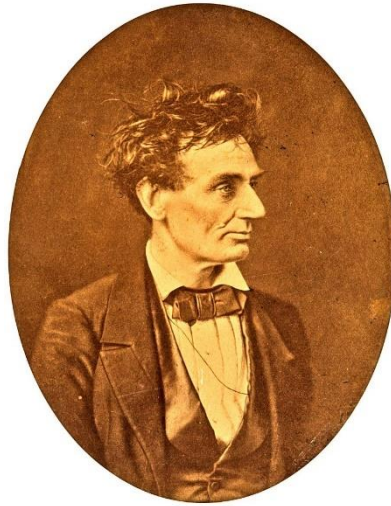


Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Lincoln's Mysticism: He tried to link his will with God's

By: Reverend Charles Brock
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Alexander Hesler took this photo of Abraham Lincoln in 1857. Hesler tried to tidy up the young lawyer's hair before the shoot, but Lincoln chose to ruffle it up again anyway. This, as told by politician and newspaperman Joseph Medill, set the tone for the rest of Honest Abe's career.

Abraham Lincoln does not fit into any usual mystical description. He was often, especially in his early life, very skeptical of religion and churches. He never claimed that he was “in the presence of God” directly, but in the last few years of his life and going through terrible suffering with the Civil War on his shoulders, he did turn to the Bible and took major aspects of Reformed theology and scriptural texts to heart.

He seems an unlikely choice for a mystic. He had no reported theophanies and he didn't say that he ever saw or heard God. But there is a mystical category previously

discussed that seems to fit into his last few years of life, and that is the notion that God had ordained what happens for the good. “My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”

Lincoln saw the horrible problem of slavery, though many, including Northerners, did not: “To read in the Bible, as the word of God himself, that ‘In the sweat of *thy* face thou shalt eat bread,’ and to preach there from that, ‘In the sweat of *other men’s* faces shalt thou eat bread,’ to my mind can scarcely be reconciled with honest sincerity.” Lincoln continued, “When, a year or two ago, those professedly holy men of the South, met in semblance of prayer and devotion, and in the Name of Him who said, ‘As you would all men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them,’ appealed to the Christian world to aid them in doing to a whole race of men, as they ... would have no man do unto themselves, to my thinking, they condemned and insulted God and His church, far more than did Satan when he tempted the Savior with the Kingdom of the earth.” (*Collected Work of Abraham Lincoln 6.64*)

Lincoln trusted that God would intervene: “And while it has not pleased the Almighty to bless us with a return of peace, we can but press on, guided by the best light He gives, trusting that in His own good time, and wise way, all will yet be well.” (*CWAL V:518*)

Lincoln wanted to do God’s will, but that wasn’t easy to discern: “I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is, I will do it! 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, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree.” (*CWAL V:420*)

In 1862, Lincoln said that God is permitting the war, but he did not know why. The *Meditation on the Divine Will* of 1863 was written by Lincoln for his personal meditations and not for public consumption, but it tells a lot: “The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war, it is quite possible that God’s purpose is something different from the purpose of either party; and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect his purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true; that God wills this contest and will that it shall not end yet. By his mere great power on the minds of the now contestants, he could

have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And, having begun, he could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.” (CWAL V:403)

Lincoln wrestled to discern God’s will: “We are indeed going through a great trial – a fiery trial. In the very responsible position in which I happen to be placed, being a humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father, as I am, and as we all are, to work out his great purposes, I have desired that all my works and acts may be according to his will, and that it might be so, I have sought his aid – but if after endeavoring to do my best in the light which he affords me, I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise. If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced. If I had been allowed my way this war would have been ended before this, but we find it still continues; and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of his own, mysterious and unknown to us; and though with our limited understandings we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe, that he who made the world still governs it.” (CWAL V:478)

Lincoln trusted in God: “Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance on God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right.” (CWAL VI:536)

America deserved the punishment of the Civil War, wrote Lincoln: “When our own beloved Country, once, by the blessing of God, united, prosperous and happy, is now afflicted with faction and civil war, it is peculiarly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults and crimes as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before Him, and to pray for His mercy – to pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved.”¹ (From Lincoln’s Proclamation for Prayer and Fasting)

In his final public speech, he delivered the Second Inaugural Address. He now knew what God was doing unlike a year or two before and he now discerned the Providence of God. Lincoln reached theological heights that no other president had gone before (or after): “Both [sides] read the same Bible and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange than 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. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered full.

The Almighty has his own purposes, according to the Bible: “Woe unto the world because of offences! For it must need be that offenses come; but woe to the man by

whom the offense cometh!” Wrote Lincoln: “If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him?”

Continued Lincoln: “Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. 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.’” (*CWAL VIII:333*)

Lincoln walked with God as he understood it. He tried to link his will with God’s. That was his mystical experience. He was killed on Good Friday. Some saw him as a savior who died for America’s sins.² In my view Lincoln was the man who had proclaimed liberty throughout the land, and led people to the Promised Land, but was not permitted to see it himself.

In that sense, he was *America’s* Moses.

Citations:

1.Seward, William H. “Proclamation of a Day of Fasting.” *The History Place - Abraham Lincoln: Proclamation of a Day of Fasting*, [//www.historyplace.com/lincoln/proc-3.htm](http://www.historyplace.com/lincoln/proc-3.htm).

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Photos:

Lincoln: [//boredomtherapy.com/rare-lincoln-photos](http://boredomtherapy.com/rare-lincoln-photos)

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