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ESSAY

What the Bible Taught Lincoln About America

In wartime, a president who once seemed indifferent to religion evolved into a theologian of liberty.



Abraham Lincoln on Feb. 5, 1865, two months before his death.

PHOTO: EVERETT COLLECTION

By Meir Soloveichik

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When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860, he was certainly not thought of as a man given to religious fervor. But over the next 4½ years, as hundreds of thousands of Americans died in the Civil War, the 16th president evolved into a theologian of the American idea, using the language and concepts of the Bible to reflect on the war's larger meaning. This year on

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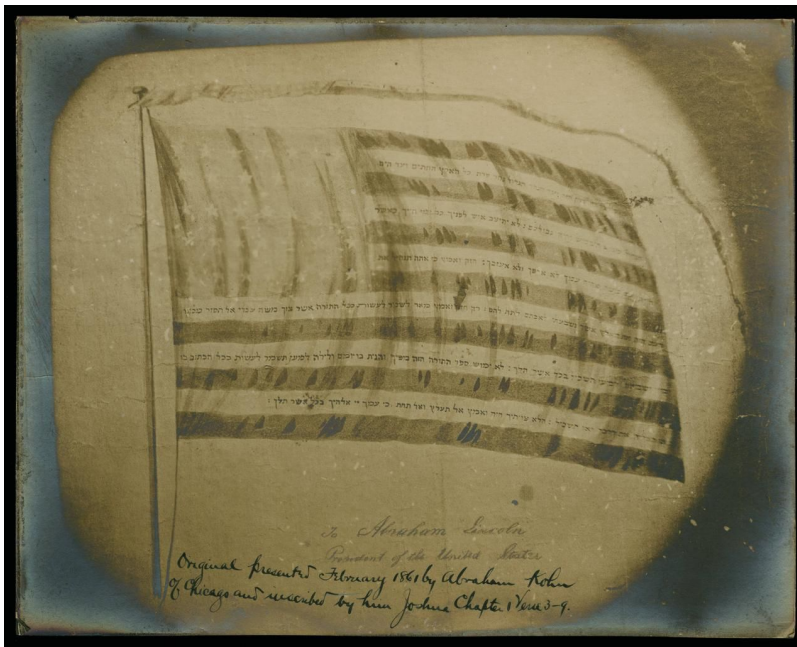


CATCH UP



Why, for instance, did Lincoln begin the Gettysburg Address with the words “fourscore and seven years ago?” It isn’t because he usually spoke that way, as many readers of the speech might now assume. Rather, he knew that his audience was deeply familiar with the King James Bible and would recognize the language of the Psalms: “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years.” As Adam Gopnik has written, Lincoln “had mastered the sound of the King James Bible so completely that he could recast abstract issues of constitutional law in biblical terms.”

The Bible’s influence on Lincoln’s language can be seen even before he took office. In February 1861, with the South seceding and the future of the Union hanging in the balance, the president-elect received an unusual gift from Abraham Kohn of Chicago. A Bavarian immigrant who was fiercely committed to both Judaism and Republican politics, Kohn was convinced, as his daughter later wrote, that Lincoln “was the destined Moses of the slaves and the savior of his country.” The gift that he sent reflected those convictions—a framed painting of an American flag, on whose stripes Kohn had inscribed Hebrew verses from the book of Joshua: “As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee; I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Be strong and of good courage; be not affrighted, neither be thou dismayed; for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest.”



A painting of the American flag with Hebrew lettering, presented to Lincoln by Abraham Kohn in 1861.

PHOTO: NEWBERRY LIBRARY

Shortly after receiving the painting, Lincoln departed Springfield, Ill., for his inauguration in Washington. Before the train pulled out of the station, he declared: “I now leave not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon

the historian Harold Holzer believes that Lincoln was “clearly inspired by Kohn’s present,” noting that as president he displayed the painting in the White House.

Lincoln’s mind remained on the Bible during his two-week-long journey to Washington. In Trenton, N.J., he gave a speech to the state senate in which he recalled reading as a child about George Washington’s battle for the city. “I recollect thinking then,” he reflected, “boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those men struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come.” It was his intention, Lincoln concluded, “to serve as a humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his almost chosen people.”

The American founding, Lincoln suggested, was about more than independence for one country.

By referring to Americans as an “almost chosen people,” Lincoln drew a comparison between his country and biblical Israel, which according to Genesis was brought into being so that all the families of the world would be blessed. The American founding too, Lincoln suggested, was about more than independence for one country. It was destined to embody an ideal of human equality, “a great promise” for all the world.

Lincoln traveled on to Philadelphia, where on Washington’s birthday he visited Independence Hall. While bidding good night to a crowd, Lincoln offered another impromptu biblical reflection: “All my political warfare has been in favor of the teachings coming forth from that sacred hall,” where the Declaration of Independence was signed. “May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if ever I prove false to those teachings.”



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The audience would have recognized Lincoln's allusion to Psalm 137: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its cunning." In the Bible, Jerusalem was the home of the Ark of the Covenant, the reminder of God's promise to the Israelites. Independence Hall, Lincoln implied, was the American Jerusalem, and the doctrine that "all men are created equal" was the covenant of the "almost chosen people." In the impending civil war, Americans' dedication to that covenant would be tested.

Lincoln's biblical reflections on America reached full flowering in his Second Inaugural Address, delivered in March 1865. More a sermon than a political speech, it is the most remarkable piece of oratory in American history. Lincoln called his country to repentance and described the Civil War as God's punishment for American slavery, concluding with the Psalmist's declaration that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." The historian Paul Johnson has noted that it is impossible to imagine any other statesman of Lincoln's time—Disraeli, Napoleon III, Bismarck—giving such a speech; only Americans were accustomed to seeing themselves in such biblical terms.

Lincoln was shot by John Wilkes Booth just weeks later, on the evening of Friday, April 14, when Christians were observing Good Friday. The next morning, as news of the president's death spread, Jews were heading to synagogue for the Sabbath of Passover. The service turned into a double commemoration, of the Exodus from Egypt and the life of the man many called America's Moses. Mary Lincoln would later report that just before he died, the president had reflected that "there was no city on earth he so much desired to see as Jerusalem." On that Passover, Lincoln was mourned by Americans like Abraham Kohn, who had just concluded their seders with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem."



In the 21st century, no president could use the language of the King James Bible with Lincoln's certainty that his listeners would grasp the allusion. But Lincoln's description of America as an "almost chosen people" remains important, not just as a key to his thought but as a warning for Americans today. A chosen people is eternal, but America is an exceptional nation only if it remains ever loyal to the covenant of its founding, the ideals for which Washington fought and Lincoln died.

—Rabbi Soloveichik is director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York and co-editor of "Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States."

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