Review

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Allen C. Guelzo. *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*. Second Edition. Updated and Revised with a New Preface (Library of Religious Biography). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022. Pp. xxv, 508.

The 1999 (first) edition of *Redeemer President*, published by Eerdmans in 2000, justifiably earned Professor Guelzo not only various awards such as the 2000 Gilder Lehrman Lincoln Prize and the 2000 Abraham Lincoln Institute Book Prize, but also widespread acclaim as the first "intellectual biography" of America's 16th president who had "redeemed" America from the sin of slavery. Eerdmans published *Redeemer President* as a part of their *Library of Religious Biography* series, but it was Guelzo's intention with *Redeemer President* to focus on Abraham Lincoln as a complex "man of ideas," rather than simply his religious beliefs. Nevertheless, in the two decades since its original publication, *Redeemer President's* conclusions about Lincoln's faith, or lack thereof, have been among the most widely discussed aspects of the book.

In the first edition of *Redeemer President*, Guelzo made competent use of what was not only the then-standard resources such as Roy P. Basler's edition of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*; Earl Schenck Miers's *Lincoln Day-by-Day*; and Mark E. Neely, Jr.'s *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, but he also employed the new oral histories of Lincoln. These included Michael Burlingame's *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (1994); Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis's edition of *Herndon's Informants* (1998); and Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher's compilation *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (1996).

However, Guelzo does not incorporate any new research into the second edition. While adding a new preface and making some editing and minor factual corrections, he has changed very little in the new *Redeemer President*. The second edition's preface is largely an expansion of the 1999 edition's notes on sources, and it includes a brief synopsis of several selected academic works about Lincoln that have been published since the first edition of *Redeemer President* came out.

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Although Guelzo's new preface adds a number of excellent Lincoln books published in the last 20 years, such as Michael Burlingame's two-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2008) and Richard Carwardine's *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (2003), he omits several other invaluable works that present noteworthy analysis of Lincoln's religious beliefs and religious philosophy. Among those worthy of inclusion are Ronald C. White's *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (2009) and *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural Address* (2002); Stewart Winger's *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (2003); and Joseph R. Fornieri's *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (2003) and *Abraham Lincoln, Philosopher Statesman* (2014).

These omitted works present a number of religious interpretations that differ from those expressed by Guelzo in his first and second editions of *Redeemer President*. One example has bearing on Guelzo's opinion about the famous "little book on infidelity" which was destroyed by Lincoln's friend Sam Hill in New Salem. Guelzo supports William H. Herndon's theory that the book of infidelity was an attack on the divinity of Christ. But scholars Fornieri and Winger support William E. Barton's theory that instead of its being Lincoln's attack on Christ's divinity, it may have instead been Lincoln's defense of universal salvation based on 1 Corinthians 15:22.[1]

In the Introduction, Guelzo makes a commendable effort to present a condensed explanation of the complicated developments in America's churches in the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. In the 18th century, most American churches were Calvinist-based (Presbyterian, Congregational, Reformed Baptist, etc.). This changed, however, with the advent of the Revolution, the rise of liberalism, the impact of the First and Second Great Awakenings, the waxing and waning of Unitarianism, the conflict of Old-School Calvinism with New School revivalism, and the rapid expansion of Methodist evangelism. Along with these developments Guelzo introduces the great religious influencers of that day, such as Jonathan Edwards, John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith, Charles Hodge, and John Wesley.

Guelzo finishes his biography's Introduction with an insightful identification of what he calls "three large-scale contexts" for Lincoln's intellectual development. Since Lincoln received very little formal education, it was Lincoln's own study of these subjects that Guelzo believes was essential in his "intellectual maturation."

1. See Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith*, 54–55; Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*, 174–75 (both DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003); and William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (N.Y.: George E. Doran, 1920), 152–53.

The first of these contexts was the "rigid Calvinism" in which Lincoln was raised in Kentucky and Indiana. Most of the reading Lincoln did as a youth, until his mid-teen years, was from the Bible or textbooks that drew heavily on the Bible for their lessons. Both the Bible and the textbooks were interpreted by Lincoln's preachers and teachers in a Calvinistic manner: the total depravity of man and absolute sovereignty of a God that predestines souls to heaven or hell.

Guelzo theorizes that, as a young man, Lincoln totally abandoned Calvinism when he moved to New Salem and embraced "Lockean Enlightenment" ideas—which is his second context. The books that influenced Lincoln were such works as Paine's *The Age of Reason* and Volney's *Ruins*, which Guelzo says made Lincoln "a Victorian" and "religiously skeptical." Guelzo proposes that "the Enlightenment [was Lincoln's] intellectual guide toward 'infidelity,' 'atheism,' and Tom Paine in religion, to Benthamite utilitarianism in legal philosophy, and to 'Reason, all-conquering Reason' in everything else." Guelzo believes that these contexts are the "principal guideposts" for understanding Abraham Lincoln and his justification to "read Lincoln seriously as a man of ideas."

Even though these ingredients may be sufficient for a loaf baked in Lincoln's earlier years, they are insufficient to explain the man who wrote the Second Inaugural Address. It is questionable whether a dash of atheism was ever mixed into the dough, and missing is the yeast of Lincoln's presidential years, his increasing trust in the guiding hand of a sovereign, providential God.

The third context of Lincoln's intellectual maturation, Guelzo avows, was "classical [political] liberalism, especially the economic liberalism" proclaimed by 19th-century influencers such as philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill. Classical liberalism made Lincoln a proponent of a free market economy, limited government, and the rule of law. It also made him receptive to Whig Party principles and supportive of the rise of the labor class, protection of individual rights, and (eventually) concern for the plight of the slave.

Guelzo brilliantly integrates Lincoln's background with these three "contexts" to explain the reason for Lincoln's devotion to the Whig Party and his rise to political prominence. Lincoln abhorred the memory of the farmwork he did for his father, and he consequently developed a disdain for the philosophy of Democrats Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. These two political leaders promoted an agrarian economy based on a (permanent) wealthy planter class, a middle class of yeoman farmers, and slaves. Instead of this, Lincoln

embraced the Whig Party's promotion of individual opportunity and the social progression of the lower classes.

The Whig Party's means of accomplishing this upward mobility was by supporting the economic system originally envisioned by Alexander Hamilton, i.e. the promotion of wage labor, rapid commercial expansion, a free market, and extensive manufacturing. As a Whig politician, Lincoln faithfully supported infrastructure improvements, a strong national bank, the right for laborers to strike, the rule of law, and a moral code for society that was based on biblical principles.

Although Guelzo skillfully demonstrated how Lockean enlightenment and Mill's economic liberalism transformed Lincoln's mind, like most historians he struggles to understand Lincoln's religious beliefs—especially the impact of the "rigid Calvinism" of his youth. Guelzo relies heavily on Herndon's interpretations of Lincoln's faith for his own interpretations. Almost totally absent in Guelzo's discussions about Lincoln's religious beliefs is his (Lincoln's) increasing reliance on scripture. Guelzo says very little about Lincoln's use of the Bible, mentioning simply that he thought of it as the "richest source of pertinent quotations" and that he "would quote scripture, but more by way of proverb and illustration than authority."

But Lincoln's use of the Bible evolved, and he often *did* use scripture "authoritatively," beginning with his moral arguments attacking slavery. He began these attacks in the 1850's with scripture like Mark 3:25 in his "House Divided" speeches and dozens of speeches about the slave's right to the fruit of his labor based on Genesis 3:19 and Psalm 128:2.[2]

Testimony about Lincoln's increasing dependence on the Bible comes not only from his speeches and letters, but also from many White House witnesses. Nevertheless, Guelzo downplays President Lincoln's Bible reading while he was in the White House, offering in support of his arguments only two weak testimonies, one from a 15-year-old White House babysitter and another from Lincoln's old friend Orville Hickman Browning. Browning admitted that Lincoln frequently read the Bible, but he "never knew of his engaging in any other act of devotion" such as the blessing of meals. Julia Taft Bayne declaimed "He read the Bible quite as much for its literary style as he did for its religious or spiritual content." Just how little "Julie"

2. For examples of Lincoln's many bold uses of the Bible, see *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (hereafter *CW*), 2:461; 2:405; 2:520, and others cited in the Appendix of Gordon Leidner's *Abraham Lincoln and the Bible: A Complete Compendium* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2023).

(as Lincoln called her) could read Lincoln's mind when he studied the Bible is a mystery not explained. Significantly, Guelzo makes no mention of Lincoln's well-known 1864 conversation with his close friend Joshua Speed, when he told Speed that he was wrong for his skepticism and that he should "take all of [the Bible] upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith."[3]

With regard to Lincoln's development into a "redeemer" president, Guelzo offers a well-researched argument, beginning by correctly pointing out that Lincoln did very little, politically, to support the abolitionist cause until the 1850's. But prior to this, Guelzo observes that Lincoln did, in fact, speak of his hatred of the institution, probably because he identified with what Lincoln would later call the slave's "unrequited toil." Lincoln's personal identification with the slave likely stems from the way his father hired him out to work for other farmers (and then kept his wages) in his teen years. Guelzo correctly observes that the right to work and better oneself became a major theme of Lincoln's life and was a likely motivator in Lincoln's hatred of slavery. Guelzo's exposition of Lincoln's journey from a subtle disdain of slavery to his resolute determination to end it is a prime example of Lincoln's bold transformational leadership.

As mentioned above, Guelzo expends a great deal of effort throughout the book trying to interpret Lincoln's evolving religious beliefs. This effort includes an erudite discussion of Lincoln's "fatalism," his belief in "the doctrine of necessity," his dalliance with universalism, his perceptions of "motives" as the basis for moral decisions, his doubts about man's free will, and the testimony of several of Lincoln's peers such as William H. Herndon regarding his dismissal of Christ as personal savior. Guelzo also develops an ambitious, albeit confusing theory of what Lincoln thought about providence. But this confusion is hardly surprising, considering that volumes have been written on the recondite subject of Lincoln's faith. In his analysis, Guelzo is forced into the same trap that most historians fall into regarding Lincoln's religious beliefs, selectively choosing testimony to support their preconceptions of what Lincoln's relationship with his Maker was.

In the second edition, Guelzo does not soften his support of William H. Herndon's often erratic claims about Lincoln's moral philosophy and lack of biblical faith. An example of this is Herndon's

3. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 2nd ed., 306. For the many White House witnesses of Lincoln's diligent reading of the Bible see Leidner, "How Many 'Lincoln Bibles'?," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 75 n90. Joshua F. Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln and Notes of a Visit to California* (Louisville, Ky.: John P. Morton, 1884), 32–33.

quite unconvincing argument that the 16th president's religious beliefs were unchanged from his Springfield through his White House years. Shortly after Lincoln was assassinated, to "prove" that Lincoln's religious skepticism never diminished while he was president, Herndon fired off a one-page letter to John Nicolay asking him whether Lincoln's religious habits had changed in the White House. Nicolay quickly replied: "Mr. Lincoln did not, to my knowledge, in any way change his religious ideas, opinions, or beliefs from the time he left Springfield to the day of his death." Guelzo then proclaims that "hardly anyone was in a better position to know than Lincoln's chief-of-staff [Nicolay]."[4]

Yet Guelzo makes this assertion in spite of the fact that in the same letter to Herndon, Nicolay follows up this denial of any change in Lincoln's religious beliefs with the avowal, "I do not know just what they [his religious beliefs] were, never having heard him explain them in detail . . ." Lincoln scholar Richard Current justifiably writes that "such a confession of ignorance is enough to throw Nicolay's testimony out of court."[5]

As Herndon probably knew, Nicolay was not the best choice for a witness as to whether Lincoln's religious views had changed from his Springfield years. Although Nicolay had been able to observe behavioral habits of Lincoln in the White House (which, as he and Lincoln's other secretary John Hay elsewhere admitted, included diligent Bible reading, prayer, and requests for prayer), he barely knew Lincoln before the presidential years.[6]

A better source for any change in Lincoln's religious beliefs would have been Lincoln's closest lifelong friend Joshua Speed, who admitted that he [Speed] did, indeed, see "evidence of change" of Lincoln's religious beliefs in Washington. Although he was not present in the White House "day-to-day" like Nicolay, Speed (an unrepentant skeptic) had had at least two meetings with Lincoln in the last year of the president's life, when they specifically discussed and/or he was able to observe Lincoln's religious beliefs.[7]

4. *Redeemer President*, 2nd ed., 304.

5. Richard N. Current, *The Lincoln Nobody Knows* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 62.

6. Nicolay and Hay wrote about the president reaching "for the Bible which commonly lay on his desk" to look up Scripture, in John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History*, 10 vols. (New York: Century Company, 1890), 9:40. Nicolay said "Mr. Lincoln was a praying man. I know that to be a fact and I have heard him request other people to pray," quoted in William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1959), 124.

7. Speed, *Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln*, 32–33, 27–28.

Guelzo mentions some of what was said by Speed concerning Lincoln's increasing faith in other parts of the biography, but they and the opinions of friends such as Joseph Gillespie and Noah Brooks—Nicolay's slated replacement for the office of secretary and, some would say, Lincoln's surrogate son—he discounts. Statements from Speed such as that Lincoln "made the Bible a preceptor to his faith and a guide for his comfort" and from Brooks that Lincoln had developed "the habit of daily prayer" and that after his election Lincoln had undergone "a process of crystallization" in religious faith are dismissed by Guelzo as "hopeful opinions" or "exaggerations." Not seriously considered is similar latter-years testimony from others such as James Matheny (who had previously acknowledged that Lincoln was an infidel when young) about Lincoln's increasing religious beliefs while president.[8]

Guelzo correctly asserts that Lincoln "never spoke in the language of evangelical Christianity of Jesus as *my* savior (2nd ed., 305). Nevertheless, in the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Lincoln refers several times to Christ as *the* Saviour, and once as "the Saviour of mankind." (The British spelling of the word was common in Lincoln's time.) Whether or not Lincoln was ever personally converted to orthodox Christianity will be something about which learned historians such as Professor Guelzo choose to speculate and debate. In the end, however, the answer to that question remains, of course, between Lincoln and "his Maker."[9]

Lincoln, it is obvious to this reader, in his four years of leading the nation through a terrible war diligently sought the guidance of the Almighty through his frequent prayers and frequent reading of the Bible. In so doing, he increasingly manifested a desire to live *coram Deo*—before the face of God. Although he evidently considered his devotions essential to receiving direction from the providential God whose "will prevails," it is the fruit of Lincoln's leadership, rather than whether he was granted a place in heaven, which is most relevant to the free world today.

8. James Matheny wrote in a December 16, 1872, letter to Rev. J. A. Reed: "While I do believe Mr. Lincoln to have been an infidel in his former life . . . yet I believe he was a very different man in later life; and that after associating with a different class of men, and investigating the subject, he was a firm believer in the Christian religion." Quoted in Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 320–21. See also *Redeemer President*, 2nd ed., 434–35.

9. See Lincoln's references to "the Saviour" in *CW*, 1:167; 2:442; 2:501; 2:511; 3:17; 7:368; and 7:542. Lincoln referred to God as "my Maker" in the September 1862 cabinet meeting when he stated his intention to issue an Emancipation Proclamation. Fehrenbachers, *Recollected Words*, 96; Leidner, *Abraham Lincoln and the Bible*, 103.

Finally, as Professor Guelzo so cogently observes in his epilogue, "Providence was what allowed him to overrule the moral limitations of liberalism. To do liberalism's greatest deed—the emancipation of the slaves—Lincoln had to step outside liberalism and surrender himself to the direction of an overruling divine Providence whose conclusions he had by no means prejudged." (437) In surrendering to what he believed was the will of God, Lincoln not only preserved democratic government for what has been heretofore the most powerful nation on earth, but he did so as the redeemer president, transforming what he said in the Gettysburg Address was the Declaration's mere "proposition" that "all men are created equal," into constitutional law.

Redeemer President remains an unsurpassed contribution to the interpretation of Lincoln's intellectual complexity. Yet this reader hopes that Professor Guelzo will, in the future, engage more with the increasing body of research on Lincoln's religious beliefs by other scholars, so that they may together contribute to our understanding of this enigmatic "man of ideas."