old Norse were combining slowly but surely. It has to be remarked that in religious terms the language that was kept on being used was Latin. The amalgamation of the languages was considerable at some point. Regarding language, things were not easy after the Norman invasion in 1066, another language reached to Isles: French. The Roman, Germanic, and Norman invasions might be amongst the most important milestones regarding language and history for this territory and the English Language. After the Battle of Hastings (1066) not only did a new king arrive, William 'The Conqueror', but also a new nobility was established in the Royal Court. The Old English nobility had been, in Cable and Bough's words, "wiped out" and the important positions in government had

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been taken by the Normans. Hence, the language to be used also changed: “the Conquest of England by the Normans in 1066 had led to the suppression of English in public life [...] government departments and the courts” (McGrath, 2001, p.26). The upper classes spoke French, not only because they did not know English, but also because it was a way to distinguish themselves from the laity: “English would do very well for the common labourer; French was the language of choice for the elite” (McGrath, 2001, p. 27). Conversely, the language used by Church remained to be Latin, and it was virtually the only possible option, apart from Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, for reading the Bible.

**Figure 5.** *Watling Street. Divisor line: England and the Danelaw*



*Note.* From [TheFreelanceHistoryWriter.com](http://TheFreelanceHistoryWriter.com)

### **THE ‘LATIN VULGATA’, THE PRINTING PRESS, AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT ERA**

The Bible had been translated into the language of the Roman Empire by Jerome of Stridon in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century, baptised as the ‘Latin Vulgata’. Simultaneously, the Vulgata was a revision translation of Old Italian ‘Versus Latina’ which were the Gospels used by the Roman church in mass. The Vulgata became the official Bible Book to be used at the Catholic Church in the Council

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of Trent (1545-1563). The only way up to the moment to spread God's words was by making copies by hand of the Bible. It meant a long process and involved many monks, whose everyday tasks were translating other religious works or copying the sacred scriptures. Notwithstanding, a pioneering artefact came to light in Germany by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Johannes Guttenberg had assembled different existent inventions, and built up the printing press. This machine meant a huge innovation since it allowed copying manuscripts, or other texts, in a faster and a cheaper way. William Caxton was responsible for introducing the printing press in 1476. According to Crystal "he was involved in importing and selling manuscripts, before he turned to printing, a technique which he learned in Cologne, Germany" (2004, p 255). McGrath makes it clear that "the development of printing meant that works available earlier only to a charmed clerical circle were now available to a much wider readership" (2002, p 14).

The Enlightenment era meant an increment in the literacy of people. More and more people could read and write, it had stopped being something constricted to the clergy. Demanding to understand what was being said in mass grew. The English Language was demanded to be spoken in church. There was an increment of nationalism by the 15<sup>th</sup> century; English was being considered much more important rather than French, especially after the Battle of Agincourt (1415) and the so-called Hundred Years War (1337-1453), between England and France. French started to be considered the language of the enemy, so it started to be displaced from the Isles. The turn for displacing Latin from the territory had come. Growing English in importance, it became to be used in the religious field. By the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the cities of York and Chester to celebrate the festivity of the Corpus Christy, a series of plays started to be recreated. These plays not only meant the beginnings of drama, but also they started to play a significant role in people's lives. But it is perhaps the use of the English language the most important feature of these plays. For the first time

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in history Religion and the English Language met. Apart from offering religious education, these could be understood by the laity. It was the first time that people could understand what was being told in those religious episodes. Hence, “the demand for a printed Bible in the English language became an issue of increasing importance in the late Middle Ages” (McGrath, 2002, p.32). The clergy was against these demands, since English was considered, to put it in McGrath's words "a barbarous language, lacking any real grammatical structure, incapable of expressing the deep and nuanced truths of the Bible in particular, and the Christian faith in general” (2002, p. 33). English was not a suitable language for translating the Bible; however, it ended up being translated into it. The problem was not the language. The issue was that if people now could read the Bible, they could be able to interpret what was being said there; therefore, the power of the Church was threatened.

**THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE INTO VERNACULAR LANGUAGE**

Leaving religious conflicts aside, the first translation from Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, was carried out by William Tyndale (1494-1536) (Fig. 6 right) and the first to be printed in 1526. According Luther and other scholars, the Latin Vulgata contained many translation errors, and what Tyndale wanted was to portray what was really said in those scriptures. There were not many places where one could study Hebrew at that time; therefore, its translation was a complex and a challenging task. So much so, that Tyndale had to coin several words for this purpose. For instance, “scapegoat” (Leviticus 16:8), or “atonement” (Leviticus 16:6) —meaning reconciliation; and phrases such as “my brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4:9), “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13), or “law unto themselves” (Romans 2:14) have reached to our present times, being included as regular idiomatic vocabulary among many other phrases.

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**Figure 6.** *Martin Luther and William Tyndale*



*Note.* From [ucg.org](http://ucg.org)

Many controversies surrounded Tyndale’s translation regarding religious ‘ingredients’ since it was considered to support Lutheran ideas. Eventually, its publication was forbidden in England, and it was never placed in any parish in England. Crystal (2004, p.271) claims, “by 1611, when the King James Bible appeared, over fifty different translations had been made”, yet Tyndale’s translation was *‘the cornerstone’* for all of them. The language used was highly influential in the translations that were to come. Some better than others, nonetheless, it was the King James Bible considered the best of all versions. The in-charge translators for this latter version were carefully chosen, and their aim was not to make a new translation but to make the best one. In this case, this group of men did not start from scratch. They had many translations in their hands to peruse and investigate whether the translations they were producing were suitable or not for their purpose. Hebrew is a highly idiomatic language and this commission needed to choose “which Hebrew expressions were to be taken literally, and which were to be seen as idiomatic” (McGrath, 2002, p.231). Consequently, many Hebraic phrases were literally translated into English. For instance, “*to fall flat on his face*” (Numbers 22:31), “*by the skin of my teeth*” (Job 19:20), “*like a lamb to the slaughter*” (Isaiah 53:7), or “*to lick the dust*” (Psalm 72:9) among others. They were introduced



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into daily use English. Many people are unaware of the biblical origins of these idioms, and what is more, that they are based on the Hebraic language.

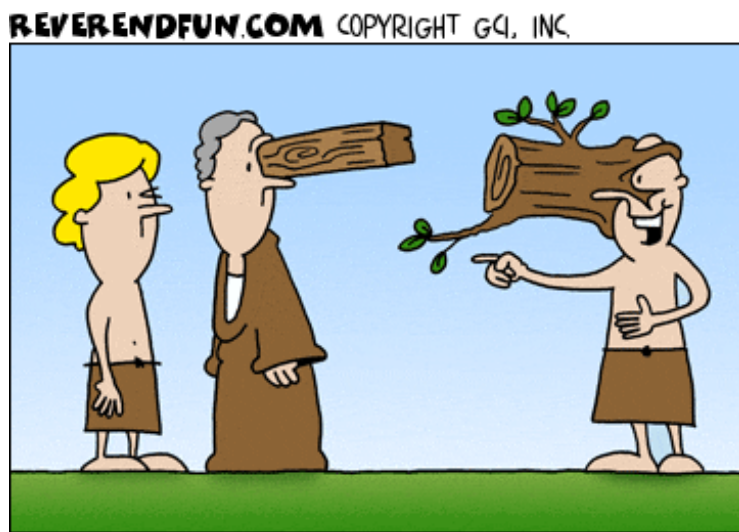
**BIBLICAL IDIOMS IN TODAY’S SPEECH**

Biblical English is very common in everyday day speech, “we find expressions in daily use, where people take a piece of biblical language and use it in totally non biblical context” (Crystal, 2010, p.6). Let us take for instance “*lesser light*” (Genesis 1:16); “*as old as the hills*” (Job 15:7); “*let there be light*”(Genesis 1:3); “*manna from heaven*” (Exodus 16:4); “*land of [flowing with] milk and honey*” (Exodus 3:8); “*apple of his eye*”(Deuteronomy 31:16); “*giving up the ghost*” (Job 3:11); “*the patience of Job*” (James 5:11); “[*a*] *fly in the ointment*” (Ecclesiastes 10:1); “*a voice in the wilderness*” (Isaiah 40:3); “*a drop in the bucket [ocean]*” (Isiah 40:15); “*the mote in someone’s eyes*” (Matthew 7:3) (Fig. 7); “*proclaim from the rooftops*” (Luke 12:3); “*den of thieves*” (Matthew 21:13); “*den of lions*” (Daniel 6:12); “*casting pearls before the swine*” (Matthew 7:6); “*scales from his eyes*” (Acts 9:18); “*a cross to bear*” (Luke 14:27); “*no room at the inn*”(Luke 2:7); “*seeds fell by the road side*” (Matthew 13:4), “*shake off the dust from your feet*” (Mark 6:11), and “*Jesus wept*” (John 11:35) to name a few, are ‘*alive and kicking*’ in everyday English. Christianity and the sacred scriptures of the Holy Bible are important elements for the Western Society, and they are present, unperceived to many people; “We often fail to realize how deeply the English language is in debt to the Bible” as Pinnavaia (2012, p. 3) claims.

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Figure 7. *The Mote in Someone's Eye*



(See Matthew 7:1-5) 01-23-2001

HAH HAH, YOU JUST TOLD HIM THAT HE HAS A  
SPLINTER IN HIS EYE, AND YOU HAVE A BEAM  
IN YOURS

*Note.* From [pastormikemcdowell.wordpress.com](http://pastormikemcdowell.wordpress.com)

There are other idioms, which were not been taken literally from the Bible, they have derived from it instead. In other words, they have Biblical elements forming the phrases. To name a few, that is the case of “*to be a Judas*” meaning betrayer; “*from Jericho to June*” to mean a long way to cover; “*not knowing someone from Adam*” not recognising someone; “*the garden of Eden*” to refer to a lovely and calm place; “*a perfect Babel*” to refer to a messy place, or to a place where nobody can understand each other; “*the prodigal son*” to refer to somebody who derived from the right path but that has come to their senses; or “*the lost sheep*” with a similar meaning to the previous one, with the difference that that person has not come to their right senses yet. Christianity and Biblical English are, as Kang (2013, p. 56) puts it “of great importance in the formation process of the English language, it is the treasure house of English words, idioms, and mottoes”. Accordingly, Geană (2018, p.169) sustains that “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”.

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**IDIOMS AND THEIR WEIGHT IN SLA**

In order to learn a second language, not only studying the grammatical rules is important, learning the culture that surrounds that language is of great importance as well. Idioms are an important part of the culture of a country, and as Kang (2013, p. 56) says: “only with a good command of its meaningful words and expressions we can learn English better”. However, it has to be added that when idioms are mastered they make SL students to sound more natural, when speaking, closer to nativeness, “Idioms are the most frequent encountered in discourse [...] over a life time of 60 years, a person would use about 20 million idioms” (Cooper, 1998 p.255). In Bromley’s words (1984, p. 274) idioms are very interesting and despite of being “disruptive, ambiguous, and difficult for the language user, so also are they interesting and colourful. Idioms add humour, imagery, and spice to language”

Idioms are the most forgotten part of a language in SLA. Irujo (1986, p. 237) claims that “[A] reason why second language learners do not learn idioms is that we [teachers] do not teach them very well. Many second language-teaching materials either ignore idioms entirely or relegate them to the ‘other expression’ ”. Although this issue is changing with time, since more time is developed to teaching idioms in class, figurative language keeps on being the hardest part of a language to study from students’ perspective. As Cooper (1998, p.259) puts it “idiomatic expressions are so frequently encountered in both spoken and written discourse, they require special attention in language programmes and should not be relegated to a position of secondary importance in the curriculum”. In order to solve this, Bromley (1984) suggests the creating of idiom-dictionaries built up by the students, although it might seem tedious, writing might help to memorise the collocation of the idiom, and the meaning at the same time. Along with Cooper (1998), children’s literature is suggested as another method to learn idioms. When encountering idioms in a text, meaning needs to

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be guessed by the reader in order to gather meaning from what it is being read, thus, it might help to memorise those expressions and learn them. However, the best way to learn and understand idioms is through the culture of the language that is being learnt. As it has been said before, figurative language derives from literature, television, music, and many other elements from the culture of a country, including the Bible.

Television is another good way to find idioms. Day by day the scripts that the actors follow resemble more natural and spontaneous speech and, consequently many idioms are included in their scripts. Although they do not provide interaction from the part of the viewer with the person that is being seen on the screen, they are a good way to gather and grasp the meaning of them by means of the context.

### **STRATEGIES AND ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATIONS TO SEVERAL BIBLICAL IDIOMS**

Figurative language is also interesting in the moment in which they need to be translated into other languages. A huge amount of cultural baggage is needed in order to transport the meaning of that language in the TL. In order to bring about that task different strategies of translation are needed.

According to Collins Dictionary, an idiom is "a group of words which, when they are used together in a particular combination, have a different meaning from the one they would have if you took the meaning of all the individual words in the group". Furthermore, it adds that "the idiom of something such as speech, writing, music, or architecture is its particular style, especially when this style belongs to a certain country or period of history". Hence, in order to translate figurative language the whole phrase must be taken as a whole since they are like metaphors. The complete phrase represents an idea. Whenever that phrase is missing a part of its meaning is lost.

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Translating requires using different strategies in order to be able to transport the majority of the metaphoric language from the SL to the TL. Strategies, as Vázquez Ayora (1977), Zaro and Truman (1988), and Molina and Hurtado-Albir (2002) label as ‘*modulation*’, ‘*equivalence*’, ‘*adaptation*’, or ‘*literal translation*’ are applied. These strategies are the ones in common used by Gutierrez-Diez, Bueno, and Negro-Alousque. Modulation consists of changing the point of view of the sentence, or phrase which is required to be translated. Equivalence is the most used whenever idioms have to be expressed in other languages. It consists of expressing the same idea but with other words or with other images, the idiom creates in the mind. Adaptation is frequently used whenever there are no equivalents in the TL. Sometimes there are ‘experiences’ which exist in a culture that do not exist in other which are difficult to transport in a translation. Literal translation might be considered the easiest way of translating, since each word individually is transported into the TL. Yet might be the easiest, it is not the best solution, since in many cases the meaning is completely lost. In Gutierrez-Diez’s (1995, p.38) words “the formal complexity of these kind of expressions, in many cases, it must be added, that there is no intercultural equivalence of those expressions of the idiomatic expressions in the SL”. Hence, the task of the translator is to portray sense to those expressions in the TL. Translators seem to lean towards applying ‘*equivalences*’ and ‘*adaptions*’ from the SL to the TL in order to translate idioms.

Nevertheless, ‘literal translation’, as it has been mentioned before, was a strategy applied by the translators of the different versions of the Bible. They did not know at that time that the translations they were doing of typical Hebraic idioms into English, would make an impact within the English language and they would be included into the language for good.

There are many different ways to say the same ‘thing’ in a language, and the same happens whenever a translation is made, i.e. the same meaning can be expressed in different words. As there

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are many ways to express an idea, in the following diagram it has been tried to produce a different translation from the common ones that have been provided in different situations. As it can be observed in the first half of the table, the most common strategies used are ‘*equivalence*’, ‘*adaptation*’, and ‘*literal translation*’. In order to provide a different translation, in the second half of the following table, the strategy of ‘*transposition*’, which consists of changing the grammatical category of the phrase, has been used in several cases.

The following table shows two different translations for the same Biblical phrase in English. In one column there is the most common one and in another column, there is an alternative translation to the previous one, most widely used, but that means the same. Spanish is a rich language in lexis; hence, it offers the possibility to say the same but with different expressions, onomatopoeias, and even expletives. The table also includes the the strategy that has been applied when translating in both cases, the original one and the new possible translation.

**Table 1.**

*Examples of alternative translations to Biblical Idioms and the strategies used.*

<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>BIBLICAL IDIOM</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>COMMON OR MOST KNOWN TRANSLATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>OTHER POSSIBLE TRANSLATION</b>
(Genesis 1:16)	“[a] lesser light”	Adaptation	“hacer de menos [a una persona]”	Transposition <sup>1</sup>	“Menospreciar”
(Job 15:7)	“as old as the hills” “as old as Adam”	Equivalence	“de los tiempos de la Tarara”, “más viejo que Matusalén”, “de los tiempos de Mari Castaña”	Equivalence	“De cuando mi abuelo usaba pañales”

<sup>1</sup> Change of grammatical category – in this case from an attribute to a verb.

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<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>BIBLICAL IDIOM</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>COMMON OR MOST KNOWN TRANSLATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>OTHER POSSIBLE TRANSLATION</b>
(Genesis 1:3)	“let there be light”	Literal translation	“que se haga la luz [y la luz se hizo]”	Adaptation	“¡¡Tachannnn!!”
(Exodus 16:4)	“manna from heaven”	Literal translation	“como [pan] caído del cielo”	Transposition <sup>2</sup>	“Sin que te lo esperes”
(Exodus 3:8)	“land of [flowing with] milk and honey”	Equivalence	“la tierra de la prosperidad”	Equivalence	“Un lugar maravilloso”
(Deuteronomy 31:16)	“apple of his eye”	Literal translation	“la niña de sus ojos”	Adaptation	“Lo que más quiere en el mundo”
(Job 3:11)	“giving up the ghost”	transposition (from phrase to verb)	“tirar la toalla”	Equivalence	“No rendirse” “De menos hizo Dios a Perico”
(James 5:11)	“the patience of Job”	Literal translation	“[tener] la paciencia del Santo Job”	Equivalence	“Tener mucho aguante”
(Ecclesiastes 10:1)	“[a] fly in the ointment	Equivalence	“la única pega es que...”	Adaptation	“Lo que tenía que joderlo todo”
(Isaiah 40:3)	“a voice in the wilderness”	Equivalence	“Era de noche, y sin embargo llovía”	Adaptation	“”Que sí, que sí”
(Isiah 40:15)	“a drop in the bucket [ocean]”	Equivalence	“una grano de arena [en el desierto]”	Equivalence	“hacer de un algo, un mucho”

<sup>2</sup> Change of grammatical category – in this case from a noun phrase to a prepositional phrase

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<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>BIBLICAL IDIOM</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>COMMON OR MOST KNOWN TRANSLATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>OTHER POSSIBLE TRANSLATION</b>
(Matthew 7:3)	“the mote in someone’s eyes [and not the beam in ours]”	Literal translation	“ver la paja en el ojo ajeno, y no la viga en el nuestro”	Equivalence	“Consejos vendo que para mí no tengo”
(Luke 12:3)	“proclaim from the rooftops”	Equivalence	“proclamar a los cuatro vientos”	Equivalence	“Decirlo de voz en grito”
(Matthew 21:13)	“den of thieves”	Equivalence	“una casa de putas”	Adaptation	“Panda de chorizos”
(Daniel 6:12)	“den of lions”	Equivalence	“un nido de víboras”	Transposition <sup>3</sup>	“No es el mejor lugar para meterse”
(Matthew 7:6)	“casting pearls before the swine”	Equivalence	“no está hecha la miel para el hocico del asno”	Equivalence	“No sabe apreciar nada”
(Acts 9:18)	“scales from his eyes”	Equivalence	“quitarse la venda de los ojos” (1 Reyes 20:41)	Equivalence	“Darse cuenta de la realidad”
(Luke 14:27)	“a cross to bear”	Equivalence	“llevar un gran peso [encima]”	Equivalence	“Un gran sufrimiento”
(Luke 2:7)	“no room at the inn”	Equivalence	“no cabe ni un alma”	Modulation	“Como sardinas en lata”
(Matthew 13:4)	“seeds fell by the road side”	Equivalence	“caer en saco roto”	Modulation	“No sirve para nada”

<sup>3</sup> Change of grammatical category – in this case from a noun phrase to a verb phrase



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<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>BIBLICAL IDIOM</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>COMMON OR MOST KNOWN TRANSLATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>OTHER POSSIBLE TRANSLATION</b>
(Mark 6:11)	"shake off the dust from your feet"	Equivalence	"hacer borrón y cuenta nueva"	Equivalence	"Empezar de cero"
(John 11:35)	"Jesus wept" <sup>4</sup>	Equivalence	"¡Virgen Santa!"	Adaptation	"Me cago en la puta"
<b>(Numbers 22:31)</b>	"to fall flat from his face"	Literal Translation	"Caerse de bruces"	Equivalence	"Darse en todos los morros"
<b>(Job 19:20)</b>	"by the skin of my teeth"	Equivalence	"por los pelos de un calvo"	Adaptation	"por un pelín"
<b>(Isaiah 53:57)</b>	"Like a lamb to the slaughter"	Equivalence	"Como cordero degollao"	Adaptation	"como si lo fueran a matar"
<b>(Psalm 72:9)</b>	"to lick the dust"	Equivalence	"morder el polvo"	Adaptation	"Te vas a enterar de lo que es bueno"
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	"to be a Judas"	Literal Translation Adaptation	"Ser un Judas" "Ser un hijo de la Gran Bretaña"	Adaptation	"Ser un <i>hijoputa</i> "
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	"from Jericho to June"	Adaptation	"Donde Cristo perdió el gorro" "Donde Cristo dio las tres voces"	Adaptation	"Allí a <i>tomarporsaco</i> "
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	"the garden of Eden"	Literal Translation	"El jardín del Edén"	Adaptation	"una auténtica maravilla"
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	"a perfect Babel"	Adaptation	"una leonera"	Equivalence	"Una autentica locura/ desorden"

<sup>4</sup> This phrase is used nowadays as an expletive.

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<b>LOCATION</b>	<b>BIBLICAL IDIOM</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>COMMON OR MOST KNOWN TRANSLATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY USED</b>	<b>OTHER POSSIBLE TRANSLATION</b>
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	“the prodigal son”	Literal Translation	“El hijo pródigo”	Adaptation	“El que no quería saber nada, vuelve”
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	“the lost sheep”	Literal Translation	“la oveja descarriada”	Adaptation	“el <i>perdío</i> ”
<b>Based on the Bible</b>	“not knowing someone from Adam”	Adaptation	“no nos han presentado nunca”	Adaptation	“y yo que me sé quién es”

*Note.* Translations taken from popular knowledge and *Dichos y frases hechas* (2000) Belén Bermejo Meléndez y José Callés Vallés, in the first part, and my own translations on the second half.

Spanish and English share similar ideas regarding religion, they have the same common thread: Hebrew. Hence those idioms that appeared in the Bible and many other images can be transported by literal translation, not only from Hebrew to English, but also from English to Spanish. It is needed to bear in mind that the Bible, in Spanish was also born from different translations, from Hebrew and Latin though time. In a way, the Biblical Language crosses paths, deriving from the same starting point, with English and Spanish.

**“LET THERE BE LIGHT”**

*THE DAWN OF ‘BIBLICAL IDIOMS’, IDIOMS AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION, AND  
ALTERNATIVE TRANSLATIONS TO SEVERAL ‘BIBLICAL IDIOMS’*

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**CONCLUSION**

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Christianity has much to do with Western Civilisations. Regardless of being a believer or not in God, there is no doubt that the majority of the population uses biblical English in the form of idioms or proverbs in non-religious contexts. Religion might be less important in the lives of people nowadays but it has much to do with language speaking. It is part of the culture of many civilisations. Languages influence other languages; languages are inter-connected, in a way, the same as people are connected, and influence each other.

The translation of the Bible into vernacular languages supposed a revolution for the constant formation of the languages around the world. For the second language learner, learning idioms of whatever field is as important as studying the grammar rules or the vocabulary. It allows speaking naturally and fluently, reaching the point of nativeness. For those who do not speak a second language, the work of the translator makes the audience or readership to understand a kind of figurative language that is very difficult to grasp depending on the context. Being able to understand figurative language, despite of being the most difficult feature of a language, helps to understand deeper feelings and situations within a different culture than the one we were born into.

Languages are not rigid and they are in constant change. Idioms are the best example of that evolution of language, and, although, sometimes forgotten in to be included in the students' curricula, they mean the most important asset for communication. The translation of figurative language have bettered along time, and trying to find different ways to express that puzzling language in a TL is also a good way to understand, learn, and speak, foreign languages better.

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