

The Impact of *The Bible* on the English Language

MA Shunshun, MENG Fanyan
Linyi University, Linyi, China

The Bible is called a classic of Western civilization. Its doctrines and ideas have laid the foundation for Western culture and thought, but also the source of Western languages, producing important influence on the English language. The English language cultures are closely related to *The Bible*, and even can be said that *The Bible* is one of the cultural origins of the English language.

Keywords: *The Bible*, the English language, influence

Introduction

In the Western world, *The Bible* as a classic of Christian culture, its influence has moved far beyond the religion, and its doctrines have permeated through all aspects of Western social life. *The Bible* includes *The Old Testament* and *The New Testament*, which is a classical collection of history, legends, biographies, ethics, laws, proverbs, and religions, producing a profound influence on Western social thought and culture. A series of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and customs advocated in *The Bible* have been deeply rooted in people's minds, and have made the mark on all aspects of people's lives. *The Bible* is a classic not only for Christianity but also for Western culture. The United Nations recognizes that *The Bible* is the greatest and the most influential book on mankind and has had a tremendous impact on the world, especially for the development, ideology, and cultures of Western society. At the same time, *The Bible* is also the source of literature, art, architecture, and music. This paper mainly treats of the influence of *The Bible* on the English language.

In Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Institute of World Religions, Mr. Zhuo gave a high evaluation and affirmation to *The Bible*. He said,

To understand the world culture, it is inevitable to contact with *The Bible*. As a religious classic, *The Bible* is a book which is must to be read for the Christians. Believers comprehend the Christian doctrines from the book, finding the true meaning of faith and accessing the basis of spiritual life. As a valuable historical material, *The Bible* records the historical development and vicissitude of the Jewish people and other peoples of the ancient Mediterranean region, and becomes a guide for historians to explore and study the mystery. As an ancient document, *The Bible* refers to the mythology, legends, history, system, law, folklore and ethics of ancient society. It is an all-encompassing ancient culture encyclopedia. As a masterpiece of literature, *The Bible* collects a variety of styles of folk songs, narrative stories, and it is the origin of many cultural allusions which are widely circulated in the world, providing ideas and sources for the world literature, painting, sculpture, poetry and music. Therefore, the interests of the people in knowing what *The Bible* is, reading the contents and stories of *The Bible*, and exploring the huge influence of The Bible on world culture are very strong. (2016, pp. 270-273)

Acknowledgements: This article is sponsored by the program "The Topic Structure of Small Clauses" (No. X202110452162).
MA Shunshun, English Major, Class 4, Grade 2019, School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University, Linyi, China.
MENG Fanyan, Master, associate professor, School of Foreign Languages, Linyi University, Linyi, China.

Language is a communicating tool for people to living in the social life, and also a carrier of culture, reflecting the culture. In a word, *The Bible* and the culture associated with it have affected the politics, economic, culture, and society of Western countries.

Literature Review

The study of the influence of *The Bible* on the English language and culture is mainly due to the gradual rise of domestic English fever, and the time is not very long, probably from the beginning of the last century. In recent years, due to the upsurge of English learning in the country, people's interests on this issue also have been growing, producing more and more research results. The study of this issue allows us to understand the great influence of *The Bible* in the West from another perspective, as well as to provide new horizons, new perspectives, and new approaches for us to understand and analyze *The Bible*.

The research on this issue of domestic scholars does not last a very long time, probably from the beginning of the last century. As a result of the increasing number of people who had studied the English language at this time, people had begun to discover that *The Bible* culture contained in the English language was a major obstacle to English learning. So a group of experts who were specializing in *The Bible* study and English language teaching begun to study the influence of *The Bible* on the English language in this field. The original intention of this study was making convenience for English learners to remove *The Bible* cultural barriers, and better learning and applying the English language. There were only a few monographs on this field, and only some of the monographs covered some aspects of this issue. These monographs only collected some of the stories or idioms derived from *The Bible* and did not relate to the interrelationship between *The Bible* and the English language. In recent years, many results of this issue have been produced, there are many monographs on this issue, we can find many great breakthroughs and deep study in these monographs, and the study of this problem is better than the 1980s and 1990s of last century's. Except for *The Bible* allusions and idioms, they have begun to expand the scope of the English language to the general terms, proverbs, and so on.

The Influence of *The Bible* on the English Language

The Influence on English Idioms

English idioms are also called idioms. General idioms refer to all the idiomatic usage and special expressions in a national language. They can be a word, a phrase, or a sentence. Many of the idioms in the English language are derived from *The Bible*. These English idioms have their specific historical backgrounds, national origins, and cultural identities. Through these idioms, people can express their views and attitudes more concise and clear. Idioms are the core and essence of the English language. Without idioms, language will become dull and boring. Some of the characters and stories in *The Bible* have been widely circulated for a long time, and are gradually incorporated into people's everyday speech. These idioms produce a subtle influence on modern English language, enrich the content of English language, and promote the development of English language.

In *The Bible*, Cain was the eldest son of Adam and Eve. Cain made a living by farming, and his brother Abel was a shepherd. Cain and Abel provided their production as the sacrifice to the Lord, but the Lord only liked the sacrifice provided by Abel, so Cain was jealous of Abel and killed him in one day. It can be seen that Cain is a man who is choleric and easy to be angry. Therefore, in the English language, "Cain" has become the

synonymous of “devil”. As usual, people use “to raise Cain” to express the meaning of “noisy, to be angry, try to stir up trouble” and so on.

The idiom “a mess of pot-tage” is from the book of Genesis. Jacob was the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham; he and his brother Esau fought for the right of primogeniture. According to the custom of that time, the eldest son, Esau can inherit a lot of properties from his father. One day, Esau felt very tired and thirsty when he was back home after hunting, while Jacob was cooking red bean soup. And the calculating Jacob used a bowl of red bean soup to get the right of primogeniture from Esau. So Esau sacrificed the long-term interest for immediate benefits.

In the book of Genesis, Jacob was especially fond of the youngest son Joseph and made special clothing for him. Joseph’s brothers were jealous of him. They stripped out of his clothing, and sold out Joseph, and painted the clothing with the goat blood, then brought it back to their father, so that their father believed that Joseph had been harmed by the beast. So the idiom “Joseph’s coat” has become the synonymous of “get bad out of fortune”.

The phrase “by the skin of one’s teeth” is from *The Bible, Old Testament, The Book of Job*, Chapter 19, Section 20. Job revered the God, but Satan accused him to the God, and received the God’s permission to test whether he believed in God or not, so that he lost his children, properties and got serious illnesses. In this case, many people abandoned him, but he endured. He said to his friend, “My bone cleaveth to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth”. The teeth should have no skin, so this sentence was expressing the extremely dangerous situation of that time; he lost all of his properties except his life. People take this idiom to express the meaning of “a narrow escape”.

When people read the sentence “Can’t you see the writing on the wall?”, it does not mean “Do not you see the words that written down on the wall?” That is because the idiom “the writing on the wall” (Daniel, AD605, p. 98) implies a deep cultural connotation. “The writing on the wall” means “the disaster is going” in *The Bible*. It originated from an allusion which is in *The Bible, Old Testament, The Book of Daniel*, talking about a story of the King Beshasa who was the son of the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar I. One day, he drank with the ministers in the palace; suddenly, there appeared a finger and wrote a line of words that people cannot understand on the wall. The king was shocked and gathered the talents to interpret its meaning; at last, the king called Daniel who was the prophet from Israel to interpret the words. These words meant: “Because of the negligence of the existence of God, Babylon will perish, Beshasa will be killed”. Finally, the king was dead at that night. Therefore, the phrase “the writing on the wall” becomes an idiom, saying “the harbinger of the doom”.

The Influence on English Proverbs and Mottos

The same as the English idioms, the proverbs and mottos from *The Bible* are well known in the Western countries. These proverbs and mottos are elegant and neat, rhythmic and beautiful, which has become the part of daily language. Using the proverbs and mottos from *The Bible* is much easier to understand for people than the simple caveats and the blatant accusations. And the proverbs and mottos are more powerful. English proverbs and mottos from *The Bible* often have special power, especially those related to ethics and morality. These proverbs, to a certain extent, constrain people’s behavior, guiding people from generation to generation to abandon evil. For example: The Western parents often use “reap as you have sown” to encourage their children to study hard. This proverb is derived from the Galatians that the original sentence is “Whatever a man

sows, that he will also reap” (Paul, AD46, p. 58). Many proverbs and mottos are derived from *The Bible*, such as “There is no crown without the cross”, “Man proposes, but God disposes”, “Blood is thicker than water”, “Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away”, “A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones”.

The Influence on English Words

The influence of *The Bible* characters on English words. Some of the characters in *The Bible* have become the synonymous of a kind of people, having specific meaning. Taking Solomon as an example, he was the king of Israel who inherited the throne from his father David; the Israel kingdom was extremely prosperous under his rule. *The Bible* recorded that Solomon did not chase the wealth and longevity for himself, but chased the wisdom so that he could rule the nation in prosperous. This kind of behavior catered to the God’s appetite, so the God gave Solomon the great wisdom and broad mind, just like the immeasurable sea sands. He made three thousand proverbs, one thousand and five hundred poems. His wisdom was unprecedented. Solomon has become the synonymous of “wisdom”.

Moses was recognized as a national hero in the history of Israel. He obeyed the call of God to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, breaking the slavery of the Egyptians, and accept the commandment of God in Mount Sinai. Now people use Moses to refer to leaders and legislators.

Adam was the first person who was produced by God and in accordance with his own image with the clay, known as the ancestor of mankind and the oldest characters. The English phrase “as old as Adam” means very old or out of time.

Job was a righteous man, fearing the God, away from evil. In order to test Job, God promised Satan (the devil) deprived him of everything: his children, properties, and health. Although Job suffered all kinds of great calamities, he still did not lose his faith and remained unyielding to God’s devotion. Now “Job” means the person who is highly tolerant.

The influence of *The Bible* allusions on English words. The meaning of some English words is closely related to the allusion from *The Bible*. For example, the Tower of Babel was the name of a city in *The Bible*, and the descendants of Noah wanted to build a tower forward to heaven. God was angry with them in this arrogant practice, so God made their accents in chaos so that they did not understand with each other and cannot cooperate. So they stopped to build the tower. God made the people’s words in chaos, so that the crowd scattered in the whole earth, so the city called “Babel” which means “mess”. Now the word “Tower of Babel” has become a synonym of language barriers, or is used to describe the chaotic scenes.

The influence of the plants and animals on English words. “Fig-leaf” is commonly used as a “gee-string”. Adam and Eve violated the command of God and ate the fruit of the tree that God had not allowed them to eat; then, both of their eyes were bright, recognizing that they were naked and felt very shy, so they took the leaves of the fig tree to cover their bodies.

As usual “the pigeon and the olive branch” symbolize peace and hope. When the world was corrupt and the earth was full of evil, the God made the flood on the earth for 40 days and nights to destroy the world. Only Noah found grace from the Lord, for Noah was a righteous man. After 40 days, Noah released a pigeon from the ark to test whether the water ebb-tide or not. But the land was still flooded by water; the pigeon returned to the ark. Another seven days past, Noah released the dove again. In the evening, the pigeon held a new olive leaf and returned to the ark. Noah knew that the water was ebb-tide.

The Influence on English Names

The influence on English personal names. In the West, many parents like to use the name from *The Bible* to name their children. For example, people often use the name of Jesus disciples to name boys John, James, Peter, Philip, Andrew, Thomas, Simon, Matthew, and so on. In addition, boys commonly used names are Adam, Abraham, David, Joseph, Benjamin, and so on. Girls commonly used names are Mary, Sarah, Elizabeth, Rebekah, Rachel, and so on. People use the names which symbolize peace and happy from *The Bible* to name their children, expressing the parents' good expectations and blessings to the children.

The influence on English place names. Jerusalem, the holy place of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, often appears in everyday speech English to describe the places which are attracting. The young couples call their cozy cottage as the garden of Eden, a romantic and loving paradise; and dishonest people are ridiculed as Crete because Cretans are all liars. Jericho is the ancient city of the Dead Sea. According to the *Old Testament*, the emissary of the king of Israel David was shaved half of the beard by the new king, and the man was told that he was living in Jericho, and he would come back after the beard reborn. Now Jericho is the synonymous of "long distant place, distant exile or seclusion". Such as "go to Jericho", "from Jericho to June".

Conclusion

The Bible is not only the historical origin of Western culture, but also the main communication tool of Western countries. *The Bible* gave birth to Western culture and it is an important part of Western culture. The influence of *The Bible* on English culture makes it an integral part of the English language. As one of the most wonderful and influential books in the world, there is no doubt that *The Bible* will continue to influence and enrich the English language.

The truth of *The Bible* is the noblest norms of human behavior and the guide to light the way of life. *The Bible* is the one and only, so that people get the truth and morals, getting a satisfactory answer for the most mysterious problems of life. As the German writer Goethe says, "All my profound thoughts are derived from my faith in *The Bible*. My moral life and literary works are instructed by *The Bible*. *The Bible* is the most reliable capital of my life, and it is the inexhaustible treasure" (2007, p. 67).

References

- Bunyan, J. (2015). *The Pilgrim's progress*. Liaoning: Liaoning People's Press.
- Carroll, R., & Pricker, S. (1997). *The Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goethe, J. (2007). *Faust*. (C. Q. Qian, Trans.). Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House.
- Rapid, G. (1996). *The student Bible*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House Press.
- Sun, P. J. (2008). The Bible and its impact on the English language (Doctoral thesis, Shandong University, 2008).
- Vanloon, H. (1985). *The story of The Bible*. America: American Bible Society.
- Zhang, H. S., & Chen, Q. M. (Trans.). (1981). *A collection of biblical stories*. Beijing: Beijing Xinhua Press.
- Zhuo, X. P. (2016). Religious studies in contemporary China. *Review of Religion and Chinese Society*, (3), 270-273.