

Review

JAMES B. CONROY

Jon Meacham. *And There Was Light: Abraham Lincoln and the American Struggle*. New York: Random House, 2022. Pp. xxxvii, 676.

Jon Meacham's 20 years of depth in the art of historical biography, his elegant prose style, often lyrical and sharp in the same breath, and his recent impactful turn as a presidential speechwriter, not to mention his Pulitzer Prize, raise a certain expectation of skill. The narrative grace and scholarly strength of his life of Abraham Lincoln are no surprise and reasons enough to read, enjoy, and learn from it. But its underlying premise that a biblically informed conscience and a growing belief in a transcendent moral order were the force behind Lincoln's greatness in his time and can stand as a model for greatness in ours is out of intellectual style and a gift to inquisitive minds.

Having studied the ample evidence of Lincoln's lifelong search for moral and spiritual meaning, Meacham claims no access to his nuanced theological conclusions, if he reached any. "Lincoln's specific religious beliefs remain shrouded in speculation." (p. 127) But he seems to have understood divinity more or less as the transcendentalists did, a politically disadvantaged view in an orthodox Christian nation. Only after he won the presidency did he drift toward conventional religion, where he never quite landed. The book makes a cogent case nonetheless that an expanding "faith in the unseen" (xix) not only influenced his mature political career but impelled it, that a spiritually grounded sense of right and wrong steered his course to and through the White House while his political skills steered him around the rocks. The heart of Meacham's thesis is the powerful idea that despite his flaws and failings Lincoln was a great president because he was a good one, not 'good' meaning 'able' but 'good' meaning 'good,' moved by what he saw as a spiritual mandate not to seek and keep power for its own sake in "a world of ambition and appetite," his own included, but "to discern and to pursue the right." (xx-xxi)

Tactical considerations surely influenced Lincoln's positions on the issues of his day, not always for the best, but Meacham is convinced that a belief in accountability to a higher power than the electorate was

his overriding guide. As Meacham has the poetry to put it, Lincoln believed that "God whispered His will through conscience, calling humankind to live in accord with the laws of love." In this he "was in tune with the times—and with the timeless." (xx)

All of that said, *And There Was Light* is a political biography, not a religious tract. Lincoln's moral and spiritual evolution is its theme but far from its only subject. The book shines new light on Lincoln's life and career through his inauspicious youth, his single term in Congress, his decidedly earthly Senate campaign, his signature speech at Cooper Union, his leadership in the White House, and the reasons behind his choices. The evidence is refreshing, particularly in our own fraught time, that Lincoln was driven by a conviction that whatever its political price, "a core moral commitment to liberty must survive the vicissitudes of politics, the prejudices of race, and the contests of interest. This is not to separate Lincoln's moral vision from his political sensibilities—an impossibility—but to underscore that he was acting not only for the moment, not only for dominion in the arena, but for all time." (349)

Starting with fresh perspectives on Lincoln's early poverty and embarrassing family circumstances, Meacham follows his spiritual evolution from a child of the rustic Baptist church to a teenaged non-believer scoffing at religion with amusing adolescent enthusiasm, to a troubled youth with a growing sense of otherworldliness, to a fully mature, intellectually sophisticated man with a deepening faith in an overarching moral authority. Seamlessly interwoven therewith is a generally admiring, sometimes critical appraisal of Lincoln's evolving positions on slavery, race, union, and disunion sharply focused on the moral reasons why he chose, abandoned, or refused to abandon them, often at political cost.

Lincoln enjoyed a lifelong romance with the moral and rhetorical voice of the King James Bible but never declared himself saved or in need of saving and seldom went to church until the burdens of his presidency, unmatched before or since, moved him into a family pew. All of this was rare and politically toxic, which he did his best to mitigate, for his unconventional conception of the divine would have jarred the typical voter. He regularly spoke of God in public, or "Providence" as he often preferred, but Meacham notes that he "never stopped to define his terms, leaving his listeners to interpret his invocations of the Almighty as they would. In churchgoing America, those well-wishers heard what they wanted to hear, and he took no pains to enlighten them as to his less-than-orthodox understandings of familiar concepts." (226)

Nonetheless, the book goes on, Lincoln came to see American history “as mysteriously but inexorably intertwined with the will and the wishes, the vengeance and the mercy, and the punishments and the rewards of a divine force beyond time and space.” (226) For Meacham, Lincoln’s “framing of the American story in a moral context” culminated in his Second Inaugural address, which the book calls nothing less than an exercise in preaching, with a message “neither wholly sectarian nor wholly secular.” (370–71)

And There Was Light does little if any preaching of its own. Its examination of Lincoln’s life is a rigorous biographical exercise, and its focus on the reasons he did what he did is an important contribution to the Lincoln literature. Though church Christianity has faded in most of America since the 1960s, let alone the 1860s, the Judeo-Christian thought that heavily influenced Lincoln’s is a cornerstone of our culture, and our best mainstream literature should examine more often its potential force for good in our politics and society. Meacham began to do so in 2006 with *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, and continued in 2020 with *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope*. His biblical exegesis is sometimes more explicit in *And There Was Light* but comes close to a sermon only in a few short passages of Chapter Twenty-Six, “The Almighty Has His Own Purposes,” where Meacham is entitled to expand on what they might be.

If conscience is Meacham’s theme, context is his medium. Much to his readers’ advantage he lingers more than most biographers do over the social, political, and cultural pools and rapids that Lincoln had to navigate and the men and women whose thoughts and writings guided him, from his backwoods youth through his cutting-edge adult reading. In 1844, during Lincoln’s circuit-riding lawyering days, Robert Chambers, a Scottish journalist, published *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, a widely read challenge to the biblical account that posited the world and humanity itself as products of evolution, 15 years ahead of Darwin. The scientific community was interested; the orthodox Christian ministry was apoplectic. Lincoln was intrigued. “Old certitudes were cracking,” Meacham writes, “familiar truths unraveling,” and Lincoln, like others, “was struggling with modernity.” (126)

If Henry Clay’s approach to government shaped his politics, Thomas Jefferson’s vision of the American ideal moved him. Lincoln saw the Declaration of Independence of 1776 as purer than the 1789 Constitution and its tacit endorsement of a terrible crime. “Slave owners invoked the Constitution as a shield for suppression,” Meacham

writes. "Lincoln invoked the Declaration of Independence as a higher, older, superseding authority," (347) and made his antislavery case "by fusing the scripture of old with the scripture of America and interpreting the result by the light of conscience." (314) His path was partly marked by the brilliant transcendentalists Theodore Parker and Ralph Waldo Emerson and other spiritually influenced thinkers. Parker had written that to study history and the power of conscience is to see the arc of the moral universe bend slowly toward justice. Lincoln sought the White House with ambition he could taste but also for a chance to do some bending.

Among other intellectuals who influenced his upwardly mobile morality, Meacham spends profitable time with John Bright, the radical British egalitarian whose portrait Lincoln kept in his White House office, a reminder of why he was there. Frederick Douglass often scorned the content, scope, and pace of Lincoln's positions on race and slavery, but having read and conferred with him, Lincoln was much impressed by Douglass, who influenced some of his course corrections. Douglass ultimately called him "the black man's president." As president, Lincoln often attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, moved by the weight of the war and his office, the death of his young son Willie, and the thought-provoking companionship of the church's scholarly pastor Dr. Phineas Densmore Gurley, who counseled him in theology, urged him to believe in the survival of the soul, and gave him comfort when he needed it most.

Looming over it all, of course, is the original sin of slavery and the lasting sin of bigotry. Meacham critiques Lincoln's stands on race in his unsuccessful Senate campaign, some of which indeed makes for "painful reading," (162) and correctly finds him lagging behind the most enlightened voices of his day, though few of them sought elective office in a thoroughly racist country, which undermines the comparison. Meacham acknowledges, however, that Lincoln could not take the highest ground until the lower ground was secure and he and the Civil War had done their bending. Lincoln also believed, like many others, including some leading black voices of the day, that a thoroughgoing program of racial integration was socially and politically impossible and perhaps even undesirable, and emancipation, when it came, should be paired with turning freed slaves into foreign colonizers as encouraged volunteers.

"Yet the evidence of 1860–1865 shows him to have been evolving politically and consistently devoted to the moral work of expanding, not constricting, human liberty and human rights." (415) Meacham rightly excuses him for putting the Union first and emancipation

later, if for no other reason than that abolition would be dead in an independent South, and notes that his career-long antislavery stand is his ultimate reformist credential, for it “risked defeat and banishment to Springfield—the highest of prices for a political man to pay,” momentarily overlooking assassination. (337) As Meacham says, Lincoln was no “Martin Luther King, Jr. in a stovepipe hat” (xxxiii) and could not have been in his time, but his views were progressive in the mid-19th century, when many leading *abolitionists*, Emerson and Parker included, believed in racial superiority, purportedly peaking not just in whites but in Anglo-Saxons, and uttered racist thoughts that would kill a career in the 21st. Whether Lincoln uttered his out of political expediency, saturation in a racist culture, or both, what Meacham calls his “morally informed insistence” (xxx) on stopping the spread of slavery and anticipating its death by slow strangulation never wavered, despite the political disadvantage.

Lincoln knew how to count votes, and his positions on slavery, the dominant issue of his day, were broadly unpopular, unlike the Know-Nothings’ bigotry against blacks, Roman Catholics, and immigrants, which he condemned despite the political cost. Meacham notes that in his presidential run against John Breckinridge, who supported slavery; Stephen Douglas, who endorsed its expansion into territories and states wherever white plebiscites welcomed it; and John Bell, who owned slaves and dodged the issue, 60% of the electorate voted for one of them, not for him. When pushed after his election to betray the antislavery principles that had won it, he preferred civil war. His limited informal support for black citizenship in his presidency’s final days may have cost him his life, and Meacham makes a compelling argument that matchless politician though he was in every part of his body, elbows and knees included, Lincoln’s motives were essentially pure and his moral courage second to none, or second at least to few. Committed to doing right as his conscience informed him and the presidency empowered him, he was willing to accept the consequence of losing his office to George McClellan and his life to the likes of John Wilkes Booth.

Between Lincoln’s election to the presidency and the outbreak of civil war, Northern leaders split on whether to let the Union unravel or stop its dissolution by force. Some leaders, Meacham notes, like Lincoln’s Secretary of State William Seward, advised him to compromise on slavery and change the subject of the national conversation from expanding or containing its spread to union or disunion. This Lincoln would not do, determined, come what may, to hold the line that elected him. Meacham asks why, and his typographically emphatic

answer is uncomplicated: "Because he thought it was the right, just, and morally sound thing to do." (225)

When it came to core values, Meacham says, Lincoln's refusal to be compromised by compromise did not grow out of a conventional Christian worldview, for his antislavery passion was less rooted in the New Testament, which seems to have grabbed him not as viscerally as the Old, than in an "intuitive moral sensibility and a conviction that there were universal goods to be discerned and acted upon. 'God,' in Lincoln's vernacular, was the God of Abraham" (226) but was also to be found in every person's conscience, a human inclination toward justice and kindness, and a spiritual accountability for pursuing or neglecting them.

Meacham's writing is a pleasure to read, and his gift speaks for itself: "In Lincoln's hour upon the stage, many hoped he would go farther along the road toward equality than he did; many feared any step at all. But on he walked." (xxxiii) Mark Twain understood that just the right word turns the lightning bug into the lightning, and so does the right detail. Meacham typically finds both, including so small a particular as the days of the week when key events occurred and occasionally the times, lending immediacy even to dates. An instance of his eye for vivid detail is a witness's observation of Lincoln as president-elect sitting in a Chicago church, upright and attentive at first, then toying with the tassel on the back of a woman's cloak in the pew ahead of him as the sermon droned on.

Every Lincoln biographer must retell some shopworn tales, but Meacham makes them fresh with acute observations of his own and others left by Lincoln's contemporaries, many rarely in print. Having recounted Lincoln's memory of the site of his backwoods youth "as unpoetical as any spot of the earth," Meacham "suspects he was not just referring to the landscape" (122) and explores the darker corners of his upbringing and his early impressions of life.

An unspoken message of *And There Was Light* is the heartening thought for our times that our country has been stressed to near rupture before and emerged in one piece, better and stronger for the healing. With what Meacham has called the 'soul of America' once again at risk, the light he shines on Lincoln's principled leadership informs our own choice of leaders. "A politician unburdened by conscience could have made different decisions and left us a different nation." (226)

Ours is also not the first time America has been divided not only by alternative beliefs but also by alternative facts. Lincoln too, Meacham writes, sought to lead "a country riven not only by competing

interests," but also "by incompatible understandings of reality." (187) Northern abolitionists saw their mission as a moral compulsion while Southern secessionists saw it as a smug, hypocritical campaign to destroy their economy and what Republicans were likely to call their deplorable culture. Once the South "was told that the rest of the nation had found its way of life morally wanting," (189) and its values unworthy of respect, the natural consequence was intransigent rage. It was paralyzing then as now that "When everything was at stake, nothing could be conceded." (191) For many Northern leaders, slavery made the South a moral pariah. For many Southern apologists, the enslavement of African Americans was an "ordinance of God," which ejected abolition from the realm of respectability. To defend slavery "was to defend Christianity itself. When the issue was framed so starkly, compromise was impossible, for to compromise was to sin. Reason did not enter into it." (180) And so it goes today.

A conspiracy was afoot in 1861 to stop the ceremonial counting of electoral votes and the official proclamation of Lincoln's election. A Massachusetts congressman, Meacham notes, was appalled by a scheme to generate "chaos and anarchy out of which might come the establishment of the Confederacy as the government *de facto* in the very halls of the national capitol." (212) Who among his Northern peers would have imagined the Confederate battle flag paraded through those halls a century and a half later on the same occasion? As on January 6, 2021, "Much came down to a single man, and a single moment: the vice president of the United States, John Breckinridge," (215) the South's candidate for president, and his willingness to certify his opponent's election. A hundred plainclothes policemen stationed in the Capitol proved unnecessary when Breckinridge did the right thing.

Simply put, *And There Was Light* is an invaluable Lincoln biography for our time, a reminder, as it says, that "our finest presidents" have striven to bring "a flawed nation closer to the light," acting on the principle "that politics divorced from conscience is fatal to the American experiment in liberty under law." (419–20)