

Abraham Lincoln and the Bible: A Complete Compendium. By Gordon Leidner. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2023. 245 pp. \$27.95 paper.

It was a source of surprise to many who met Abraham Lincoln that, for a man with so minimal a formal religious profile, he could quote from even the most obscure passages of the Bible to make some point. And no presidential inaugural address has ever been more deeply informed by the Bible than Lincoln's Second Inaugural in 1865. But it has never been clear whether this reflected some well-concealed spiritual stirring in Lincoln, or merely the cultural habit of a nation that had been swamped by the impact of the Second Great Awakening. Many books have been written about Lincoln and God; few have given us more than a handful of hopeful anecdotes about the nature of that relationship.

Dispelling this lack of clarity will be helped tremendously by Gordon Leidner's new "compendium"—almost a concordance—of Lincoln's citations of the Bible, either as direct quotations from the Authorized Version or as paraphrases and/or allusions. Overall, Leidner locates 199 such connections in the eight volumes (plus two supplements) of Roy Basler's 1953 edition of *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, which Leidner then sorts carefully into five categories of usage: allegory or metaphor, theological illustration, oratorical flourish, moral argument, or personal conviction. He does not, in the pattern of Don and Virginia Fehrenbacher's *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln* (1996), attempt to add the numerous occasions in which others recorded Lincoln using the Bible to these purposes. But simply from the citations he does itemize, it is clear that Lincoln "quoted the Bible more than any other book," including his beloved Shakespeare (4).

Leidner has a sharp eye for even obscure biblical allusions. When Lincoln says in a speech during the Lincoln–Douglas campaign of 1858 that "nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on," the vocabulary of *image* and *likeness* draws plainly on Genesis 1:26; when he writes to a friend in 1855 that pro-slavery politicians should "like Haman . . . hang upon the gallows of their own building," the line Leidner draws to Esther 7:10 does not leave much room for debate; and Lincoln's speech in Philadelphia in 1861 claims that any forgetfulness of the principles of the Declaration of Independence will cause "my right hand to forget its cunning and my tongue to cleave to the roof of my mouth," as though Philadelphia and not Jerusalem were the object of Psalm 137:5–6. All told, Leidner finds Lincoln citing almost evenly from Old and New Testaments, with the bulk of the New Testament citations coming from the four Gospels and those of the Old Testament clustering around Genesis, Exodus, Job, and the Psalms.

Still, even with such a meticulous enumeration of Lincoln's biblical citations, what Lincoln actually thought about the Bible, and about its messages, remains elusive, even for Leidner. On the one hand, Leidner wisely eschews any effort "to answer the question of whether Lincoln was a Christian" (4). Yet, Leidner cannot quite free himself from the temptation to speculate about "how he was personally transformed by his life-long study of scripture" (8). Two-thirds of *Abraham Lincoln and the Bible* is a biographical narrative that traces Lincoln's numerous uses of the Bible, and from the very beginning, Leidner wants to shrive Lincoln of any "reputation as a skeptic" (which he blames mostly on William Herndon's 1889 memoir of Lincoln) (24). He prefers

to follow Ronald White in describing Lincoln as a seeker whose “position changed from simple fatalism to a belief in a providential God who used people and events for beneficent purposes” (35). Especially during the Civil War, “biblical language becomes more pervasive in his speeches” (107). Although Leidner is careful to offer no “absolute conclusions about his personal faith,” he cannot resist suggesting that Lincoln “had undergone a significant change of heart before the last year of his life,” and found in the Bible “his firm place to stand” (140, 144).

But Lincoln’s uses of the Bible, abundant as they are, may tell us less than we think. It is significant that Lincoln’s scriptural citations take a sharp tick upward in the 1850s, as he emerges into the front rank of antislavery activism, just as we see in his references to natural law—and no wonder, since he needed to appeal to an authority that would override the protections of statute law invoked by slaveholders. Even Leidner acknowledges that the single largest cluster of Lincoln’s scripture quotes—thirty-four of them—occurs in Lincoln’s little-known “Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” where Lincoln was using them “for the secular purpose of documenting what the Bible reveals about the timeline of when various inventions and discoveries were made” (7).

That the war forced Lincoln into a deeper and more complicated exploration of a personal God who mysteriously wills human events is, I think, indisputable. Whether those explorations were the result of a changed view of the Bible’s supernatural nature or authority is less certain, especially since a number of close observers of the Lincoln White House claimed that Lincoln read the Bible frequently, but read it more as literature than as an oracle. What is certain, however, is that Lincoln’s Bible reading never led him to join a church, nor led him to embrace publicly anything more theological than a confidence in divine determinism and judgment, both of which could emerge from Shakespeare as much as the Bible.

Still, Leidner has performed an invaluable service in the patient compiling of Lincoln’s biblical uses, and easily surpasses several previous itemizations of those uses by Clarence Macartney (*Lincoln and the Bible* in 1949) and Philip Ostergard (*The Inspired Wisdom of Abraham Lincoln* in 2008). Certainly for the Lincoln fraternity, it must climb to the top shelf of Lincoln reference works.

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***Storied Witness: The Theology of Black Women Preachers in 19th Century America.* By Kate Hanch. Fortress Press, 2022. xiii + 196 pp. \$28.00 paper.**

In *Storied Witness*, Rev. Dr. Kate Hanch examines the theology of three nineteenth-century Black female preachers: Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth. They developed theologies that “told their world the truth about God, justice and judgment,” Hanch writes. Their preaching was “deeply biblical,” emphasizing “social justice.” Hanch hopes that an encounter with these three women may guide today’s readers into the path of justice (xii, 164).