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TRACING THE SACRED TONGUE: ENGLISH BIBLICAL IDIOMS FROM GREEK ORIGINS TO THE KING JAMES VERSION

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Abstract

This study examines biblical idioms as dynamic linguistic and cultural signs, tracing their transformation from the Greek text of the New Testament to their stable integration in modern English phraseology. Drawing on Saussure's concept of arbitrariness, Peirce's triadic semiosis, and cognitive prototype theory, this study redefines idioms as semiotic entities whose meaning emerges through historical interpretation rather than fixed equivalence. Through a comparative analysis of the *Textus Receptus* and several major English Bible translations—from Wycliffe and Tyndale to the King James Version—the paper investigates how idiomatic meaning, originally embedded in Greek conceptual and theological frameworks, has been re-categorized within the evolving linguistic consciousness of English. Data from the GloWbE corpus and Google Ngrams substantiate the hypothesis that while the semantics of biblical idioms have sometimes been modified through translation, their prototypical biblical core has survived, ensuring continuity of form and meaning. Idioms such as *the blind leading the blind*, *to wash one's hands of*, *thirty pieces of silver*, and *to cast pearls before swine* illustrate this semantic resilience and global vitality. Their persistence across English varieties confirms that biblical phraseology functions as a shared system of cultural memory and moral reference within the global lexicon. This paper uses a linguosemiotic framework—phraseological semiotics—for interpreting idioms as living signs shaped by translation, interpretation, and tradition.

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1. BIBLICAL IDIOMS AS SIGNS: A LINGUOSEMIOTIC APPROACH TO TRANSLATION CONTINUITY FROM GREEK ORIGINS TO MODERN ENGLISH

Our study explores biblical idioms as linguistic and cultural signs, tracing their transformation from the Koine Greek text of the New Testament to their stable presence in English phraseology. The study rests on the assumption that idioms of biblical origin are not merely lexical relics but dynamic semiotic units that have survived through translation, interpretation, and cultural adaptation. Their endurance reflects the continuity of conceptual metaphors, theological thought, and linguistic structures across epochs and linguistic systems. The corpus includes idioms recorded in the *Longman Dictionary of Idioms* (marked as "Bible"), *Oxford Bible Dictionaries*, and other authoritative lexicographic sources, as well as textual evidence from the *Textus Receptus*[1] and its major English translations—from Wycliffe's Middle English version translated mainly from Latin to the King James Bible (1611), based on the Greek original text. Our research aims to identify how idiomatic meaning, initially grounded in the Greek conceptual and cultural world, was recategorized within English linguistic and theological frameworks. Our object of the study is the *biblical idiom* as a linguistic sign in its original Greek form. The subject is the dynamic transformation of these idioms in their English translation, from Wycliffe to the King James Version. The material comprises the Greek biblical text (primarily Erasmus's and Stephanus's editions of the *Textus Receptus*) and major English Bible versions (Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Bishop's, Geneva, and KJV).

[1] The *Textus Receptus* (lit. "received text") was first published by Erasmus in Basel in 1516, based on a small number of Byzantine manuscripts. Subsequent editions, especially that of Robert Stephanus (Paris, 1550), became the principal Greek source for Reformation-era translations, including Tyndale's *New Testament* and the King James Version.

1.1. Arbitrariness and Motivation in the Linguistic Sign

Saussure's principle that "the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (100) remains foundational in linguistic theory, emphasizing that the link between signifier and signified is conventional, not natural. Taylor develops this notion further, noting that "reality is a diffuse continuum, and our categorization of it is merely an artefact of culture and language." (6) For idioms, however, arbitrariness coexists with a different kind of motivation—metaphorical, cultural, and historical. Idiomatic expressions, while conventionalized, preserve traces of the conceptual worlds that generated them. In biblical idioms, these motivations are rooted in sacred narrative, cultural symbolism, and the theological imagination of the ancient world. Saussure's notion of arbitrariness can also be viewed through the lens of opposition: a sign becomes meaningful only through its differentiation from other signs. Phraseological units, composed of such signs, inherit arbitrariness from the system yet acquire secondary motivation through fixed context and figurative meaning. Thus, biblical idioms illustrate a paradoxical balance: they are arbitrary as linguistic constructions, yet deeply motivated by theology, imagery, and cultural resonance.

1.2. From Structuralism to Semiosis

While Saussurean linguistics focuses on internal relations within the sign system, Peircean semiotics expands this scope to include the process of semiosis—the continuous interaction between sign, object, and interpretation. In this triadic model of the linguistic sign, meaning is not fixed but generated through interpretive action. As Pietarinen emphasizes, Peirce's semiotics is essentially a form of logic that governs how signs function as 'habits' of thought. In this perspective, the stability of a biblical idiom is not found in the frozen lexical form, but in the Interpretant—the cognitive and logical effect the sign produces in the mind of the interpreter. Ransdell further suggests that the 'idea of representation' in Peirce's work allows us to view these idioms as stable mental representations that preserve their 'habitual' meaning even when the external cultural context shifts. Applying this to biblical idioms, we can see that their idiomaticity does not belong to the original Greek expression itself—often literal in context—but arises through the historical process of interpretation. Translation becomes an act of semiosis: it recontextualizes the sign within a new

linguistic and cultural horizon, transforming theological content into idiomatic form (Andreichuk 95-113). For instance, phrases such as *pearls before swine* or *to wash one's hands* were literal narrative moments in Koine Greek but became metaphorical, moralizing idioms in English through repeated cultural reinterpretation. Each translation stage thus performs an act of sign re-creation rather than substitution.

1.3. Toward Phraseological Semiotics

This research proposes the notion of *phraseological semiotics*, a framework for studying idioms as semiotic entities functioning within a cultural and textual space. In this view, the idiom operates as a *sign in action*: it carries information, evokes interpretation, and embodies cultural value. The biblical idiom's sign function extends beyond its linguistic form—it performs theological, moral, and aesthetic roles within discourse. Its semiosis depends on how it is read, quoted, and reinterpreted across time, allowing us to treat idiomatic meaning as a unity of form, sense, and function.

Our study uses a *linguosemiotic interpretation method*, analyzing idioms as functioning signs rather than static linguistic forms. The analysis includes:

- Identifying idioms of biblical origin in contemporary English lexicons.
- Comparing their form and meaning with their Greek sources in the *Textus Receptus*.
- Examining continuity and transformation in major English Bible versions.
- Contextually interpreting semantic and cultural shifts.

This approach allows both synchronic and diachronic perspectives: how idioms act within a language system and how they evolve across historical translations.

We hypothesize that while in some cases the original biblical semantics of idiomatic expressions has been fully preserved and in others lost or modified through translation, the prototypical biblical core of meaning has survived. This continuity deepens our understanding of the enduring influence of prototype texts in the English linguistic and cultural tradition.

Our investigation contributes to the study of *biblical phraseology* and *translation semiotics*, highlighting that idioms function as *prototypical signs of*

cultural memory. Their survival across languages and centuries demonstrates that meaning is sustained not by linguistic form alone but by the dynamic interaction of interpretation, belief, and tradition. The idiom becomes a living mechanism of cultural semiosis—a transformation of thought into communicable form.

1.4. From Classical Categories to Prototypes and Ethnolinguistic Meaning

The conceptualization of meaning and categorization has long been central to linguistic inquiry. The classical approach to categorization, rooted in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, defines categories through a conjunction of necessary and sufficient features. Within this framework, features are understood as binary, abstract, and universal; categories are assumed to have clear boundaries, and all members share equal status within the set. This model presupposes that features are innate primitives, allowing for objective and stable classification across languages and cultures (Taylor 7).

However, the prototype model offered a major challenge to this classical view. Developed most extensively by the psychologist Eleanor Rosch, prototype theory emphasizes that category membership is not defined by fixed boundaries or uniform features but by graded centrality: certain members are more representative or "prototypical" than others. This insight marked a shift toward cognitive realism, acknowledging that categorization is shaped by perception, experience, and culture rather than abstract logic alone (Rosch 1-24). This shift from classical to prototype models resonates strongly with the linguistic variability found in biblical idioms. When idiomatic expressions migrate from Greek into English through translation, they undergo not merely lexical substitution but a re-categorization of meaning, where semantic prototypes shift in accordance with the target language's conceptual priorities.

Malinowski's ethnographic perspective further enriches this discussion. As an anthropologist who approached language through the lens of culture, Malinowski asked a question that underlies the present research: *does a native word correspond to an idea that exists, even partially, for English speakers, or does it encode an entirely foreign conception?* (306). He observed that every language contains untranslatable elements—particles, idioms, or contextual nuances—that resist direct equivalence. These linguistic peculiarities, though subtle,

express distinct mental attitudes and worldviews, and thus expose the deep interdependence between language, thought, and culture.

In the context of biblical translation, such ethnolinguistic differences become particularly pronounced. The translators of the Bible were not merely transferring words but negotiating conceptual worlds—mediating between the metaphorical and symbolic frameworks of Greek and those of English. This theoretical framework allows us to hypothesize that biblical idioms, though subject to semantic shifts and cultural re-interpretations, preserve a prototypical core of meaning derived from their original scriptural context.

2. KOINE GREEK AND THE TEXTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL IDIOMS

From the perspective of translation theory, the stability of many biblical idioms can be explained by the predominance of source-oriented strategies in early English Bible translation. Nida's distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence is particularly relevant here (Nida 159). While later translations increasingly aimed at receptor-oriented clarity, the formative English Bible tradition largely privileged formal correspondence, preserving metaphorical structure and lexical imagery even where full semantic transparency was not guaranteed. This translational conservatism proved crucial for the subsequent idiomatization of biblical expressions, allowing source-language imagery to be absorbed into English phraseology rather than paraphrased or neutralized.

The linguistic and cultural journey of biblical idioms cannot be understood without reference to their original medium—the *Koine Greek* of the Hellenistic world. Emerging after the conquests of Alexander the Great, *Koine* represented a levelling and expansion of the Attic dialect, combining features of formal literary Greek with those of the spoken vernacular used across the Eastern Mediterranean. Its flexibility made it the language of administration, trade, and ultimately, of scripture (Horrocks 137).

The *Koine* embodied a unique balance between Attic refinement and communicative accessibility. As the prestige of Classical Attic gradually gave way to the more pragmatic linguistic tolerance of the Hellenistic and early Roman periods, the language became increasingly hybridized. A practical, non-Atticizing *Koine* became the medium of everyday communication and record-

keeping, while a more refined, "middlebrow" literary style evolved under the influence of the New Testament's relatively unadorned Greek. This blending of registers allowed sacred texts to express profound theological meaning through accessible idiomatic forms, uniting abstract philosophical heritage with vivid everyday imagery (Horrocks 137-138).

It was within this linguistic continuum that the *Textus Receptus*—the "received text" of the Greek New Testament—took shape. As the foundational source for early English Bible translators — from Tyndale to the King James committee—the *Textus Receptus* served as the linguistic and cultural bridge between Hellenistic idioms and English expression. Its phrasing, often rooted in Semitic conceptual patterns but expressed through Greek grammatical and metaphorical structures, posed both a challenge and an opportunity for translators seeking to balance fidelity to the source with the naturalness of English idioms.

Thus, the idioms that entered the English biblical tradition—*the spirit is willing*, *to kick against the pricks*, or *the powers that be*—are more than textual artefacts. They are cross-cultural syntheses, born from the encounter between the Koine's hybrid expressiveness and the evolving idiomatic potential of English. Understanding their origins in Koine Greek and their transmission through the *Textus Receptus* enables us to trace not only linguistic evolution but also the continuity of conceptual metaphors across languages, epochs, and cultures.

The theoretical perspectives outlined above—from the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign to the prototype-based and ethnolinguistic views of categorization—provide a framework for understanding how meaning evolves across languages and cultures. When applied to the history of biblical translation, these insights illuminate the ways in which idioms undergo semantic and structural transformation. Each stage of English biblical translation—from Wycliffe's Middle English version to Tyndale's Reformation-era text, through Coverdale, the Bishops' Bible, and finally the King James Version (1611)—represents not merely linguistic revision but a re-categorization of sacred concepts within new linguistic systems.

In this light, the transmission of idioms from Ancient Greek into English cannot be seen as a simple process of equivalence. Rather, it involves the

negotiation of meaning between two distinct conceptual frameworks: the Hellenistic worldview, with its metaphorical and philosophical depth, and the evolving English linguistic consciousness, shaped by theological reform, cultural change, and stylistic innovation. The following section therefore explores this historical and linguistic continuum, tracing how specific Greek idioms were preserved, reinterpreted, or reimagined in English biblical discourse.

2.1. Comparative Analysis of Translation Continuity in Biblical Idioms

It is important to note that the expressions discussed below were not idiomatic in the strict sense within the Greek New Testament itself. In their original narrative contexts, they functioned as literal or metaphorical utterances embedded in discourse rather than as fixed phraseological units. Their idiomatic status emerged gradually through repeated translation, quotation, and cultural reuse—a diachronic process of conventionalization that transformed context-bound expressions into autonomous idioms within the English lexicon.

This process can be empirically traced back through the continuity of translation across early English Bibles. The following examples demonstrate how the repeated and largely consistent rendering of key scriptural phrases facilitated their long-term integration into English linguistic consciousness, from Wycliffe's Middle English Bible to the King James Version (KJV), as well as intermediary revisions such as the Bishop's and Geneva Bibles.

Consequently, the idioms preserved in these versions represent a direct lineage from the Erasmian Koine to the expressive idiomatic fabric of English, maintaining both lexical fidelity and metaphorical resonance across centuries.

Many enduring biblical idioms are built on a simple, fixed grammatical or numerical structure, leaving little room for translators to make stylistic changes without losing the original meaning or authority. Grecisms often employ vivid, concrete imagery (like blindness, light, or an animal) to represent an abstract concept. This visual clarity ensures that the metaphor survives independently of its original source. The empirical verification of these idioms relies on the Google Books Ngram Viewer, a tool Cohen describes as a 'gateway' to the possibilities of digital research in the humanities. While Cohen cautions against 'unigramism'—the focus on isolated words—he emphasizes that the most profound insights for humanities scholars lie in longer 4- and 5-grams, which provide the necessary context for interpretation. By analyzing complex

biblical phrases rather than single words, this study captures the 'contextual co-occurrence' that Cohen identifies as essential for meaningful historical and linguistic analysis.

The blind leading the blind

One illustrative example is the phrase *the blind leading the blind*[2] (Matthew 15:14). The Greek *ὁδηγοί εἰσιν τυφλοί τυφλῶν* 'they are blind guides of the blind' appears in Wycliffe's Bible as "thei ben blynde, and leederis of blynde men", in Tyndale's as "the blynde leaders of the blynde", and remains virtually identical in the Bishop's and Geneva versions. The KJV preserves the formula, "Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind," whose visual clarity ensured its idiomatic survival in modern usage for moral and political blindness. The enduring survival and systemic integration of this phrase are best confirmed by analyzing its relative frequency over time, which normalizes usage against the expanding size of the corpus. Data from the Google Ngram Viewer (comparing American and British English corpuses from 1800 to 2019) demonstrate the idiom's stable, continuous productivity. This consistent presence in published English literature and its enduring cross-varietal usage confirms that the phrase has transcended its original biblical context to become a stable, global metaphor for incompetence or misguided authority. The high frequency of the idiom in contemporary discourse supports the hypothesis of idiomatic stability—the phrase, once motivated by the Gospel narrative, remains semantically intact despite shifts in cultural and communicative context. In linguistic terms, this expression exemplifies how a motivated biblical image (vision and guidance as metaphors for understanding) has evolved into an autonomous idiom, whose meaning is now interpreted independently of its scriptural source, yet functions as a robust, shared cultural sign within the global English lexicon.

[2] Longman Dictionary of English Idioms. Harlow: Longman Group Limited, 1979. Internet Archive, OCLC 1392417931, https://archive.org/details/longmandictionar0000unse_h1t5.

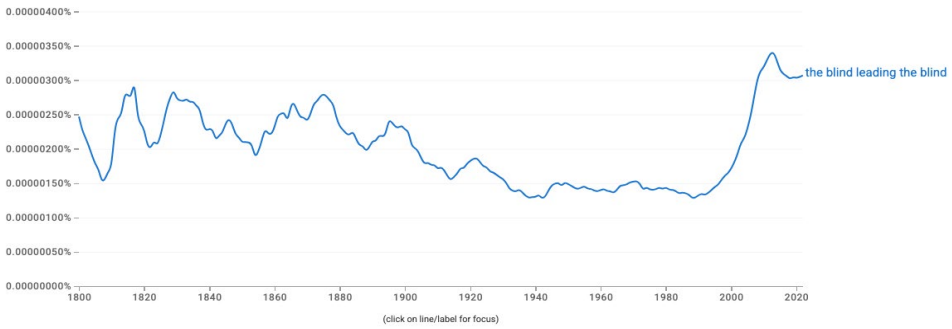

Figure 1. Relative frequency of the idiom *the blind leading the blind* in the English Corpus (1800–2019) (Google Ngram Viewer).

The idiom appears across nearly all regional varieties of English, showing its widespread recognition and continued use. The dominance of occurrences in US and UK English reflects their textual and media influence, while stable occurrences in South Asian and African varieties confirm its global idiomatic integration.

To wash one's hand of (something)

The persistence of biblical idioms in global English highlights their remarkable semantic stability, transitioning seamlessly from scripture to secular discourse. This continuity is clearly illustrated when moving from the cautionary tale of *the blind leading the blind* to the moral disclaimer *to wash one's hands of (something)*. The consistency of this Grecism (Matthew 27:24) is rooted in its unifying of a literal physical ritual with an abstract moral concept. The idiom's resilience comes from its direct translation of a powerful symbolic gesture into a fixed verbal expression and originates in a Gospel episode, symbolically declaring innocence: "When Pilate took water, and washed his hands before the multitude", Gr. "ειμι απο του αιματος του δικαιου τουτου". This gesture of moral disengagement entered the English idiomatic lexicon. From Wycliffe's "I am innocent of the blood of this riytful man" to Tyndale's "I am innocent of the blood of this just person" and the parallel readings of Bishop's, Geneva, and KJV, the act itself became a metaphor for disclaiming responsibility. Corpus evidence confirms that this biblical idiom, though stylistically elevated, continues to appear in modern English, particularly in political and journalistic discourse.

The GloWbE corpus registers numerous examples such as "no politician can wash his hands of a problem which the electorate pins on him" (Guardian, GB, Tue 24 Jul 2012) and "Bean is critical of Bridges' attempt to wash his hands of the AIF Base in Egypt" (AWM, AU, 9 December 2020). These instances preserve the figurative sense of moral detachment while demonstrating the idiom's adaptability across English varieties (UK, AU, CA, IE). Corpus data are employed in this study as supporting evidence of contemporary usage and cross-varietal distribution rather than as a primary measure of semantic relevance. Absolute frequency counts are interpreted cautiously and always in conjunction with historical, textual, and semantic analysis. Their function is to demonstrate idiomatic vitality and geographical spread, not to quantify cultural importance or theological centrality. As shown in Figure 2, Google Ngram Viewer data reveals a contrasting usage pattern for the idiom to wash his hands of compared to the previously discussed idiom. While the blind leading the blind shows recent growth, to wash one's hands of (something) exhibited historical volatility in the 19th century (peaking around the 1880s) before stabilizing at a lower relative frequency throughout the 20th century, followed by a noticeable contemporary decline post-2000. This usage pattern suggests that to wash one's hands of (something) has undergone semantic stabilization primarily as a moral allusion within formal and written registers, maintaining a low conversational frequency. Its continued presence across registers, despite the decline in printed frequency, shows the enduring influence of biblical imagery on English phraseology, though its functional role is more restricted than the high-frequency idiom.

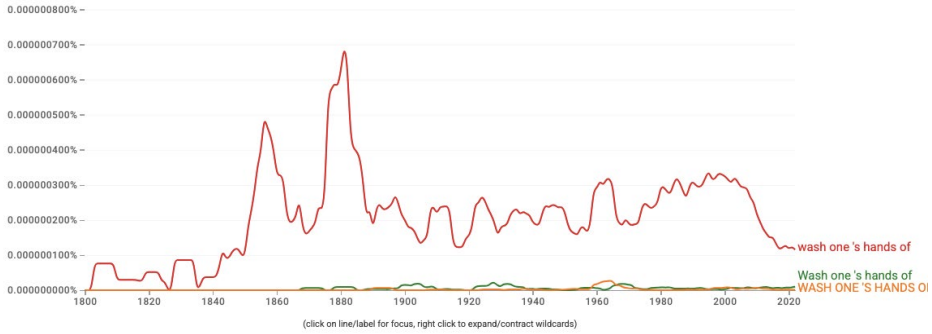

Figure 2. Relative Frequency of the idiom to wash one's hands of in the English Corpus (1800–2020), showing temporal trends and stability (Google Ngram Viewer)

Thirty pieces of silver

The Greek *τριάκοντα ἀργύρια* (lit. 'thirty silvers') is translated consistently across versions—*thirty pieces of silver*—from Wycliffe ("thretti pans of siluer") to the Geneva Bible. This lexical stability points to the translators' shared perception of the phrase's symbolic weight—an emblem of treachery and moral betrayal. Although *thirty pieces of silver* is not formally registered in the *Longman Dictionary of English Idioms*, corpus data confirm its continued idiomatic vitality. The expression appears 117 times across the GloWbE corpus, with the highest concentration in American English (41 instances), followed by Philippine English (18), Canadian (13), and British (10) varieties. This wide geographical distribution suggests that the phrase remains semantically active and culturally intelligible across the global English-speaking world. In contemporary usage, it retains its biblical resonance, functioning as a moral metaphor rather than a literal monetary reference. The idiom *thirty pieces of silver* endures because it functions as a direct symbol or numerical allegory, a common feature in Semitic narrative and thought, which the Greek and subsequent English translations preserved.

The monetary value of *thirty pieces of silver* is not arbitrary; it draws its significance from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible), which makes it a strong Semitic feature:

- *Prophetic Foretelling*: In the Book of Zechariah (11:12-13), thirty pieces of silver is the insulting price paid to the prophet for his labor—a sign of the people's contempt.
- *Legal Valuation*: In Exodus 21:32, thirty shekels of silver is the price paid to the owner for the life of a slave killed by an ox.

The Gospel writers, writing in Koine Greek, use the specific number to create an immediate, powerful link between Judas's betrayal and these Old Testament precedents. It is not simply 'a lot of money' or 'some money,' but a fixed, symbolically low value. By keeping the number precise (*τριάκοντα*), the Greek translation ensures the reader recognizes the parallel with the contemptuous and legal valuation of a slave's life. From a consistency point of view, the numerical precision of this idiom in its English translations means that English translators, from Wycliffe to the KJV, had no stylistic reason to make any changes. By translating the number and the noun literally, they preserved the

symbolic weight of the money, ensuring that the phrase immediately evokes treachery, moral compromise, and low worth.

Corpus-based evidence substantiates the argument that thirty pieces of silver functions as a living idiom—its form and meaning stabilized through centuries of religious, literary, and journalistic usage. This phrase, which functions as a potent, specific symbolic allusion to betrayal and greed, offers a key comparison to the general moral disclaimers and warnings previously discussed. The following Ngram data illustrates the temporal trends in its printed frequency from 1800 to 2022.

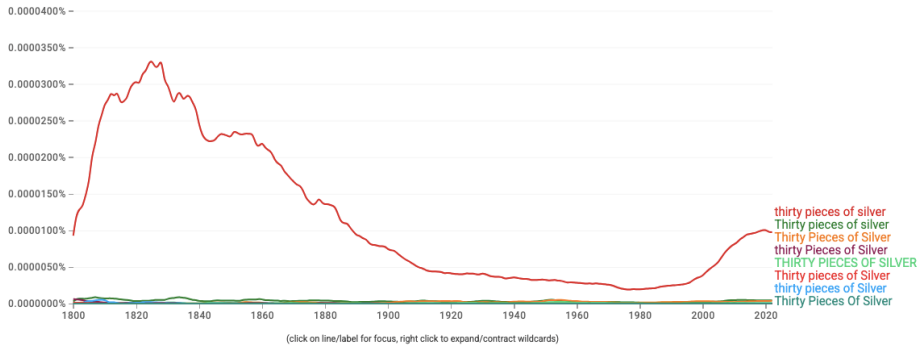

Figure 3. Relative Frequency of the phrase thirty pieces of silver in the English Corpus (1800–2022) (Google Ngram Viewer)

The Ngram data for thirty pieces of silver reveals a historical trend dramatically different from the other two idioms discussed above. This pattern is characteristic of a phrase that was historically deeply embedded in formal discourse but later underwent significant attrition before a sharp contemporary revival.

- *19th Century Peak and Decline (1800–1900):* The phrase exhibited its highest usage frequency in the early 19th century, peaking around 1820 at approximately 0.000330%. It then underwent a strong, consistent decline throughout the rest of the century, indicating a gradual obsolescence or marginalization in common written discourse.
- *20th Century Attrition (1900–1990):* Usage reached its lowest point around the mid-20th century, stabilizing at a very low relative frequency (below

0.000050%). This long period suggests the phrase lost significant functional productivity, becoming less relevant in secular contexts as society became less saturated with direct biblical references.

- *Contemporary Revival (Post-1990):* Beginning sharply around 1990, the phrase experienced a strong and sudden increase in frequency, climbing back toward its 19th-century peak. This revival suggests that the phrase has been reactivated, serving as a powerful, unambiguous allusion to betrayal and corruption in modern political, journalistic, or historical commentary.
- *Case Sensitivity:* The chart shows that the phrase is overwhelmingly used in its lowercase form (red line), indicating its full lexicalization as a common phrase rather than a proper noun.

To cast pearls before swine

The metaphor μὴ δῶτε τὸ ἅγιον τοῖς κυσί… μηδὲ βάλητε τοὺς μαργαρίτας ὑμῶν ἔμπροσθεν τῶν χοίρων appears in all major English translations with minimal lexical variation. Wycliffe writes, "Nile ye yyue hooli thing to houndis, nethir caste ye youre margaritis bifore swyne", a Middle English phrasing already clear in its symbolic weight. Notably, Wycliffe's rendering *margaritis* reflects the Latin Vulgate (*margaritas*), from which his entire translation was made, rather than the Greek μαργαρίτας of the *Textus Receptus*. Later translators, beginning with Tyndale ("Geve not that which is holy to dogges nether cast ye youre pearles before swyne"), restored the Greek source, replacing the Latinate form with the native *pearls*—a shift that marks the transition from Vulgate-based to Greek-based English idiom. Despite such variation in lexical origin, the idiom's conceptual and rhetorical structure remains remarkably stable. Its power lies in a fixed absurdity: the striking, impossible image of a valuable object (pearls) being wasted on an animal (swine) incapable of appreciating it. This hyperbolic contrast, characteristic of Semitic imagery, vividly conveys the futility of bestowing what is sacred or precious upon the unworthy. Across Wycliffe, Tyndale, and the King James Version, the semantic core persists: a warning against offering something of profound worth—whether intellectual, moral, or spiritual—to those unable or unwilling to understand it.

The enduring consistency of this idiom across centuries exemplifies how biblical expressions can retain both their form and moral force even as their linguistic medium evolves.

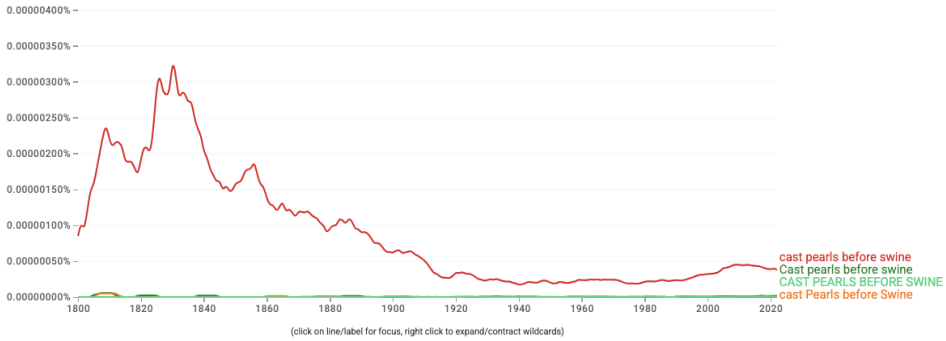

Figure 4. Relative Frequency of the phrase "Cast pearls before swine" in the English Corpus (1800–2022)(Google Ngram Viewer)

The Ngram data for cast pearls before swine shows a pattern of sharp historical decline and subsequent stabilization at a very low frequency. This trend suggests the phrase, though once highly productive, has moved toward near-obsolescence in contemporary written discourse, primarily functioning as a static cultural allusion.

- *19th Century Peak and Rapid Decline (1800–1900):* The phrase peaked early, around the 1830s, reaching a frequency of approximately 0.000325%. Following this peak, it underwent a steep and rapid decline throughout the remainder of the 19th century, similar to *thirty pieces of silver* but without a subsequent revival until very recently.
- *20th Century Near-Obscurity (1920–1990):* By the 1920s, usage stabilized at an extremely low relative frequency (around 0.000025%). This stabilization at the bottom of the corpus suggests that the idiom largely lost its productivity and was primarily used only in specific academic, historical, or literary contexts.
- *Minor Contemporary Increase (Post-2000):* There is a small, subtle increase in frequency after 2000, rising slightly to approximately 0.000045% by 2020. This minor uptick contrasts sharply with the dramatic revival of *thirty pieces of silver* or the surge in *the blind leading the blind*. It indicates a

minimal re-activation of the phrase, possibly as a stylistic choice, but does not suggest a return to widespread common usage.

- *Case Sensitivity:* The phrase is consistently used almost entirely in the lowercase form (red line), confirming its full lexicalization as an idiom.

The usage trend for *cast pearls before swine* exemplifies an idiom that has experienced functional marginalization. Unlike the other biblical phrases, its imagery, while evocative (the value of wisdom vs. the inability to appreciate it), may have become too archaic, or its meaning too easily substituted by modern expressions, leading to a long-term decline in relative frequency. It maintains stability as a static cultural allusion but shows little sign of the dynamic productivity seen in the blind leading the blind or the strong re-motivation evident in thirty pieces of silver. From a semiotic standpoint, this decline represents a 'semiotic drift' of the Interpretant. While the traditional interpretation focused on the 'pearls' (the value of wisdom), the modern Interpretant has shifted focus to the 'swine' (the audience). In an era of inclusive discourse and democratic communication, the zoomorphic metaphor is increasingly perceived as a marker of elitist aggression rather than didactic caution, leading to its functional decline. Following Bocharov's framework on the transformation of signs into arguments (293-299), we can conclude that the idiom fails to function as a valid "Argument" in modern discourse because the shared "habit" of its interpretation has been broken, leading to its functional marginalization.

2.2. Synthesizing Ngram Data: A Functional Taxonomy of Idiom Persistence

The analysis of the four biblical idioms reveals that their survival in the global English lexicon is not uniform. Rather than a singular phenomenon of idiomatic stability, the Ngram data and corpus data suggests a taxonomy (from Greek *taxis, τάξις*, meaning 'arrangement', and *nomia, νομία*, meaning 'method') of functional persistence, defined by the idiom's historical context, level of abstraction, and contemporary productivity .

Table 1. Taxonomy of Bible idiom persistence

Idiom	**Primary Function/ Context**	**Ngram Trend (1800–2022)**	**Conclusion on Persistence**
The blind leading the blind	General warning/ metaphor for incompetence	High stability + *Strong contemporary surge*	*High productivity*. Fully lexicalized, functioning as a high-frequency, cross-varietal colloquial phrase.
To wash one's hands of	Moral disclaimer/ procedural analogy	Historical volatility + *Contemporary decline*	*Stylistic restriction.* Fixed as an elevated moral allusion, primarily restricted to formal/public discourse; losing traction in common usage.
Thirty pieces of silver	Specific symbol of betrayal and corruption	Historical decline + *Sharp contemporary revival*	*Symbolic re-motivation*. Attested long-term stability, but its recent surge confirms its effectiveness as a potent, unambiguous rhetorical tool in political contexts.
Cast pearls before swine	Warning against waste/ misplaced value	Long-term decline + *Near-obscurity*	*Functional marginalization*. Imagery is archaic; stability is low, demonstrating minimal contemporary productivity outside of literary/historical contexts.

We would like to note that the analysis of these distinct temporal patterns shows that the influence of biblical imagery is not monolithic; rather, it is sustained by the continuous, selective re-motivation and re-purposing of different phrases to fit the rhetorical needs of the contemporary discursive landscape. To highlight the key theoretical implications, we must first mention that all the four idioms demonstrate semantic stability—as their core meaning remains entirely intact. However, we can clearly see that their functional productivity (how often they are actively used) varies widely: while idioms of general incompetence, such as *the blind leading the blind*, maintain strong behavioural habits (De Busser and LaPolla 436–439) and conversational frequency, idioms of specific moral judgment, such as *thirty pieces of silver*, demonstrably rely on contextual re-motivation for their contemporary revival.

Furthermore, we must also mention the role of imagery (motivation): as we can see, the phrases with abstract, timeless imagery (*the blind leading the blind*) or powerful, easily transferred symbols of current affairs (*thirty pieces of silver*) show the highest contemporary productivity, whereas phrases whose imagery is less immediately relevant or perhaps archaic (*cast pearls before swine*) experience the greatest long-term attrition. Finally, we would like to note that cross-register maintenance is crucial: the persistence of these idioms confirms their function as shared cultural signs, and while some, like *to wash one's hands of*, are maintained in high-prestige journalistic registers, others survive through high conversational use, thus ensuring their collective place in the global English lexicon through a varied functional load.

CONCLUSIONS

The study demonstrates that biblical idioms function as enduring semiotic entities whose continuity depends less on their static lexical form and more on their stable metaphorical prototypes. Across centuries of translation—from Koine Greek through Latin and Middle English to Early Modern English—the semantic core of these expressions has remained remarkably resilient. Even when idioms such as *cast pearls before swine* or *wash one's hands of* underwent linguistic adaptation, their symbolic structure and moral logic persisted, showing that translation can preserve cultural cognition rather than distort it. This continuity reveals the deep semiotic potential of idioms as vessels of theological and cultural memory.

The empirical analysis of the four biblical idioms—*the blind leading the blind, to wash one's hands of, thirty pieces of silver,* and *to cast pearls before swine*—provides robust evidence for a functional taxonomy of idiomatic stability within the modern English lexicon. While all four examples uphold the fundamental principle of semantic stability by retaining their core biblical meaning, their relative frequencies over the last two centuries diverge sharply, challenging the notion of uniform persistence. Google Ngram data highlights that survival is directly tied to functional role and contemporary relevance: phrases easily adaptable to broad, conversational critique (*the blind leading the blind*) maintain strong productivity, while those that serve as highly specific moral allusions (*to wash one's hands of, cast pearls before swine*) risk functional marginalization.

Most compellingly, the pattern of strong contemporary revival observed in *thirty pieces of silver* demonstrates that biblical phrases can be re-motivated and re-purposed by current political and discursive needs. Their persistence in modern usage, confirmed by corpus data across global English varieties, attests to their recontextualization as autonomous metaphors functioning beyond their biblical origin. Their journey from Koine Greek to modern English exemplifies the interplay between arbitrariness and motivation, system and meaning, text and interpretation. Through the lens of linguosemiotics, we see that the survival of these idioms illustrates not only linguistic inheritance but also the ongoing interpretative dialogue between sacred texts and secular discourse—a process through which biblical language continues to shape the collective moral imagination.

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BIONOTE

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