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# Abraham Lincoln's Religion: The Case for His Ultimate Belief in a Personal, Sovereign God.

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# Abraham Lincoln's Religion: The Case for His Ultimate Belief in a Personal, Sovereign God

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SAMUEL W. CALHOUN and LUCAS E. MOREL

It is commonplace to say that the religion of Abraham Lincoln will forever be a mystery. Adam Gopnik thinks that Lincoln's faith is "the most vexed question in all the Lincoln literature."<sup>1</sup> Richard Carwardine writes that Lincoln's "personal faith . . . necessarily remain[s] a puzzle."<sup>2</sup> We believe that such assertions are overstated. While important ambiguities remain, such as whether Lincoln was a Christian in the sense of trusting Jesus as his Savior,<sup>3</sup> some elements of Lincoln's religious faith are beyond doubt.<sup>4</sup> Mark Noll agrees. Although referring to "the vexing knot of Lincoln's faith," he also lists elements of Lincoln's religious experiences and beliefs that have been "verified . . . at least as far as historical facts can be verified."<sup>5</sup> We contend that one more fact should be added to Noll's list—the mature Lincoln believed in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>6</sup>

We presume that most readers of this *Journal* agree with Noll that it is important to seek the truth about Lincoln's religious beliefs.<sup>7</sup> Truth is valuable for its own sake, but in Lincoln's case, it has special importance.<sup>8</sup> Given Lincoln's overriding cultural significance,<sup>9</sup> it really matters what he believed. Consequently, those embarking upon historical inquiry concerning Lincoln bear a great responsibility. They should strive not only for thoroughness and accuracy, but also for impartiality.<sup>10</sup> And anyone who proposes that any aspect of Lincoln's life be accepted as fact is rightly subjected to a heavy burden of proof. This is especially true for us, who make this claim about a subject—Lincoln's religious beliefs—that not only has obvious significance, given his pervasive public use of religious language,<sup>11</sup> but also "has been a source of incessant debate almost from the moment of the assassination itself."<sup>12</sup>

*Editor's Note: Because of the lengthy documentation for this article, the notes are located at the end of the text.*

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The evaluative process is straightforward. The historical record contains considerable raw data pertaining to Lincoln's religious beliefs: his words, both written and spoken, and his actions. We believe that much of this data strongly suggests Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God. But did Lincoln actually hold these beliefs? While other explanations are theoretically possible, the theory that best accommodates all the evidence is that Lincoln, by the end of his life, believed in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>13</sup>

### The Second Inaugural Address

The starting point for our argument is the Second Inaugural Address,<sup>14</sup> which some believe to be Lincoln's greatest speech.<sup>15</sup> The Second Inaugural is especially important because it is "a speech of culmination," disclosing "Lincoln's thinking, at the end of his life," on several "key issues."<sup>16</sup> It is "the martyr-president's last defining utterance on the nation's ultimate defining experience . . . [one] among the small handful of semisacred texts by which Americans conceive their place in the world."<sup>17</sup> Our claim is that the address reveals Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>18</sup>

One can read the Second Inaugural in many different places and formats, but none more impressive than as carved on the north, inside wall of the Lincoln Memorial. An interesting thought experiment is to imagine someone who has just read the entire address for the first time.<sup>19</sup> If such a reader were asked, based on the speech itself, whether Lincoln believed in a personal, sovereign God, what response would one reasonably anticipate? On the surface, the first two paragraphs say nothing pertinent,<sup>20</sup> but the third and fourth paragraphs have a "strikingly religious character."<sup>21</sup> Our reader presumably would notice the multiple matter-of-fact references to God—"God" (five times), "living God" (once), the "Almighty" (once), the "Lord" (once), "His" (three times), "He" (twice), "Him" (once)—all in the short space of 469 words in two paragraphs. But would the reader naturally think that Lincoln's words contemplated a personal God? Yes. "Living God" connotes a being, not a mere force.<sup>22</sup> Lincoln's language also portrays God as having an active will; He chooses how to act.<sup>23</sup> God willed "American Slavery" for a time and now "wills to remove" it,<sup>24</sup> but might mandate "that [the war] continue" until the wrongs of slavery were fully atoned for in wealth and blood.<sup>25</sup> Speaking of God's will in this way connotes a God who intervenes in human affairs to accomplish His objectives. Moreover, Lincoln describes God as having character traits—"divine attributes."<sup>26</sup> God is "just"<sup>27</sup> and renders "'judgments . . . [that] are true

and righteous."<sup>28</sup> Finally, Lincoln's God is in two-way communication with humans. They commune with God via prayer (referred to six times),<sup>29</sup> and God communes with humans not only through the Bible (referred to by name once,<sup>30</sup> formally quoted twice,<sup>31</sup> informally quoted once,<sup>32</sup> and directly applied twice),<sup>33</sup> but also by answering prayers (yes and no)<sup>34</sup> and providing guidance "to see the right."<sup>35</sup>

Just as Lincoln's God was clearly personal, He also was undoubtedly sovereign. Our hypothetical reader could not miss Lincoln's portrayal of God's absolute, complete control. "The Almighty has His own purposes"<sup>36</sup>—He willed both slavery and its end. While God might have removed it by a conflict of lesser magnitude or duration, He instead chose "this mighty scourge of war" to punish "both North and South" for the "offence" of slavery<sup>37</sup>: to extract retribution for slavery's horrific impact, slaves' wealth unjustly forfeited, and their blood unjustly shed.<sup>38</sup>

Our assertion, then, is that the Second Inaugural reveals Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God. But some scholars have doubts.

### Possible Objections

#### 1) Lincoln did not make firm claims but was only speculating

Lincoln introduces his discussion of God's will pertaining to slavery by saying, "If we shall suppose."<sup>39</sup> Fred Kaplan therefore concludes that what follows "is in its entirety a hypothesis: let us for the moment, [Lincoln] proposes, speculate about these matters . . . without arguing about whether the speculation is true or not."<sup>40</sup> The "supposing" terminology, however, does not pertain to Lincoln's many references to prayer or to most of his references to God Himself. Thus, the phrase does not impact our claim that Lincoln spoke of a personal God.<sup>41</sup> As to the sovereignty of God, a number of other scholars have, like Kaplan, referred to Lincoln's provisional language. Stephen Oates says, "Lincoln . . . contended that God perhaps had willed" the war.<sup>42</sup> To Doris Kearns Goodwin and James McPherson, Lincoln "suggested" what God had in mind.<sup>43</sup> Ronald White characterizes Lincoln's language as "speculative in terms of asking questions about divine intention."<sup>44</sup> Michael Burlingame writes that Lincoln "offered . . . a hypothesis"<sup>45</sup>—"the Civil War might be God's punishment on both North and South for the evil of slavery."<sup>46</sup> To Douglas Wilson, Lincoln "conditionally" posited this "supposition."<sup>47</sup> These descriptions are accurate, but they do not rebut our claim that Lincoln in the speech asserted the sovereignty of God.

The tentative language comes after Lincoln said, "The Almighty has His own purposes."<sup>48</sup> There is nothing provisional about this statement. It is a flat assertion of fact, which includes the presupposition that a God who is "The Almighty" can effectuate those purposes.<sup>49</sup> Lincoln begins to speculate only when stating his view of God's goals. Surely, however, Lincoln hypothesized to demonstrate an appropriate human humility before God. After all, "The Almighty has *His own* purposes." It would have been the height of arrogance for Lincoln to have asserted definitively what God had in mind.<sup>50</sup> As John Channing Briggs observes, "To presume that one possesses divine knowledge of such things, even on the verge of a seemingly providential victory, is to err in the way that the North and South have done before."<sup>51</sup> It is clear, though, and historians overwhelmingly agree, that Lincoln was saying, "Here's what I believe the Almighty is doing." Ronald White states that the "Second Inaugural illuminates Lincoln's understanding of the various ways God is at work in history."<sup>52</sup> Lincoln left no doubt as to how he interpreted God's purposes. Stephen Oates says the address disclosed Lincoln's "apocalyptic conclusion about the nature of the war . . . [It was] divine punishment for the 'great offense' of slavery, as a terrible retribution God had visited on a guilty people, in North as well as South."<sup>53</sup> Lincoln's "supposing," therefore, does not signify distancing himself from the statement about God's chastening purposes, but rather reflects his best attempt to make sense of the devastating conflict and the unexpected liberation of American slaves.

## **2) Lincoln did not mean what he said but spoke religiously only to please his audience**

Ronald White writes that "any analysis of Lincoln's public religion must include the question: Was he using religious words simply for public consumption?"<sup>54</sup> Some scholars have explained the pervasive religious tone of the Second Inaugural on these grounds. For Fred Kaplan, the Second Inaugural evinces Lincoln's "usual biblical resonance" because "the Bible [was] the text of reference most widely shared by nineteenth-century Americans."<sup>55</sup> David Donald thought that Lincoln, masking his actual beliefs, chose biblical language to be understood better and believed by "a devout, Bible-reading public."<sup>56</sup>

The "please-the-public" perspective on the Second Inaugural is unpersuasive for two reasons: (1) what Lincoln said was hardly what the public wanted to hear, and (2) there is overwhelming evidence that the address expressed Lincoln's actual beliefs.

Many scholars have observed that Lincoln undoubtedly shocked his audience.<sup>57</sup> According to William Miller, "No one would have been surprised if the president of the United States, nearing the end of this bloody, religion-drenched war, had in his address claimed that the impending victory showed that God was on the side of the Union. But—astonishingly—he did not do this; he said something that almost contradicts it: the Almighty has His *own* purposes, beyond those of either side."<sup>58</sup> Lincoln's conception of what God intended was probably even more shocking—the "mighty scourge of war" was God's judgment not only on the South, but on the North as well. Joseph Fornieri points out the "stunning contrast" between Lincoln's view and "the renowned preacher Henry Ward Beecher," who charged "'the whole guilt of this war'" against the South.<sup>59</sup> "To many of his listeners," writes Gary Scott Smith, Lincoln's theory of shared guilt "was probably unimaginable."<sup>60</sup> Saying such things is a strange way to curry favor with one's audience.<sup>61</sup> The more likely explanation is that Lincoln meant what he said.

Lincoln's sincerity is also strongly corroborated by other evidence. First, the Second Inaugural was preceded by "forerunners [that] function[ed] as early, if partial drafts, of the master work, each giving a trial exposure to a part or an expression of what would become an impressively articulated and integrated whole."<sup>62</sup> In September 1862, Lincoln penned his "Meditation on the Divine Will," which clearly foreshadows the later speech.<sup>63</sup> He leaves no doubt whatever as to God's complete sovereignty: "The will of God prevails."<sup>64</sup> The war exists, leading to Lincoln's humble supposition concerning God's will: "I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet."<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the God whose will Lincoln contemplates is a personal God, actively involved in human affairs: "By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. . . . And . . . He could give the final victory to either side any day."<sup>66</sup> We agree with Michael Nelson that "clearer evidence would be hard to find demonstrating not only that Lincoln's religious views had changed over the years but also how they had changed. In his 1846 election handbill Lincoln had written that the human mind is governed by 'some power, over which the mind itself has no control.' Sometime between then and 1862, he had identified to his own satisfaction its source—no longer 'some power,' but rather 'his mere quiet power.'"<sup>67</sup> Lincoln no longer believes in a mere abstract force, but in divine agency, a being with an independent will and the power to implement it.<sup>68</sup>

Beyond the content of the Meditation, it is important to empha-

size that the document was not intended for publication but rather reflected Lincoln's private thoughts.<sup>69</sup> John Nicolay and John Hay, Lincoln's private secretaries, state that Lincoln wrote it "absolutely detached from any earthly considerations . . . It was not written to be seen of men. It was penned in the awful sincerity of a perfectly honest soul trying to bring itself into closer communion with its Maker."<sup>70</sup> Consequently, as Ronald White notes, the Meditation "becomes a primary resource in answering the question of the integrity of Lincoln's ideas in the Second Inaugural."<sup>71</sup> As "an authentic expression of his innermost views,"<sup>72</sup> this document in itself undermines the please-the-public dismissal of the Second Inaugural. But if more evidence is demanded, it is bountiful.

In an October 1862 letter to Eliza Gurney, Lincoln clearly communicated his belief in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>73</sup> He not only expressed appreciation for Mrs. Gurney's prayers<sup>74</sup> but also suggested his own—seeking the "Heavenly Father[']s" aid in conforming to "his will" and acting "in the light which he affords me."<sup>75</sup> That will prevails "for some wise purposes of [God's] own."<sup>76</sup> Even though that purpose "may be mysterious and unknown to us . . . yet we cannot but believe, that he who made the world still governs it."<sup>77</sup>

Two 1864 letters provide additional evidence that the Second Inaugural expressed Lincoln's genuine beliefs. In an April letter to Albert Hodges, Lincoln affirmed that "the nation's condition [was] not what either party, or any man devised, or expected. God alone can claim it."<sup>78</sup> Moreover, if God willed to punish both North and South for "complicity in [the great] wrong" of slavery, there would be no cause to question "the justice and goodness of God."<sup>79</sup> In September, Lincoln again wrote to Eliza Gurney. He acknowledged the personal character of God by thanking her and "the good christian people of the country for their constant prayers" and by expressing his confidence in her continued "earnest prayers to our Father in Heaven."<sup>80</sup> Lincoln also alludes to his own prayers: "We must work earnestly in the best light He gives us."<sup>81</sup> He also flatly asserts God's supervening control of events: "The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail."<sup>82</sup> Despite human hopes for an earlier end to "this terrible war . . . God knows best, and has ruled otherwise."<sup>83</sup>

If the foregoing evidence leaves any doubt as to Lincoln's sincerity in the Second Inaugural, his post-speech letter to Thurlow Weed is definitive.<sup>84</sup> Lincoln characterized the address as showing "a difference of purpose" between "the Almighty and [men]."<sup>85</sup> Not to accept this fact would be "to deny that there is a God governing the world."<sup>86</sup> This was "a truth [Lincoln] thought needed to be told."<sup>87</sup> While this



language most obviously proves Lincoln's belief in God's sovereignty, we think it is equally dispositive as to his faith in a personal God. To speak of differing purposes between men and God is to speak of God as a living being. A mere force or law does not have a "purpose," a term that connotes intention and choosing. Moreover, Lincoln also said that any "humiliation" associated with this difference fell "most directly" on him.<sup>88</sup> To speak of humility in the context of referring to one's differences from another superior, living being, is to invoke an attribute most commonly associated with personal relationships.<sup>89</sup>

It is also worthwhile to ask why Lincoln believed the truth contained in the Second Inaugural "needed to be told." He was attempting to foster a common understanding of the war by refusing to blame the South alone for the evil of slavery. He supposes that the offense of slavery could be attributed to both Southern and Northern citizens, and that God "now wills to remove" it through "this mighty scourge of war." By assigning responsibility to both sides, he prepares the way for national reconciliation. Encouraging humility through shared blame, expressed in the third paragraph of the Second Inaugural, is the essential foundation for his memorable exhortation, "With charity for all," in the fourth paragraph.<sup>90</sup> This serves as additional, important evidence that Lincoln's theological statements were sincere.<sup>91</sup>

We believe we have demonstrated that the Second Inaugural communicates Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>92</sup> We recognize, however, that grounds for possible dissent remain.<sup>93</sup> David Donald says that Lincoln's language lifted "his own responsibility for the conflict. If there was guilt, the burden had been shifted from his shoulders to those of a Higher Power."<sup>94</sup> This shift-the-blame argument receives support from Don Fehrenbacher, who says that Lincoln's Second Inaugural "absolved" himself from "ultimate responsibility" for "a cruel war."<sup>95</sup> An initial question is how this perspective, even if accurate, would cast doubt on Lincoln's sincerity. For Lincoln to think that blame was actually shifted, he had to have believed what he said. Or is the suggestion that Lincoln just wanted to deceive genuine religious believers into thinking that blame was shifted?<sup>96</sup> Regardless, the argument fails, for Lincoln's understanding of God's prevailing will did not relieve humans of responsibility for their actions.<sup>97</sup> As he eloquently stated in his 1862 Annual Message to Congress: "We of this Congress and this administration, will be remembered in spite of ourselves. . . . The fiery trial through which we pass, will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation. . . . We—even *we here* . . . bear the responsibility."<sup>98</sup> If some are tempted to view this famous quote as referring only to Lincoln's felt responsibility to the evaluation of history, not to God's



judgment, Lincoln elsewhere made it plain that he felt accountable to God as well.<sup>99</sup>

One might also question Lincoln's sincerity in the Second Inaugural by turning one of our arguments for the address's genuineness on its head. We contend that Lincoln's theological explanation laid the groundwork for forbearance toward the conquered South.<sup>100</sup> Is it not possible that Lincoln, not believing what he said, disingenuously used his theological argument for precisely this purpose?<sup>101</sup> It would not have been the first time (or the last) that a canny, unbelieving politician exploited God for short-term political advantage. This "strategic-theology" explanation of the Second Inaugural is of course theoretically possible. The question is its likelihood. At one point, Garry Wills uses language that initially seems supportive. Lincoln had a "use[] for biblical religion."<sup>102</sup> In the Second Inaugural, Lincoln put his "rare ability to enter into others' feelings . . . to good political use"; by adopting "the political rhetoric of the time," he used the religious concept of "expiatory suffering" to forge "a bond of pain transcending partisan gains and losses."<sup>103</sup>

Using religious ideas to accomplish certain objectives, however, does not mean that one fails to believe the underlying religious principles. We have already presented evidence demonstrating that the Second Inaugural communicated Lincoln's actual beliefs. Wills himself agrees. In *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, he says that the Second Inaugural is an essential supplement to the Gettysburg Address "to express the whole of Lincoln's mind."<sup>104</sup> What beliefs did Lincoln intend to convey? Among others, "that pragmatism was . . . not only moral but pious," that slavery was "the great national sin," and that "Americans must be judged in a comprehensive judgment binding on all."<sup>105</sup>

While we are persuaded that the Second Inaugural evinces Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God, the ultimate question is not what the speech shows in itself, but what the evidence as a whole demonstrates. We have already commented on this broader inquiry,<sup>106</sup> but we now turn to a fuller consideration. In this format, we cannot fully canvass a dispute that has been ongoing for over 150 years.<sup>107</sup> Instead, we will focus on the recent parameters of the debate. Several scholars, including Joseph Fornieri, James Tackach, and Ronald White, would agree with us that Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God should be added to Mark Noll's list of verified facts about Lincoln's religion.<sup>108</sup> Many other scholars would not. No one really questions that Lincoln believed in a sovereign God. The focal point of disagreement is whether he believed in a personal God. More specifically, the issue is whether Lincoln's view of God ever changed from his acknowledged

early belief in the deistic God associated with the “doctrine of necessity.”<sup>109</sup> Did he ever come to conceive of God as personal?<sup>110</sup> Opinions vary across a wide spectrum, from those who seem close to agreeing with us that he did, to those who maintain that Lincoln’s earlier views never changed. Several scholars fall between these two extremes. To contribute to a thorough examination of the question posed, we will discuss representative dissenting scholars from each category.<sup>111</sup>

### A Range of Scholarly Opinion

#### 1) Nearly a personal God, but not quite

##### a) *William Lee Miller*

William Lee Miller finds no trace of Lincoln’s “youthful skepticism” in the God’s-will-focused portions of the Second Inaugural.<sup>112</sup> These “reverberate[] with the outlook of ‘believers in a Living God’ in one of its most teeth-rattling forms.”<sup>113</sup> But Miller does not plainly say that Lincoln actually had this outlook. Instead he writes that “these sentences” perhaps still contain “something like Lincoln’s youthful fatalism or determinism, . . . but it has now taken on the shape of the Calvinistic providential history-arranging God.”<sup>114</sup> Miller could be saying here that Lincoln’s words, but not necessarily his beliefs, now reflected “the culture in which he was surrounded.”<sup>115</sup> But later, Miller again seems close to acknowledging Lincoln’s actual belief in a personal God: Lincoln’s language “contains the element of an act of will that marks religious faith.”<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, however, Miller, without explanation, seems to back off by referring to “whatever [Lincoln’s] true state of belief may have been.”<sup>117</sup>

We are puzzled by Miller’s caution. In writing about Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address, he stresses the significance that Lincoln, in the speech itself, accorded to his impending oath of office. Lincoln emphasized that he would have an “oath registered in Heaven” to preserve the government, whereas his “dissatisfied countrymen” would have no such promise to destroy it.<sup>118</sup> According to Miller, Lincoln was saying, “You [the unhappy Southerners] are still in a realm of calculation and choice; I will be in the different moral realm of necessity. You can act differently; I cannot.”<sup>119</sup> But how is it that an “oath registered in Heaven” has this extraordinary solemnity? The only plausible answer is that Lincoln believed in a God to whom he would owe a special responsibility to fulfill his promise. To speak of accountability to God is to conceive of God in personal terms.<sup>120</sup>

*b) Richard Carwardine*

Richard Carwardine concludes his discussion of the Second Inaugural by saying that Lincoln's "God [had] acquired a more Calvinist, conventionally Protestant, appearance."<sup>121</sup> Since Protestants believe in a personal God, is Carwardine saying that Lincoln believed this too? Not quite. Lincoln's God had only become "*more . . . conventionally Protestant.*" This comports with Carwardine's earlier explanation that Lincoln, "under the pressure of wartime events . . . was without doubt swept along to a new religious understanding, one much closer to . . . historic Calvinism . . . Lincoln's 'Providence' . . . became an active and more personal God."<sup>122</sup> Again Carwardine is ambivalent—Lincoln's God became "*more personal.*" In what way? For one thing, Lincoln "began to use the possessive pronoun—'responsibility to my God,' 'promise to my Maker'—in ways that suggested a belief in a more personal God."<sup>123</sup> But why say such a belief was only "suggested"?<sup>124</sup> Carwardine's tentativeness is especially surprising given how he evaluates Lincoln's response when informed that Christians across the nation were praying for him—"Lincoln's reply evinced more than simple politeness: 'This is an encouraging thought to me. If I were not sustained by the prayers of God's people I could not endure this constant pressure. I should give up hoping for success.'"<sup>125</sup> To believe that one is assisted by others' prayers is to believe as well in one who hears and answers.<sup>126</sup> In the end, it is unclear why Carwardine does not take the plunge and positively affirm Lincoln's belief in a personal God.<sup>127</sup>

*c) Michael Burlingame*

Michael Burlingame also seems close to acknowledging Lincoln's belief in a personal God. He writes that Lincoln probably meant "to include himself among" those believers in a Living God mentioned in the Second Inaugural.<sup>128</sup> This assertion, however, is somewhat surprising in view of Burlingame's previous references to Lincoln's religion in his comprehensive biography. Burlingame leaves the impression that Lincoln's well-known early skepticism continued until 1860.<sup>129</sup> Burlingame also nowhere fully explains the statement that by 1865 Lincoln probably believed in a "Living God," although he does note that Lincoln's interest in religion increased after his son Eddie's death in 1850,<sup>130</sup> and that Lincoln "reflected more intently on the ways of God after [his son] Willie's death" in 1862.<sup>131</sup> In addition, Burlingame, in describing both the Second Inaugural and what we have called Lincoln's earlier "'partial drafts,'"<sup>132</sup> does not discuss what Lincoln's language indicates about his deepening religious faith.<sup>133</sup>

## 2) Somewhere in between

### a) *Douglas Wilson*

Douglas Wilson ponders what Lincoln's many earlier "references to the divine will," which foreshadowed their subsequent full expression in the Second Inaugural,<sup>134</sup> tell us about "Lincoln's religious beliefs and how they may have informed his thinking on this subject."<sup>135</sup> To Wilson, Lincoln's "theological thinking," although deep,<sup>136</sup> evinced no drastic alteration in his religious views. Wilson admits some change during the presidential years. He is "struck by the numerous appeals to God and religion generally" in Lincoln's writings.<sup>137</sup> But, "if we start with the notion that Lincoln always believed in an overruling Providence, . . . his new position may be understood as something like an extension or amplification brought about by the transforming pressures of the office."<sup>138</sup> But it was not much of an "extension or modification." Lincoln had long "endorsed" the Declaration of Independence's acknowledgment of a creator who endowed humans with inalienable rights.<sup>139</sup> "It was not such a long step from that position to affirming that the war and its duration were governed by the will of the same creator."<sup>140</sup>

Whatever one thinks of Wilson's evaluation of this change in Lincoln's views, it is striking that Wilson nowhere mentions the evidence, in the very documents he emphasizes, of another change in Lincoln's perspective—that he had come to conceive of God as personal.<sup>141</sup> Some might see an explanation in Wilson's contention that Lincoln chose his language, including specifically that of the Second Inaugural, after considering "the dispositions of the audience and the most promising ways to which it might be appealed."<sup>142</sup> Lincoln "had reason to believe that a very large and influential portion of his audience, which was thoroughly Christian and largely Protestant, would be susceptible to the prophetic mode and a theological theme."<sup>143</sup> We have already shown that Lincoln's appreciation of the effectiveness of religious language does not mean he failed to believe his words.<sup>144</sup> Wilson himself agrees: while Lincoln chose his language—in particular, that which blamed both North and South for slavery<sup>145</sup>—with "the hoped-for effect of tempering the vengeful spirit" that he feared would hamper "postwar reconstruction,"<sup>146</sup> he also wanted to communicate "moral truth."<sup>147</sup> One therefore would be mistaken to read Wilson as questioning Lincoln's sincerity.<sup>148</sup>

Wilson's failure to comment on Lincoln's conception of God as personal is especially surprising in view of Wilson's important contribution to our understanding of Lincoln's famous Springfield Farewell

Speech in February 1861.<sup>149</sup> Wilson says that the “most electrifying moment” of the poignant scene was Lincoln’s “emotional plea” for prayer: “I hope you, my friends, will all pray that I will receive . . . Divine Assistance.”<sup>150</sup> Moreover, we believe that the Farewell also evinces Lincoln’s own prayers. In his remarks as probably delivered, Lincoln said he placed his “reliance for support” on the same “Almighty Being” whose aid sustained Washington.<sup>151</sup> He most likely was referring to his own prayers for the same “Divine assistance” for which he had solicited the prayers of his audience.<sup>152</sup> In the revised version of his remarks intended for a reading audience, Lincoln stated, “To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.”<sup>153</sup> The natural reading of this sentence is that Lincoln was referring to his own prayers for his listeners.<sup>154</sup> A man who values others’ prayers on his behalf and prays himself is someone who believes in a personal God.<sup>155</sup>

*b) Allen Guelzo*

To Allen Guelzo, “the view of God that appears in the Second Inaugural as the core of [Lincoln’s] speculation on the war’s meaning could only be God the Judge.”<sup>156</sup> While this may be true concerning “the war’s meaning,”<sup>157</sup> Guelzo ignores much in the speech that is relevant to assessing Lincoln’s overall “view of God.” He does not, for example, mention Lincoln’s many references to prayer and to the Bible.<sup>158</sup> Guelzo elsewhere states that the pressures of war softened Lincoln’s “notion of providence . . . into something more personal.”<sup>159</sup> Lincoln was forced “to confront once again the Calvinist God . . . who possessed a conscious will to intervene, challenge, and reshape human destinies.”<sup>160</sup> Given this 1999 statement, it is surprising that in 2000 Guelzo said that Lincoln “was something close to a Deist. He believed in a very general sense that there was a God, or at least there was a force that gave order and shape and predictability to the world. . . . But he would not move beyond anything more than that, anything more explicit than that. He believed there was some kind of God, but whether this God was a personal God, whether this God gave active direction and intervention to human affairs, that was a subject that, over the years, he tended to shift his position on a good deal.”<sup>161</sup>

How could Lincoln be “close to a Deist” if he believed that God had “a conscious will to intervene”?<sup>162</sup> Moreover, the 2000 quote suggests that Lincoln’s views shifted in varying directions. However, we have shown that Lincoln’s beliefs progressively changed in one way only—toward an eventual firm belief in a personal God. Guelzo does not agree,<sup>163</sup> in part because Lincoln, although coming to believe

that the concept of providence meant “the intervention of a divine personality rather than simply forces or laws,” still had a “strained sense of distance from religion.”<sup>164</sup> Lincoln, for example, admitted his deep need for God’s help, “but he made no claims to having personally received any.”<sup>165</sup> This statement, if accurate, would undercut our claim that Lincoln believed in a personal God. But it is not accurate. As we have shown, Lincoln highly valued prayer and acknowledged how it had strengthened him.<sup>166</sup>

Guelzo also gives inadequate weight to an incident that strongly communicates Lincoln’s personal conception of God—his vow to God concerning the timing of the Emancipation Proclamation. In their contemporaneous diary entries, Salmon Chase and Gideon Welles describe why the Proclamation was issued in September 1862.<sup>167</sup> At a special cabinet meeting, Lincoln said that he had previously resolved to announce emancipation once the rebels had been forced from Maryland. As Guelzo tells it, Lincoln “had said nothing about this determination to anyone; it was a promise he made only to ‘myself and’—here, Chase noted in his diary that Lincoln hesitated—‘to my Maker.’ It was, as Welles described Lincoln’s comments in his own diary, ‘a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle [Antietam], he would consider it an indication of the divine will and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation.’”<sup>168</sup> We agree with William Barton that this episode “settle[s] forever the essentially religious character of Abraham Lincoln. If we had no other word from his lips touching on the subject of religion but this one, we should be assured of his unfaltering belief in God, in a profound sense of his own personal responsibility to God, in prayer, and a personal relationship with God.”<sup>169</sup> Guelzo disagrees. He does not doubt Chase’s and Welles’s accounts. He in fact accords great importance to Lincoln’s vow: it “played a controlling role in the outcome of the Civil War.”<sup>170</sup> Guelzo also recognizes that the vow evinces Lincoln’s changed understanding of God.<sup>171</sup> There is a stark “contrast between the skeptical and infidel Lincoln of the pre-war days who spoke of God as . . . remote and impersonal . . . and the Lincoln who . . . offer[ed] as his reason for the most radical gesture in American history a private vow fulfilled in blood and smoke by the hand of God.”<sup>172</sup> Guelzo also acknowledges that Lincoln’s saying “my God” indicates that “some unprecedented personal reciprocity had been established.”<sup>173</sup> In the end, though, Guelzo surprisingly concludes that Lincoln “could not come the whole way to belief.”<sup>174</sup> He was “something very different from the scoffer or deist or infidel in New Salem in 1831,” but he was

not “a convert.”<sup>175</sup> Rather than the confidence of a personal relationship with God, Lincoln sensed only “abandonment.”<sup>176</sup>

Guelzo suggests the same thing in commenting on the Emancipation Proclamation’s invocation of the “the gracious favor of Almighty God.”<sup>177</sup> This phrase was not just a “flourish,” but “touched directly on Lincoln’s deepest faith . . . [in a] sovereign and predestinating Calvinistic God.”<sup>178</sup> Since this passage refers to Lincoln’s deep faith, how can we claim that Guelzo continues the theme of abandonment? Because Guelzo goes on to say that Lincoln “always carefully left aside any implication that he knew what or who this Almighty God was.”<sup>179</sup> We are puzzled by Guelzo’s conclusion. If Lincoln believed in a “Calvinistic God,” this would seem to indicate that Lincoln had answered some “what” and “who” questions about God. In addition, the many references to Scripture and to prayer in the Second Inaugural demonstrate that Lincoln meant the biblical God.

### 3) No change

#### a) David Donald

David Donald acknowledges the Second Inaugural’s biblical language, but says that Lincoln might just as easily have expressed his argument “in terms of the doctrine of necessity, in which he had long believed.”<sup>180</sup> Lincoln chose instead to speak in terms more readily believed and understood by “a devout, Bible-reading public.”<sup>181</sup> The weaknesses of the please-the-public argument have already been detailed.<sup>182</sup> Donald’s error, however, goes beyond this. He posits that Lincoln at this late date still believed in the doctrine of necessity,<sup>183</sup> and he does not address the evidence we have relied upon, inside and outside the address itself, to show that Lincoln had come to believe in a personal God. Donald thus repeats an earlier mistake made when addressing how Lincoln had “increasingly . . . brooded over the war and his role in it.”<sup>184</sup> Lincoln, “forget[ing] his earlier religious doubts,” now “found comfort and solace in the Bible.”<sup>185</sup> But Donald does not examine whether this new confidence in the Bible showed that Lincoln’s conception of God had changed. He says only that “reading [it] reinforced Lincoln’s long-held belief in the doctrine of necessity.”<sup>186</sup> Because he never contemplates that Lincoln may have moved away from this once-held belief,<sup>187</sup> Donald’s analysis is unhelpful on Lincoln’s mature thinking.<sup>188</sup>

#### b) Fred Kaplan

Like Donald, Fred Kaplan gives an unpersuasive please-the-public explanation of the Second Inaugural.<sup>189</sup> He also suggests, with no textual



support, that the "Living God" referred to in the address may differ from the God who used the war to punish the country for slavery.<sup>190</sup> Kaplan's biggest error, however, is his insistence that Lincoln in the speech referred merely to "some power beyond the human, call it what you will."<sup>191</sup> To Kaplan, this is the only interpretation consistent with Lincoln's "own deism," which "allowed for a God who, having made the world, did not participate in the working out of its ends."<sup>192</sup> Kaplan misinterprets contrary evidence concerning Lincoln's beliefs, such as the Springfield Farewell,<sup>193</sup> and he does not otherwise explain how the Second Inaugural can be read to mean a God who does "not participate." But he does suggest a possible explanation. We speculate that, to Kaplan, Lincoln could not have meant a participatory "Living God" because for Kaplan this phrase connotes, in Christian theology, a loving and caring God.<sup>194</sup> But no such God could have done what Lincoln said—used a terrible war to punish both North and South—especially since Lincoln believed that the North was in the right to oppose slavery.<sup>195</sup> But Kaplan's conception of a "Living God" is incomplete.<sup>196</sup> It is true that both the Old and New Testaments describe God as loving and caring. But He also is a God of holiness and judgment. In both Testaments, God used various means to punish His disobedient people.<sup>197</sup> Both Testaments also portray God as using hardship to instruct in holy living.<sup>198</sup> Thus, we believe Kaplan erred in letting an inaccurate theological presupposition limit his thinking on what Lincoln must have meant.

*c) Adam Gopnik*

Adam Gopnik shares Kaplan's theological misunderstanding. He writes that the Second Inaugural's "vision of Providence, and of God" is too dark to be "quite compatible with any kind of ordinary Protestantism."<sup>199</sup> Lincoln believed "in a shaping power, a divine power, but not in an interceding divinity, a good Father."<sup>200</sup> Gopnik misses a principal point of the address, which was to communicate Lincoln's belief that the "mighty scourge of war" was the result of a judging God's intercession.<sup>201</sup> One therefore is justifiably surprised by Gopnik's assertion that Lincoln was a "maker[] and witness[]" of the great change that . . . marks modern times: the slow emergence from a culture of faith and fear to one of observation and argument, and from a belief in the judgment of divinity to a belief in the verdicts of history and time."<sup>202</sup> Gopnik interprets words that plainly invoke God's judgment as displacing an active God altogether.<sup>203</sup> Could there be an exegesis more dismissive of what Lincoln said<sup>204</sup> and more mistaken concerning Lincoln's beliefs about God?<sup>205</sup>

## Conclusion

Our goal has been to present the case for Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God.<sup>206</sup> To us, the Second Inaugural and the extrinsic evidence plainly demonstrate the largely uncontested point that Lincoln believed in a *sovereign* God. Factual support for Lincoln's belief in a *personal* God is also compelling. We call special attention to the great value Lincoln accorded to prayer, both others' and his own, and the significance he accorded to two of his vows, his first inaugural oath of office and his covenant with God concerning the timing of the Emancipation Proclamation.

We recognize that alternative theories such as please-the-public<sup>207</sup> or strategic-theology<sup>208</sup> will likely continue to garner support. Our problem with such approaches is not their abstract impossibility, but that they do not accommodate all the evidence. In particular, they do not explain Lincoln's own prayer life. There are only a finite number of ways to handle the evidence that Lincoln prayed. One is to reject it completely—to maintain that Lincoln did not pray. In view of the number and variety of the testimonies to Lincoln's personal prayer life, this response strains credulity. Another tack is to admit that Lincoln prayed, but argue that he did so only as a ruse to enhance the impact of his overall please-the-public and/or strategic-theology deceptions. Consider what is required for this explanation to be correct. First, Lincoln must have possessed a level of duplicity completely at odds with his reputation for honesty.<sup>209</sup> Second, Lincoln would have needed an unremitting focus on exploiting opportunities for foisting insincere evidence of his prayer life on credulous observers. This is a highly unlikely scenario. Are we to believe, for example, that Lincoln, on the morning of the First Inaugural, intentionally left the door open when he retired for private prayer, just to enable those nearby to overhear his insincere invocations of God's help?<sup>210</sup> It is much more plausible to acknowledge that Lincoln genuinely believed in a personal God who would hear and answer his prayers.

Some who still reject our claim may be influenced, perhaps without realizing it, by the fact that they themselves do not believe in a personal, sovereign God. Others may find such a belief so outlandish that they are puzzled at its embrace by any rational person. If the much-admired Lincoln so believed, it would raise troubling implications: maybe Lincoln is not so admirable after all, or, conversely, perhaps one's own rejection of a personal, sovereign God needs to be reevaluated. These factors create a powerful incentive to deny that Lincoln believed any such thing.<sup>211</sup>

Anyone seriously interested in Lincoln's religious beliefs should squarely face the evidence. This includes those who do not desire or cannot imagine Lincoln's having believed in a personal, sovereign God. But it also includes those, like us, who do believe in such a God. We too must guard against the risk of concluding that Lincoln believed like us just because we would like that outcome. This article is an effort to show that the facts, if confronted head-on, demonstrate that Abraham Lincoln, by the end of his life, believed in a personal, sovereign God.

## Appendix

Second Inaugural Address  
March 4, 1865

FELLOW-COUNTRYMEN: At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then, a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued, seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the attention, and engrosses the energies of the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

[1] One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. [2] These slaves constituted a peculiar, and powerful interest. [3] All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. [4] To strengthen, perpetuate and extend this interest, was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war, while the government claimed no right to do more, than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it. [5] Neither party expected for the war, the

magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. [6] Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. [7] Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. [8] Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. [9] 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; but let us judge not, that we be not judged. [10] The prayers of both could not be answered—that of neither, has been answered fully. [11] The Almighty has His own purposes. [12] “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.” [13] If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences 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? [14] Fondly do we hope—ferverently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. [15] Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

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 a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.<sup>212</sup>

## Notes

1. Adam Gopnik, *Angels and Ages: A Short Book about Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 126. Unfortunately, as we will demonstrate later, *infra* notes 199–205 and accompanying text, Gopnik himself contributes to needless continued vexation on the content of Lincoln's religious beliefs.

2. Richard J. Carwardine, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), xiii.

3. Whether Lincoln was a Christian is an issue beyond the scope of this article. On this point, Andrew Ferguson describes Michael Burkheimer's *Lincoln's Christianity* as

"earnest and careful and as thorough as a book can be that hopes to treat so serpentine a subject in the span of two hundred pages." Andrew Ferguson, "Lincoln and the Will of God," *First Things* (March 2008), 20. Given unresolved questions like Lincoln's Christianity, Richard Carwardine is correct to say that we "will never get to the bottom of Lincoln's private religious thought, or definitively weigh the competing claims about his personal piety." *Lincoln*, 221. Our argument, however, is that we can confidently affirm Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God. Carwardine apparently disagrees. See *infra* notes 121–27 and accompanying text.

4. We thus disagree with the entry on religion in Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*. Neely notes Lincoln's "heightened . . . religious interests" following his son Willie's death in 1862, plus the many "biblical and religious references in his state papers, thanksgiving proclamations, and speeches of the Civil War period." *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), 261. But Neely attempts virtually no description of the content of Lincoln's beliefs, presumably because he thinks that "no one can be certain what Lincoln's religious views were." *Ibid.* We think that the available evidence strongly supports Lincoln's belief in a personal, sovereign God. But see *infra* note 6.

5. Mark Noll, "The Struggle for Lincoln's Soul," *Books and Culture: A Christian Review* (September/October 1995), 3, 5–7. Andrew Ferguson, although thinking that people often wrongly assume they know more about Lincoln's religion than they actually do, agrees that it is incorrect to conclude there is no certainty whatever about Lincoln's faith. Ferguson, "Lincoln and the Will of God," 20–21, 23. To him, a key source for this confident knowledge is the Second Inaugural, although he does not see the same clear proof in the address as we do. See *infra* note 111.

6. We accept Mark Noll's qualification that there is a limit to how conclusively historical facts can be verified. Lincoln's religious beliefs involve his state of mind, which would ultimately be knowable only to him, regardless of what the extrinsic evidence suggests. Thus, our claim is that the available evidence overwhelmingly indicates that Lincoln came to believe (see *infra* note 13) in a personal, sovereign God. We do not use the phrase, "personal, sovereign God," as a code to signal that Lincoln was a Christian. As previously stated, *supra* note 3, we do not investigate that particular issue here. One can believe in a personal God, i.e., a God who interacts with mankind, without necessarily being a Christian.

7. Noll, "Struggle for Lincoln's Soul," 7.

8. Lincoln's law partner and biographer, William Herndon, wrote that "it is alike just to his memory and the proper legacy of mankind that the whole truth concerning him should be known." William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln: The History and Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln*, introduction and notes by Paul M. Angle, with new introduction by Henry Steele Commager (Cleveland: World, 1942; reprint, New York: Da Capo, 1983), v.

9. See *infra* note 211.

10. This includes not only us as authors but all who want to understand the truth about Lincoln. See *infra* the discussion before and after note 211.

11. Frequency alone is not the only factor. Lincoln invoked God to express his concept of justice pertaining to slavery. See, e.g., *infra* notes 37–38 and accompanying text. The nature of the God in whom Lincoln believed is critical to making sense of his rhetoric. See *infra* note 162.

12. Noll, "Struggle for Lincoln's Soul," 5. Noll commends Merrill Peterson's *Lincoln in American Memory* for providing "an excellent summary of the battle for Lincoln's soul between pious biographers who claim him as a dedicated fellow Christian and

naysaying unbelievers who protest that he was one of them." *Ibid.*, 3. See Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68–69, 76, 79–81, 217–32, 358–62.

13. We realize that Lincoln did not always hold these beliefs. "Most writers on Lincoln's religion [have] recognized the need for a developmental approach. His religion evolved." Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory*, 223–24. While there is compelling evidence that as a young man Lincoln was a religious skeptic, the evidence is at least as strong that over time his skepticism waned substantially. See *ibid.*, 224–27; *infra* notes 67–68, 85–86, 130–31, 159–60 and accompanying text; see also Matthew Pinsker, *Lincoln's Sanctuary: Abraham Lincoln and the Soldiers' Home* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 30. But see *infra* notes 184–88 and accompanying text; *infra* notes 189, 203. For an especially thoughtful discussion of Lincoln's spiritual development, see Nicholas Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation: Emancipation and War," *Civil War History* 46 (Fall 2000): 227–53. On this subject, William Herndon, an important source of evidence for Lincoln's early skepticism, falls short. Paul Angle writes that "there can be little question but that during the last years of his life Lincoln went through a spiritual development with which his former partner was unfamiliar." *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, xlv.

As for Noll's own opinion, his 1995 list says it is "verified" that "Lincoln knew, read, and quoted the Bible" and that he "valued prayer." Noll, "Struggle for Lincoln's Soul," 5. Noll's bottom-line assessment is that Lincoln was "seriously religious," "immersed in the Scriptures," respected God, was eager "to commit the Civil War to divine rule," and possessed a "personal sense of living under the authority of divine providence." *Ibid.*, 5–6. Noll, though, falls short of affirming that Lincoln believed in a personal God. This may in part be explained by Noll's focus on Lincoln's concept of the sovereignty of God rather than the nature of Lincoln's relationship with God. See, e.g., Mark A. Noll, "'Both . . . Pray to the Same God': The Singularity of Lincoln's Faith in the Era of the Civil War," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 18 (Winter 1997): 1–26.

14. See the Appendix for the text of the address.

15. E.g., Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002).

16. James Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision: The Second Inaugural Address* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), xiv.

17. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 426.

18. The Second Inaugural also speaks to some of Lincoln's other religious beliefs, such as his view of the Bible, his attitude toward prayer, and whether there is such a thing as evil. We will discuss such matters only as they bear on our principal claim.

19. We both have observed what Douglas Wilson describes, Lincoln Memorial visitors "stand[ing] in silence" as they read the entire address. Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 284. We have also wondered if they were surprised by the address's starkly religious language, which Frederick Douglass described as "'more like a sermon than a state paper.'" Ronald C. White, Jr., "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount: The Second Inaugural," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 223.

20. The opening paragraph explains why the address will be brief. The second paragraph discusses the outbreak of the war, emphasizing that it was something neither side wanted. Its concluding phrase, "And the war came," foreshadows Lincoln's subsequent argument that God was the ultimate author of the war. As he expressed it elsewhere, the war was a "mighty convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay."

Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to Eliza P. Gurney," Roy P. Basler et al., eds. *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953–1955), 7:535.

21. See Mark Noll, "Both Pray to the Same God," 5. Noll elsewhere refers to the speech's "surprisingly vigorous religious vision." Noll, *America's God*, 6. Jon Meacham uses an even stronger word, "startling," to describe the address's "religiosity." *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 121. Richard Carwardine thinks the speech has "the character of a sermon," *Lincoln*, 246, and Doris Kearns Goodwin says, "More than any of his other speeches, the Second Inaugural fused spiritual faith with politics." *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 699. Even though Mark Neely agrees that the address sounds "more like a sermon than a secular political appeal," *Last Best Hope of Earth: Abraham Lincoln and the Promise of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 156, he unaccountably says that "Lincoln's religious views were related most closely to his private life. . . . He did not mix religion and statesmanship." *Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, 261. The Second Inaugural plainly mixes "religion and statesmanship," not only in its language, but also in how Lincoln's religious convictions drove his attitude toward post-war reconciliation. See Lucas E. Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort: Defining Religion's Role in American Self-Government* (Lanham Md.: Lexington Books, 2000), and "War and Remembrance in Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address," *On Principle* (John M. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, February 2009), 10–11. See also *infra* the discussion preceding note 90.

22. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 13.

23. Rather than engage the issue of what personal pronoun to use for God, we will follow Lincoln's lead by using the masculine form.

24. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 13.

25. Appendix, Para. 3, sentences 14–15.

26. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 13.

27. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 9.

28. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 15.

29. Appendix, Para. 3, sentences 8 (twice), 9, 10 (twice), 14. In addition, Lincoln in Paragraph 4 looks to God to help him discern "the right." This most likely is another allusion to prayer. See *infra* notes 75, 81 and accompanying text.

30. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 8.

31. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 12 (Matthew 18:7); sentence 15 (Psalm 19:9).

32. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 9 (Matthew 7:1 ["judge not"]).

33. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 9 (Lincoln invokes Genesis 3:19 in commenting on the injustice of slavery); sentence 13 (Lincoln applies Matthew 18:7 in characterizing slavery as an offense that God "now wills to remove").

34. Since God did not answer either side's prayers fully, Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 10, the suggestion is that He answered some "yes," some "no," and some only partially.

35. Appendix, Para. 4.

36. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 11.

37. Appendix, Para. 3, sentences 14–15.

38. William Lee Miller labels this passage "the most profound of all condemnations of American slavery." It is a "stark invocation of the justice of God against [the institution] . . . drop of blood for drop of blood." *President Lincoln: The Duty of a Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 411, 410. Stephen B. Oates observes that "Lincoln's vision was close to that of old John Brown, who had prophesied on the day he was hanged . . . that the crime of slavery could not be purged from this guilty land except



by blood." *Abraham Lincoln: The Man Behind the Myths* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 118. True, but there is an even older precursor: namely, Jefferson's fear that God would punish the country for slavery. "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever: that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events: that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest." Thomas Jefferson, "Query XVIII: Manners," *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. and intro. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 215. Lincoln knew of Jefferson's grim forecast and used it against Stephen Douglas in their famous 1858 debates. Abraham Lincoln, "Fifth Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, at Galesburg, Illinois: Mr. Lincoln's Reply," *Collected Works*, 3:220. By 1859, Lincoln expressed his personal agreement with Jefferson's warning. In a widely circulated letter, which declined an invitation to attend a birthday celebration for Jefferson, Lincoln wrote, "Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, cannot long retain it." *Ibid.*, 376. A few months later, Lincoln reiterated this point. Stephen Douglas, according to Lincoln, viewed slavery as an "unimportant" matter morally. "Speech at Columbus, Ohio," *Collected Works*, 3:409, 410. But Lincoln described Jefferson as believing "there was a question of God's eternal justice wrapped up in the enslaving of any race of men . . . and that those who did so braved the arm of Jehovah—that when a nation thus dared the Almighty every friend of that nation had cause to dread His wrath." *Ibid.*, 410. Whose side did Lincoln take? Jefferson's, as clearly implied by Lincoln's challenge to the audience: "Choose ye between Jefferson and Douglas as to what is the true view of this element among us." *Ibid.* James Tackach relies on Lincoln's letter and speech to conclude that by 1859 he was asserting his own belief that "slavery [was] a grievous sin that would be punished eventually by a just God." Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*, 66–68. Lincoln, however, had suggested this view as early as 1856, in a statement to his friend, Joseph Gillespie: "'Slavery was a great and crying injustice, an enormous national crime, and . . . we could not expect to escape punishment for it.'" *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, comp. and ed. Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1996), 169.

39. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 13.

40. Fred Kaplan, *Lincoln: The Biography of a Writer* (New York: Harper, 2008), 354–55.

41. Sean Wilentz finds evidence that Lincoln did not believe in a personal God in the address's phrase, "shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?" (Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 13). Lincoln "seemed at pains not to identify himself as one" of those believers. Wilentz, "Who Lincoln Was," *New Republic* (July 15, 2009), 24–47; quote on page 29. William Miller points out that Reinhold Niebuhr thought that this phrase, since it did not "specifically [number Lincoln] among those believers," revealed "a trace of his youthful skepticism." *President Lincoln*, 408. The text does not insist upon this particular interpretation. Lincoln's language can just as readily be read to include himself as a believer. Michael Burlingame writes that this is what Lincoln "probably" meant. *Abraham Lincoln: A Life*, 2 vols. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 2:768–69. Burlingame observes that Lincoln's "impersonal manner of presenting his argument recalls the impersonal way in which he wrote his autobiographical sketch in 1860, alluding to himself in the third person." *Ibid.*, 768. See Joseph R. Forniari, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 170; White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 145–46. Moreover, as Miller also states, the language of the speech as a whole plainly marks Lincoln as a believer in a living God. Miller, *President Lincoln*,

408–409. (To Miller, whether Lincoln actually believed is a more complicated question; see *infra* notes 112–20 and accompanying text.) Finally, evidence beyond the address demonstrates Lincoln's belief in a living God. See *infra* notes 62–91 and accompanying text.

42. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln*, 118.

43. Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 699; James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 59.

44. White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 216. See also Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 415, 419.

45. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:768.

46. Michael Burlingame, *The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 33.

47. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 271.

48. Appendix, Para. 3, sentence 11.

49. Sidney Mead interprets this phrase as meaning "that all the works of finite men stand always under the judgment of the infinite God—and 'the will of God prevails.'" Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 73.

50. Alfred Kazin calls the words "The Almighty has His own purposes" the "most compelling sentence" of the Second Inaugural. Kazin argues that "Lincoln had come through a terrible experience to submit to a power higher and greater than anything his political ambition had prepared him for" and "felt himself responsible before God for whatever he did and said to guide the nation." He adds, "There is a troubled searching here of God's will, a startling admission by a man who was as self-trusting in religion as he was in law and the art of writing." But does Kazin think Lincoln believed in a personal God? He highlights the "conditionals" in the third paragraph, reflecting "Lincoln's actual reserve." Kazin then concludes that "the terrible war has overwhelmed the Lincoln who identified himself as the man of reason," and now, "in heart-breaking awareness of the restrictions imposed by a mystery so encompassing it can only be called 'God,'" Lincoln "could find no other word for it." Kazin, *God and the American Writer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 120–41, 137, 138.

51. John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 326.

52. White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 223.

53. Oates, *Abraham Lincoln*, 118; see Stephen B. Oates, *With Malice Toward None: The Life of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 410–11. Richard Carwardine concludes that Lincoln stated this assessment as the "only . . . logical explanation" of the high cost of the anticipated Union victory. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 246–47. To James M. McPherson, the Second Inaugural was the "most eloquent expression" of what Lincoln "came to believe" about God's working in human history. "A Passive President?" *Atlantic* (November 1995). Michael Burlingame agrees that the Second Inaugural expressed Lincoln's "conclusion about the will of God." The address was a "stunning revelation of his understanding of the war's cause and the reason for its bloody continuation." *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:711, 769. To Allen Guelzo, Lincoln "had come to see in the war . . . a kind of divine weighing of the republic—not just the South, but South and North together—in which the war's losses were the wages of national sin, payable by both in life and treasure." *Redeemer President*, 417. See Andrew Ferguson, "Lincoln and the Will of God," 23 (the Second Inaugural reflects "Lincoln's deepest contemplation and belief") and Andrew Ferguson, *Looking for Lincoln: Adventures in Abe's America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007), 261–62. See also Gopnik, *Angels and Ages*, 129 ("the

key statement of Lincoln's mature vision"); Meacham, *American Gospel*, 121; Wills, *infra* text accompanying note 104; Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 262 (Lincoln considered this to be a "necessary message").

54. White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 209. White, without giving specific examples, refers to the assertion of "some" that Lincoln understood that "religious language . . . was a major coin of the realm" and "knew he was speaking to a largely Protestant audience, and he adopted their language." White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 125.

55. Kaplan, *Lincoln*, 354, 223. See Sean Wilentz, "Who Lincoln Was," 30: Lincoln "borrowed some clerical language . . . from his beloved King James Bible, the book most widely read and studied by his countrymen."

56. David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 566–67. Donald says the true belief Lincoln chose not to proclaim was his long-held adherence to "the doctrine of necessity" (566). For a brief explanation of this doctrine, see *infra* note 109. See *infra* notes 180–88 and accompanying text for our critique of Donald's argument. Donald apparently thought that Lincoln deliberately misled his audiences as to his true beliefs. One can frame a please-the-public explanation of Lincoln's religious speech less cynically. One might argue that Lincoln had not reached any firm conclusions as to the nature of God, but still chose to use language that he knew would forcefully impact his Bible-steeped audience. This theory, while plausible in the abstract, is probably inaccurate, given the evidence, especially that concerning Lincoln's prayer life and the importance he accorded to vows to God, that his language conveyed propositional truths he had come to believe. On Lincoln's prayer life, see *infra* note 120; *infra* notes 75, 81, 151–52, and accompanying text. On Lincoln's vows, see *infra* notes 118–20, 167–73, and accompanying text.

57. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 246 (Lincoln's speech was not celebratory, much less triumphant, unlike what the crowd expected); Neely, *Last Best Hope of Earth*, 156 (not what the people "want[ed] to hear"); Noll, *America's God*, 428; White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 211, 223; White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 36, 48, 87, 203; Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 271, 7.

58. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 406. See Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 698 (the crowd was "disappointed" if it "expected a speech exalting recent Union victories"; Lincoln instead "urged a more sympathetic understanding" of the South, in part by stating that God's will did not fully align with Northern hopes); Garry Wills, "Lincoln's Greatest Speech?" *Atlantic* (September 1999), 62–63 (the address defied expectations not only because Lincoln did not voice "the expectable, even forgivable, emotion . . . that the rightful cause had triumphed," but also because he said very little about the ongoing war and failed seriously to engage "matters that were haunting everyone on the eve of victory," e.g., the status of both former slaves and the soon-to-be conquered Confederacy).

59. Forniery, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith*, 171. Beecher's remarks were made on April 14, 1865, the day Lincoln was shot, at the ceremony marking the raising of the United States flag over Fort Sumter. Noll, "Both Pray to the Same God," 5–6.

60. Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency: From George Washington to George W. Bush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 120; see Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 247 (the concept of shared Northern and Southern guilt "affronted many").

61. Lincoln himself believed that the speech was not "immediately popular." Letter to Thurlow Weed, *Collected Works*, 8:356.

62. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 254. We suppose one could argue that these "forerunners," rather than showing Lincoln's sincerity, instead reveal his sustained effort to draft please-the-public language. The flaw in this theory is that the Second Inaugural was hardly calculated to please his audience.

63. William Miller relies upon Douglas Wilson to conclude that the document "was probably written in 1864, in the philosophical run-up to the Second Inaugural, of which it is an anticipation." Miller, *President Lincoln*, 406. Michael Burlingame agrees with the likelihood of the 1864 date. *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:711. Richard Carwardine, who once accepted the 1862 date, *Lincoln*, 226, now believes that "in or nearer the year 1864" is more likely. Richard Carwardine, "Whatever Shall Appear to Be God's Will, I Will Do: The Chicago Initiative and Lincoln's Proclamation," *Lincoln's Proclamation: Emancipation Reconsidered*, ed. William A. Blair and Karen Fisher Younger (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 75–101, 101 n. 51. Many scholars, however, still cite the 1862 date with no apparent qualms. E.g., Donald, *Lincoln*, 371; Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 326; Noll, *America's God*, 431; Parrillo, "Lincoln's Calvinist Transformation," 245; Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*, 96; White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 122 (although he does note a dispute as to when in September 1862 Lincoln wrote; 209). Even if 1864 is the correct date for the Meditation, there is other proof that Lincoln began reflecting on God's will pertaining to the war as early as 1862. See infra note 69, infra notes 73–77, and accompanying text. An 1864 date for the Meditation also obviously would not alter its proper characterization as a precursor of the 1865 address. Douglas Wilson believes the Meditation to be Lincoln's "most direct confrontation of the premise" forming the "intellectual core of the Second Inaugural . . . that whatever was happening in the Civil War, however difficult to understand and painful to endure, was precisely what God wanted to happen." *Lincoln's Sword*, 254.

64. *Collected Works*, 5:403.

65. *Ibid.*, 5:404.

66. *Ibid.*

67. Michael Nelson, Introduction, in William E. Barton, *The Soul of Abraham Lincoln* (1920; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005), xxxvii–xxxviii. The handbill was issued by Lincoln in his 1846 congressional election contest with the Rev. Peter Cartwright to rebut "the charge of atheism." See Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:238–40.

68. To Lincoln, "the war itself [had become a] clue that more was operating in the universe than mere necessity." Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (paperback ed., New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 168. "A living, thinking, reasoning, willing God, unlike a 'POWER,' would rise above predictability, rise perhaps to some other possibility that no one had anticipated." *Ibid.*

69. See Donald, *Lincoln*, 371 ("an informal memorandum to himself"); Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 326; Noll, *America's God*, 431 ("meant for Lincoln's eyes alone"); White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 214 (a "private musing"). There is another important example of Lincoln's private expression of his struggle with the subjects dealt with in the Meditation. In the summer or fall of 1861, Lincoln asked his friend Orville Browning, "Suppose God is against us in our view on the subject of slavery in this country, and our method of dealing with it?" Carwardine, "Whatever Shall Appear to Be God's Will," 92. "It was the first time that the devout Browning could recall that Lincoln showed any hint 'that he was thinking deeply of what a higher power than man sought to bring about by the great events then transpiring.'" Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, 167.

70. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, "Lincoln and the Churches," reprinted in Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, Appendix VIII, 384.

71. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*, 126–27.

72. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 226.

73. *Collected Works*, 5:478.

74. "I am . . . glad to know that I have your sympathy and prayers." *Ibid.* For other

evidence that Lincoln appreciated others' prayers for him, see *infra* notes 80, 125, 150 and accompanying text.

75. *Collected Works*, 5:478. One could argue that these phrases do not necessarily refer to Lincoln's own prayers. In September 1862, Lincoln wrote of the steps he took to learn the will of God: "These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case [whether to emancipate the slaves], ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right." *Collected Works*, 5:420. Exercising one's reason, of course, is not incompatible with prayer for God's wisdom in doing so. Lincoln's words to Gurney connote this very thing: he would "do his best," i.e., study and think, "in the light which [God] affords me" after seeking his aid, i.e., the guidance God offers in response to prayer. This interpretation is supported by other evidence that Lincoln prayed for God's assistance. See *infra* note 120; *infra* notes 81, 151–52 and accompanying text.

76. *Collected Works*, 5:478.

77. *Ibid.* This affirmation of God's rule is an obvious precursor to the Second Inaugural. A month earlier, Lincoln foreshadowed another idea developed in that address: that ascertaining God's will was complicated because both sides in the war prayed for and expected God's favor. *Collected Works*, 5:420; see also *ibid.*, 5:279. Even earlier, in 1859, Lincoln had prefigured yet another main theme of the Second Inaugural: that the war was God's punishment on the country for slavery. See *supra* notes 37–38 and accompanying text.

78. *Collected Works*, 7:282. This statement obviously communicates Lincoln's belief in God's sovereignty. Douglas Wilson observes that Lincoln made the same point shortly afterward in a speech at the Baltimore Sanitary Fair: "'So true it is that man proposes, and God disposes.'" Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 253 (quoting *Collected Works*, 7:301).

79. *Collected Works*, 7:282. To reference God's character traits is to acknowledge a personal God. See *supra* text accompanying notes 26–28.

80. *Collected Works*, 7:535. For why prayer connotes a personal God, see *supra* text accompanying notes 29–35.

81. *Collected Works*, 7:535. See *supra* note 75 and accompanying text.

82. *Collected Works*, 7:535.

83. *Ibid.*

84. There is other important corroborating evidence, including (a) Lincoln's initial presidential oath of office, *infra* notes 118–20 and accompanying text; (b) the significant references to prayer in the Springfield Farewell, *infra* notes 149–55 and accompanying text; and (c) Lincoln's vow pertaining to issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, *infra* notes 167–73 and accompanying text.

85. *Collected Works*, 8:356.

86. *Ibid.* Ronald White stresses the significance of this statement to Weed. It is Lincoln's "own exegesis" of the address, showing that its "central theme . . . was 'The Almighty has his own purposes.' Lincoln's beliefs have unquestionably moved far beyond any doctrine of necessity or environmental determinism. In the Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln 'abandoned his secular view of history and resigned himself to serving as an instrument in the hands of God.'" White, "Lincoln's Sermon on the Mount," 223.

87. *Collected Works*, 8:356. The specific "truth" Lincoln thought it necessary to convey was that there was "a difference of purpose" between God and man. To reject this truth would be to deny that "God govern[s] the world," something that Lincoln could not do.

88. *Collected Works*, 8:356. The war's devastation, along with emancipation, Lincoln

confesses, served as a lesson in humility to the president, who expected neither outcome when he first took office. So he decided that to admit as much to the nation—and at his reinauguration, no less—would permit him to share the lesson with all interested and affected parties. In keeping with his admonition that one should judge not lest he be judged, Lincoln renders a judgment that applies first and foremost to himself.

89. Given Lincoln's familiarity with the Bible, he would have been familiar with the spiritual concept of humbling oneself in the sight of the Lord; see, e.g., Exodus 10:3, 2 Kings 22:19, 2 Chronicles 34:27, James 4:6, 10, and 1 Peter 5:5–6.

90. See Morel, *Lincoln's Sacred Effort*, 199, 200, 207.

91. It is theoretically possible that Lincoln used theological arguments he did not believe only to achieve political objectives. We later discuss and reject this alternative. See *infra* notes 100–105 and accompanying text.

92. Other scholars agree with this conclusion. See *infra* note 108 and accompanying text.

93. Some might contend that the public utterances of all politicians should be distrusted as a matter of course. As Glen E. Thurow observes more generally: "Except for a few expressions of sympathy, . . . all of Lincoln's religious expressions appear as part of utterances that directly address political problems, that are given in a political context, or that intend to have political effects." *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), xii. Even if one rejects this particular reason for skepticism concerning Lincoln's religious statements, our text discusses other possible grounds for questioning his sincerity.

94. Donald, *Lincoln*, 566. Donald also characterizes Lincoln's second letter to Eliza Gurney, which also spoke of God's prevailing will, see *supra* notes 80–83 and accompanying text, as containing a "comforting doctrine [that] allowed [Lincoln] to live with himself by shifting some of the responsibility for all the suffering." Donald, *Lincoln*, 514–15.

95. Don. E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and Context: Collected Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987), 162–63.

96. At some point, these theories exceed any reasonable threshold of plausibility. Lincoln-as-fraud also obviously contradicts his well-known reputation for honesty. According to Noah Brooks, writing in 1865, "Honest Old Abe" has passed into the language of our time and country as a synonym for all that is just and honest in man. Yet thousands of instances, unknown to the world, might be added to those already told of Mr. Lincoln's great and crowning virtue. He disliked innuendoes, concealments, and subterfuges." "Personal Recollections," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* (May 1865), 225. Those arguing for the sincerity of Lincoln's religious language have long emphasized this weakness in any deceive-the-public explanation. James Reed, writing in 1873, pointed out the dilemma that evidence of Lincoln's deepening religious faith presents to those who want "to fasten on him the charge of permanent skepticism." While generally praising Lincoln's honesty, these same people, by arguing that Lincoln was only using religion for political advantage, "attribute to him the very grossest duplicity." James Reed, "The Later Life and Religious Sentiments of Abraham Lincoln," reprinted in Appendix IV, Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 318; see *infra* note 209 and accompanying text.

97. William Miller understands how a "logician might assume that Lincoln affirmed the Almighty's almighty purposes . . . to relieve himself of responsibility for the carnage in which he was implicated, off-loading it onto an all-controlling Providence." But Miller ultimately concludes that "its effects were, rather, personal and national humility and self-criticism: while we act, responsible for our actions, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see it, we recognize that there are purposes beyond our own." Miller,



*President Lincoln*, 406. See Meacham, *American Gospel*, 119; Tackach, *Lincoln's Moral Vision*, 138–39, 145–46.

98. *Collected Works*, 5:537.

99. Lincoln believed he was “an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty.” *Collected Works*, 4:236. Well before assuming the presidency, Lincoln understood himself as acting within the providence of God’s overarching will. For example, in July 1842 he made playful reference to his part in uniting his close friend, Joshua Speed, with Speed’s eventual wife, Fanny: “I always was superstitious; and as part of my superstition, I believe God made me one of the instruments of bringing your Fanny and you together, which union, I have no doubt He had fore-ordained. Whatever he designs, he will do for me yet” (emphasis in original). *Ibid.*, 1:289. According to Noah Brooks, Lincoln, when misunderstood by others, was comforted “to know that no thought or intent of his escaped the observation of that Judge by whose final decree he expected to stand or fall in this world and the next.” “Personal Recollections,” 226. See also *Collected Works*, 5:146 (Lincoln, in a message to Congress, refers to his “great responsibility to my God”); *Collected Works*, 7:302 (Lincoln says he is “responsible . . . on my final account to God” for the treatment accorded to captured “colored troops”); Parrillo, “Lincoln’s Calvinist Transformation,” 247 (Lincoln’s fear of God’s judgment upon him should he “roll back emancipation”); *infra* notes 118–20 and accompanying text (Lincoln’s sense of the special obligation imposed by invoking God in his first inaugural oath of office).

100. See *supra* the discussion preceding note 90.

101. This strategic-theology argument differs from the please-the-public theory previously discussed. Lincoln arguably could have realized that his Northern audience would not enjoy being labeled co-sinners with the South. He nonetheless might have hoped that serious believers would eventually take the point to heart and therefore be influenced to support Lincoln’s milder approach to reuniting the country. Assessing possible Southern responses to Lincoln’s words is more complicated. Some would not have liked Lincoln’s stance on the sinfulness of slavery, but presumably none would have objected to Lincoln’s spreading any blame to include the North.

102. Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 215. This could be read to suggest a utilitarian motivation, not conviction.

103. *Ibid.*, 217.

104. Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 177.

105. Wills, “Lincoln’s Greatest Speech?” 66–68. Wills does not address the question of whether Lincoln conceived of a personal God. See *infra* note 111.

106. See *supra* notes 62–91 and accompanying text.

107. See *supra* note 12 and accompanying text.

108. See *supra* text accompanying note 5. These three think that the Second Inaugural itself would justify this addition: Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln’s Political Faith*, 169; Tackach, *Lincoln’s Moral Vision*, 142; White, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech*, 146–48, 198. Others in this category are Elton Trueblood and William J. Wolf. See Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 136–38; Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 179, 181–86. Other scholars, while not according such significance to the Second Inaugural in itself, conclude on the basis of the entire historical record that Lincoln believed in a personal, sovereign God. This group includes William E. Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, see *infra* note 206; Michael Nelson, Introduction, in Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*; Parrillo, “Lincoln’s Calvinist Transformation”; Ronald D. Rietveld, “Lincoln and Religion,” *Sacred History* (March/April 2006): 20–34, 90, 92–96; and Wayne C. Temple, *Abraham Lincoln: From Skeptic to Prophet* (Mahomet, Ill.: Mayhaven, 1995).



109. David Donald writes that Lincoln “from his earliest days . . . had a sense that his destiny was controlled by some larger force, some Higher Power.” *Lincoln*, 15; see 514. Lincoln accepted “what was called the Doctrine of Necessity, which he defined as the belief ‘that the human mind is impelled to action, or held in rest by some power, over which the mind itself has no control.’” *Ibid.*, 15; see *infra* note 191. Allen Guelzo argues that the Doctrine of Necessity did not necessarily depend upon any kind of God, deistic or not, but may have been attributed “to a comparatively impersonal *cause* or *force*.” Guelzo, “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 18 (Winter 1997): 64. Guelzo suggests that the particular way Lincoln understood it does not really matter, *ibid.*, 69, a position that we find surprising. See *infra* note 162.

110. For what we mean by “personal,” see *supra* text accompanying notes 22–35.

111. These classifications admittedly are imprecise, and the evidence for assigning someone to one category rather than another is not always conclusive. We have used our best judgment. There are other scholars, including Mark Noll and Garry Wills, who, in discussing Lincoln’s religion, focus on the “God’s judgment” aspects of the Second Inaugural, and do not, through its language or otherwise, comprehensively engage the issue of Lincoln’s final understanding of the nature of God. For Noll, see Noll, “Both Pray to the Same God,” 1–26; *America’s God*, 426–38; *supra* note 13. For Wills, see *Under God*, 217–18; *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 177–89; “Lincoln’s Greatest Speech.” This group also includes Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals*, 698–99; Andrew Ferguson, “Lincoln and the Will of God,” 23; James M. McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln*, 59 and “A Passive President?”; and Stephen Oates, *With Malice Toward None*, 410–11.

112. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 408.

113. *Ibid.* Incidentally, Miller’s analysis of the Second Inaugural in 2008’s *President Lincoln* is substantially the same as the one given in his “first venture into the Lincoln field,” a 1980 essay on the address. *Ibid.*, 472 (referring to William Lee Miller, “Lincoln’s Second Inaugural: The Zenith of Statecraft,” *The Center Magazine* [(July / August 1980)]: 53–64).

114. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 408.

115. *Ibid.*, 409. But Miller himself seems to repudiate this notion by observing that “on this topic [Lincoln] surely did not say what most in the churches might have expected him to say.” *Ibid.*, 409 n.

116. *Ibid.*, 411. Even this statement is not quite definitive. By referring to the “element” of will-exercising “that marks religious faith,” is Miller perhaps suggesting that additional elements are required?

117. *Ibid.*, 412. From its context, it is possible that Miller here was referring to the ultimately uncertain degree of Lincoln’s belief in orthodox Christianity, not to his belief in a personal God. Even if so, we still do not read Miller as unequivocally asserting Lincoln’s adherence to the latter. Our conclusion is supported by Miller’s statement elsewhere that Lincoln “does *seem* either to have held all along or to have come to during the terrible pressures of the war—perhaps more strongly after his son Willie’s death in 1862—a belief in the God that Bible-believers believe in.” Miller, *Lincoln’s Virtues: An Ethical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 89 (emphasis added).

118. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 25 (referring to the First Inaugural, *Collected Works*, 4:271). Lincoln was obviously referring to the “So help me God” that has always been part of the presidential oath even though the Constitution does not prescribe that phrase.

119. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 25.

120. There is other evidence of Lincoln’s personal interaction with God in connection

with the First Inaugural. Mary Lincoln told the Rev. Noyes Miner that Lincoln, on the morning of the address, spent time in private but audible prayer (due to a partially open door), in which "he commended his family, his country and himself to God's protecting care." Miner, *Personal Reminiscences of Abraham Lincoln* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1882), 48–49. Miner's account of Mary Lincoln's telling of this incident is not included in the Fehrenbachers' study of Lincoln's recollected words, presumably because Mrs. Lincoln spoke of a private prayer she overheard rather than words directed to any person. We note elsewhere, however, that the Fehrenbachers express a general skepticism concerning any of Miner's statements relating to Lincoln's religion, a negative bias that they do not explain. See *infra* note 125.

121. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 247. He does not specifically state what parts of the address convey this concept of God. For our own views, see *supra* notes 22–38 and accompanying text.

122. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 225–26; see 227 ("some movement toward the evangelical mainstream"). Carwardine repeats these views in a recent essay. Carwardine, "Whatever Shall Appear to Be God's Will," 92–93. This wartime evolution in Lincoln's thinking built upon past development, for to Carwardine, "there are reasonable grounds for believing that the mature Lincoln of the 1850s was more receptive to Protestant orthodoxy than he had been twenty years earlier." *Lincoln*, 34; see 4.

123. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 227–28. Carwardine also writes that Lincoln's invocation of God's favor in the Emancipation Proclamation interjected that document with "his private faith." Carwardine, "Whatever Shall Appear to Be God's Will," 96. See *infra* notes 177–78 and accompanying text.

124. And why again say "more personal" instead of just "personal"?

125. Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 235. Carwardine quotes the recollection of Noyes Miner, a Springfield pastor and neighbor of the Lincolns. Interestingly, the Fehrenbachers rate this story as a "C," which means that the quotation was "recorded noncontemporaneously." *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, 330, lii. While this grade is noncommittal on the issue of authenticity, in a preface to Miner's reminiscences, they state that "the religiosity expressed in some of the passages that follow may reflect Miner's capacity for invention or Lincoln's capacity for taking on the coloration of his audience." *Ibid.*, 330. That religiosity, of course, could also very well reflect Lincoln's actual beliefs. The Fehrenbachers give no explanation for why one should accept their skeptical interpretive predisposition. Carwardine states no doubts about Miner's account, which, after all, is consistent with Lincoln's often-expressed gratitude for prayers on his behalf. See *supra* notes 74, 80 and accompanying text; *infra* note 150 and accompanying text.

126. We recognize that even an unbeliever could receive comfort and encouragement from others' prayers as evidence of their concern and support. It is more likely, however, that Lincoln was alluding to the sustenance God gave him in response to others' prayers. See *infra* note 150 and accompanying text. The evidence is compelling that Lincoln also sought help from God through his own prayers. See *supra* note 120, *infra* note 152.

127. Carwardine is noted for his emphasis on Lincoln's use of religious arguments to appeal to the Northern religious constituency that was so important to the war effort. See, e.g., Richard J. Carwardine, "Lincoln, Evangelical Religion, and American Political Culture in the Era of the Civil War," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 18 (Winter 1997): 27–55; *Lincoln*, x–xi, 274–82, 313. Carwardine, however, does not argue that Lincoln was disingenuous in his choice of religious language. See *infra* note 148.

128. Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:768–69; see *supra* note 41. We believe that Jon

Meacham would agree with this statement. To him, the God Lincoln wrote about in the Meditation on the Divine Will “was no amorphous source of intelligence, no Platonic form, but an active, involved, and consummately mysterious Lord whose will was at work in the world.” *American Gospel*, 115–16. Meacham also recounts Lincoln’s “deal with the Almighty” concerning the timing of emancipation, *ibid.*, 117; see *infra* notes 167–73 and accompanying text, and Lincoln’s acknowledgment that he needed prayer to cope with Willie’s death (122). In the end, though, Meacham unaccountably does not definitively assert Lincoln’s belief in a personal God: “Perhaps . . . somewhere in his soul Lincoln held out a hope that at the end of the feeling, the reasoning, the questioning, and the doubting, he, too, would emerge from the twilight, sure and certain of a divine order” (132). See also Gabor Boritt, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech Nobody Knows* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) (Lincoln’s “religious outlook” became more God-focused during the War (120–21). “He added ‘under God’ to his remarks at Gettysburg” and relied upon God “‘to see the right’ of abolishing slavery.” *Ibid.* But Boritt still is somehow able to conclude that Lincoln “showed no inclination to build a personal relationship with God.” *Ibid.*, 121.).

129. *Abraham Lincoln*, 1:83–84, 239.

130. *Ibid.*, 1:359.

131. *Ibid.*, 2:299; see *supra* note 4.

132. See *supra* note 62 and accompanying text.

133. See *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:710–11, 767–69.

134. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 261; see *supra* notes 62–83 and accompanying text.

135. *Ibid.*, 261.

136. *Ibid.*, 252.

137. *Ibid.*, 261.

138. *Ibid.*, 262.

139. *Ibid.*

140. *Ibid.*

141. See *supra* notes 62–83 and accompanying text.

142. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 262.

143. *Ibid.*, 262–63.

144. See *supra* notes 100–105 and accompanying text.

145. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 271.

146. *Ibid.*, 262.

147. *Ibid.* Wilson later quotes Lincoln’s letter to Thurlow Weed, in which Lincoln flatly states that the address contained “‘a truth which [he] thought needed to be told’” (276); see *supra* notes 84–89 and accompanying text.

148. The same is true of Richard Carwardine. Wilson correctly notes Carwardine’s emphasis on how Lincoln “well understood the importance of gaining the support of religious groups and denominations, which he worked at by actively cultivating their leaders.” Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 262; see *supra* note 127. But it would be incorrect to conclude that Carwardine brands Lincoln’s religious language as exclusively instrumentalist. Carwardine quite clearly differentiates between his discussion of Lincoln’s personal religious beliefs and his argument that Lincoln mobilized religious believers to support the war effort. See, e.g., Carwardine, *Lincoln*, 313. He devotes considerable effort to assessing Lincoln’s deepening personal faith, see *supra* notes 121–27 and accompanying text, which nowhere suggests that Lincoln was insincere in the Second Inaugural. See *supra* notes 53, 57, 60, 72 and accompanying text.

149. Wilson differentiates between the “official” published version of the Farewell and Lincoln’s remarks as actually given. *Lincoln's Sword*, 11–14. He argues that the most

likely spoken version is the one labeled "B Version" by *Collected Works*. See Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 13; *Collected Works*, 4:190.

150. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 13–14. This appeal for prayer was emphasized by Mary Lincoln in an 1866 interview with William Herndon. Rietveld, "Lincoln and Religion," 32. Wilson recounts that Lincoln's spontaneous plea for prayer led to an "emotional exchange between [him] and the crowd," in which Lincoln's "exhortation to pray elicited choked exclamations of 'We will do it; we will do it.'" Wilson, "Lincoln's Sword," 13. By his own words, Lincoln sought not merely future demonstrations of people's emotional commitment to him, but their invocations of God's help. There is considerable additional evidence that Lincoln coveted others' prayers for him. See supra notes 74, 80, 125 and accompanying text.

151. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 13; *Collected Works*, 4:190 ("B Version").

152. See supra note 150 and accompanying text. That Lincoln prayed for God's help is corroborated by the recollection of Noah Brooks, who in 1865 wrote that Lincoln once said, "'I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day.'" Brooks, "Personal Recollections," 226. The Fehrenbachers give this quote a "D" rating, which means "there is more than average doubt" about its authenticity. *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, 50, liii. Their reason is that the "date and context of this remark are not specified, and it is not clear that Brooks was himself the auditor." *Ibid.*, 50. But Brooks's title, "Personal Recollections," suggests that he is recounting his own interactions with Lincoln. And how does the failure to state the date and context of the remark suggest that he misreported its content? Brooks was a trusted friend of Lincoln's, slated to serve as his personal secretary, and the remark in question is consistent with Lincoln's known views, as the Springfield Farewell makes clear. We therefore see little reason to question Brooks's account. Interestingly, the Fehrenbachers state no specific reason for doubting the authenticity of another of Brooks's recollections concerning Lincoln's prayer life: Lincoln told Brooks "'that after he went to the White House he kept up the habit of daily prayer. Sometimes [Lincoln] said it was only ten words, but those ten words he had.'" Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 327; see Fehrenbacher, *Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln*, 47, lii. But see Andrew Ferguson, "Lincoln and the Will of God," 21 ("We don't know whether Lincoln told [Brooks] this or whether Brooks simply willed it into a fact by asserting it.").

153. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 13–14 (citing the "A Version" of the Farewell in *Collected Works*, 4:190).

154. There is additional compelling evidence that Lincoln himself prayed. See supra notes 120, 152; supra notes 75, 81 and accompanying text.

155. We thus disagree with Martin Marty's comment on the Springfield Farewell. Marty argues that one should "not read too much" into Lincoln's language, which "helped establish him as a friend to morality and displayed his readiness to let people think of this non-church member as a Christian." Martin E. Marty, "The War-Time Lincoln and the Ironic Tradition in America," 39th Annual Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture (Gettysburg, Penn.: Gettysburg College, 2001), 21. But Marty asserts that things soon changed: "The war . . . rather consistently [led] Lincoln to express a more personalized view of Providence." *Ibid.*, 23.

156. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 419.

157. Guelzo does not literally mean "only . . . God the Judge." The address also evinces Lincoln's appeal to "the sovereign providence whom he had long before decided could not be anticipated, but only yielded to." *Ibid.*, 418.

158. As we have shown, both of these support the concept of a personal God. See

supra notes 29–35 and accompanying text. Guelzo also does not acknowledge or discuss the fact that the speech demonstrates Lincoln's belief in a God with both a conscious will and attributes of character. See supra notes 22–28 and accompanying text.

159. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 325.

160. *Ibid.*, 327. Lincoln now believed in “the intervention of an intelligent will” and “the intervention of a divine personality.” *Ibid.*, 327, 328; see supra note 68.

161. *Abraham Lincoln: Great American Historians on Our Sixteenth President*, ed. Brian Lamb and Susan Swain (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008), 190. Michael Lind also argues that Lincoln remained a deist. His “non-Christian fatalism—the ‘doctrine of necessity’—persisted throughout his life” and reflected nothing so much as a kind of “post-Christian deism.” Michael Lind, *What Lincoln Believed: The Values and Convictions of America's Greatest President* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 56, 51.

162. Supra note 160 and accompanying text; see supra note 63. We are equally puzzled that elsewhere Guelzo suggests that it really does not make much difference what Lincoln believed about the source of the power that gave order to the world: “Whether . . . Lincoln actually believed in a personal God . . . or merely . . . habitually personalized with the term ‘God’ the gigantic fate that he believed relentlessly ruled and judged all human events is almost beside the point.” “Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity,” 69. According to Guelzo's latest writings about Lincoln, it makes all the difference in the world. Lincoln, according to Guelzo, reached the point where he could only talk about slavery in categories of right and wrong determined by Lincoln's understanding of the “justice of God.” See infra note 174. Could a “gigantic fate” be the source for understanding divine justice?

163. See infra text accompanying note 174.

164. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 328.

165. *Ibid.*, 328.

166. See supra note 120; supra notes 74–75, 80–81, 125–26, 150–52 and accompanying text.

167. See Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln*, 2:407–408.

168. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 341.

169. Barton, *Soul of Abraham Lincoln*, 286. Barton stresses that “this was no platitude uttered to meet the expectation of the religious people of the United States . . . [or] to fit whatever religious desire might lie in the minds of those who heard him . . . . It was the sincere expression of the abiding faith of Abraham Lincoln in God, prayer, and duty.” *Ibid.* See infra note 172.

170. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 447; see 454.

171. In *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, Guelzo's discussion of the vow follows an account of several incidents demonstrating to Guelzo that Lincoln was pondering the possibility “that God was not a ‘POWER’ after all but a personality who consciously moved all things by his own will.” See *ibid.*, 167–69; supra note 67 and accompanying text. But how was God's will to be discerned? Lincoln told a group of ministers that “the days of miracles” were over, but nonetheless “in fact . . . ask[ed] for one” via the vow. *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, 168–69. “If there was a God who twisted human destinies around the spindle of his will, it was time to test him, like Gideon of old.” *Ibid.*, 169.

172. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 342. Guelzo stresses how surprised the cabinet must have been: “No one who knew Lincoln could have ever predicted that he would pop familiar references to the Ancient of Days into a cabinet discussion, and Chase was so amazed that he asked Lincoln to repeat himself just to be sure he had heard him aright.” *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*, 171. There is an obvious explanation—those “who

knew Lincoln” did not actually know him. They were justifiably surprised because such language was unusual for Lincoln. Miller, *President Lincoln*, 260. But it is apparent that they also failed to understand how far Lincoln’s conception of God had evolved. Guelzo recognizes that the vow itself is evidence of Lincoln’s changing beliefs. See *supra* note 171 and accompanying text; *infra* text accompanying note 173.

173. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 342.

174. *Ibid.*, 463. In *Lincoln: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 127, Guelzo makes the equally surprising statement that Lincoln was a “consistently secular man.” Especially surprising because, in the very same sentence, Guelzo says that Lincoln could not speak “of equality and politics in ways that did not conform to the eternal principles of right and wrong; nor did he hesitate to chart out a path for a political future . . . by reminding [Americans] that the future of liberal democracy had to conform itself, whether it liked it or not, to the dictates of the justice of God.” *Ibid.*, 127–28; see *supra* note 162. We do not see how this reflects a “secular” worldview.

175. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 463. The assertion that Lincoln was “very different from” a deist is inconsistent with Guelzo’s characterization of Lincoln’s “peculiar providentialism” as “Calvinized deism,” *ibid.*, 447, and his 2000 statement that Lincoln was “something close to a Deist.” See *supra* text accompanying note 161.

176. Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 463. This assessment seems inconsistent with what Guelzo says about Lincoln in a 2006 essay, “The Prudence of Abraham Lincoln,” *First Things* (January 2006), 11. In extolling Lincoln’s prudence, Guelzo says that its “most obvious example . . . is his handling of slavery and emancipation,” and “no characteristic of Lincoln’s prudence on emancipation . . . was more remarkable than his invocation of providence” via his covenant with God concerning the issuance of the proclamation. *Ibid.*, 11–12. In 2009, Guelzo stated that Lincoln “had come to his great act, not as a confident progressive, but as a humble suppliant of the Divine will.” *Lincoln*, 106–107. But how, if Lincoln believed that God had abandoned him, was it prudent to depend upon God’s disposition of events to guide his actions on such a significant issue? Trusting God makes sense only if one believes not only that God exists, but also that He has the will and power to intervene in human affairs.

177. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, 203. The phrase was added “at the last minute” upon the suggestion of Salmon Chase. *Ibid.*

178. *Ibid.*; see *supra* note 68. Richard Carwardine writes that this phrase turned “a legal document that could be defended upon [Lincoln’s] war powers into one that also acknowledged his private faith.” Carwardine, “Whatever Shall Appear to Be God’s Will,” 96.

179. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation*, 203.

180. Donald, *Lincoln*, 566.

181. *Ibid.*, 567.

182. See *supra* notes 54–89 and accompanying text.

183. For a brief explanation of this doctrine, see *supra* note 109.

184. Donald, *Lincoln*, 514.

185. *Ibid.*

186. *Ibid.*

187. Donald does acknowledge that Lincoln as president more “frequently asked for God’s aid” than he had before, and that following Willie’s death “he increasingly turned to religion for solace.” But he “did not experience a religious conversion . . . nor did he abandon his fundamental fatalism.” *Ibid.*, 337.

188. This is also our view of Sean Wilentz’s assessment of Lincoln’s religious beliefs.

Wilentz refers to a “perennial puzzle in Lincoln scholarship: the increasingly religious tone of [his] speeches after 1862, culminating in his second inaugural address.” “Who Lincoln Was,” 29. The most obvious solution to this puzzle is that Lincoln’s views had changed. Wilentz, though, asserts that Lincoln, although admittedly attending church more often and deriving some benefit from the preaching, remained a “Victorian doubter,” who never came to believe in a living God. See *ibid.*, 29–30. Wilentz does not discuss all the evidence to the contrary. Stewart Winger also never moves Lincoln beyond the doctrine-of-necessity phase, commenting that in the Second Inaugural Lincoln “returned to his doctrine of necessity” and a “providential and deterministic outlook.” *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 205, 206.

189. See *supra* text accompanying note 55. In fact, Kaplan uses this argument as a general explanation of Lincoln’s religious language. Elsewhere, Kaplan says that Lincoln’s “strategic Christianity made Christian references particularly useful to him.” *Lincoln*, 278. Kaplan also characterizes Lincoln’s reference to “God’s will,” in talking to a Christian delegation, as “deferring to the clerical rhetoric.” *Ibid.*, 339. Towards the end of his life, “when the pressures of war and his obligation to rally the nation in terms that it understood pushed hard, [Lincoln] drew heavily upon the Judeo-Christian language that had dominated his childhood.” *Ibid.*, 10. See *infra* note 193. For our theory as to why Kaplan cannot accept the idea that Lincoln actually believed what he said, see *infra* notes 194–98 and accompanying text.

190. See Kaplan, *Lincoln*, 355. Kaplan also makes the unconvincing suggestion that Lincoln in the address did not assert the truth of his theological suppositions. See *supra* text accompanying notes 39–40. For our rejection of this claim, see *supra* notes 41–53 and accompanying text.

191. Kaplan, *Lincoln*, 355. Kaplan elsewhere explains that this “power” actually was nothing other than the old doctrine of necessity, “the universal law” of “‘cause and effect’ . . . that everything is connected, that there is a cosmic principle of compensation, or balance, determining outcomes in human affairs.” *Ibid.*, 238.

192. *Ibid.* See *ibid.*, 71, 334.

193. Kaplan discusses the Farewell but misses its true significance. He acknowledges that Lincoln called “for the prayers of well-wishers and the assistance of the ‘Divine Being,’” but he interprets this as “a deistic motif.” *Ibid.*, 323. Calling Lincoln’s language “deistic” is by definition to assert Lincoln’s non-participatory, and hence non-personal, conception of God. We disagree with this characterization. Lincoln’s poignant appeal for his hearers’ prayers, see *supra* note 150 and accompanying text, only makes sense if he believed in a participatory God. Of what possible use is prayer if there is no one there to hear with the power to respond? Kaplan’s suggestion that Lincoln spoke like this to comport “with the religious sentiment of the country,” *ibid.*, 323, is contradicted by the evidence that Lincoln himself prayed in private. See *supra* notes 120, 152.

194. Kaplan, *Lincoln*, 355; see 161.

195. *Ibid.*, 355.

196. See Meacham, *American Gospel*, 120.

197. E.g., Amos 3:1–15; Luke 13:1–5; Acts 5:1–11.

198. E.g., Deuteronomy 8:1–5; Hebrews 12:7–11.

199. Gopnik, *Angels and Ages*, 131.

200. *Ibid.* Lincoln “evidently had some kind of complicated and rich sense of ‘necessity’ and a supernatural presiding power.” *Ibid.*, 126. Gopnik thus draws a distinction between a “supernatural presiding power,” in which Lincoln did believe, and “an interceding divinity,” which he says Lincoln rejected.



201. See *supra* note 53 and accompanying text.

202. Gopnik, *Angels and Ages*, 187. Gopnik, unlike in his careful, fact-based evaluation of the dispute concerning Secretary of War Edwin Stanton's words upon Lincoln's death, *ibid.*, 112–14, offers no evidence or argument to support this proposition. He simply asserts that Lincoln had developed a "faith in deep time," *ibid.*, 187, "a new, almost mystical sense of . . . [its] power—time the explanatory force, the justifying force that gives meaning to life by asking us to think in the very long term." *Ibid.* Lincoln thus no longer saw "life 'vertically,' in terms of the verdict of heaven . . . [but] 'horizontally,' in terms of the judgment of time." *Ibid.* Lincoln's "last position, ironically, is not entirely unlike that of . . . Karl Marx—sublimation of Old Testament fatalism into a new religion of history, where history does the brute, necessary work of nation building through the extended punishment that Jehovah had done before." *Ibid.*, 131–32. How could one possibly so characterize Lincoln in the face of the Second Inaugural and the other evidence we have cited? But see *infra* note 204.

203. See Gopnik, *Angels and Ages*, 122. To Gopnik, Lincoln sought "some form of transcendence," but "resist[ed] the supernatural meanings of faith." *Ibid.*, 186. Gopnik acknowledges that Lincoln during the war spoke "increasingly of God," *ibid.*, 126, and that Lincoln's "religious consciousness" grew during its last year, *ibid.*, 27, but his bottom-line position is that "Lincoln was all his life—aggressively in his youth, more mildly in his age . . . a profound and declared skeptic." *Ibid.*, 126. He never moved "so far from that youthful doctrine of necessity." *Ibid.*, 131. These conclusions are contradicted by the evidence we have discussed.

204. Gopnik's conclusions cry out for an explanation. He reveals more than he probably intended in saying that his book does not have "an agenda, but . . . [it does] have a thesis": to assert the necessity of "literary eloquence . . . to liberal civilization." *Ibid.*, 22. We suggest, however, that his overriding purpose may have been to extol a particular vision of what "liberal civilization" entails. To Gopnik, it means "a world without a present God but with providential purposes." *Ibid.* How one obtains the latter without the former is never made clear, but the key point is that there is no room for a living God in what Gopnik calls "modern times" and "modernity." See *ibid.*, 187. How could there be when such a belief connotes reliance on "faith and fear" rather than on "observation and argument"? See *supra* text accompanying note 202. This ideological presupposition could well have been what led to Gopnik's major errors concerning Lincoln. (In addition to what we have already described, see *infra* note 205.) But his mistakes do not stop there—he somehow interprets the Civil War as a whole as signaling a transformation in American life from reliance on God to faith in history. See *ibid.*, 21–22.

205. Gopnik's view of how we should determine right and wrong is additional evidence that he misunderstands Lincoln. In modernity, "we make our values in the face of facts. And so the values are ours. We can't outsource them upward. The judgment that some act is right, rather than demonic, can only be our own. We can turn to faith for meaning, but not for morality." *Ibid.*, 195. Contrast this with where Lincoln, Gopnik's herald of modernity, looked for guidance on questions of morality. He looked to God and the Bible: "It is the best gift God has given to man. All the good the Saviour gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong." *Collected Works*, 7:542. Lincoln put these views into practice on the specific issue of whether slavery was immoral. See *supra* notes 162, 174. To Lincoln, slavery violated God's equal creation of mankind. "Nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted, by its fellows." *Collected Works*, 2:546. Slavery also violated Jesus' command that we treat

others as we would like to be treated. *Collected Works*, 3:205, 7:368, and 8:361. Finally, slavery contradicted the Bible's teaching on the nature of work. See Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, plus *Collected Works*, 2:520, 7:368, and 8:155.

206. Adding this fact to Mark Noll's "verified" list of Lincoln's religious beliefs would make it more consistent with the list offered nearly a century ago by William E. Barton, whose *Soul of Abraham Lincoln* is a well-regarded evaluation of Lincoln's faith. The book concludes with "The Creed of Abraham Lincoln in His Own Words." *Ibid.*, 300. Although Barton does not use the adjective "personal" in listing Lincoln's beliefs about God, Lincoln's conception of a personal, sovereign God is evident throughout.

207. See supra notes 54–56 and accompanying text.

208. See supra notes 100–103 and accompanying text.

209. It is interesting that William Herndon, in arguing that Lincoln was not an orthodox Christian, asserted that had Lincoln so believed, his sincerity and honesty would have led him to say so openly. See Guelzo, *Redeemer President*, 442. This common view of Lincoln's character hardly comports with a Lincoln who would use specious religious terminology for political gain. See supra note 96.

210. See supra note 120. Similarly, is it credible that Lincoln during the Springfield Farewell made an emotional appeal for prayers on his behalf, see supra note 150 and accompanying text, all the while knowing that he did not believe in the efficacy of prayer? If Lincoln did act like this, he would have to be branded as one of history's greatest frauds.

211. Another influential element may be Lincoln's cultural clout. Gary Scott Smith says that "Americans continue to debate Lincoln's religious . . . convictions because of his immense value in the nation's culture wars. . . . In some circles, the question 'What would Lincoln do?' is more important than the query 'What would Jesus do?'" *Faith and the Presidency*, 94. To Mark Noll, those who argue about Lincoln's faith "seem to feel that, if only Lincoln could be enlisted on their side—whether of evangelical faith or naturalistic rationalism—it would amount to a great victory in today's culture wars." Noll, "Struggle for Lincoln's Soul." As Noll recognizes, Lincoln's continued cultural impact can tempt everyone, wherever they may fall on the ideological or religious spectrum. See Matthew Pinsker, "Lincoln Theme 2.0," *Journal of American History* 96 (September 2009): 436. All sides in the debate about Lincoln's religious views need to be sensitive to this risk.

212. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" (March 4, 1865), President's Reading Copy, reproduced in Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 268, Figure 9–9. The most commonly cited source of the Second Inaugural (with slightly different punctuation) is the corrected manuscript or draft of the Second Inaugural that Lincoln presented to his secretary, John Hay, on April 10, 1865; see *Collected Works*, 8:332–33. Douglas Wilson points out that Lincoln's final version of the Second Inaugural, the one he delivered on March 4, 1865, was actually printed ahead of time and distributed to the press the day of the inauguration. See Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword*, 264, and corresponding note on 331–32.