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Adam Nicolson on Biblical Illiteracy

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Adam Nicolson is a distinguished British historian and author of an important book on the history of the King James Bible. He writes in *The Wall Street Journal*:

It might be said that a civilization consists, at its core, of these easily transmitted packages of implication. They are one of the mechanisms by which cultures can be both efficient and rich. You don't have to return to first principles every time you wish to communicate. You can play your present tune on a received instrument, knowing that your listener hears not only your own music but the subtle melodies of those who played it before you. There is a common wisdom in common knowledge.

But does this Bible-informed world still exist? I would guess that on the whole, and outside committed Christian groups, biblical literacy is a thing of the past. That long moment of Christian civilization is over. The lingua franca of modern, English-speaking people is not dense with scriptural allusion, just as the conversation of educated people no longer makes reference to classical civilizations. If you dropped the names nowadays of Nestor, Agamemnon or Pericles — every one of which would have come trailing clouds of glory up to a century ago — you would, I think, draw a near total blank from even educated listeners.

Nicolson is concerned that our “long moment of Christian civilization is over.” I am less concerned with the eclipse of civilization than with the ignorance of the church. Yes, it would be better if some level of biblical literacy could still be found among the inhabitants of the land. But our far greater concern should be the biblical illiteracy of too many Christians, for whom the church (and Christian parents) must take responsibility.

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