



## **Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language**

*David Crystal*

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"Let there be light," "A fly in the ointment," "New wine in old bottles," "How are the mighty fallen," "The salt of the earth." All these everyday phrases owe their popularity to the King James Bible. Indeed, it is said that this astonishing Bible has contributed more to the color and grace of the English language than almost any other literary source.

In *Begat*, best-selling language expert David Crystal offers a stimulating tour of the verbal richness and incredible reach of the King James Bible. How can a work published in 1611 have had such a lasting influence on the language? To answer this question, Crystal offers fascinating discussions of phrases such as "The skin of one's teeth" or "Out of the mouth of babes," tracing how these memorable lines have found independent life in the work of poets, playwrights, novelists, politicians, and journalists, and how more recently they have been taken up with enthusiasm by advertisers, Hollywood, and hip-hop. He shows, for instance, how "Let there be light" has resurfaced as "Let there be lite," the title of a diet cookbook, and "Let there be flight," the title of an article about airport delays. Along the way, Crystal reminds us that the King James Bible owes much to earlier translations, notably those by Wycliffe in the fourteenth century and Tyndale in the sixteenth. But he also underscores crucial revisions made by King James's team of translators, contrasting the memorable "Am I my brother's keeper" with Wycliffe's "Am I the keeper of my brother." Language lovers and students of the Bible will be equally enthralled by *Begat* and its engaging look at the intersection of religion and literature.

## **Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language Details**

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### **BHodges says**

This seemed like an interesting subject, but the execution was boring. Each chapter tackles one or several biblical phrases by tracing its use amongst English speakers. I was surprised by continuous reference to Google search results as a source for phrase usage. There is really no analysis about the interaction between language and culture, it is merely a litany of examples of phrases which people apparently still use, the origins of which being traceable to the King Jams version of the Bible. This book might have worked better as a long-running daily blog post or something.

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### **George Shubin says**

I'm not sure who the target audience is. Perhaps a small group of etymologists would find some interesting information tucked away in each chapter, but I'm not sure.

The author surveys the Bible, chapter by chapter, and lists for the reader phrases that have entered into the English idiom, oftentimes apart from the public's awareness of its Biblical origins. Examples and modifications of each phrase or idea are provided, but that's about it. There is no interacting with or analysis of the Biblical text itself.

This book reminds me of a Spanish class assignment I was given in the 9th grade. My teacher wanted me to list cities and towns in California with Spanish names and provide their English meaning. So, that's pretty much what I did, and it was fairly exhaustive. I was quite happy with my work, until my teacher gave me only a C for my effort, saying he was expecting more background to the cities names and a bit of historical color to go with each name. Well, why didn't he say so to begin with?

In reading this book, I have become the teacher in my story, expecting more. But there isn't any more. What's there is not bad, and if you are not familiar with how the King James Bible has flavored the way we talk then this might be an enlightening book for you, but for me, I expected more color.

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### **JackieB says**

Very interesting. It examined how the King James bible has affected the English language, in an accessible, but fairly in-depth way. The author explained why some phrases are memorable and others are not. He also looked at how the meanings might have changed over the years, and how we "play" with phrases for comic and other effects. I learnt a lot about English. This review makes it sound a really boring book, but it wasn't, partly because of the author's sense of humour but also because the phrases he discussed are used so often probably every English speaker has heard them, if not used them themselves.

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## **Leasha says**

I do not understand what this book is supposed to be.

Is it a book you reference?

Is it a book you read?

Really, it's neither. It has paragraphs that are unlike those in a reference book, but most of them are list-y paragraphs that are not at all readable. The organization is not explicit enough for it to be easily referenced, although the indices are friendly toward such endeavors.

A few gems are tucked away, but overall, it was not worth the work to get to them.

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## **Katherine says**

I got the impression that the author had queried the publisher, had his idea accepted, and then discovered he didn't have enough material. I'd say at least 30% of the book is discussing phrases that did NOT make it into the English language. And that's all the book discusses--I'd hoped to see material on how the King James Bible affected style. I still found it interesting, but not as interesting as I'd hoped.

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## **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

### **The King James Bible and the English Language**

It's been 400 years since the King James Bible was published in 1611, and it is often referred to as a source of great influence on the English language. Consider these commonly used phrases: 'A fly in the ointment', 'How are the mighty fallen', 'Let there be light', 'New wine in old bottles', 'The salt of the earth', and 'The skin of one's teeth'. Each of these phrases owes its popularity to the King James Bible.

But is it true that no book has had a greater influence on the English language? To answer this question, David Crystal, a professor of linguistics, has sifted through the King James Bible and compared it to six earlier translations. While acknowledging that the King James Bible owes much to those earlier translations – especially those by Wycliffe (14th century) and Tyndale (16th century) there are also some key revisions. Consider the impact of 'Am I my brother's keeper?' with Wycliffe's 'Am I the keeper of my brother?'

English has changed in the past 400 years and while (most of us at least) no longer use the exact same language of the King James Bible, David Crystal has looked at idiom rather than quotation to demonstrate its influence. David Crystal has counted 257 phrases or words that are now idiomatic, and they are each listed and discussed in the book. While only 18 of these idioms take the exact form shown in the King James Bible, 7 exact forms come from other translations.

Interestingly, in 37 cases the King James antecedent has been rewritten while in the other 196 cases, the form of words in the King James Bible is paralleled in an earlier translation: the majority (160) in the Geneva Bible of 1560. There's a marvellous 38 page table setting out the occurrence of David Crystal's 257 identified idioms in the different versions of the bible chosen.

So, what is the difference between Bible quotation and idiom? Bible quotations are characterised by being used only in settings where their religious application is relevant, and they maintain their original sense, for

example: 'Behold a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son.' A biblical idiom that has entered the language will, in contrast, also be used by non-believers, will often have a change of meaning and will frequently (and sometimes humorously) be adapted, for example: 'Let there be lite'.

David Crystal acknowledges that his classification is to some extent subjective and that other people may arrive at a slightly different number. So, what does this mean? Well, those that claim that there are thousands of examples are wrong. While 257 may not seem a particularly large number, a similar method applied to the writings of Shakespeare arrives at a total of about 100.

Fascinating stuff for those of us interested in the English language.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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### **Sarah says**

A much lighter, quicker read than I'd expected. The approach is formulaic: here is a snippet from the Bible, here's how it has evolved, here's how we extend it. But that isn't really a problem for me - I was just fascinated by how many idioms were biblical in origin without me being aware of it!

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### **Christopher Rush says**

So basically ... this is a chronicle of one weekend David Crystal spent online looking up references to Biblical phrases on the British Internet. Mr. Crystal pretends at the beginning it will be a survey of how the phrases of the KJV have influenced the language and thought patterns and (we naturally infer) life choices of the English-speaking members of the human race. Mr. Crystal cannot keep up the imposture long, however, and he knows it - almost immediately after stating his purported intent, Mr. Crystal demurs by intimating how difficult a task that is and will only be mentioned sporadically. Before the introduction is over, the attentive reader wonders why all the fuss, then. And Mr. Crystal proceeds to answer that question not at all.

The bulk of this thing (I can't really call it a "book") is effectively a summary of Web search results Mr. Crystal found. I kid you not. Mr. Crystal takes what he suspects are famous and influential phrases and notions and vocabulary from the KJV, compares them to previous English translations of the Old Testament and New, then tells us what similar phrasings he found online. And as we all know, immediate Web search results are the definitive guide to understanding influence, especially in the field of language.

For no scrutable reason, Mr. Crystal wants us to believe "using expressions incorrectly, inaccurately, incompletely, or just plain differently signifies influence." Perhaps on some planet in our or another solar system, hundreds of thousands of people using an expression completely unlike how it was originally meant without even knowing its source can be accurately adjudged as "influence." However, and especially for the The Old Sword, this is not the case on this planet, the planet upon which this review is being written.

It's bad enough Mr. Crystal measures "influence" by Web results (he addresses the issue and its difficulty substantially only for something like two full paragraphs throughout the entire work, thoroughly disappointing), he then proves he has rarely any grasp of what these misuses of Biblical phrases (certainly a

tenuous grasp of them in their Biblical contexts at best as well). For instance, while it is nice, I suppose, references to Star Trek outnumber references to Playboy Magazine at the ratio of 5:1, Mr. Crystal proves he has no understanding of the Star Trek reference to Babel, because he either a) conflates the Star Trek (Original Series) second season episode "Journey to Babel" with the Deep Space Nine first season episode "Babel," or b) he just assumes because he has no idea the Starship Enterprise is in the DS9 episode "Babel." And it's those kinds of inaccuracies that give us no confidence in why Web articles using Biblical phrases incorrectly somehow proves the KJV has been influential in some sort of meaningful way.

The last sixty-some pages of the non-book is just charts of whether the Geneva Bible, Tyndale, and the others use the same phrases as the KJV, which could be interesting in some other work, but Mr. Crystal makes it totally boring. And perhaps that was his whole point. He concludes by trying to tell us the KJV hasn't been all that influential after all, since some of the phrases that have become common idiom are combinations of Tyndale, the KJV, and others, and sometimes not even the KJV. Maybe this is all part of some insidious plot by David Crystal and others to make the Bible look like some old fashioned pile of nonsense. If so, this thing is itself such a useless pile of nonsense it might almost succeed, if it weren't for the fact, well, the Bible is the Bible, after all, and no amount of piffle from Crystal, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Darwin, Gervais, or any of the gang will undermine that no matter how hard they try (or just write up a weekend's worth of Web browsing with no actual intellectual effort, as is the case here).

Oh, and, inexplicably, Mr. Crystal throughout calls soccer "football," an embarrassing error one would think the formerly reputable publishers at Oxford University Press would catch.

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### **Jillian says**

My frustration with this book (a gift from my late husband) is reflected in the fact that it has taken me 33 months to finish. There are lots of interesting snippets (it might prove a useful source-book for the QI quiz show) but it is hard to see where it is leading until the Epilogue.

Structures as it is, the book raises more questions than it answers and the Epilogue confirms what the reader has been forced to suspect - that the King James Version of the Bible does not, from Crystal's analysis, stand by itself in influencing particular expressions in contemporary English usage.

Crystal identifies, and examines, 257 contemporary expressions found in the King James Bible. Of these, 196 are found in at least one other earlier translation (Geneva, Bishops, Douai-Rheims, Tyndale or Wycliffe) or the expression pre-dated Bibles in English. The title, therefore, does not seem to capture the book's thesis. This resulted, for this reader at least, in considerable confusion and frustration in following 256 pages of discussion of specific phrases (organised chronologically for the Old Testament and thematically for the New) before the 5 page Epilogue broadens the thesis.

On the plus side, the book is very well indexed. There is an excellent Appendix of the 257 expressions discussed compared across six English versions of the Bible up to and including King James and a summary of the number of identified contemporary phrases used in each book of the King James Bible (why almost none in the last 16 books of the Old Testament being an unanswered question worthy of discussion). There is also an extensive index of the modern phrases discussed, of books of the Bible and Bible translations, as well as a general index. These would be of great use to language scholars who want to take this further.

For a Biblical scholar, I'd have thought that a critical question might be how to avoid modern usage of the

257 expressions getting in the way of understanding the original meaning. While it is interesting that we can find contemporary usage of the archaic past tense of 'beget', it is perhaps more significant to work out whether modern usage of terms like 'unclean', 'holier than thou' or 'few are chosen' get in the way of our understanding of the message the biblical translators were trying to convey.

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### **Seth Heasley says**

The fact that it took me twelve weeks to finish David Crystal's ambitious *Begat: The King James Bible & the English Language* should not be taken as a criticism of the book. In fact, I see it as a result of two things: 1.) my other reading and 2.) short chapters.

With the Herculean goal of determining the impact of the King James Bible not on Western Culture or Western Law or anything like that, but on the English Language itself, Crystal in *Begat* takes a meandering stroll through the more and less productive parts of the KJV and analyzes the impact notable phrases have had on English. In doing so, he also mentions whether the same wording occurred in earlier or contemporary English translations, and what kind of use the phrase is put to in the here and now.

As I mentioned, the chapters are nice and short, and each chapter is broken up into sections for each phrase under consideration. So it makes for good nightstand reading, and that's the chief reason I kept not finishing this book. But it's a fascinating tour of one of the most read books in history.

David Crystal is one of the foremost authorities on the English language, and I'd been meaning to read one of his books for quite some time. His writing is excellent, and I appreciated the examples he picked out to use when considering the lengths to which phrases could be adapted. One of my favorite examples was an adaptation of "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife" into "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's WiFi." Heh.

Full review on my blog.

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### **Doug Newell says**

The book sets out to see if the King James Bible is the most influential book in the English language. His answer ends up being yes and no. Yes, in that many idioms come from the KJV but no in that those same phrases are found in earlier translations or the Book of Common prayer so it's hard to say about a good many of the phrases discussed.

There is a formula for every chapter. Take a book or section of the King James, identify well known words or phrases, do a google search to see how these phrases have been used or modified. Identify if this first appeared in the KJV and close the chapter with a few really bad puns. Then repeat. The formula became tedious.

If you really, really love etymology or are researching this particular topic, then you might enjoy this book. Two stars means "it was ok" and that is exactly what it was.

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## Emily says

Two hundred fifty-seven. That's how many idioms Mr. Crystal has identified as coming into common use in the English language expressly because of the King James Version of the Bible. The "skin of one's teeth," "fire and brimstone," "there's nothing new under the sun," even "be very afraid" all have their roots in the KJV, arguably the most influential book ever published.

In coming up with the number two hundred fifty-seven, Mr. Crystal makes a distinction between idioms, which have general everyday usage and can apply to various situations, and quotations, which he defines as "expressions which are used only in settings where the religious application is relevant, maintaining their original biblical sense." So, let's look at Psalms, for example. "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalms 23:1) is an extremely well-known phrase found in the King James Version of the Holy Bible, but it is rarely, if ever, used out of the original context and therefore counts as a quotation, not included in the two hundred fifty-seven idioms mentioned above. However, "out of the mouth of babes" (Psalms 8:2) is spoken frequently when a child says something humorous, insightful or prescient.

Idioms in the Old Testament are dealt with in the order in which they appear, starting with Genesis ("let there be light") and going through Malachi ("root nor branch"). After a brief interlude discussing some of the differences between the Old and New Testaments, Mr. Crystal picks up with a thematic approach to the New Testament, grouping similar topics of idioms together. With the aid of Google (and, I'm sure, other research methods), Mr. Crystal collects several examples of uses to which these idioms have been put, some incredibly clever and some groan-worthy. In the chapter "A Coat of Many Colours" he mentions the Broadway musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat;" the country song by Dolly Parton; a blog for bi-color, tri-color and solid-coated cats; and headlines on articles in biochemistry, publishing, fashion, politics and sociology, just to name a few.

Among the fascinating tidbits throughout the book are the additional translations that Mr. Crystal notes. He refers frequently to at least five other versions of the Bible: Wycliffe's, Tyndale's, the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the Douai-Rheims translation. He even includes an appendix comparing the translations of the 257 idioms across the six versions. It's sometimes difficult, Mr. Crystal points out, to pin the credit for making a particular phrase a common idiom on the KJV. Some of the phrases (like "my brother's keeper") were in multiple translations, some (such as "sour grapes") were already in common usage before the KJV was published and some ("no rest for the wicked," for example) take a different form than what is actually found in any translation of the Bible.

Begat may be a bit heavy on linguistics and historical and grammatical minutiae for those not intrigued by the topic, but even so, it's a great reference to read a chapter or two at a time for curiosity's sake.

(On a related note, there's a delightful video at <http://kingsenglish.info/> which takes you through 100 idiomatic phrases from the King James Bible – all mentioned in Begat – in three minutes!)

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## **Daniel Wright says**

Having been impressed and intrigued by another of David Crystal's other works, and being quite interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture generally, this book promised to be a fascinating intersection between the two. While it still did exactly what it said on the can, the lexical influence of the Bible in general and the King James Bible in particular are surprisingly limited. Far more influential - though Professor Crystal completely fails to note this - has been the KJB's very imitable *style*.

Admittedly Crystal rightly pours cold water on some of the more nauseatingly hyperbolic rhetoric about its linguistic and aesthetic importance that we got during the 400th anniversary year. He still claims, though, that the KJB is the single most influential individual text on modern English. While he's not wrong, he again fails to note that this is partly because no individual text has a great deal of importance on linguistic development, which tends to be more organic.

Despite all this, Crystal has assembled, in the way only he can, a cacophony of commonplace phrases, and there is something to for everyone learn here.

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## **Mike says**

On the fence about awarding this a "2" it's definitely more of a 2.5 than a full 3.

Like many books on narrow/obscure topics, one gets a bit weary from the repetition. However, I picked up this book because I was interested in the topic of how our common language was influenced by this well-known (and fairly early, but not THE earliest) translation into the vernacular.

I don't know the author from a hole in the wall and I did not do any research on him, but I feel like he did a very credible job of looking for and choosing which tidbits came to us via this bible versus others (or none). Somethings were obvious and others were very pleasant surprises.

If you are interested in how we have seeded the language with aphorisms, quotations, and things which become the bedrock of our shared knowledge this is a pretty good book.

Check it out for yourself.

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## **Phil Mc says**

A coffee table book which, whilst interesting, falls into the 'linguistic tourism' category and in spite of the meticulous and systematic effort of one of the great modern writers in linguistics, it ends up being a little dull. Greater focus on the grammar amongst other more meaty linguistic areas would have made this more interesting but perhaps less accessible to the masses.

Crystal's work is impressive but, on this occasion, not effective in capturing my attention and imagination.

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