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# Yesterday's idioms today: a corpus linguistic analysis of Bible idioms

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## Abstract

Many of the idioms used in English stem from the Bible. There they were originally coined and used to announce God's word, to facilitate the understanding of it, and to capture the ineffable and unsaid. Nowadays with newly derived and synchronic meanings, they can be employed in a similar fashion in contexts that are not just religious. It is the simultaneous existence of the two metaphoric readings – the historic and the synchronic – that makes Bible idioms particularly rich and fascinating linguistic tools worthy of study. This article analyses a series of twenty-five Bible idioms in contemporary English, as represented by the *British National Corpus*. While the examination provides data as to the frequency and distribution of the idioms in different texts, particular attention is placed upon their communicative functions in discourse in order to try and individuate three pragmatic types of Bible idiom.

## 1. Bible idioms in English

Surely no other written work pulses with as much figurative language as does the Bible. In God's words spoken through the prophets in the Old Testament and through Jesus and the apostles in the New, there are over two hundred figures of speech. According to the careful parsing by professor Bullinger (1898), the use of such rhetoric is a "designed and legitimate departure from the laws of the language, in order to emphasise what is said" (*The Companion Bible* 1990: appendix 6: 8). In *Genesis* 3 emerge some of the earliest examples: in verse 14 ("And the Lord God said unto the serpent, "because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life"), both *upon thy belly shalt thou go* and *dust shalt thou eat* have figurative meanings that intensify the truth of their message. In fact, while the sentences cannot be interpreted literally, they nonetheless call attention to the reality of the facts by painting the picture of Satan's final humiliation and of his utter defeat. These concepts are conveyed by two expressions that classify as idioms of overstatement, and in particular, of hyperbole commonly used in the Scriptures for reinforcing a point.

Besides idioms of overstatement, comprising hyperbole and hendiadys, which is the combination of two or three elements to express the same idea (see, for example, in *Psalms* 107 v. 10: "Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, Being bound in affliction and iron"), the Bible also offers idioms of comparison made up of similes and especially of metaphors, such as the famous "Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" found in *Matthew* 5 v. 13. It also contains idioms of understatement that include examples of irony, litotes, euphemism and antithesis; idioms involving omission known as ellipsis; idioms of association composed of metonymy, synecdoche and merismus; and idioms stressing the personal dimension made up of personification and apostrophe. In sum, the Bible contains a myriad of idiomatic expressions through which over the centuries God's word and teaching have been made known to Christians all over the world in a variety of languages, consciously and unconsciously shaping their thoughts and expressions of them (Bradshaw 1997).

We often fail to realize how deeply the English language is in debt to the Bible. Having had the Scriptures available in the common tongue for over five centuries has meant that many Hebrew idioms and biblical sayings have become part of our language. Unlike many other idioms that have one literal and one metaphoric reading, bible idioms have two

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metaphoric readings. One is the original historical and theologically-based meaning for which they were ideated, the other is the derived and secular synchronic meaning. Such a feature makes them particularly interesting from a linguistic point of view, and is why this study will focus on this category of expression. More precisely, this study intends to uncover how exploitable Bible idioms are in everyday discourse by means of a corpus linguistic analysis.

In the last thirty years phraseological researches in contemporary corpora have provided insight into such facts as the frequency and the use of idioms that have surprised both experts and laymen alike. Contrary to general opinion, Moon (1994, 1998a, 1998b, 2001) has demonstrated that the distribution of idiomatic expressions in the English language is rather low, and that idioms are used more frequently in written texts than in spoken discourse. Numerous corpus-based analyses (for example, Barkema 1994a, 1994b, 1996, Jaegar 1999, Langlotz 2001, 2006) have also revealed that idiomatic expressions are much more structurally flexible than generally thought, defying the traditional definition of the idiom as a multiword unit whose form is fixed. This may, on the one hand, be attributed to the complex semantic configuration of most idioms, but, on the other, also to user purpose. Findings have, in fact, shown that idioms with lexically modified structures are particularly frequent in journalistic texts, where writers have the objective of manoeuvring readers' thoughts and ideas: in such texts the meaning and function of idioms is thus consciously exploited, regardless of the presumed fixedness of their structures (Pinnavaia 2000, 2007, 2008, 2010).

Aware of the significance of corpus linguistic research for a better understanding of idiom use, this work will therefore examine the frequency and function of a series of Bible idioms in the *British National Corpus* (from now on BNC). Conscious of the relative lightness of idioms in contemporary English and especially in its spoken form, the choice of such a large corpus, principally made up of a written component, seemed more suitable for the objective in mind. Corpus research on idioms has in fact shown that idioms are hard to find in large-scale corpora, let alone in smaller corpora (Gottlieb 1994: 89, Simpson and Mendis 2003: 419-420, 423, Sinclair 1991: 73, Skandera 2000: 339, 441).

The expressions, chosen randomly from the Bible, comprise 12 Old Testament and 13 New Testament idioms. The former, placed in order of appearance in the Old Testament, consist of *a land of milk and honey* (for example, Exodus 3, 8); *to worship the golden calf* (Exodus 32, 8); *to stew in one's own juice* (Deuteronomy 14, 21); *to get one's feet wet* (Joshua 3, 13 and 17); *to wear sackcloth and ashes* (for example, Nehemiah 9, 1); *by the skin of one's teeth* (Job 19, 20); *to heap coals of fire on one's head* (Proverbs 25, 21-22); *a fly in the ointment* (Ecclesiastes 10, 1); *a little bird told me* (Ecclesiastes 10, 20); *a drop in the bucket* (Isaiah 40, 15); *feet of clay* (Daniel 2, 42); *the writing on the wall* (Daniel 5, 5). The latter consist of *the salt of the earth* (Matthew 5, 13); *to turn the other cheek* (Matthew 5, 39); *till/to kingdom come* (Matthew 6, 10); *a wolf in sheep's clothing* (Matthew 7, 15); *new wine into old bottles* (Matthew 9, 17); *whited sepulchre* (Matthew 23, 27); *to make a mountain of a molehill* (Matthew 21, 21); *to separate the sheep from the goats* (Matthew 25, 32); *to raise the roof* (Mark 2, 4); *to kill the fatted calf* (Luke 15, 27); *a tough row to hoe* (Acts 9, 5); *to break bread* (Acts 20, 7); *filthy lucre* (for example, Titus 1, 7). For every idiom located in the BNC, three principal aspects were accounted for: the text containing the idiom, the lexical structure of the idiom, and the semantic and pragmatic meaning of the idiom.<sup>1</sup> The following study will thus, firstly, offer information as to the frequency of these Bible idioms in English; secondly, it will consider the prevailing macro-function of language that such idioms have in the texts in which they occur most frequently; thirdly, it will uncover three pragmatic kinds of Bible idiom, based upon on a close lexico-grammatical analysis of three exemplary expressions.

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## 2. The distribution of Bible idioms in English

Considering the frequency first, it emerges that the twenty-five Bible idioms examined in the BNC are on the whole moderately frequent. Here follow the idioms and their occurrences, placed in order of increasing frequency: *a tough row to hoe* (1), *a whited sepulchre* (1), *to heap coals of fire on one's head* (3), *filthy lucre* (4), *a little bird told me* (4), *a drop in the bucket* (5), *to kill the fatted calf* (5), *to get one's feet wet* (7), *to stew in one's own juice* (7), *new wine in old bottles* (9), *to make mountains out of molehills* (11), *to break bread* (13), *sackcloth and ashes* (13), *a wolf in sheep's clothing* (13), *to worship the golden calf* (15), *to raise the roof* (16), *to turn the other cheek* (17), *to separate the sheep from the goats* (19), *a fly in the ointment* (21), *a land of milk and honey* (21), *by the skin of one's teeth* (22), *the salt of the earth* (22), *feet of clay* (22), *the writing on the wall* (26), *till/to kingdom come* (33).

It is possible to see that the most popular idioms are *to/till kingdom come* with thirty-three occurrences, followed by *the writing on the wall* with twenty-six occurrences, and then by *feet of clay*, *the salt of the earth*, *by the skin of one's teeth*, *a land of milk and honey* and *a fly in the ointment* each with over twenty occurrences. The least popular are *a tough row to hoe* and *a whited sepulchre* with one occurrence each, followed by *to heap coals of fire on one's head* with three occurrences, and *filthy lucre* and *a little bird told me* with four occurrences each. The occurrences of the remaining twelve idioms range between five and nineteen.

The lack of popularity of some of these idioms might be motivated by pondering the accessibility of the semantics and syntax making them up. The meaning 'hypocrite' of *a whited sepulchre*, for example, is not particularly transparent. The fact that in biblical times sepulchres were whitened a month before the Passover to warn off persons from contracting uncleanness that could come from being in contact with dead bodies is no longer common knowledge; moreover, the term 'sepulchre' itself is hardly ever used nowadays. Another term that is also not often used in contemporary English is 'lucre': modern versions of the Bible have in fact substituted 'money' or 'gain' for it, explaining why the idiom *filthy lucre* may not be so frequent now.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the idiom *to heap coals of fire on one's head* has a literal structure that seems to contradict its figurative meaning ('to melt down one's enemy's animosity by deeds of kindness'), and indeed may help to explain its low frequency in the BNC.<sup>3</sup>

Idiom popularity may instead be explained by the ease with which figurative meanings are accessed. More recent psycholinguistic studies in the area of phraseology have in fact proven that the key element in the instantaneous understanding of the figurative meaning of idioms is in fact familiarity. Familiarity with an idiom implies no effort on the reader/hearer, who interprets the meaning without the need of computing the literal interpretation. This apparently makes familiar idioms the more frequently used ones too (see Cacciari et al. 1992, Cacciari and Glucksberg 1995, Cacciari and Tabossi 1993, Cronk et al. 1992, Cronk et al. 1993, Shraw et al. 1988, Titone and Connine 1994). That people are more familiar with some Bible idioms more than others may in part depend on their origins: the more popular idioms like *till kingdom come*, *the writing on the wall*, *feet of clay*, *a land of milk and honey*, *the salt of the earth* come from well-known biblical passages that continue to be read and heard in church services. It may also partly depend on the transparency of the metaphoric images. The frequently used idiom *a fly in the ointment*, for example, can be semantically decomposed into 'a nuisance in a situation', just as the popular idiom *to raise the roof* clearly depicts a celebratory situation. Hence familiarity with the structure and the etymology of certain idioms may help to explain why they are more frequent than others in discourse.

As far as the distribution of the idioms in the BNC texts is concerned, it was no surprise to see that the idioms appear most frequently in the written texts of the BNC.<sup>4</sup> The

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only exception is *a drop in the bucket* that equally occurs in spoken and written texts. Among the written texts, it was interesting to discover that the majority of these idioms occur in the imaginative writings domain. More precisely, the following fifteen of the twenty-five idioms, placed in order of increasing frequency, appear in literary and creative works: *a tough row to hoe, a whited sepulchre, to heap coals of fire on one's head, filthy lucre, a little bird told me, to get one's feet wet, to stew in one's own juice, to break bread, sackcloth and ashes, a land of milk and honey, by the skin of one's teeth, the salt of the earth, feet of clay, the writing on the wall, till/to kingdom come.*

More frequently used in texts of the informative kind are the expressions *to kill the fatted calf, new wine in old bottles, to make mountains out of molehills, to worship a golden calf, to raise the roof, to turn the other cheek, to separate the sheep from the goats.* Only two idioms – *a wolf in sheep's clothing* and *a fly in the ointment* – are just as frequent in the imaginative and informative writings domains. The three text-types that were found to employ the majority of Bible idioms under survey are the literary, current affairs, and religious and philosophical texts. It is interesting to note, moreover, that in each text-type these idioms have a prevailing function, which will be exposed in the next section.

### 3. The functions of Bible idioms in English texts

To gauge the function of the Bible idioms in the three most idiom-heavy text-types, the idioms' syntactic structures were firstly analysed. This information was secondly examined in relation to each idiom's meaning and context of use. Results show that the idioms are used with one prevailing macro-function in each text-type, in accordance with the characteristics of the text and with the lexical and semantic structures of the idioms.

#### 3.1. Bible idioms in literary texts

The main objective of literary texts is presumably to entertain and please the readership. Writers thus normally place a great deal of attention on the language itself in order to achieve a coherent and cohesive piece of writing. From our analysis, it was noted that Bible idioms in literary texts are used primarily to achieve this effect. They are hardly ever manipulated at a structural level: the more familiar structures are employed in order to exploit the characteristically strong sound-sense relationship with the intention of producing a clear and neat text.

In the first example, reported below, the use of the idiom *the writing on the wall* allows the writer to convey his idea in a pristine and succinct manner, consistently with the stylistic tone of the text:<sup>5</sup>

(1) Despite numerous opportunities, she loved her husband too much ever to betray him. The momentous events that led to Ayatollah Khomeini's triumphal return to Teheran in 1979 had long overtaken the problems of Ashi's private life. With many connections in high places, Nader had seen *the writing on the wall*. Two years before the final fall of the Shah, he had begun transferring his wealth and business interests to Paris. On the day Khomeini flew in to Mehrabad Airport, she and Nader Nadirpur flew out of Teheran for the last time. They were never to return. But their new life in Paris was not to prove the dream they had both hoped it would be. (BNC: CEC1991)

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Owing to its biblical origins, the idiom *the writing on the wall* has also a poetic and rhythmic nuance that a possible literal equivalent ('something bad will happen') lacks. It therefore is a more suitable literary option considering the romantic theme of the text.

In the second example, below, the use of the idiom *to get one's feet wet* coheres with the literal phrase *to get one's hands dirty* that precedes it:

(2) If we go the right way about it, we could set ourselves up nice with a good little earner still in Rafferty's. But you won't get your hands dirty, will ye, Sean? I mean there's Denis. Sure, there's always Denis. No, Michael, I won't get *me hands dirty*. Nor, will I tell you, *get me feet wet*. But listen, Sean. What's that, Michael? If you go in with this Rico lad Ay? What will you say to Noreen? Sean thought for a minute, then smiled at his brother. Nothin'. But if you're goin' in with Rico?. (BNC: ATE 1952)

The idiom's literal structure is in fact semantically consistent with the literal phrase above it, but at the same time its metaphoric meaning ('have a new experience') creates a pun that is loaded with irony.

It would thus appear that in literary texts the poetic function of idioms prevails over other functions. This means that writers take advantage of idioms' familiar syntactic structures to create texts that on a literal level are smooth-sounding and consistent with the subject matter, but they also exploit the well-known metaphoric meanings in order to further the narration in a wittier and more enjoyable manner in accordance with the theme.

### 3.2. Bible idioms in religious texts

In the religious texts denominated belief and thought in the BNC, the biblical meanings of the idioms are definitely conspicuous. In these texts, where the themes are normally theological, the idioms normally refer to the Biblical passages from which they originated. In example (3) below, the theme of the Christian value of forgiveness, founded upon the Holy Scriptures, is illustrated by the idiom *to kill the fatted calf*. In this text, clear reference is made to the parable of the prodigal son, thus conveying the original spiritual message:

(3) That is his business. Some theologians have suggested that the essence of the gospel is nothing more than forgiveness as it is enshrined in the story of the prodigal Son. The father sees the son coming home after all the bingeing the wine, women and song and runs out with love and says: How good it is to have you home! *Kill the fatted calf!* That is the gospel, they say. It is, however, only one half of the gospel. Forgiveness is a killing business; it has a habit of crucifying people. We must not minimize the cost of reconciliation; forgiveness is never cheap. But let us ask again: Is it the case that moral qualities cannot be transferred? (BNC: ABV 1817)

Similarly, in example (4), allusion to the idiom *to worship the golden calf* is made by mention of the golden calf story in the Bible:

(4) You shall have no other gods before me (Exod.20.2). Just twelve chapters later we hear them saying to Aaron, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. So Aaron makes a golden calf, and when the people see it, they cry, These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt! *The story of the golden calf* is not quite a complaint story, though it is more terrible than any of them, and as it

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proceeds shares many of their features, particularly those of the one in Numbers 14.  
(BNC: ACG 1468)

Evidently and in accordance with the scope of the texts concerning belief and thought, the prevailing function of these idioms is referential. This means that the idioms serve to startle readers into thinking about the indisputable information being imparted.

### 3.3. Bible idioms in current affairs texts

In texts that deal with current affairs, denominated world affairs in the BNC, Bible idioms have a more marked interpersonal function than seen so far. In these texts, writers employ the idioms to express their ideas in an almost euphemistic manner, in the hope of influencing their readers' opinions too. In example (5) below, the writer takes advantage of the well-known structure and meaning of the idiom *a wolf in sheep's clothing* in order to underline – albeit in a mitigated way – the negative sentiment felt towards the political matter at hand:

(5) We congratulate him on spelling out the good things that we shall be offering. We also pledge that when we are drawing up the membership of the commission we shall take into account his earlier suggestions about widening the membership. We shall even consider him in whatever new role he has at the time. *If ever there was a wolf in sheep's clothing this Bill is it.* It pretends to be about local government when it is nothing of the sort. It pretends to be in favour of the user, the customer, although it does not mention quality at all. That being the case, we are right to ask what the Bill's objectives really are. (BNC: HHX 14911)

Likewise in example (6), the unsuitability of the military headgear described in the text is more diplomatically conveyed through the use of the idiom *a fly in the ointment*:

(6)The design of the cap badge had been the result of a competition which was won by Sergeant Bob Tait who came up with the winged dagger emblem. The motto, Who Dares Wins, is credited to Stirling. *The only fly in the ointment was the headgear which was issued – white berets.* Wearing a white beret in among Australians, New Zealanders and every type of nationality out there brought some great wolf whistles, which were naturally not received in the right manner. It was a question of: You pick your partner and I'll pick mine. (BNC: AR8 285)

By including the idioms *a wolf in sheep's clothing* and *a fly in the ointment* that have negative evaluative functions, the writers express their own negative feelings without losing face. This is because they can hide behind the stereotyped expressions that issue a universally-borne sense of negativity.

Idioms that serve to manipulate the thoughts and opinions of readers are idioms that are in turn often manipulated by writers. Hence it is in this text-type that most idiom variation occurs. In example (7), the idiom *a land of milk and honey* has negative polarity, even though it is normally used in its affirmative form:

(7) I was as happy as a pig in shit. I was a cowboy. Tom Mix, Buck Jones riding over the range on the look-out for hostile Injuns. Oh! To recapture the joys and imagination of childhood! That fanciful world we return to, usually, when we become geriatrics. It has to be remembered that Britain of the 1920s *was not a land of milk and honey.* To be

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sure, we had a great Empire we British had conquered far and wide. What we could not take by political intrigue and threats we took by gun-boat diplomacy. Who would dare defy the might of the Raj? Who would dare incur our displeasure? We were then the greatest industrial nation on earth. And yet. (BNC: BN3 83)

The marked negative semantic prosody that the idiom *a land of milk and honey* assumes in this text highlights further the contrast between what was believed to be a positive situation with the true negative reality, thus endorsing it.

In example (8) below, the idiom *sackcloth and ashes*, normally used to express one's remorse, is abbreviated to *sackcloth*. The deletion of *ashes* seems to signal the writer's apparent remorse:

(8) And finally, a last word on our election coverage to all the Lab-our activists in the new seat of Milton Keynes North East, who proved us wrong in our assessment that the Lib Dems were the main challengers to the Tories there. In fact, Labour's Maggie Cosin came second, with 23.7 per cent of the vote, 343 votes ahead of the Liberal Democrats. *I'm donning the sackcloth even as I write.* What socialism means. Whatever the results of the election, the issues of constitutional reform will continue (rightly) to occupy the political centre-stage. Robin Blackburn (Letters, 3 April) has argued in favour of proportional representation because he sees that it will enable a New Left Party to stand under its own colours. (BNC: CAG 1503)

In actual fact, however, the varied structure of the idiom, while seemingly apologetic, acquires a pungently ironic and almost polemic tone.

Bible idioms in texts concerning current affairs have therefore a dual function. On the one hand, they have a striking and influential effect upon readers; on the other hand, they consent writers to express personal opinions without their having to expose themselves too much with the risk of losing face. This is especially true when idioms undergo variation, which is particularly common in this kind of informative prose.

It has been seen that in each text-type these Bible idioms are used in such a way as to foreground one of the three macro-functions of language – referential, interpersonal, or textual – thus fulfilling and comply with the major communicative purpose of each type. In literary texts, the idioms are prevalently used to secure textual coherence and cohesion; in religious texts, they have a prevalently informational function; whereas in texts dealing with current affairs, they are principally employed and often manipulated to instil new ideas in the readership.

#### 4. Three pragmatic kinds of Bible idiom

While idioms can be employed and manipulated in different texts to serve the three different macro-functions of language: at times ideational, at times interpersonal, and at other times textual – as has been seen above, there can be no denying that every idiom has a prevailing pragmatic force that will evidently influence its use in discourse. This might explain why certain idioms recur in certain text-types more frequently than others, but more importantly why their lexico-grammatical profiles tend to be constant in most of the texts in which they appear. Since time and space will not allow for a thorough exposition of the lexico-grammatical structures of all twenty-five Bible idioms in use, the lexico-grammatical analysis of three idioms should nonetheless help to individuate among this group three pragmatic kinds of Bible idiom: those with a strong locutionary force; those with a strong illocutionary force;

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and those with a strong perlocutionary force. It is the case of the idioms *to turn the other cheek*, *a little bird told me*, and *new wine in old bottles*.

#### 4.1. *To turn the other cheek*

The idiom *to turn the other cheek* meaning ‘responding to an aggressor without violence’ appears in seventeen texts in the BNC, and is thus a quite frequently used idiom in English. As mentioned earlier, it appears more frequently in the texts that belong to the informative domain, and in particular in texts treating religion and thought (example 11), arts, world affairs (example 13), social and commercial matters (example 12), as well as pop lore. In fact, it appears in eleven texts of the informative kind, five of the imaginative kind (example 10), and in only one text of spoken discourse (example 9). It is therefore used in a variety of texts, complying in each case with the prevailing function of the text. And yet, even though the idiom *to turn the other cheek* fulfils different macro-functions according to the theme of the text in which it is set, it is noteworthy that in most of these texts, its semantic structure remains firmly tied to the original Christian ethics of charity:

(9) He he must be taught that and he's taught that through his training. [ ... ] *discipline*. Does that yeah does th that mean that if he's say h he's taunted about his race he sh he should just *turn the other cheek* and have a stiff upper lip? Yes. I do. If I was on the streets of Ireland now, and I've been there many occasions and someone said to me, look at that Welsh get there, I would just have to take it. And I do take it and I have taken it: [ ... ] and I just get on with my job. (BNC: HVD 236)

(10) I would never have believed that a landlord any landlord would refuse a man a drink the night before he was wed. If you were a Romany you'd need to get used to such things, Seb. It's happened many times to all of us. I've learned *to turn the other cheek* in a manner that would make *Christian* proud. It's the way we have to be if we're to survive. If there's any trouble, it isn't the villager who finds himself before the court, but the Romany. Well I know where we'll get a drink and enjoy a sight better company than we'd have got back there.(BNC: HHC 1696)

(11) It is worth examining some of this testimony. |||JESUS AS FREEDOM-FIGHTER| Later *Christian* tradition has emphasised the image of a meek, lamb-like saviour, who eschews violence and bids *one turn the other cheek*. As we have seen however, the Messiah for Constantine and the fourth-century Roman Church, as well as for Jesus and his contemporaries was a very different figure: a stern martial leader and liberator, quite prepared to assert his right by force and, if necessary, to employ violence against his enemies”. (BNC: EDY 791)

(12) Mr Kaplan's best chapters are those on Romania and Greece, which he knows well. But read his encounter, at the Serbian Orthodox monastery of Grachanitsa, with Mother Tatiana, a tough Serbian nun. Having slugged back a glass of plum brandy, she says: I'm a good *Christian*, but I'll *not turn the other cheek* if some Albanian plucks out the eyes of a fellow Serb, or rapes a little girl, or castrates a 12-year-old Serbian boy. After this horrifying war, which the Serbs started and in which they committed most of the horrors, people will want to ponder how such things came to be said”. (BNC: CRB 542)

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13) Stokely Carmichael of the SNCC, one of the emerging radical leaders, summarized these ideas in a single phrase: 'What we want,' he said, is 'black power', and this became the slogan of the more militant black movements from 1966. Tension between the races was increasing for two main reasons. First, the strain of maintaining Martin Luther King's advice to '*turn the other cheek*' was becoming too great to bear in the face of continued attacks and insults. Secondly, the high expectations aroused by *civil rights legislation* had been disappointed; the conditions of most blacks continued to show little material improvement. So the civil rights movement began to splinter, and young blacks in particular followed more militant leaders. (BNC: EWG 1507)

The idiom *to turn the other cheek* in fact maintains its strong religious overtones, as the examples above might show. This can be understood from its grammatical structure which, firstly, remains fixed and never really varies, and, secondly, by its lexical context which often comprises lexemes that either directly (such as *Christian, discipline*) or indirectly (such as *civil rights legislation*) re-echo the Christian values of benevolence and sympathy, whether the writer's message is in harmony or in contrast with such teachings. This idiom thus represents a category of Bible idiom that has remained syntactically and semantically close to its original biblical form and content. It is the kind of idiom whose locutionary force, or its original Christian message, emerges loud and clear from its syntactic structure, despite the secular nature of the texts in which it is employed.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4.2. *A little bird told me*

Like the former idiom, *a little bird told me* also tends to remain syntactically fixed in contemporary discourse (except for the verb *said* that is sometimes substituted for *told*); unlike the former, however, its meaning nowadays has little to do with its original biblical meaning. *A little bird told me*, in fact, originates from "Curse not the King, no not in thy thought; and curse not the rich in thy bedchamber: for a bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter" (*Ecclesiastes* 10, v. 20), whereby it was meant to encourage honesty and loyalty in relation to noble and serious concerns. Now it is used to informally announce trivial information without disclosing the provider of such information, as the following four examples below show:

14) All you really need is co-operation with safeguard. Later on, in a pub, Mr Smith chats to a friend: Of course we've got to get stuck in, at least to some extent, because the alternatives make the mind boggle. Now let's eavesdrop on old Bill. Say Charlie, *a little bird told me* that Joe there's been a bit crafty. Remember that garden fork he borrowed? He's been and gone and sold it! Honest he has! Of all the blooming cheek! Sold it! He just about takes the biscuit. It's about time Joe pulled himself together. (BNC: C9R 496)

15) They didn't want to spell it out too much for Eve, but it was a big event, the child they had brought up being invited out to a party. The whole community was delighted for her. As Benny had walked down the town, Mr Kennedy called her into the chemist. *A little bird told me* it was your birthday, he said. I'm ten, Benny said. I know. I remember when you were born. It was in the Emergency. Your Mam and Dad were so pleased. They didn't mind at all that you weren't a boy. Did they want a boy do you think? (BNC: CCM 205)

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16) It's happened before, the midnight flits. But that was a biggish house, ten rooms or more, so I heard. Slim'll surface again, though, never fear. You see, he knew if they had taken him in and it was proved he had been using her, or, *as a little bird told me*, he had got her ready for shipment, they would have surely sent him along the line this time, and stripped the house of all his fine pieces. And that's another thing I heard: it wasn't only bairns and young lasses he collected, but furniture and foreign crockery, mostly from China, they say. Oh, he had taste in his own way. But my God! (BNC: CK9 1407)

17) And it was true, over the long term you were finished if the malais took it into their heads that you were the wrong kind of Danuese. You might get through a few months, gross good luck see you to a year, but from then on the odds against survival lengthened considerably. See Rosa while you can, *said a little bird to me*. And I was eager to see her, the desire built itself up from nothing, as desires do. I could not endure the irony of missing her now. I invented a task for myself, which would take me that way. I'd get wild orchids for the garden, I told Mrs Goreng, knowing some had grown near Rosa's. She clapped her hands.(BNC: H9N 441)

Apart from the first example taken from a text dealing with the social sciences within the informative writings domain, the other three texts come from the imaginative writings domain. The idiom *a little bird told me*, in fact, appears mostly in creative literature and only four times in the BNC. Hence, it is not a commonly used expression in English.

While the synchronic meaning of this idiom is easily understood owing to its transparent syntactic structure, which must have incidentally influenced the passage from its historic meaning, the strength of this idiom lies in its illocutionary force more than in its locutionary one. This simple cliché in fact provides “a complex package of information” (Fernando 1996: 107) that includes the writer’s attitude too. This pithy idiom not only signals a claim of awareness, but also – and more importantly perhaps – conveys the writer’s stance regarding it. By employing this idiom, writers appear less committed to the claim being made, which consequently becomes more defensible. Considering, however, that the claim never really seems to have any moral weight, the writer’s attitude is paradoxical and contributes to giving this idiom the ironic tone it has.

#### 4.3. *New wine in old bottles*

The idiom *new wine in old bottles* occurs nine times in the BNC texts which are all informative writings texts. Of the three idioms examined here, it is the only expression that really undergoes variation. The other two idioms only undergo a constructional adaptation that allows the idioms to adapt to the grammatical context of the situation, and regards the inflection of nouns and verbs. The types of variation that *new wine in old bottles* undergo involve the substitution of lexemes and in particular of the adjectives *new* and *old* (as shown in example 18); the addition of pre- or post-modifiers (as in examples 19 and 20); the deletion of parts of the idiom (as in example 21); or the formation of a completely new elaboration of the idiom (as in example 22):

18) Theory X is not a straw man for purposes of demolition, but is in fact a theory which materially influences managerial strategy in a wide sector of American industry today. What was true in 1960 remains true even now. What sometimes appear to be new strategies decentralisation, management by objectives, consultative supervision,

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democratic leadership are usually but *old wine in new bottles*, because the procedures derived to implement them are derived from the same inadequate assumptions about human nature. These new approaches are no more than different tactics programmes, procedures, gadgets within an unchanged strategy based on Theory X. (BNC: G0U 566)

19) As times grow hard, general publishers are looking for new markets. This will inject fresh blood and competition for the established ELT publishers, who might just have grown a little too complacent. Readers The old Longman Simplified English Series has been repackaged and renamed Longman Fiction. *Old wine* (LSES Lamb's Tales was published in 1933) *in very attractive new bottles*, this continues the tradition of disguising simplified texts as real books. Penguin has a brand new series of ready Readers , a mixture of classic and modern stories at three levels and designed to lead in to the same publisher's Simply Stories series. Background Longman has Britain In Close-up, a fairly advanced text about British life and institutions". (BNC: F9J 759)

20) Some generalisations proved possible, but only in a piecemeal and not wholly consistent fashion. The *new wine of quantum theory* was soon bursting the *old wineskins of classical mechanics*. The Bohr atom was just a staging post on the way to the quantum world rather than the point of entry into the land itself. One promising line of further reconnaissance involved the attempt to find a fundamental role for waves where no one had previously supposed they were relevant. (BNC: EW6 230)

21) The final glimmer comes from recent attempts to develop novel strategies for controlling corporate crime. These turn out to be *old ideas* worn-out and discredited as solutions to conventional criminals reinvigorated by appearing in *new bottles*. If employees, consumers, and other corporate victims had their awareness sharpened and supported by trade unionism, consumerism, and environmentalism, and if the state and legal institutions could be shamed into closing the gap between lofty principles and tawdry practices, then some of these old ideas could be put into effective operation. (BNC: CHL 969)

22) Moreover, his system has a reflex result upon the mind of the patient, and a general condition of buoyancy and freedom, and indeed of gaiety of spirit takes the place of the old jaded mental position. It is the pouring in of *new wine*, but *the bottles must also be new* or they will burst, and this is exactly what Mr. Alexander's treatment does. *It creates the new bottles and then the new wine can be poured in*, freely and fully. Rev. W. Pennyman MA. (BNC: BM0 287).

The all-encompassing meaning of the idiom *new wine in old bottles* ('something new added to or imposed upon an old or established order') explains why it has become popular in secular English. In fact, of the nine texts in which it appears, only two deal with religious matters, one of which is included above (example 22). The other texts deal with daily matters that range from events related to leisure, commerce (example 18), arts (example 19), natural and social sciences (examples 20 and 21). In all these texts the idiom is manipulated in order to startle the readership. Surprised by the new and unexpected syntactic layout, readers are naturally drawn to reflect more on the role of the idiom and its meaning within the text, with the result that the writer's message has more influence upon the readers' opinions. The balanced syntactic structure of this nominal expression, made up of a two pre-modified nouns, along with its broad semantic scope seems to make the idiom *new wine in old bottles* more suitable

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for syntactic manipulation than the former idioms analysed. As a result, it is the perlocutionary force of this idiom, and that is its effect on readers, that can be especially exploited in texts.

In the three idioms described above, it has been possible to individuate three types of Bible idiom, based upon the predominating pragmatic force. One type, as represented by the idiom *to turn the other cheek*, is the idiom whose historical and biblical metaphoric meaning rings more loudly than its secular derivation. Its locutionary force in fact prevails and it is no surprise that it hardly ever undergoes variation. It is not used to manipulate the thoughts and opinions of the readership but prevalently deployed to inspire upright behaviour. Idioms with a strong illocutionary force are, on the other hand, those expressions that have a greater potential in issuing writer stances and evaluations. The idiom *a little bird told me* seems to stand for this type of expression: from behind its semantically transparent and generally fixed syntactic structure, one can sense an evidently deriding attitude on the part of the user. When it is the readers' reactions that principally concern writers, idioms with a strong perlocutionary force are those that writers tend to employ. It is the case of the idiom *new wine in old bottles* whose balanced syntactic and semantic structure not only encourages a wide range of uses, but also different types of syntactic variation, allowing writers to astonish and manipulate their readership's thoughts.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite its restricted scope, this study has revealed some tendencies in the way yesterday's idioms, and that is Bible idioms, are used in English today. Aware of the fact that idioms are not generally frequent in English and especially not in spoken discourse, the majority of the twenty-five Bible idioms analysed in the BNC have resulted to be moderately frequent in written texts. The texts that resulted as being most idiom-heavy are those that regard literary, current affairs, and religious matters. While it was seen that the same idiom can obviously appear in more than one text-type, it was interesting to notice that in the three most idiom-heavy text-types, the idioms are always used with one prevailing purpose, to further the narration and entertain in the literary texts, to inform and teach in the religious texts, and to persuade and often cajole in the current affairs texts. Consequently, the idioms in the latter text-type tend to undergo more variation and manipulation than in the other two text-types where they generally remain fixed.

While these observations of a pragmatic nature might not be solely typical of Bible idioms, there can be no denying that, unlike most other idiomatic expressions, those with biblical origins have the fortune to have two standard metaphoric meanings; one historical meaning and one synchronic one. This gives Bible idioms an enormous communicative potential and broad scope of use. Writers can in fact exploit more the locutionary force of Bible idioms in order to continue imparting the original beliefs for which they were ideated; or else exploit more their illocutionary or perlocutionary forces in order to convey personal evaluations and judgements in the former situation, in the hope of manoeuvring their readerships' opinions in the latter situation. Moreover, the results of our corpus linguistic analysis seem to hint at the fact that each Bible idiom is prone to being exploited in one way more than in another: *to turn the other cheek* has a significant locutionary force, *a little bird told me* has an important illocutionary force, *new wine in old bottles* a major perlocutionary force. Although there is need of more research in this direction, it might be safely said that most Bible idioms are exploitable at two distinct metaphoric levels, even though the two levels often simultaneously transpire. Where the presence of the two metaphoric readings is

more evident, the effect produced by the idiom is undoubtedly more striking and often determines its popularity in English.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In order to locate all the idioms including those with syntactically modified structures, one keyword, or at the most a sequence of two words (including the keyword), were typed in.

<sup>2</sup> Also *a drop in the bucket* (referring to a drop of water from the bucket) is less common nowadays than the more transparent variant *a drop in the ocean* (where drop means raindrop), which occurs twenty-seven times in the BNC.

<sup>3</sup> The metaphorical meaning becomes a little clearer after due analysis: in the Bible this expression is used to mean that “if thou doest good to one whose burning words thou hast received, they will burn him in another sense” (*Proverbs 25 v. 22*).

<sup>4</sup> The BNC is, after all, composed of texts ninety percent of which are written and only ten percent spoken. It is worth noting that seventy-five percent of the written component comprises informative writings that include texts regarding the applied sciences, the arts, belief and thought, commerce and finance, leisure, natural and pure science, social science and world affairs. The remaining twenty-five percent of texts belong to the imaginative domain, and include literary and creative works.

<sup>5</sup> The italics in the texts cited from the BNC are mine and serve the purpose of highlighting the language under examination.

<sup>6</sup> Only in five texts out of the seventeen is this idiom used to mean ‘responding to an aggressor without violence’ without any references to Christian ethics.

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