

# LINCOLN LORE

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## BIBLICAL INFLUENCES IN THE SECOND INAUGURAL ADDRESS

A deputation of colored folk visited Abraham Lincoln at the White House on September 7, 1864 and presented him with a copy of the Bible. In his reply of acceptance the President made this statement, "In regard to this great book, I have to say, it is the best gift God has given to man."

This week the most important publishing event of the century occurs with the appearance of the recently prepared *Revised Standard Version of The Holy Bible*. There are 1,000,000 copies in the first printing but preliminary orders already will exhaust the inadequate supply. The significant occasion invites some inquiries about the extent that Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address was influenced by the sacred book.

There are many literary critiques who consider the address Lincoln made on the occasion of his Second Inaugural the finest contribution to come from his pen. The President himself was confident it would "wear as well" as anything he had written. Among those who are religiously inclined the address has always struck a responsive chord and it has often been called Lincoln's "Sermon on the Mount". It was delivered at the pinnacle of the President's career and the sentiment embodied therein is in harmony with the highest concepts of Christian behavior.

Possibly it is the essence of modesty in the text that has gained for it the profound esteem in which it is held. In but one sentence does the President refer to himself, and this is the only occasion where he uses the personal pronoun "I". Even on the very verge of the final military triumph of the north, he does no bragging and ventures no extravagant predictions.

The exceedingly short address consists of but four paragraphs including only twenty-five sentences. The first paragraph contains the introductory words referring to his former inaugural address and a brief reference to the progress of the war "upon which all else chiefly depends". The second paragraph reviews the origin and purpose of the hostilities. The only paragraph of any length, the third, deals with slavery which he proposed was "somehow the cause of the war". The last paragraph, which contains but one sentence, takes the form of an entreaty.

It is in the middle of the third paragraph that Lincoln's terminology falls into almost a paraphrase of Biblical lore and a preponderance of citations to diety. The unusual number of these references to the divine personality invites a tabulation of the phrases in which they appear in bold face used for emphasis. They follow in the order in which they are used:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God.  
Each invokes His aid against the other.  
Any men should dare ask a just God's assistance.  
The Almighty has His own purposes.  
In the providence of God.  
Continued through His appointed time.  
He now wills to remove.  
He gives to both north and south.  
Believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him.  
Yet, if God wills.  
The judgments of the Lord.  
As God gives us to see the right.

It will be noted that Lincoln refers to diety fourteen times and he also uses other words of recognized scrip-

tural terminology. However, the most impressive Biblical influence is revealed when he quotes or paraphrases verses from both the old and new testaments.

The main argument in the address may have been suggested to the President by the visit of two women from Tennessee. They came to the President asking for the release of their husbands, who were prisoners of war at Johnson's Island. The brief interviews continued on three consecutive days before their requests were granted. On Dec. 3, 1864 Lincoln jotted down a memorandum in pencil containing his final comments to one of the women who had kept insisting that her husband was a religious man. He was so impressed with his deduction that he called his secretary, John Nicolay, into his office to hear it read. It follows:

"You say your husband is a religious man; tell him when you meet him, that I say I am not much of a judge of religion, but that, in my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help some men to eat their bread in the sweat of other men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get to heaven."

The presentation of the main thesis which he develops in the inaugural address is introduced in these words: "It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces." In his conversation with the women from Tennessee and in the preparation of the above statement, he was undoubtedly thinking of the following passage from the first book of the Bible:

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread. Gen. 3:19.

No sooner had Lincoln written this critical comment about his slaveholding brothers than he immediately tempered his accusation by a direct Bible quotation which he applied to those of the north, including himself: Judge not, that ye be not judged. Matt. 7:1.

The concluding argument of the third paragraph is often set apart as the climax of the address. It begins and closes with two direct quotations from the Bible; the former in the Gospel of St. Matthew, and the latter in the Psalms:

Woe unto the world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence commeth! Matt. 18:7.

Lincoln presents slavery as one of the "offences" and the terrible war as the "woe due". Moving on to a benediction, he states:

The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. Ps. 19:9.

The Biblical influence in the address continues to its very last sentence, which breathes the very substance of the "Gloria in Excelsis" theme:

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men. Luke 2:14.

Abraham Lincoln's memorable conclusion of the Second Inaugural Address will be recognized in these immortal words:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan — to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves and with all nations."