

Review

IAN T. IVERSON

Gordon Leidner. *Abraham Lincoln and the Bible: A Complete Compendium*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2023. Pp. x, 246.

The matter of Lincoln's religious faith has been a source of controversy since the 16th president's tragic assassination on Good Friday in 1865. Among Lincoln's contemporaries, opinions ranged from Newton Bateman's assertion that the late president had embraced evangelical Christianity to William H. Herndon's insistence that Lincoln had died a skeptic. In this short biography, Gordon Leidner seeks to avoid the question of whether Lincoln was a Christian and instead aims to provide "a sound introduction to the study of Lincoln's use of the Bible [that] will facilitate more thorough investigations into Lincoln's leadership and how he was personally transformed by his lifelong study of scripture" (8). Leidner also includes a 52-page appendix that meticulously traces Lincoln's references to Scripture in his surviving writings. This focus on Lincoln's relationship to the Bible seems especially appropriate in light of Mark A. Noll's recent work, *America's Book*, which convincingly characterizes the antebellum United States as a "strongly Protestant Bible civilization."¹ Regardless of what Lincoln believed in his heart about the historical veracity of Scripture or the truth of the Gospel's message, his study and use of this paramount text warrants careful examination.

While Leidner gestures towards the relevant historiography to provide context or clarification, and his narrative draws heavily on earlier works of Lincoln scholarship (and is documented as such in the endnotes), his analysis relies principally on Lincoln's own words, as recorded in the *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (CW).² Beginning with the 15-year-old Lincoln's copybook recording of Isaac Watts's

1. Mark A. Noll, *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794–1911* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 4.

2. Roy P. Basler, Marion Dolores Pratt, and Lloyd A. Dunlap et al., eds., *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. + 2 suppl. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press for the Abraham Lincoln Association, 1953–1955; 1974; 1990).

hymn, "The Shortness of Life and the Goodness of God," Leidner probes how Lincoln's early experiences with frontier Christianity and the Bible shaped his views of God, the Church, and the role of religion in American life. Like many who have closely examined Lincoln's youth, Leidner concludes that the tragedies of Lincoln's early life, namely the premature deaths of his mother and sister, as well as his exposure to the doctrine of predestination which shaped his family's antimission Baptist community deeply instilled a sense of fatalism that resurfaced throughout his life. In contrast to historians such as David Herbert Donald,³ however, Leidner insists that Lincoln's view evolved over time "from simple fatalism to a belief in a providential God who used people and events for beneficent purpose" (35). This argument echoes Ronald C. White's claim that over the course of his life, Lincoln's fatalism evolved into a providentialism more in line with orthodox Protestant views.⁴ Leidner also suggests that young Lincoln's disdain for church leaders' "hypocritical efforts to instill dissension among church members about their fulfillment of Jesus' Great Commission" (19) made him distrustful of ministers and their claims concerning Scripture, a wariness borne out in Lincoln's attacks on Peter Cartwright, a Methodist circuit rider and early political opponent. Leidner's view of Lincoln's frustration closely aligns with that of Michael Burlingame, who finds that Lincoln was repelled by "the cranky sectarianism that bred enmity and divided communities."⁵

When considering the skepticism closely associated with Lincoln's young adulthood and time in New Salem, Leidner rejects the conclusions of historians such as Allen C. Guelzo, who have argued that in 1834 Lincoln drafted an irreverent essay, "a little Book on Infidelity," that denied Christ's divinity and dismissed orthodox claims to Scripture's authority.⁶ Instead, Leidner proposes that in that controversial essay, which was never published, Lincoln advanced a claim for universal salvation based on 1 Corinthians 15:22. This interpretation is based on an account offered by Lincoln's New Salem tutor, Mentor Graham, and was first advanced by William E. Barton in the early

3. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 337.

4. Ronald C. White, Jr., *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), 624–27.

5. Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 1:84.

6. Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 50–51.

twentieth century.⁷ From this reading of Lincoln's skeptical essay, Leidner concludes that Lincoln's "religious beliefs in New Salem lean[ed] more toward universalism and predestinarianism than atheism" (25). Acknowledging that Lincoln may have approached the Bible with a wary eye throughout his twenties, Leidner points to Lincoln's use of the Bible in his 1842 temperance address to Springfield's Washingtonians and his contemporary correspondence with Joshua Speed as evidence that Lincoln had begun to re-engage with the Bible by his early thirties.

Leidner argues that Lincoln's relationship with the Bible continued to evolve in the ensuing decade, gesturing to Lincoln's references to Scripture as a congressman and in his well-known farewell note to his dying father, but like many other Lincoln scholars, Leidner marks Lincoln's political resurgence following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a turning point in his life. Highlighting Lincoln's use of Genesis 3:19 and Psalm 128:2 to criticize slavery and the institution's expansion into the western territories, Leidner emphasizes how "Lincoln's speeches were becoming bolder and more moralistic" (55) as he grew more comfortable with the Bible. For Leidner, the House Divided speech and Lincoln's subsequent use of Scripture in his formal debates with Stephen A. Douglas reveal how Lincoln was both inspired by the Bible and used the Bible to inspire others. Straddling the line between an analysis of Lincoln's use of the Bible and an argument regarding Lincoln's faith, Leidner asserts that for Lincoln in the late 1850s, "the Bible was becoming less of a book of great quotations and more of a personal driving force" (67). As evidence for this claim, he points to Lincoln's endorsement of the Golden Rule as articulated in the Gospels and Lincoln's belief that the nation would suffer if it did not ultimately blot out the moral stain of slavery.

Considering Leidner's professed reluctance to take a firm stand on Lincoln's personal faith, he might have done more to contextualize Lincoln's use of Scripture in the 1858 campaign. Lincoln emphasized antislavery passages in Scripture as part of a broader appeal to Illinois voters not only steeped in the Bible but also deeply committed to an ethos of self-improvement inspired by the Founding Fathers and free labor ideology. As the historian Richard J. Carwardine aptly summarized, it was Lincoln's "fusion of Jeffersonian and scriptural precepts, set in the context of Whiggish self-improvement" that inspired many

7. William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: George H. Doran, 1920), 152–53.

of his supporters.⁸ To say that Lincoln's use of the Bible was instrumental in this context need not exclude the possibility that he found Scripture genuinely inspiring, but as a politician, Lincoln would have been foolish not to draw on it to reinforce his arguments on the fundamental connection between free labor and republican government before evangelical audiences eager to hear their faith echo their politics and vice versa.

In his treatment of Lincoln's engagement with the Bible from the election of 1860 through the Civil War, Leidner reveals how Lincoln grew increasingly dependent on the Bible's wisdom as he struggled to steer the ship of state through the most treacherous of waters. Leidner records Lincoln's many references to Scripture throughout his pre-inaugural tour of the North, his turn to the Bible after the Union defeat at the First Battle of Bull Run, and reflections on the will of God following the death of his son Willie in February 1862. Leidner argues that as he read the Bible, "Lincoln began to diligently seek God's will on what he should do about slavery" (98) and ultimately concluded that he "was to be God's instrument in [the] momentous task [of abolishing it]" (104). Leidner notes Lincoln's frequent invocations of biblical mercy and his disposition towards compassion, whether toward Union deserters, Dakota warriors, or Southern refugees. Amid a culture of loss, Lincoln turned to the Book of Job to make sense of the nation's devastation.

As many scholars have noted, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address echoes the language and rhythm of the King James Bible. Leidner argues that Lincoln not only sought to emulate the tone of Scripture but applied an "underlying theme of 'life—death—rebirth' [that was] reminiscent of Christ's teachings from the Gospel of John" (116). Like the historian Douglas L. Wilson, Leidner challenges the dating of Lincoln's "Meditation on Divine Will," traditionally placed in September 1862, and argues that Lincoln drafted the document sometime in the spring of 1864.⁹ Leidner points to the similarities between that document and the April 1864 letter to the Kentucky newspaper editor Albert G. Hodges to suggest that "it was written sometime shortly before or after the Hodges letter" (127). While Leidner's analysis of these two documents is sound, he muddies the waters by suggesting that Lincoln's "Meditation" was influenced by the military stalemate that emerged in the summer of 1864. Given the profound influence

8. Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln* (Harrow, U.K.: Pearson Longman, 2003), 83.

9. Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 254–56.

the bloodletting of that summer had on Northern morale and public opinion, it is significant whether Lincoln's "Meditation" was drafted before, or after, the setbacks of the Overland, Petersburg, and Atlanta campaigns. Nevertheless, the sense of Providence that emerges in the letter to Hodges, the Meditation, and a letter to Eliza P. Gurney dated September 4 all support Leidner's claim that in 1864, "Lincoln's concept of a sovereign God was stronger than ever" (128).

Ultimately, as Leidner exhibits in his analysis of Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln embraced both a sense of divine justice, insisting that the war "was an unquestionable judgment from God that the bloodshed of slavery must be paid for by the bloodshed of war" (135), and a spirit of God's forgiveness that would extend "malice toward none; with charity for all." Standing diametrically opposed to the prevailing mood of vengeance, "Lincoln asserted that the Bible says God requires not only atonement for sin, but also forgiveness of enemies" (137).

In his conclusion, Leidner engages directly with the question of Lincoln's personal faith, explaining that "it is natural to wonder why a man who relied on the Bible so much would not have articulated to others any definite conclusions on the state of his soul" (140). Regarding the conflicting testimonies of William H. Herndon and Newton Bateman as unreliable, Leidner places great emphasis on Joshua F. Speed's encounter with Lincoln late in the war while the president was staying in the Soldiers' Home. There, Lincoln surprised Speed, a religious skeptic, by encouraging him to put his trust in the Bible. This anecdote, according to Leidner, demonstrates how Lincoln had outgrown his youthful suspicion of Christianity and had become "at least a biblical monotheist, who believes that God answers prayer" (144). While Leidner's allusions to Lincoln's ever-strengthening personal faith earlier will likely draw criticism, his conclusion concerning Lincoln's faith in his final year as president is fundamentally sound. By the end of the Civil War, Lincoln had come to trust that a higher power directed human events and increasingly sought insight into the workings of Divine Providence in Scripture.

Leidner's appendix neatly organizes Lincoln's quotations of and allusions to the Bible in canonical order, providing the appropriate passage from the King James Version alongside Lincoln's words, together with a citation to the volume and page number of the CW, the date provided by the CW's editors, and where and to whom Lincoln made the reference. For allusions that might point to more than one passage from Scripture, Leidner includes citations to the alternative passages, a feature especially helpful for allusions to passages in the

synoptic Gospels. The appendix displays the breadth of Lincoln's biblical literacy, subtly strengthening Leidner's argument that we cannot understand Lincoln without recognizing his deep engagement with Scripture.

Abraham Lincoln and the Bible merited more careful editing, as several errors that will stand out to attentive readers slipped through the net. These include the year the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed Congress (6), the month when Richmond, Virginia, became the capital of the Confederacy (87), the year the Battle of Chancellorsville was fought (127), and the spelling of Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's name (131). Beyond these superficial blemishes, some readers may also take issue with Leidner's claims concerning the strength of Lincoln's biblical faith, especially before his presidency. Nevertheless, few will disagree with Leidner's central claim that Lincoln "used essential biblical principles and teachings to lead his followers to a higher moral plane" (145). Lincoln scholars and lay readers alike will appreciate the care and attention put into this book, especially the appendix. Having identified more than fifty references beyond earlier efforts by Clarence E. Macartney and Philip L. Ostergard to catalog Lincoln's use of Scripture, Leidner's list of biblical quotations within the *Collected Works* will undoubtedly serve as a starting point for future historians as they grapple with the thorny question of Lincoln's faith and scrutinize his use of the Bible.¹⁰

10. Clarence E. Macartney, *Lincoln and the Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949); Philip L. Ostergard, *The Inspired Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2008).