

IN THE VALLEY OF THE DRY BONES: LINCOLN'S BIBLICAL ORATORY AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR

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Abstract: Challenging traditional readings of Abraham Lincoln, this article investigates his public use of the Bible before he became President of the United States. The rhetorical tropes of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth illuminate a previously under-appreciated dimension of Lincoln's Biblical oratory. A close study of those themes reveals a consistently radical and polarizing Lincoln from his early speeches (Lyceum and Temperance) to his late pre-Presidential ones (Peoria and House Divided). At the heart of this unity was an uncompromisingly moral vision of the Union. The article concludes with some reflections on the enduring importance of the Bible in the American tradition, and the place of redemptive violence in political life.

Keywords: Abraham Lincoln, American presidency, Bible, slavery, Republicans, United States, leadership, American North, American South, oratory, rhetoric, war, violence, Puritans, Jeremiad, covenant, sacrifice, compromise, moral conflict, liberalism, Civil War.

The one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Civil War invites a reexamination of the political and moral thought of its central figure, Abraham Lincoln (1809–65). This article challenges a reading of Lincoln that he began his political career as a conservative, less preoccupied with the moral and political problem of slavery than with other affairs. On this account, Lincoln only later articulated a public moral position *vis-à-vis* slavery.³ We offer a different perspective. By investigating Lincoln's public use of the Bible before he became President, we conclude that Lincoln, from his early days, was a radical political thinker, disruptive of the politics of sectional compromise as practised by his Whig contemporaries. Even though Lincoln was often flexible for the sake of the Union and reserved on account of his political ambition, existing alongside his prudential navigation of the slavery issue, Lincoln's speeches consistently harbour a vision of a transformed and perfected Union,

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³ Allen Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids MI, and Cambridge MA, 1999), argues that Lincoln did not consider slavery a major agenda until well into his Presidency; David H. Donald, *Lincoln* (New York, 1996), argues that it was only the Civil War that crystallized his emancipationist vision of America; David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion* (Princeton, 1993), argues that Lincoln had little to do with antebellum moral reform, and only took to fiery moral rhetoric after 1854.

purged of slavery, everywhere. Through his Biblical citations Lincoln opened a window into the inner structure of his moral and political imagination. Biblical themes of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth reveal a bold, radical and consistent Lincoln. We demonstrate this through novel readings of the Lyceum (1838), Temperance (1842), Peoria (1854) and House Divided (1858) speeches.

In arguing that Lincoln was consistently anti-slavery throughout his entire political career, we enter a rich tradition of Lincoln scholarship that examines Lincoln's fundamental attitude towards slavery. We bring out the more radical messages that Lincoln intended to subtly convey to his Biblically literate audience. In so doing, we defend the morally radical Lincoln against two other traditions of scholarship: (1) those who claim that Lincoln's position on slavery evolved only over time and especially during the war, and (2) others who suggest that Lincoln was always a political pragmatist, who never fully embraced a final moral stance on the slavery question. Proponents of the evolving Lincoln include most notably Eric Foner who argues that 'the hallmark of Lincoln's greatness was his capacity for growth', growth especially on the matters of slavery and race.⁴ The clearest reading of Lincoln the pragmatist can be found in David Donald who argues that Lincoln never fully embraced a moral anti-slavery stance.⁵ We align ourselves most closely with those who see Lincoln as a principled radical on the question of slavery.⁶ But we go further and deeper into Lincoln's moral world than these other studies and find evidence of Lincoln's radicalism from his first major public appearances. While we argue that Lincoln's moral opposition to slavery was constant, we do not want to suggest that Lincoln had a uniform and consistent policy towards the position of the African-American race in the United States. Though these issues are sometimes confused in the Lincoln literature, they represented separate concerns for Lincoln. It is well known that Lincoln favoured colonization of blacks as the solution to the American racial problem that came about as a result of slavery. According to one new study, he clung to this possibility as late as 1865, possibly to the end of his life.⁷ But on

⁴ Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York, 2010), p. xix. For a similar reading that emphasizes Lincoln's growth from a relatively conservative to a relatively radical position on slavery see Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Baltimore, 2008).

⁵ See Donald, *Lincoln*. A more nuanced view that nevertheless shares Donald's scepticism about Lincoln's principled anti-slavery orientation can be found in Guelzo's *Abraham Lincoln* and Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York, 2004).

⁶ See esp. Richard Striner, *Father Abraham: Lincoln's Relentless Struggle to End Slavery* (Oxford, 2006); and James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York, 2007).

⁷ Phillip Magness and Sebastian Page, *Colonization after Emancipation* (Columbia MO, 2011).

his opposition to slavery Lincoln was consistent and principled, and, as our readings of his major speeches will show, covertly a radical all along.

We place Lincoln into the recent revival in scholarly literature that examines the influence of Biblical narratives in early modern and American political thought.⁸ These studies rehabilitate the Bible as a central book of the American political tradition. It was the most ubiquitous book in nineteenth-century America, a staple of public oratory and an inspiration to mass movements. Without an understanding of the Bible one is bound to miss much of the richness of the American tradition. It is not any specific devotional content of the Bible that Lincoln appropriates. Rather it is a Biblical narrative arc of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth that gives a frame and metaphor for the American project. Often referred to as the American jeremiad, this originally Puritan sermon reminded the Bay colony of its covenantal obligations, God's providential plan for their sacred errand in America, and their failure to live up to it.⁹ Whig political culture appropriated the jeremiad by converting it into a sacred mission of political liberty.¹⁰ Lincoln both deepened and reversed the jeremiad. His speeches painted America as the slaveholding Egyptians who would be smitten by God's wrath unless they purified themselves and returned to the covenantal equality enshrined in the Declaration.¹¹ It was Lincoln, perhaps more than anyone else, who recognized the power of the Biblical narrative as a metaphor for America.

Scholarly study of Lincoln's use of the Bible can be divided into two categories. The first is comprised of scholars who place emphasis on Lincoln's personal religious beliefs. They attempt to situate Lincoln's use of the Bible within the context of nineteenth-century American Protestantism. These studies have shed light on Lincoln's knowledge of the religious quarrels of his day, his early scepticism, and his return to Protestantism late in life. There are, of course, limits to this line of inquiry. It is plagued by lack of primary source material and is forced to rely on anecdotal evidence and secondary sources of sometimes dubious value. As we have no theological tract from Lincoln, it is

⁸ Daniel Elazar, *Covenant and Constitutionalism*, Vols. II–IV (New York, 1996 and 1998); Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic* (Cambridge MA, 2010); Michael Novak, *On Two Wings* (San Francisco, 2002). For an excellent treatment of the Bible in America see Wilson Carey McWilliams, 'The Bible in the American Political Tradition', in *Religion and Politics*, ed. Myron J. Aronoff (New York, 1984).

⁹ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, 1975); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison, 1978); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge MA, 1956); Andrew Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (Oxford, 2009).

¹⁰ Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins*; Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal* (Baltimore, 1976).

¹¹ For congruence with the black jeremiad, see David Walker's argument in *The Antislavery Appeal*, ch. 3.

very difficult to trace definite lines of affiliation between contemporary Protestant doctrines and the theological import of Lincoln's writings.¹²

The second group of scholars that examines Lincoln's use of the Bible is interested in understanding the character of Lincoln's political theology. For them, Lincoln often becomes the paradigmatic figure of a democratic statesman who moderates public opinion through his use of Biblical themes. On these accounts, Lincoln uses the Bible mainly as a political tool to humble democratic individualism and Northern triumphalism.¹³

Our article makes a contribution to this literature by showing that the depth of Lincoln's political theology is missed if one neglects the Biblical themes of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth. We are not the first to notice these themes.¹⁴ Some have attempted to explore these themes in the Romantic and religious context of the nineteenth century, without, however, being able to attach them in consistent ways to Lincoln's own Biblical references, especially in his pre-war speeches.¹⁵ While Biblical references to

¹² From perspectives of biography and historical contextualization the best sources are Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb, 2003); Richard Carwardine, *Lincoln* (New York, 2003); Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*; and Mark Noll, *America's God* (Oxford, 2002). Winger places Lincoln's religion between Calvinism and Romanticism; for an emphasis on Lincoln's ability to employ Protestant themes for political purposes see *America's God*. For an intellectual biography that emphasizes Lincoln's intellectual milieu, especially his economic liberalism, see Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln* and William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion* (Boston, 1970).

¹³ Here consult Glen Thurow, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion* (Albany, 1976); Lucas Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort* (Lexington KY, 2000); Joseph Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb IL, 2003); Michael Zuckert, 'Lincoln and the Problem of Civil Religion', in *Lincoln's American Dream*, ed. Joseph Fornieri and Kenneth Deutsch (Washington DC, 2005); Gary Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (New York, 1992); John Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered* (Baltimore and London, 2005).

¹⁴ The following scholars have noticed the themes, though often in passing: Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion*, pp. 169–71; Eva Brann, 'A Reading of the Gettysburg Address', in *Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address, and American Constitutionalism*, ed. Leo Paul De Alvarez (Dallas, 1976), p. 45; George Anastaplo, *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography* (Lexington KY, 1999), p. 232; Zuckert, 'Lincoln and the Problem of Civil Religion', pp. 350–66; Harry Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided* (Chicago, 1959), pp. 226–9.

¹⁵ Of these, Winger skilfully situates these themes in the Romantic and Protestant cultural milieu of Edward Everett, George Bancroft and Theodore Parker (Winger, *Lincoln, Religion and Romantic Cultural Politics*, pp. 101, 202). Garry Wills offers a more textual exegesis of the Romantic elements in Lincoln's thought in Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, ch. 2, pp. 78 and 88. The most adept treatment of themes of purification is the much maligned book by Dwight Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Quest for Immortality* (New York, 1982). Anderson (like Winger and Wills) does not, however, notice the themes in Lincoln's Biblical references, and therefore has a difficult time attaching his discussion of the Bible in the American tradition to Lincoln's own words (Anderson,

covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth are prominent in the war speeches, this article shows that Lincoln develops them much earlier.

While these conclusions are interesting for those who want to understand Lincoln's politics and the place of the Bible in the American political tradition, they also give rise to more general reflections about the relation of sacrificial violence to political regeneration. Recent scholarship has highlighted the inadequacy of liberalism to fully achieve the transcendent purposes that animate political life.¹⁶ Moving beyond the liberal tradition which sees political association as founded upon rational consent, these scholars emphasize the politico-theological themes that continue to undergird contemporary politics. In stressing that Lincoln saw the Union as a sacred covenant across generations seeking to achieve a transcendent purpose, we show how Lincoln is very much attuned to the role that sacrificial violence plays in the formation of political community. Lincoln always held that the bedrock of American democracy was the consent of the governed constrained by natural rights. However, it is important to emphasize other strains of Lincoln's political thinking. Indeed, his uncompromisingly moral vision of a purified Union entailed a principled and thereby provocative confrontation over slavery. Lincoln understood that this might very well entail war. While troubling, for Lincoln this prospect was not the greatest evil. He understood the indispensable role that violence played in the creation and re-creation of the American political community, and he interpreted that violence, from his earliest days, through the Biblical themes this article highlights.

I

The Blood of the Covenant

The Lyceum Address is a speech of a young state legislator discussing the rise of mobs, riots and violence that consumed the country in the 1830s. The rioters, mostly organized by the local Northern elites who sought to maintain the status quo, directed their anger primarily at abolitionists and blacks.¹⁷ They felt particularly threatened by the growth of anti-slavery societies across the North. This led, in one instance, to the murder of a prominent abolitionist publisher, Elijah Lovejoy, by an anti-abolitionist mob in 1837. Lincoln himself

Abraham Lincoln and the Quest for Immortality, pp. 72–3, 76–7, 136–46, 154, 164, 178–80). Joseph Fornieri's in-depth study of the influence of the Bible on Lincoln, and the various ways in which he employed it, notices but on the whole gives only passing reference to these themes (Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith*, pp. 25, 47, 130).

¹⁶ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Stanford, 2005); Paul Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (Cambridge MA, 2005); Paul Kahn, *Sacred Violence* (Ann Arbor MI, 2008); Sheldon Wolin, 'Contract and Birthright', *Political Theory*, 14 (2) (1986), pp. 179–93.

¹⁷ Leonard Richards, 'Gentlemen of Property and Standing': *Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America* (Oxford, 1970).

was not an active abolitionist and was troubled by the violent outcomes produced by the clash of pro-slavery forces with evangelical abolitionism. This clash was the occasion for a broader reexamination of the state of American democracy in the Lyceum Address.

While the overt danger to which Lincoln draws attention — in the Lyceum Address — is the rise of ‘mobocracy’, or the rule of the mob, the speech is ultimately concerned with the problem that slavery presents to the perpetuation of free government.¹⁸ Slavery is not the sole, but it is the main, catalyst of the political decay that worries Lincoln. He describes that decay as the alienation of the people from the government, which results in the erosion of civic spirit. This in turn incites a peace-loving and law-abiding people to throw themselves into the arms of a tyrant, who, in the name of securing their rights and property, will either ‘free slaves or enslave freemen’ to satisfy his ambition.¹⁹ Lincoln’s example is precisely chosen. He knows that slavery agitation is the primary source of mobocracy. Slavery points to the ambivalence of the Founders’ legacy: the American Constitution establishes free government while protecting what endangers it.

This problem is obscured by the seemingly conservative stance Lincoln adopts. Lincoln’s famous solution to the problem of mobocracy is ‘political religion’.²⁰ Political religion preserves law-abidingness by instilling a ‘reverence’ for the Constitution and the laws.²¹ The imperative to venerate the laws is introduced by Lincoln as the critical antidote to the seemingly inevitable erosion of allegiance to government caused by mobocracy. Lincoln makes it clear that *all* existing laws are to be obeyed. But he does not say that legal agitation for change is unpatriotic. However, political religion places a premium on the true and tried, and not on the new and experimental. By suppressing innovative impulses in the body politic, political religion attempts to achieve the goal of conservative transmission that is Lincoln’s proposed task in the Lyceum Address. Lincoln appears to be a conservative, concerned with preserving the Constitution and existing laws.

Yet the conservative transmission envisioned by political religion is inadequate insofar as it does not address slavery, a central instigator of mobocracy. Lincoln is aware of this problem. In fact, his opposition to slavery in the Lyceum Address is subtle but unmistakable. About abolitionism he says: ‘One of two positions is necessarily true: that is, the thing is right within itself, and therefore deserves the protection of all law and all good citizens; or, it is wrong, and therefore proper to be prohibited by legal enactments; and in

¹⁸ Lincoln said that ‘the slavery question often bothered me, as far back as 1836–40’ (cited in Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, p. 121).

¹⁹ Roy P. Basler, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (9 vols., Rutgers, 1953–5) (hereafter *CW*), I, p. 114.

²⁰ *CW*, I, p. 112.

²¹ *Ibid.*

neither case, is the interposition of mob law, either necessary, justifiable, or excusable.²² Since emancipation is right within itself, Lincoln expresses the desire that the nation should be, eventually, all free. The problem is that the protection of slavery is also a legacy of the Founding. Therefore, strict obedience to and transmission of the Constitution gives rise to the ultimate problem of the political religion Lincoln recommends. He cannot be the conservative he at first appears.

Lincoln's solution to the difficulty of preserving the founding legacy while ridding it of the stain of slavery entails a reformulation of the nature of the American political project. Lincoln's political religion in fact does not extol simple obedience to the Constitution. Lincoln enjoins Americans to take an oath to the Revolution. It is here, in 1838, that Lincoln first makes his characteristic move from the Constitution to the Revolution as a possible solution to the problem of slavery. Lincoln uses the Revolution as a means to reformulate the American political project from one based on a contract to uphold the Constitution to a covenant that endows the American project with a sacred and transcendent purpose.

Lincoln turns from the Constitution to the Revolution in the very midst of his discussion of political religion. His choice of words is careful: 'Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular the laws of the country.' Americans should 'sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars' and the laws should be 'religiously [observed]'.²³ Lincoln's lexicon is charged with covenantal imagery of blood, oaths, sacrifices and altars. This language is evocative of the covenant²⁴ at Sinai in the King James Bible. When Moses is at Sinai, he

told the people all the words of the Lord, and all the judgments: and all the people answered with one voice, and said, All the words which the Lord hath said will we do . . . And he sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and *sacrificed* peace offerings of oxen unto the Lord. And Moses took half of the *blood*, and put it in the basins; and half of the *blood* he sprinkled on the *altar*. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people; and they said, All that the Lord hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the *blood*, and sprinkled *it*

²² *CW*, I, p. 113. See also 'Protest in the Illinois State Legislature on Slavery' (*CW*, I, p. 74); and Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln*, p. 128.

²³ *CW*, I, p. 112.

²⁴ When Lincoln announced his decision to emancipate the slaves he told his cabinet that he made a 'covenant . . . with his maker' (cited in Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*, p. 162). Compare Winger's analysis of the Lyceum Address that stresses Romanticism (*ibid.*, pp. 164, 176–80) with the one presented here.

on the people, and said, Behold, *the blood* of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you.²⁵

In the Lyceum Address, Lincoln appropriates a common narrative trope of America dating from the Puritan ‘founding’: Americans as the Hebrews escaping from the bondage of the Old World in order to found a New Jerusalem on the other side of the Atlantic.²⁶ Lincoln is aware of and extends the narrative. Moses took the Hebrews out of Egypt and through the desert. It is this travail that formed them as a people and prepared them for freedom.²⁷ When they arrived at Sinai the creation of the Hebrew community under God was cemented by covenant, and sworn by blood and sacrifices. Lincoln turns the sacrificial blood by which the Hebrews accepted the covenant with God into the blood of the Revolution by which Americans took an oath to the laws. The blood of the sacrifice sprinkled on the Hebrews is the blood of the Revolution, the communion that binds the American nation to the Declaration and the Constitution. It is the blood of the Revolution that made Americans a people, not the Constitution.

Through this image Lincoln communicates an anxiety to his Biblically literate audience. After the covenantal sacrifice in Exodus 24, Moses ascended the mountain for forty days and nights. Meanwhile the Hebrews rejected their covenant and turned to the worship of the golden calf. Moses returned from the mountain and was so infuriated that he broke the tablets of the law:

Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who *is* on the Lord’s side? *let him come* unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him. And he said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put every man his sword by his side, *and go* in and out from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. And the children of Levi did according to the word of Moses: and there fell of the people that day about three thousand.²⁸

The story of the formation of Israel at Sinai is one saturated with political turmoil. Israel could not abide by the covenant it swore to obey, and Lincoln’s Biblical reference reinforces his speech’s thematic anxiety about the precariousness of the American covenant in the midst of the political decay of his generation. After breaking the first tablets Moses re-ascended the mountain and re-promulgated the law to the people. The implication is that the Constitution as it stands may be inadequate to address the problem at the root of the

²⁵ Our emphasis, Exodus 24: 3–8.

²⁶ Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Quest for Immortality*, pp. 136–45; Elazar, *Covenant and Constitutionalism*, Vol. II, ch. 1; Novak, *On Two Wings*, ch. 1. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, p. 191, intimates that Moses is in play in the Lyceum Address without linking that hunch to the Biblical passage.

²⁷ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York, 1992).

²⁸ Exodus 32: 26–8.

Republic; a re-constitution may be necessary. As in the case of the Hebrews, that reconstitution may involve sacrificial violence. Unlike the degenerative effects of mobocratic violence, sacrificial violence is redemptive and purifying. It models the binding effects of the violence of the Revolution of 1776 that lives on in the soldiers' 'mangled' and 'mutilated limbs'.²⁹ Even though Lincoln ends his speech with the hope that reason can replace violence as the mode of political transmission, he is nevertheless appreciative of the beneficial effects that accompany sacrificial violence.

This suggestive interpretation would be extravagant were it not for the fact that in the Temperance Address and in the Eulogy of Henry Clay, Lincoln returns to the book of Exodus. Moreover, his lecture on Discoveries and Inventions in 1858 shows just how detailed a reading of Genesis and Exodus Lincoln was capable of, explicitly citing the Bible at least twenty-six times in a fairly short speech.³⁰ Thus Lincoln uses the formation of the Hebrew people as told in Exodus as a metaphor for America.³¹ But as we shall see, in later speeches Lincoln effects a monumental reversal of the narrative. He turns America not into a New Jerusalem, but into Egypt, a nation that held another in slavery, and for that incurred God's wrath.

Therefore, embedded in Lincoln's Lyceum Address, underneath the dominant conservative theme of obeying the laws of the land, is a disruptive core that comes through in Lincoln's subtle use of Biblical language and quotations. The picture that emerges is one of awareness that the Constitution provides enormous benefits for the stability of the Republic, but not without a certain cost. This tension leads Lincoln to question the sustainability of the prevailing public order. We also see that Lincoln is aware that reform brings with it the possibility of violence, not only as an unfortunate failure but as an unhappy necessity.

II

The Blood of the Apocalypse

The Lyceum Address poses a problem that Lincoln attempts to solve in the Temperance Address (1842). In both speeches the underlying theme is slavery.³² Yet instead of looking exclusively to the past through political religion,

²⁹ *CW*, I, p. 115.

³⁰ *CW*, II, pp. 437–42. In Lincoln's detailed exegesis, he investigates even the fabric of post-lapsarian clothing, and the number of times 'sowing' and 'thread' appear, among other details (*CW*, II, pp. 437–8).

³¹ See the reference to Exodus 13:15 in letter to Speed (*CW*, I, p. 289), which is also in the narrative of the Hebrews coming out of Egypt.

³² Briggs, Jaffa and Morel note the connection in the speech between the Temperance supporters and the abolitionists (Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, pp. 58–9, 74–5). In various ways they argue that Lincoln's intent is to moderate the Temperance

Lincoln unmistakably envisions emancipation as the consummation of the American revolutionary project.³³ He uses the Declaration and the energy of religious revivalism as a means to conceptualize a peaceful eradication of slavery in the Union. But as the main subject of the speech is the Temperance movement, Lincoln must subtly craft his discussion of it to double as an exploration of emancipation. That he does this can be seen in how he blurs the two revolutions by describing the Temperance movement in imagery that unequivocally recalls slavery.³⁴ This is the speech on abolitionism that Lincoln never gave.

The American Temperance movement was thriving in the 1830s and '40s, bolstered by the Second Great Awakening. Set in motion by Benjamin Rush's writings against alcohol in the 1780s, by the time Lincoln gave his Address in 1842 over a million Americans had joined the movement. The zeal of temperance reformers was augmented by other reform movements of the time such as abolitionism and the women's suffrage movement.³⁵

In this speech, Lincoln uses the Washingtonians, a new Temperance group formed in 1840, as models of peaceful persuasion and slow reformation of the American political scene. According to Lincoln, the old Temperance reformers were unsuccessful because they were perceived as motivated by self-interest. They increased societal animosity by anathematizing drinkers and all other sinners. They sought to preserve their own moral purity by separating themselves from the drunkards and by having nothing to do with them. One cannot help but think of the Northern abolitionists in this context, who denounced the slave-holding South as irredeemable sinners. The Washingtonians, on the other hand, see no sinner as irredeemable, no person so different from themselves that they do not feel sympathy for him. The Washingtonians, these 'redeemed specimens of long lost humanity', are therefore the best apostles of

movement. Our interpretation emphasizes Lincoln's attempt to capture and direct its energy.

³³ 'And when the victory shall be complete — when there shall be neither a slave nor a drunkard on the earth — how proud the title of that Land, which may truly claim to be the birth-place and the cradle of both those revolutions, that shall have ended in that victory. How nobly distinguished that People, who shall have planted, and nurtured to maturity, both the political and moral freedom of their species' (*CW*, I, p. 279).

³⁴ 'Turn now to the Temperance revolution. In it, we shall find a stronger bondage broken; a viler slavery, manumitted; a greater tyrant deposed . . . and what a noble ally this [is], to the cause of political freedom' (*CW*, I, pp. 278–9). Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, p. 38, notes that 'abolitionist propaganda abounded with biblical and evangelical imagery and gained power from ancient Christian associations linking the concepts of slavery, bondage, and sin'. See also James Morone, *Hellfire Nation* (New Haven, 2003), pp. 147–9.

³⁵ There was a 'near universality of temperance sentiment among abolitionists' (Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*, pp. 45, 81).

the temperance cause.³⁶ Here one cannot help but think that Lincoln himself practices what he learned from the Washingtonians. By describing the Washingtonians in language reminiscent of Jesus and by employing the hymns of Isaac Watts, Lincoln turns Jesus into the model of progressive reform. Lincoln thus explores the possibility that the American political project will be perfected by religious revivalism employed for political ends, instead of through sacrificial violence. For Lincoln, the Washingtonians open up the possibility that violence can be superseded as the means of large scale political change.³⁷

While the central thrust of the Temperance Address is the attempt to envision the nation as embarking on a peaceful political rebirth, in a speech full of Biblical allusions many of the citations Lincoln chooses are quite strange. They do not appear to strengthen his argument. Instead of focusing on the peaceful nature of Jesus' accomplishment, Lincoln begins his speech by quoting from a book that foretells the pains and suffering that accompany the coming of the messiah and the purification of the world. Lincoln associates redemptive purification with the apocalypse. He further amplifies the martial tone of the opening by the violent imagery he employs, such as citadels being stormed and dismantled, temples and altars desecrated, the 'trump of the conqueror's fame' sounding from hill to hill, and by comparing the Temperance movement to an army whose ranks are swelling and that will soon go into battle.³⁸ Lincoln's opening Biblical citation plays on the ambiguity of Jesus. He was well aware of the passage from Matthew 10: 34, 'think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword . . . And a man's foe *shall be* they of his own household'. These were to be the final words of his First Inaugural, until he deleted them at Seward's request.³⁹ While hoping that America can be peacefully reborn, Lincoln's Biblical citations do not rule out or shy away from the possibility that its rebirth will be apocalyptic.

The association of judgment and the apocalypse is brought to the fore in the twenty-fourth paragraph by a combination of two other seemingly strange Biblical citations. Lincoln reminds his audience that intemperance usually strikes higher and more passionate natures. He personifies intemperance as the 'Egyptian angel of death, commissioned to slay if not the first, the fairest born of every family'.⁴⁰ He is referring to God's punishment of Egypt for

³⁶ *CW*, I, p. 272; Citing Mark 5: 15.

³⁷ Lincoln enacted in the 1850s what he preached in the 1840s by attempting to shift what he called the public mind. See speech at Chicago, IL (*CW*, II, pp. 485 ff.); speech at Springfield, IL (*CW*, II, pp. 505 ff.); 'Fragment for a Speech' (*CW*, III, p. 205); and 'Speech at New Haven, CT' (*CW*, IV, p. 19).

³⁸ *CW*, I, p. 271.

³⁹ *CW*, IV, p. 261.

⁴⁰ *CW*, I, p. 278.

holding the Jews in bondage.⁴¹ In the same paragraph Lincoln extends the Biblical metaphor with a citation of Ezekiel 37, commonly referred to as The Valley of Dry Bones. Lincoln's passage reads: 'To all the living every where, we cry, "come sound the moral resurrection trump, that these may rise and stand up, an exceeding great army — Come from the four winds, O breath! And breathe upon these slain, that they may live"' .⁴² Like the smiting of Egypt because of its sins, Ezekiel prophesied and then later heard of the fall of Jerusalem on account of the Hebrews' sins and idol worship.⁴³ After the loss of Jerusalem he prophesied the restoration and rebirth of the Hebrew nation in Chapter 37, the chapter of Lincoln's quotation, saying that God

will make [Israel] one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all. Neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of all their dwelling places, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people and I will be their God.⁴⁴

These two themes do not only occur in the Temperance Address. Ten years later Lincoln returns, in his eulogy of Henry Clay (1852), to the imagery of God's punishment of Egypt as a slave-holding nation. He closes the eulogy with a warning to Americans that 'Pharaoh's country was cursed with plagues, and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea for striving to retain a captive people who had already served them more than four hundred years. May like disasters never befall us!' .⁴⁵ He also returns to the passage from Ezekiel in the House Divided Speech in 1858, in which the content of that book — a nation unified after it has been purified — directly parallels the content of that speech.⁴⁶ Lincoln's invocation of these same passages and themes is not accidental. Indeed both these Biblical quotations evince a thematic unity. The drunkard plagued by the Egyptian angel of death, who smites him for his sins, can be saved from the clutches of perdition by purification and moral resurrection.

The reformed drunkard is a metaphor for the whole nation. He must be converted and redeemed. So, too, the passages from Exodus and Ezekiel double as metaphors for the sinning, slave-holding country. The sinning nation must

⁴¹ Exodus 12.

⁴² *CW*, I, p. 278, citing Ezekiel 37: 9.

⁴³ Ezekiel 33–4.

⁴⁴ Ezekiel 37: 22.

⁴⁵ *CW*, II, p. 132.

⁴⁶ The themes of 'a nation divided' and destruction as punishment for transgressions that are central to Lincoln's 'House Divided' Speech (1858) and Second Inaugural (1865) appear here sixteen years earlier (1842). In 1843, only a year after this speech, Lincoln wrote a Whig campaign circular entitled a 'House Divided' (*CW*, I, p. 315).

be morally reborn, lest it be slain by the Egyptian angel of death. In a cataclysmic reversal of the American narrative of seeing itself as modern-day Hebrews who escaped the slavery of Egypt, and as the chosen people in God's providential plan, Lincoln reverses the metaphor by comparing the Americans to the slave-holding Egyptians.⁴⁷ It is Americans who shall be judged by God and incur his divine wrath for their sins if they do not purify themselves and complete their revolution.⁴⁸ Typifying the tradition of the American jeremiad, Lincoln poses the alternative between an apocalyptic crisis and the completion of the Revolutionary project.⁴⁹ Like the sinner, America must be reborn if it is to live up to its covenant.

This interpretation makes sense of the strange apocalyptic language with which Lincoln begins the Temperance Address. The apocalypse associates the Day of Judgment with the hour of redemption. It is a violent event. The Temperance Address, examined through the lens of its Biblical references, encodes a deep fear of the ability of abolitionism to purify the Union without violence. Here again we encounter a Lincoln who understands the beneficial effects of sacrificial violence. Unlike the main thrust of the Temperance Address, which is an attempt to achieve a peaceful rebirth without a repetition of the bloody deeds of the Revolution, the citation and context of Exodus and Ezekiel show the rebirth of the Hebrew nation only after a crisis was reached and passed. In addition, Lincoln does not provide his audience with an unequivocal picture of Jesus. He directs his listeners towards citations that combine judgment of sins with purifying, redemptive tribulations. In the end, the Temperance Address is gripped by the same anxiety that pervades the Lyceum Address, namely, the worry that violence might be the inevitable means of completing revolutions and redeeming a sinful nation.

⁴⁷ He repeats this image in a speech at Springfield in which he compares the slave population, not America, to Israel and colonization to Africa as their exodus from Egypt, i.e. America (*CW*, II, p. 409). In 1861 he calls Americans 'the almost chosen people' in an address to New Jersey State Senate, 21 February 1861 (*CW*, IV, p. 236). Lincoln had Exodus images in mind at other times, for example at Niagara falls when he recalled the parting of the Red Sea by Moses (*CW*, II, p. 10) and in 1858 in his lecture on discoveries and inventions he returned to the story of Exodus 15, and also cited much from Genesis (*CW*, II, p. 441).

⁴⁸ God's punishment of transgression is a consistent feature of Lincoln's rhetoric. The most prominent is the Second Inaugural: 'if we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him?' (*CW*, VIII, p. 333).

⁴⁹ Bercovitch in *The Puritan Origins* and *The American Jeremiad* highlights the importance of the Book of Revelation in the jeremiad tradition, p. 152.

III The Blood of the Martyrs

In the 1850s we find Lincoln wrestling with ways of communicating the tenuous political problem of maintaining an allegiance to the Founding while breaking free from the way Constitutional protections of slavery had been cashed out by his illustrious contemporaries. The radical and unique character of Lincoln's politics becomes apparent when contrasted with that of his fellow Whig giants Henry Clay (1777–1852) and Daniel Webster (1782–1852).

Unlike Lincoln, Clay exhibited a politics of sectional balance, and ultimately equivocated on the need to purify the Union of slavery. In his final great work as a statesman, the Compromise of 1850, Clay blurred the moral question of the extension of slavery in the conquered Mexican territories. Speaking to the rigidity of the Northern politicians insisting on the Wilmot Proviso that would have banned slavery from the newly acquired territories, Clay says: 'You have got what is worth more than a thousand Wilmot provisos . . . You have nature on your side — facts upon your side — and this truth staring you in the face, that there is no slavery in those territories.' He calls on them to 'elevate [themselves] from the mud and mire of mere party contentions', and to act like responsible men, 'as lovers of liberty, and *lovers, above all, of this Union*'.⁵⁰ While Clay argued against its adoption, Lincoln voted for the Wilmot Proviso 'at least 40 times'.⁵¹ Unlike Clay, Lincoln reverses the priority of Union and liberty. To sacrifice the principle of liberty enshrined in the Declaration is to abandon the morality of the Union. In the final analysis, Clay's politics would seemingly forever preserve the slaveholding Union. For him, Union was a higher good than liberty. Our analysis of the Lyceum and Temperance Addresses reveals that in Lincoln's eyes a Union with slavery is an impure Union.⁵²

⁵⁰ Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, 1991), p. 736.

⁵¹ 'Speech at Peoria', 16 October 1854 (*CW*, II, p. 252); 'Letter to Speed', 24 August 1855 (*CW*, II, p. 323).

⁵² One might object that Lincoln's letter to the newspaper editor Horace Greeley in the midst of the war (August 1862) challenges this interpretation. Lincoln famously wrote to Greeley: 'My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery' (*CW*, V, p. 388). To that we respond in two ways. First, it is important to understand that the imperatives of the commander-in-chief are quite different to those of the agitator-in-chief, which was the posture Lincoln assumed for most of the 1850s. Second, what Lincoln says in the Greeley letter is not inconsistent with Lincoln's vision of 'saving' the Union. Saving the Union, for Lincoln, involved putting slavery in the course of ultimate extinction; and the way to do this was to commit all Americans to condemn slavery as a moral wrong and to pass national legislation that would stop its further spread. It did not involve putting slavery to an end immediately; but it did involve standing on principle, as well as acting from that principle.

Daniel Webster held the same hierarchy of moral and political commitments as Clay. In his politics of compromise and his ancestral use of religious themes, Webster was a different type of politician than Lincoln. His Senate speech supporting the Compromise of 1850 drew a distinction between himself and those men 'with whom everything is absolute — wrong, or absolutely right'.⁵³ Yet while agreeing on the abstract wrong of slavery with Webster and Clay, Lincoln was the only one willing to draw a line in the sand.⁵⁴ Webster and Clay allowed their prudence in support of the Union to blur the moral question of the Union's larger purpose. This can be seen in Webster's use of religious themes. Webster emphasized America's Puritan heritage. But an examination of Webster's use of religious themes reveals that he employed them to buttress his politics of compromise.⁵⁵ He did not use them to give voice to a higher covenantal law that bound the people and posed a challenge to the Union to emancipate the slaves. Compare Lincoln and Webster on temperance and abolitionism. Webster thought abolitionism and temperance dangerously destabilizing to the prevailing order.⁵⁶ While Webster's religion expressed an ancestral patriotism that was deeply conservative, Lincoln's Biblical patriotism was disruptive of the politics of sectional balance, and sceptical of the Union forever committed to preserving the sin of slavery. Even though he always donned the cloak of conservatism, Lincoln tapped the tradition of the American jeremiad by using the Bible to give subtle utterance to his radical core.

This radical core became increasingly explicit as Northern opinion shifted in favour of banning slavery in the territories. That shift was crystallized by opposition to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the triggering event of Lincoln's return to politics. That Act outraged Northern public opinion.⁵⁷ An Anti-Nebraska coalition, made up of former Whigs, Know-Nothings, abolitionists and some disaffected Democrats, quickly coalesced to oppose

⁵³ Daniel Webster, 'The Seventh of March Speech' (1850) (<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~dwebster/speeches/seventh-march.html>, accessed 5/25/2012). While Lincoln, too, thought politics a field of gray, on the ultimate moral question he was unequivocally clear. Moreover, he thought that principled politics ultimately rested on some 'philosophical basis' (CW, IV, p. 17).

⁵⁴ Lincoln said that he would 'Entertain no proposition for a compromise in regard to the extension of slavery. The instant you do, they have us under again . . . Have none of it. The tug has to come & better now than later' ('To William Kellogg', 11 December 1860, CW, IV, p. 150). Webster on the other hand publicly promised that he would not vote for a Proviso prohibiting slavery in these territories (Webster, 'The Seventh of March Speech').

⁵⁵ Paul Erikson, 'Daniel Webster's Myth of the Pilgrims', *New England Quarterly*, 57 (1) (1984), pp. 44–64. See also Robert Dalzell Jr., *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, 1843–1852* (New York, 1973).

⁵⁶ Maurice Baxter, *One and Indivisible: Daniel Webster and the Union* (Cambridge MA, 1984), p. 503.

⁵⁷ Joel H. Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative* (Oxford, 1985).

this wildly unpopular act in the North. The crisis also produced the Republican Party, whose rallying cry would become a principled opposition to the expansion of slavery in any new territories acquired by the Union.⁵⁸

As Northern opinion shifted against the expansion of slavery, Lincoln sought to put himself at its head. He took on the task of actively moulding public opinion, and the direction he took it in differed profoundly from that advocated by the leading statesmen-thinkers of the Union. This can again be seen in the Biblical imagery he employs. At Peoria, as in the Lyceum and Temperance Addresses, Lincoln reads American history partly through the apocalyptic lens of a Protestant version of Hebraic political theology that Whig political culture rediscovered in the 1830s and '40s.⁵⁹ At Peoria, Lincoln returns to the idea that sacrificial violence through the blood of the Revolution gave birth to a covenantal community with a transcendent purpose. As in these previous speeches, the images he chooses — blood, the book of Revelation, Macbeth's bloody hand — are by no means benign. They signal Lincoln's acknowledgment that violence can be a redemptive tool in the struggle to perfect the Union, however reticent he was about requiring the 'last full measure of devotion'.

In the long speech at Peoria, Biblical imagery plays a far smaller role than the careful legal and philosophic arguments that dominate the speech. Those arguments make it abundantly clear that Lincoln's position is to stop the extension of slavery in the territories, and not to interfere with slavery in the states where it already exists. But the Biblical imagery Lincoln chooses complicates that dominant theme. The most striking Biblical allusion occurs in the complex and rich peroration. Lincoln appeals not to the Constitution but to the Declaration:

Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution. Let us turn slavery from its claims of 'moral right', back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of 'necessity.' Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it. Let north and south — let all Americans — let all lovers of liberty everywhere — join in the great and good work . . . We shall have so saved [the Union], that the succeeding millions of free happy people, the world over, shall rise up, and call us blessed, to the latest generations.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Major Wilson, *Space, Time and Freedom* (Westport CT, 1974); Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979); William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (Oxford, 1987); Walter A. McDougall, *Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829–1877* (New York, 2008).

⁵⁹ Lawrence Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism* (Oxford, 1989); Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge, 1996); Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*.

⁶⁰ *CW*, II, p. 276; citing Revelation 7: 9–17 and also 6: 11.

That this is not an isolated thought in Lincoln's mind can be shown by his return to this same theme and passage reminiscent of Revelation in a wonderful speech at Lewistown, Illinois, four years later (1858). To those who have strayed from the Declaration Lincoln says,

let me entreat you to come back. Return to the fountain whose waters spring close by the blood of the Revolution. Think nothing of me — take no thought for the political fate of any man whomsoever — but come back to the truths that are in the Declaration of Independence. You may do anything with me you choose, if you will but heed these sacred principles.⁶¹

The Peoria and Lewistown quotations refer to the white-robed martyrs in Revelation Chapter 7:

And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came them? . . . These are they which came out of the great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb . . . For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all the tears from their eyes.⁶²

As in the Lyceum Address, a central image is sacrificial blood that had previously been shed in the cause of liberty. In that earlier speech, the language of which the Peoria peroration almost exactly repeats, the blood referred to the covenantal sacrifice at Sinai between God and the Hebrews, when they swore an oath to obey his laws. The blood referred to here is the precious and redemptive blood of Jesus, called the Lamb in the book of Revelation. The two are intimately connected. The Lamb is a reference to the sacrificial Passover lamb of the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt. In his eulogy of Henry Clay two years before the Peoria Address, Lincoln metaphorically compared the entire Union, not just the South, to Egypt:

Pharaoh's country was cursed with plagues, and his hosts were drowned in the Red Sea for striving to retain a captive people who had already served them more than four hundred years. May like disasters never befall us! [. . .] Let us strive to deserve, as far as mortals may, the continued care of divine providence.⁶³

The blood of the paschal lamb protected the Hebrews from destruction, a sacrificial symbol of their divine favour.⁶⁴ The sacrificial Passover lamb, whose blood foreshadows the first covenant at Sinai, also prefigures the blood of Jesus, who, in the words of Chapter 5 of Revelation, a few paragraphs before Lincoln's citation of the white horse of the apocalypse, 'wast slain, and hast

⁶¹ *CW*, II, p. 547.

⁶² Revelation 7: 10–17.

⁶³ *CW*, II, p. 132.

⁶⁴ Exodus 12: 13.

redeemed us to God by [his] blood'.⁶⁵ The blood of Jesus is the blood of a second covenant, one that purifies the world of sins through his sacrifice.

Lincoln's metaphors are complex but tightly organized. He turns the white robe of martyrs into the white robe of republicanism, which he says is soiled by slavery. It must be purified by a re-adoption (what he will later call a re-dedication at Gettysburg) of the principles of the Declaration. The blood of the Revolution, the sacrificial act that binds the nation, must again unite America around a common cause. He likens the blood of the Revolution, a potent symbol first employed in the Lyceum Address, to the sacrificial blood of Jesus. The re-adoption of the Declaration by a reaffirmation of purpose and meaning of the Revolutionary sacrifice is the spiritual rebirth of the American people. This rebirth is necessary to save the Union from the dangers of slavery in its midst. If the Union is not purified through the blood of the Revolution in a spiritual rebirth it will probably be smitten like Egypt, where God might will that 'every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword'.⁶⁶

This can be avoided if America returns to the blood of the Revolution. A return to the blood of the Revolution implies that no new blood need be shed. As Jesus died for posterity, so too the patriots of '76 died for their progeny. As in the Christian rite, humanity needs to be baptized in Jesus to emerge spiritually reborn, so too the nation needs to be baptized in the blood of the Revolution to give it a new birth of freedom. Lincoln subtly conceptualizes the rebirth and purification of the nation as a baptismal act, as baptism is a means of rebirth that draws inspiration and meaning from an original violent act without a need to repeat it. Just as baptism replaces blood sacrifice, the blood of '76 and its spiritual inspiration can replace violence as a means of peaceful rebirth, leading to a moral resurrection for a sinning nation.⁶⁷

But like most of Lincoln's metaphors the meaning of this citation is ambiguous. While the blood of Jesus is the blood that ends all shedding of further sacrificial blood, Lincoln again, as in the Temperance Address, returns to the book of Revelation. The purification in the book of Revelation takes place amid apocalyptic chaos. This quotation expresses Lincoln's hope that the

⁶⁵ Revelation 5: 9.

⁶⁶ *CW*, VIII, p. 333.

⁶⁷ Lincoln's use of Macbeth's bloody hand only three paragraphs later echoes the baptismal theme. Anticipating that Douglas will say that he never intended to allow slavery into the territories, Lincoln replies that 'Like the "bloody hand" you may wash it, and wash it, the red witness of guilt still sticks, and stares horribly at you' (*CW*, II, p. 276). In Macbeth the baptismal washing away of sins with water comes up numerous times. Lady Macbeth councils Macbeth to 'go get some water./ And wash this filthy witness from your hand' and 'a little water clears us of this deed' (Macbeth, II.2, see also V.1). This same play of red and white is also in Claudius' speech in Hamlet, the scene quoted by Lincoln a few pages earlier, one that Lincoln thought was amongst Shakespeare's best (*CW*, II, p. 270; citing Hamlet, III.3).

Revolution would be the sacrifice to which America could forever appeal without having to repeat its violence. But it also expresses Lincoln's anxiety that the rebirth will be an actual repetition of the Revolutionary violence. For the white-robed men in the book of Revelation are themselves martyrs who died after Jesus: his was not the only blood shed for the cause. That Lincoln has such a fear in mind can be seen from the fact that the blood referred to here is that of a second covenant that came from a new sacrifice, a 'new birth of freedom'.

Ultimately, this citation is ambiguous. The polyvalence as well as the thematic depth of Lincoln's references to Revelation could be why he liked to deploy them so often. Like the book of Revelation itself, in Lincoln's metaphor, 'hope, and fear, and doubt contend in uncertain conflict'.⁶⁸ These references hint at an anxiety about the inadequacy of peaceful reform without ever fully giving voice to that fear. Lincoln thought violence a perennial accompaniment to political life, but his interpretation of the meaning of that violence vacillated between one that emphasized violence as indicative of moral and political failure, and another that stressed its redemptive potential.

IV The Blood of the Nation

As the 1850s progressed Lincoln became increasingly pessimistic about a possible peaceful resolution of the crisis of the Union. He came to think the Compromise of 1850 a failure. In a candid letter to George Robertson, three years before the House Divided Speech, Lincoln states

that spirit which desired the peaceful extinction of slavery has itself become extinct . . . So far as peaceful, voluntary emancipation is concerned, the condition of the Negro slave in America . . . is now as fixed, and hopeless of change for the better, as those of the lost souls of the finally impenitent. The Autocrat of all the Russias will resign his crown, and proclaim his subjects free republicans sooner than will our American masters voluntarily give up their slaves. Our political problem is 'Can we, as a nation, continue together *permanently — forever — half slave and half free?*'⁶⁹

In 1856, in a lost speech in Bloomington, Illinois, Lincoln delivered such a fiery oration that his friends convinced him to not publish it for fear that it would provoke war. That address, in amended form, became what is now known as the House Divided Speech.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ CW, VII, p. 49.

⁶⁹ CW, II, p. 318.

⁷⁰ Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, p. 165.

This speech has been the object of much study.⁷¹ Our paper has argued that by examining Lincoln's use of the Bible one is able to see that Lincoln intended his citations to be vehicles of deeper meaning. As public opinion on the extension of slavery shifted, Lincoln uncovered the more radical elements of his thought, making the intention of the Biblical citations more explicit.⁷²

In the House Divided Speech Lincoln employs the Bible three times. The first Biblical reference gives the speech its name. 'A house divided against itself cannot stand.' I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.'⁷³ There are three sources for this citation, all of which tell the same story: Mark 3, Matthew 12 and Luke 11.⁷⁴ Jesus entered the Temple where some scribes were assembled, as well as a man with a deformed hand. Jesus healed his hand. Given that this was the Sabbath, and healing (in the interpretation of the scribes) was proscribed on the Sabbath, they denounced Jesus. This story from the Gospel can be easily read as a metaphor for the American political situation. It pits healing, and thus the achievement of a concrete good, against conformity with the traditional law. It is the traditional law that impedes healing the deformed hand. Lincoln always argued that he thought the Federal Government had no power to interfere with slavery where it already existed. But the Union cannot last half-slave and half-free. It must, therefore, be Lincoln's intent to eventually see slavery abolished where the writ of the Federal Government cannot run.

⁷¹ The three most penetrating treatments are Don Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's* (Stanford, 1962), pp. 70–95; Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*; Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*, pp. 164–83.

⁷² William H. Seward (1801–72) is an illuminating comparison. Like Lincoln, Seward had a moral vision for the Union, as seen in his 'Higher Law' (1850) and 'Irrepressible Conflict' (1858) speeches. He also thought that the Union could not remain half-slave and half-free, but had to be all one or all the other. But Seward lacked the Biblical element that is so prominent in Lincoln's thought. This lacuna leads to two important differences between the men. First, Lincoln was able to obfuscate his more radical meanings through suggestive but ambiguous Biblical citations, while Seward, lacking the oratorical device, appeared more incendiary. Seward was thus distanced from the moderate wing of the Republican Party. Second, because Lincoln's rhetoric was so Biblical, he was able to give the crisis a cosmic significance and grand narrative from appropriated Biblical themes of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth. Lincoln understood that given the tense political climate the consequences of a national purification and rebirth might entail war. Lincoln expressed that fear through his Biblical allusions. Seward thought the end of the irrepressible conflict was ultimately less about the purification of the Union than the triumph of the Republican Party. Some have speculated that this posture made him less prepared for war than Lincoln. See Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *William Henry Seward* (New York, 1967), pp. 245–50.

⁷³ *CW*, II, p. 461.

⁷⁴ Lincoln's language follows Mark 3 and Matthew 12.

The Constitution prevents the objective that Lincoln announces in the opening of his speech. But Lincoln does not think that the problem will be solved until a crisis will have been reached and passed.⁷⁵

What is the nature of that crisis? The context of this citation is revelatory. There was no more controversial place for Jesus to heal on the Sabbath than in the Temple. It is a dramatic, bold and controversial gesture. It is an attempt to shift the fault lines of his time and drive a wedge between his reform movement and the Pharisees. In the same passage, in Matthew, Jesus tells his followers: 'He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad.'⁷⁶ Jesus' actions establish the new, definitive fault lines. Similarly, Lincoln entered the senatorial race with two objectives in mind. The first was, of course, to win. Failing that, he wanted to render a Douglas Presidential run impossible by shifting the fault lines of the Northern opinion so as to alienate anti-slavery Republicans from Douglas. The House Divided speech is Lincoln's dramatic gesture in the Temple, his attempt to shift, like Jesus, the fault lines and to declare to the country that whoever is not with freedom is against it. It is a policy of no compromise. It is radical. There is no middle ground between a nation that is completely free and a nation that allows slavery everywhere.

Finally, when the scribes see Jesus reenter the temple, they think he is possessed by Beelzebub, or the devil. Jesus then speaks to them in parables, asking how it is possible for a devil to cast out devils, for if that were the case the devil would defeat his own purpose and divide his house. But a house divided against itself cannot stand. Jesus is fully aware that the scribes do not understand him. Instead of seeing him as their saviour, they perceive him as the devil. It is entirely possible that Lincoln would think that he also would be seen as the devil rather than the saviour for forcing the issue of slavery.

To summarize, by the image of the house divided Lincoln means to convey three things. First, like Jesus healing on the Sabbath, a moment has come in which the old law is no longer sufficient, and an appeal to a higher law must be made. Second, the speech itself is analogous to the dramatic gesture of Jesus' healing in the temple that forces a wedge into the community, compelling them to make a decision either for or against him. Finally, in the context of the citation, Jesus is demonized. He realizes that the scribes and others will see him not as the saviour but as the devil. Lincoln, who had no mean idea of his

⁷⁵ There is evidence to suggest that Lincoln thought that the crisis brought about by slavery would only be solved by freedom for the slaves, which he thought his Emancipation Proclamation went a long way towards achieving. In his third annual message to Congress, in 1863, when discussing the successes of the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln uses language reminiscent of the House Divided Speech: 'Thus we have the new reckoning. The crisis which threatened to divide the friends of the Union is past' (CW, VII, p. 50).

⁷⁶ Matthew 12: 30.

own political ambition, compares himself to Jesus in the Temple, a divisive figure forcing the issue and fully expecting demonization.

The second Biblical citation in the speech lends some credence, though perhaps only in a circumstantial way, to the idea that Lincoln saw himself playing a heroic, salvific role in American politics. After explaining that the nation was moving towards becoming all slave rather than all free, he turns to why Douglas cannot be the right Northern man to combat the advance of slavery. In another Biblical image, seemingly otiose, Lincoln quotes Ecclesiastes 9: 4, comparing Judge Douglas to a dead lion and himself to a living dog. In Ecclesiastes 9 the poet argues that good things come to both the good and the evil equally. Virtue is not always rewarded and evil is not always punished. Both alike are forgotten.

This passage seemingly adds nothing to Lincoln's purpose in the speech. But the context of this citation is interesting. At the end of this passage, a mere ten lines later, there is an arresting image.

There was a little city, and few men within it; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it, and built great bulwarks against it. Now there was found in it a poor wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city; yet no man remembered that same poor man. Then said I, Wisdom *is* better than strength: nevertheless the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.⁷⁷

The willingness of the public to ignore the wise man follows thematically the context of the House Divided citation from Luke. It also fits quite well with Lincoln's public image. He is the poor man from the woods, who had a high opinion of his own wisdom, had great ambition, and an idea that he would save his country, but also a deep melancholic worry that he would eventually be forgotten.

For such a man this image must have been particularly striking. Indeed, a mere two weeks later, in July, we have a fragment in which Lincoln discusses the glorious memory of Wilberforce and others who struggled against slavery. Lincoln privately confesses his own anxiety, that his time is not yet ripe, and that he may be forgotten and dead before he accomplishes anything worthy.⁷⁸ The themes from Ecclesiastes were then on Lincoln's mind at the time, and he may have chosen the image of the Lion to describe Douglas because he happened to be reading Ecclesiastes around the time that he composed the speech. It is unlikely that he combed the entire Bible looking for a fine image of a lion and a dog.

The final Biblical citation in the House Divided Speech is at the very end. In describing the emergence of the Republican party Lincoln says: 'Of strange, discordant, and even, hostile elements, we gathered from the four winds, and formed and fought the battle through, under the constant hot fire of

⁷⁷ Ecclesiastes 9: 14–16.

⁷⁸ *CW*, II, p. 482.

a disciplined, proud, and pampered enemy'.⁷⁹ The image of gathering from the four winds is from The Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37. It is the same image and passage that appears in the Temperance Address. When Ezekiel sees the bones becoming human again, flesh and all, he notices that they lack life; and God said unto him,

Prophesy unto the wind, prophesy son of man and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord God; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up on their feet, an exceeding great army.⁸⁰

Lincoln compares the Republican Party to a great army that will, as in Ezekiel, liberate Israel. In fact, what God promises to the Hebrews is something even more striking: 'And I will make them one nation in the land upon the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king to them all: and they shall be no more two nations, neither shall they be divided into two kingdoms any more at all.'⁸¹

The image of a nation divided into two kingdoms perfectly parallels the substance of the House Divided speech. The parallel runs even deeper. Ezekiel continues, 'neither shall they defile themselves any more with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions: but I will save them out of their dwelling places, wherein they have sinned, and will cleanse them: so shall they be my people, and I will be their God'.⁸² Lincoln's Biblical citation clearly reveals his purpose: to unify the nation, purified of the sin of slavery, under the banner of freedom.

Lincoln's intentions were not so deeply veiled nor his allusions so obscure that his critics did not perceive his true position. Right after the House Divided speech he was in fact accused of wanting to destroy slavery in the South.⁸³ Lincoln could not say that such was his intention and have a political future. As a senatorial candidate, he was too savvy to commit political suicide. But Lincoln's constant return to Ezekiel, especially in a speech as significant and provocative as this one, reveals the structure of Lincoln's moral and political imagination. Lincoln envisioned the eradication of slavery in terms of a moral resurrection.

As in Ezekiel, the conditions of that resurrection are not entirely benign. In the House Divided speech we see perhaps Lincoln's most masterful deployment of the Bible. The haunting Biblical images from Luke and Ezekiel amplify the central message that the Union must be either all slave or all free.

⁷⁹ *CW*, II, p. 468.

⁸⁰ Ezekiel 37: 9–10.

⁸¹ Ezekiel 37: 22. The two nations were the Northern and Southern kingdoms. See O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 85.

⁸² Ezekiel 37: 23.

⁸³ *CW*, II, p. 471.

Lincoln compares the sectional Republican Party to a great army that will, like in Ezekiel, purify the country and liberate the people. Here, too, we witness a tension in Lincoln's thought as the need for sacrifice and purification points both to political failure of an older Union, and to political regeneration of a new and improved one.

Conclusion

This article has examined Lincoln's public use of the Bible before he became President of the United States. It has challenged a traditional reading of Lincoln, put his moral and political thought in the context of other Whig and Republican statesmen of his time, and questioned the adequacy of understanding American political thought only through the lens of liberalism.

According to a prominent and respected tradition of interpretation, Lincoln began his political career as a conservative, for the most part unburdened with the moral and political problem of slavery, only later developing a principled opposition to it. Contrarily, this close study of the Biblical themes of covenant, purification, sacrifice and rebirth revealed a consistently radical and polarizing Lincoln. He was radical because he harboured a desire to destroy slavery in the United States from his earliest days. Always mindful of not alienating himself from the electorate, Lincoln employed Biblical passages to convey suggestive nuances to his Biblically literate audiences. This does not imply that every Biblical citation contains deeper connotations, or that Lincoln intended to import the entire background and context of every Biblical passage he ever cited. Certainly, there are many images he used for rhetorical effect, for slogans or for irony. But there are others that serve purposes beyond these. Tracing the common themes, images and passages employed by Lincoln reveals that he was not simply parroting the Biblical metaphors and slogans of his era. His use of select themes was creative and original.

This article is also a case study of the Bible in the American tradition.⁸⁴ Without knowledge of Biblical stories and themes students of American politics and history miss much of the richness of the American tradition. Worlds of meaning are closed off to them. By jettisoning the Bible as a key text in the American political tradition, the Americans become uneducated about their past. This is lamentable. But it leads to, and is part and parcel with, the slow evanescence of a long trope of American history that has shaped Americans' self-understanding, and given them a frame within which creative reinterpretation of themselves as a people can take place.

⁸⁴ Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton, 2010); Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*; Murphy, *Prodigal Nation*; McWilliams, 'The Bible in the American Political Tradition'.

This trope of the American political tradition is often referred to as the American jeremiad.⁸⁵ Taking inspiration from the Biblical story of Exodus and the Prophets, it is a narrative of a warning, a call for return, and a promise of redemption. Since the Puritan 'founding', the self-understanding of the English colonies was linked to the stories of the Hebrews' exodus out of the bondage of Egypt to found Jerusalem. This American chronicle envelops political and social strife into that Biblical narrative of covenant, sin, repentance and redemption.⁸⁶ Lincoln appropriated and shaped the American jeremiad. No longer was America the New Israel. It had become Egypt. Although America had become a fallen nation, Lincoln sought, within the American tradition itself, resources for moral regeneration. Like Jeremiah, Lincoln warned the nation of its broken covenant, called for a return to the Declaration, and led the nation through a war that he interpreted through the lens of redemptive tribulation. That tribulation was meant to restore and fulfil America's birth-right promise.

Lincoln's turn to the Revolution and the Declaration is coterminous with his attempt to augment a contractual understanding of political obligation, rooted in consent of the governed and emphasizing natural rights, with a covenantal one, grounded in a trans-generational commitment to a transcendent purpose. Lincoln saw the Constitution as the American contract and the Declaration as the American covenant. Under the contract slavery was a legal institution, undermining the Constitution's ability to resolve the slavery question. Lincoln's solution was to see the contract as morally subordinate to the American covenant. When Lincoln claims that it is the Revolution that establishes a collective American identity and that endows the entire American project with its transcendent purpose, he is indicating that more may be required than a politics of liberal contractualism if free people are to perpetuate their institutions.

Contract presupposes covenant; and covenant begins with sacrifice. The Declaration of Independence is also a declaration of war.⁸⁷ Lincoln was deeply attuned to the necessity of a covenantal community bound by blood sacrifice. From his earliest public speeches he wrestled with the tension between peaceful liberal politics of rational consent, on the one hand, and the violence that forges and may be necessary to sustain collective identity, on the other. With this, we reach a central problem of Lincoln's political thought. Lincoln expressed a hope that reason can replace violence as the primary means of political regeneration. Indeed, it is a central premise of the American

⁸⁵ Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*; Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion*; Murphy, *Prodigal Nation*.

⁸⁶ See Murphy, *Prodigal Nation*, ch. 2, esp. p. 18 where he discusses Mather's use of Ezekiel.

⁸⁷ Kahn, *Sacred Violence*, p. 123; Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place*, pp. 11–21; Elazar, *Covenant and Constitutionalism*.

experiment in self-government that citizens are capable of governing themselves without recourse to violence. But Lincoln recognized that it was the blood of the Revolution that established the American community; blood was the necessary requirement for the possibility of its experiment in self-government. Lincoln knew America was not possible without bloodshed. Moreover, he was deeply sceptical, if not pessimistic, about the ability of the American regime to regenerate itself without the shedding of further blood. Lincoln vacillated between seemingly contradictory stances on the role of violence in political life. Sometimes violence can seem an unfortunate failure of democratic politics. This is one way of conceptualizing Lincoln's attempt to alter the public mind in the 1850s, as a failure. Contrarily, one can interpret the coming of the Civil War as an unhappy necessity, and Lincoln's attempts to change the public mind not as a failure, but as a tragic confrontation with an unfortunate requirement of political life; and it was this unhappy necessity that brought about the conditions of American rebirth.

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