

Lincoln's Bible

When Barack Obama was sworn in as President three weeks ago, he placed his hand on a stack of books to take the oath of office, adding Martin Luther King Jr.'s Bible and another belonging to Michelle's family to the volume that Abraham Lincoln used for his inauguration back in 1861. Four years ago, Lincoln's Bible alone was used for the ceremony.

The reasons for Obama's choice seem obvious. As the first African American in the White House, he paid tribute to the Great Emancipator who ended slavery and opened the door to equal rights. And like Lincoln, who entered Washington in the dead of night and under armed guard to assume the presidency as America teetered on the edge of civil war, the nation once again seems perilously conflicted. Whatever his aspirations to be a healer, our current Chief Executive presides over a house divided.

Yet in other respects, the selection of Lincoln's Bible seems peculiar. For Abraham Lincoln's religious opinions have always been a matter of dispute. Unlike Obama, Lincoln was never a formal member of any organized denomination, although he once joked that he admired the Episcopalians, since they didn't care what your religious or political opinions might be. But although he quoted scripture fluently and frequently to drive home a point, he wasn't a man who spoke much about his personal faith.

Lincoln was a private person who bared his soul to few others. When William Herndon, the Illinois law partner who probably knew Lincoln best, began the research for a biography of his friend, he found estimates Lincoln's religious convictions varied widely. Lincoln's son Robert Todd said he never knew his father to discuss the subject, nor could he recall any family prayers or devotions while he was growing up, probably because there weren't any.

Certainly Lincoln didn't want to subject his own family to the kind of upbringing he'd endured. His parents Tom and Nancy

both belonged to the Little Mount Separate Baptist Church on the Kentucky frontier where their son was born, one of a variety of hard-shell churches that preached a stern doctrine of predestination—worshiping a God so powerful that people seemed puny at best.

From before the beginning God had determined who was headed to heaven and who was going to hell, choosing a few lucky individuals for salvation not due to any merit on their part but purely as an act of grace. And if you were not of the elect, there was nothing you could do to avoid damnation. For depressive personalities, predestination was a doctrine designed to inflict torments of self-doubt. For how could you ever know if you were among the chosen? Falling so far short of the glory of God, and deserving no mercy, Christians of this gloomy variety had few reasons for feeling cheerful or carefree.

As a growing boy, Abe was probably more prone to melancholy after the death of his mother, Nancy Hanks. It was shortly after Tom lost title to the little bit of land he'd claimed and moved the family from their hardscrabble place in Kentucky to another plot near Little Pigeon Creek in Indiana, that Abe's mother came down with "the milk sickness" as it was then called. Abe was only eight, and although the woman Thomas married two years later, Sarah Bush Lincoln, provided as much love as a step-mother can, the child never received much affection from his father. To be fair, eking out a subsistence where virgin forest had to be cleared before crops could be planted was a hard life. But Tom Lincoln was also a hard man, who believed that ciphering through the "rule of three" was enough education for any boy and resented the moments his son spent reading when he might be better employed as hired help in some neighbor's fields. "Thomas Lincoln never showed by his actions that he thought much of his Abraham when a boy," recalled one family member, and "treated him with habitual cruelty,' laying on the rod and whip whenever the mood seized him. If the God he encountered in church was a harsh Heavenly Father, Abraham's own father was also an angry, controlling parent.

And even as a youngster, Abraham rebelled against this tyrant deity. As his mother's cousin Dennis Hanks remembered, "He never would sing any religious songs," but would amuse his sister and half-siblings with parodies using a stump or log for a pulpit, "mimicking the style and tone of the old Baptist preachers" until his dad made him stop and sent him to work. It wasn't the last time Abe would mount a stump to give a speech. But he left his father's home, and abandoned his religion also, as soon as he could strike out on his own.

At age twenty-two, he went to work for an enterprising Illinois merchant, taking goods on flat boat down the Mississippi. James Offutt, who hired him, described his young clerk as a "friendless, uneducated, penniless boy," long, tall, awkward and funny-looking, dressed in the poorest blue jeans and broad-brimmed hat, but despite that fond of conversation "about books—such as Shakespeare & other histories. He talked about politics considerable."

He also talked about religion. Abe joined a twice-a-month debating society where one participant recalled him arguing that by the gospel's own account "Christ was a bastard and his mother a base woman." Lincoln took especial exception to the notion of eternal punishment—not because he rejected the reality of sin or the need for retribution (in fact, he told a friend he thought the world might be better off if clergy leaned a little harder on the penalties and less on the pardon for wrong-doing), but because he couldn't imagine anyone being sentenced to hellfire for deeds that had been foreordained. If events are entirely predetermined and out of our hands, whether by God or Destiny, talk of praise or blame becomes meaningless, morally speaking.

By the time he entered law and politics in Springfield a decade later, the presiding power behind Lincoln's universe had become less a personal deity than impersonal fate. Dogged by charges of atheism in a congressional race against the Methodist circuit rider Peter Cartwright, Lincoln released a circular refuting the allegations of impiety, penned with attorney-like precision. "That I am not a member of any Christian Church

is true,” Lincoln admitted. But he carefully went on, “I have never denied the truth of the Scriptures,” probably not wholly accurate, but he had at least burned a “Handbook on Infidelity” that he’d written a decade earlier, realizing that it might become a liability later on. What exactly did Mr. Lincoln believe? “In early life,” he explained, “I was inclined to believe in what I understand is called ‘the Doctrine of Necessity’—that is, that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control” Abe’s law partner filled in the rest:

Men were made as they are made by superior conditions; the fates settled things as by the doom of the powers, and laws, universal, absolute, and eternal, ruled the universe of matter and mind ... [Man} is a simple tool, a mere cog in the wheel, a part, a small part, of this iron machine, that strikes and cuts, grinds and mashes, all things, including man, that resist it.

If those really do reflect Lincoln’s views, it might explain why one of his favorite writers was Edgar Allan Poe, author of so many tales where the hapless victim is trapped in plots and devices he finds himself powerless to escape. It could also account for Lincoln’s fascination with the theater, one of the few diversions he allowed himself. For aren’t we all like actors on a stage where the entrances and exits and the denouement have all been scripted in advance? Not surprisingly, Lincoln’s favorite dramas were tragedies, especially Macbeth.

But even tragedy, the ancients believed, contained an element of cleansing or redemption. And the evidence suggests that Lincoln likewise experienced a process of purging and catharsis as he was tested repeatedly by personal loss and the calamities of war.

People, naturally, react differently to extremes. For Mary Todd Lincoln, who initially had a reputation for skepticism like her husband’s, the death of their second son Willie led to a break down emotionally and turned her spiritually toward séances where she hoped to contact the spirits of the departed near and

dear. Mary also formally joined Washington's First Presbyterian Church. But her husband intimated more than once that he saw no evidence of an afterlife, and though he sometimes indicated he wished he could be more of a believer, that shred of comfort was not for him.

Yet Lincoln's mind did change. As the terrible casualties mounted, 16,000 dead at 2nd Bull Run, 20,000 at Shiloh, 12,000 at Fredericksburg, 17,000 at Chancellorsville, as the war slogged on and neither side claimed the quick win they anticipated, Lincoln had to ask whether it was all merely sound and fury, or whether Providence might have some inscrutable reason for continuing the agony. He twitted a delegation of clergymen who came to the White House to lecture him about his policies: "I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say, that if it is probable God should reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me." Yet privately Lincoln sought to fathom events that seemed so far beyond comprehension.

In 1862, when it seemed Washington D.C. might at any moment fall to Lee's armies, he penned a personal memo, beginning with the simple axiom: "God's will prevails." That much seemed clear, even if the deity were nothing more than implacable law. This was followed by a second axiom: "In great contests, each party claims to act in accordance with God's will." And this was so; both north and south were sure they had the Almighty's approbation. And then a third thought followed, "God's purpose is different from the purpose of either party," transcending human ambitions and desires. And finally Lincoln's conclusion, "I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet." And the mysterious reason God allowed the national bloodletting to go on and on and on, he finally decided, might be to bring an end to slavery.

Lincoln had never been an outright abolitionist. He himself had always favored freedom for the slave, but if the system could be confined to the south, in order to preserve the union, it was a compromise he could live with. But what became increasingly

clear to him was that emancipation was not a choice, not an option that might or might not result from legislative compromise, nor a distant reform that could be accomplished gradually, but had become an immediate military necessity. It was the only possible solution to an increasingly impossible situation. No one had foreseen putting blacks in uniform at the outset of the war. But it became the trick that turned the tide, as black troops like the Massachusetts 54th and 55th and 1st South Carolina performed heroically. At the same time, a growing stream of runaways left their former masters, as the unpaid labor force that supplied Confederate lines headed north to the promise of freedom. Some say the Emancipation Proclamation accomplished little, but Lincoln himself understood it as the key to the struggle. Ending slavery was the reason for the conflict, as a higher power had revealed it to him--not an act for which he could claim credit, but one forced on him by events. Asked why he signed the act, he glanced upward and replied, "I could not do otherwise."

Ironically, the man who gave freedom to so many others never entirely found it for himself. To the end, Lincoln felt he was in the grip of gigantic powers, his fortunes shaped by unforeseen forces. This fatalism made him rather casual when it came to his own safety. No sitting President had ever been assassinated. But as the death threats arrived daily, security at the White House remained lax. As he told his assistant John Nicolay, "I see hundreds of strangers daily, and if anyone has the disposition to kill me, he will find the opportunity." Strangely, the man who saved the union could not save himself.

He was rich in contradictions, one of the most deeply moral individuals to ever occupy the Oval Office and one of the least conventionally devout, a man who denied the reality of hell, but was forever plagued by inner torment, a man who tried to deliberately turn his back on the religion of his youth and found that it cast a long shadow across his entire life, almost as though predestined to do so.

By the end of life, he had become less a religious scoffer than a religious seeker. Yet for him, the scriptures were not a book of

answers, but one of many books that informed the questions: Who is God? What is my purpose here? And what does my duty require to serve my country and community? Few men in high authority have been so personally humble or so aware of their own fallibility in striving for the good. He was slow to judge, quick to extend the branch of peace, even to the vanquished adversary.

Named for the Biblical patriarch, Father Abraham resembled also Jacob, the father of Israel, who contended with an angel and received a blessing from the contest.

May our current President continue to find inspiration in Lincoln's Bible, honoring the lesson of reconciliation, the example of fearless inquiry and dedication to liberty that book represents.