

The Zahava and Moshael Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought

**Essays on The Civil War Era**

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Ben Atwood

## Sermon from the Capitol Hill: Abraham Lincoln's Usage of the Bible in His Second Inaugural

How did a poor farmer's son who spent his youth publicly mocking religious preachers and never joined a Church earn the description "Christ in Miniature" by Leo Tolstoy (White, "Divine Providence")? While President Abraham Lincoln's religious life evades easy explanation, his love for the Bible and its teachings cannot be denied. He frequently laced his speeches with Biblical ideas and language, capturing the attention of a Biblically-aware audience. Indeed, Frederick Douglass dubbed Lincoln's last and perhaps most religious speech, his Second Inaugural, as more a sermon than a Presidential address (White, *Greatest Speech* 7). Lincoln's usage of Biblical references and quotes in his Second Inaugural acted not only as a rhetorical device but add deeper dimension to his message by creating a meta-narrative through the Biblical text. His clever interweaving of Biblical references makes room in a relatively short speech for Lincoln to atone for both personal and national sins and question the religious destiny of America. The speech, one of Lincoln's last, implores a torn nation to acknowledge its wrongdoing and look towards Heaven to pave a forward path through the ruins of catastrophe.

### **Lincoln's Early Life**

Lincoln's humble beginnings set the stage for understanding his methods of speaking. On February 12, 1809, in a small log cabin in Kentucky, Abraham entered the world as the second Lincoln child. Growing up, while his father had acquired only minimal education for himself, Abraham strove to read anything on which he could get his hands. His family only owned a few books, some of Abraham's favorites, including *Aesop's Fables* and the King James Bible. Doris Kearns Goodwin writes "when [Abraham] encountered new books, his eyes sparkled and that

day he could not eat, and that night he could not sleep.” Abraham gained neighborhood fame for rereading books to the point of memorization, a task he undertook because books on the frontier came and went quickly, and he wanted to make sure he gained all a book’s knowledge before it passed hands (Goodwin 51).

Of the books he reread most and mastered to memory, the Bible may have been his favorite. However, such an affinity did not seem to influence his religious behavior as a youth, as he was known to stand on tree stumps in front of all the neighborhood children and mock the Evangelist preachers frequently traveling by (White, “Divine Providence”). As he got older and traveled to New Salem, he began to read critics of Christianity and seemingly adopted fatalist beliefs<sup>1</sup>. In a letter to Mary Seed, then Lincoln’s fiancé, the future president expressed doubts regarding God’s providence based on God’s allowance of American slavery (Winger 183-184).

While many scholars endeavor to classify Lincoln’s religious beliefs as falling within a specific system, others contend that Lincoln’s faith defies definition<sup>2</sup> (Holbreich and Petranovich 123-124). His beliefs likely developed over time through life experiences. Some argue his beliefs most developed throughout the Civil War and especially after he lost his son Willie to typhoid in 1862 (“Willie Lincoln”). After Willie’s death, Lincoln developed a close relationship with Pastor Phinease Densmore Gurley at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and began to attend his speeches and confide in him. Artist Alban Jasper Conant writes that, following Willie’s death, “there was a new quality in [Lincoln’s] demeanor—something approaching awe. I sat in the fifth pew behind him every Sunday in Dr. Gurley’s church, and I

<sup>1</sup> White invokes Episcopalian Francis Wharton in his *A Treatise on Theism and the Modern Skeptical Theories* [1859] in stressing that fatalism believes the course of history to be guided by fate but not one directed by an active God; fatalists believe in providence but not necessarily Divine providence.

<sup>2</sup> Holbreich and Petranovich stress that insufficient evidence exists to classify Lincoln’s faith and doing so would be intellectually disingenuous.

saw him on many occasions, marking the change in him” (“Willie Lincoln”). Lincoln himself told members of the Baltimore Presbyterian Synod in 1863 that the journey of his presidency persuaded him to believe more strongly in and rely more on Divine providence. He stated the following:

I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am. Nevertheless, amid the great 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.” (Luthin 398)

Although Lincoln states he only relies on God when he has nothing left towards which to turn, he nevertheless expresses some belief in Divine providence.

### **Lincoln and the Bible**

Ronald White writes “Lincoln may not have joined a church, but he was joined at the hip to the Bible” (White, “Divine Providence). The question of Lincoln’s attraction to the Bible detached from organized religion deserves extensive consideration. Nathaniel Stephenson suggests Lincoln approached the Bible as he approached his studies of law, exhibiting laser focus on essential details and ignoring distracting frills, in an almost Calvinist or protestant manner. As a result, he developed a clear comprehension of the central foundations of the Bible and would often express his frustration at those who prioritize ritual service over a core Biblical principle (Stephenson 264). Randall and Current summarize the future president’s religious attitudes succinctly: Lincoln “breathed the spirit of Christ while disregarding the letter of Christian doctrine” (Randall and Current (375-377)).

Lincoln frequently used the Bible as his moral compass in guiding through contemporary issues. He applied its principles to any political issue he could, often citing the Bible’s teachings as support for his positions (Wolf). Thus, for Lincoln, the Bible and politics traveled hand-in-

hand: “his ideas moved,” writes Charles Sumner, “as the beasts entered Noah’s ark, in pairs” (Sumner qtd. in Barrett 813). He developed an interest in the interplay between moral law and human invention, exemplified by his thirty-four Biblical references in a speech about human innovation, his First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions. Thus, Wolf dubs Lincoln “unquestionably our most religious president” (Wolf 192)<sup>3</sup>. to express the all-encompassing role of God and the Bible in Lincoln’s life.

Lincoln’s acute comparisons between contemporary political issues and Biblical dilemmas found a welcome home in his speeches. As a result, his oratory often carried the same tune as that of the Biblical prophets foretelling destruction, as Lincoln exhausted much energy warning the nation of the looming Civil War and pleading for the maintenance of a whole Union. Indeed, his 1858 cry to deniers of the human equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence of “let me entreat you to come back” (Lincoln, “Speech at Lewistown, Illinois”) bears resemblance to Jeremiah’s beseeching of a recalcitrant Israel to “return, you backsliding children” (Jeremiah 3: 22, translation my own).

Some view the president’s usage of Biblical teachings in his speeches as merely good for political persuasion, as his audiences often understood his references, and he could use God to support his positions<sup>4</sup> (Holbreich and Petranovich 124). Granted, Lincoln probably intended some Bible usage for solely rhetorical purposes yet aimed much more towards loftier goals. Matthew Holbreich and Danilo Petranovich write that Lincoln often weaved quotes to conceal a deeper meaning of his words. Indeed, if one compares Lincoln’s writings to that of his

<sup>3</sup> See also Randall and Current’s comments that Lincoln was “a man with a more intense religiosity than any other President the United States ever had” (Randall and Current 372, 375)

<sup>4</sup> Holbreich and Petranovich further note that scholars see Lincoln’s “political tool” of referencing the Bible most active in the president’s attempts to tame Northern hubris

abolitionist contemporary William Seward, one may argue that Lincoln's success and Seward's lack thereof resulted from Lincoln's ability to hint at his abolitionist positions and Seward's explicit derision of slavery (Holbreich and Petranovich 140, footnote 72).

Holbreich and Petranovich further opine that Lincoln used the Bible to place his words and American issues within the context of a grand narrative. Here, too, one can compare Lincoln to Seward and recognize Seward's speeches as simply arguing for one side over another, while Lincoln's express his position as part of a more expansive vision for America and a Divinely-inspired world.

### **The Second Inaugural**

The Bible's distinct role in Lincoln's speeches may have climaxed with Lincoln's Second Inaugural address. Given March 4, 1865, only six weeks before his assassination, the Second Inaugural may constitute as the president's "last will and testament," his final grand opportunity to preach to his nation (White, "Divine Providence"). Biblical language and references littered the speech, especially surprising considering the Bible had been quoted in only one prior inauguration speech. The address lasted barely three minutes yet covered several critical aspects of the issues facing the nation. The speech reads as follows (Emphasis added for later reference):

*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.

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war. 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. Neither party expected for the war the magnitude or the duration which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with or even before the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding. Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. 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**. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.

**"Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh."** 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 offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to Him? 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 bondsman'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 lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. (Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address")

Lincoln first briefly summarized the events leading up to the war and then spoke to the nation according the standard structure of a sermon. A sermon usually consists of two main parts, an indicative and an imperative. An indicative invokes an event in Biblical history in which God judged humans but displayed His grace, and an imperative teaches the lesson and practical next step learned from the indicative. The first three paragraphs of Lincoln's Address can be viewed as its indicative, as Lincoln discusses some events leading up to the Civil War, the reality of slavery, and the stain of the war. God's judgment can be viewed as the war or the tragic extent of the war that atoned for the sins of slavery. The final paragraph of the speech consists of



Lincoln's imperative, as he implores the nation to action, to "strive," "to bind up," "to care" "to do all" to receive God's grace.

William Wolf views Lincoln's Second Inaugural almost as a revelation, revering its "mystical intuition" and Lincoln's distinct ability to make the Bible necessarily relevant to understanding what the nation was feeling towards the end of the war (Wolf 184). Lincoln himself knew his words perfectly fit the situation, writing to Republican party boss Thurlow Weed soon after the inauguration that the address may be his best speech. In the letter, Lincoln even expresses pure confidence in his theological message by stating that to deny what he preached in the speech "is to deny that there is a God governing the world" (Lincoln, "Letter to Thurlow Weed").

Before we look at the implicit messages in Lincoln's Second Inaugural gleaned from the president's clever Biblical referencing, we must recognize the speech's explicit themes. The themes include national unity, viewing the Civil War as purifying the sins of the slavery, and acting morally straight. While Lincoln indeed recognizes the North and South's unique roles in the war, he more often stresses unity by employing inclusive language: "all thoughts," "all dreaded it, all sought to avert it," "all knew" "both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God." His discussion of the war as punishment will be further discussed below. Lincoln finishes his speech by beseeching his country march forward from the destruction of the war with "malice toward none; with charity for all."

### **The Second Inaugural's Biblical References**

The four Biblical quotes in Lincoln's Second Inaugural derive from three sources: the Adam and Eve narrative in Genesis, Matthew, and Psalms. The Genesis reference reads "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," paralleling the Old Testament's "by the sweat of your brow you will eat bread" (Genesis 3: 19, translation my own). Lincoln connects the context of his speech to the tale of the Original Sin, Adam's eating of the forbidden Tree of Knowledge that leads to his and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Lincoln may have intended to stress the gravity of the sin of slavery by connecting it the Original Sin.

An aspect of slavery Lincoln intended to deride lies in the plantation owner's reaping the fruits of someone else's toiling. After the sin of Eden, in the verse Lincoln paraphrases, God declares Man's destiny to be working the ground, obtaining sustenance through his own labor. To benefit from someone else's labor reverses the Divine ordination. Lincoln explicitly recognized the slaveowner's reversal of Genesis in a letter to journalist Albert Hodges a year before his Second Inauguration, berating the hypocrisy of those who use Scripture to defend an act that explicitly opposes God's directive to Adam. Lincoln writes that reaping from someone else's work is stealing, not only by taking the actual product but by stealing the slave's self-worth. Lincoln was known in general to harbor distinct appreciation for laborers and praise them as foundational to society (Wolf 178).<sup>5</sup>

The next reference will be treated along with the final, bringing us to "woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh." Lifted from Matthew 18: 7, the quote laments the almost insurmountable temptation of sin resulting from the Original Sin and recognizes the suffering of the person who falls for the temptation. The verse aptly describes Adam and Eve's sin, as Eve

<sup>5</sup> See also Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1864.

was lured by the snake and Adam tempted by Eve to eat the forbidden fruit yet both Adam and Eve received punishment for succumbing. Using the quote in the context of slavery and the Civil War implies Lincoln viewed the sin of slavery as unavoidable, something that “needs be.” At the same time, woe to the slaveowner for not overcoming such a need. New Testament commentator Matthew Henry notes that the verse intends to dissuade one from holding a grudge against those who offend by removing some of the blame from the offender. The offender certainly acted wrongly and deserves rebuke, but, since all of humanity are sinners, he should never be severed from his community. Lincoln’s reference presents the sin of slavery as a temptation to ease the tension between North and South. The South certainly sinned, but all Americans are guilty of permitting slavery in the original Constitution. Thus, Lincoln seeks to decrease Southern guilt and dampen Northern triumphalism to unify a divided nation.

Understanding the context of Matthew 18: 7 reveals another message within Lincoln’s speech. The context discusses the steadfast religious faith of innocent children and threatens violent punishment to anyone who dares defile their beliefs (Matthew 18: 5-6). After verse 7, the text reads “If your hand or your foot causes you to fall into sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than to have two hands and two feet and be thrown into the eternal fire” (*New International Version*, Matthew 18: 8). The connection to young children can be taken literally or figuratively. The literal interpretation involves Lincoln chastising the South for including children in slavery. The “hand” and the “foot” discussed in Matthew refer to limbs used to abuse children. In her *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly*, Harriet Beecher Stowe discusses the prevalence of slaveowners beating child slaves. Lincoln may be referring so such an act in his reference.

Matthew Henry treats the child abuse in Matthew 18 as not physical but spiritual, the “hands” and “feet” as figurative and the abuse teaching children against the ways of Jesus. By invoking Matthew, Lincoln desired to protest those who preach to children a Divinely-sanctioned slavery and a Biblical notion of human equality that extends not beyond freed men. Lincoln’s Matthew reference harkens back to the Genesis teaching that all of humanity sinned equally in the Garden of Eden, with no racial distinction.

The other two Biblical references concern judgment, both the judgment of humans and the judgment of God. The first reference states “let us judge not, that we be not judged,” paralleling Matthew 7: 1’s “do not judge, or you, too, will be judged.” Lincoln’s line emerges directly after his Genesis reference, as if to say the South committed the Original Sin but should not be judged for doing so. By telling his countrymen not to judge for even the most impactful of sins, Lincoln stresses the importance of forgiveness. The North’s confidence in a successful victory was greater than it had ever been by the second inauguration that their sense of success over the South needed to be tempered, as the other Matthew verse partially did. The North cannot judge, lest they be judged and their sins revealed.

Lincoln compares the human judgment of Matthew 7 to the Divine judgment of Psalms 19: 10, “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.” Human judgment carries bias, while God’s decision to afflict both the North and the South with the Civil War bears a categorical correctness. Stewart Lance Winger adds that the Second Inaugural acts as Lincoln’s personal repentance for claiming to understand God’s actions and assuming Divine support for the North at Gettysburg (207). Even as the war neared its end at the time of the Second Inaugural, Lincoln worried over to the North’s prospects for success and began to question which side of the war, if either, God desired to win. Winger’s understanding adds another layer

to Lincoln's Genesis reference, as Eve's sin involved her wrongly assuming God's intentions in his prohibition to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Winger mentions more personal moments in Lincoln's life for which the president may have been atoning in his Second Inaugural, including his legal defense earlier in his life of a slaveowner's right to keep a slave and his prior reluctance to free all slaves with the Emancipation Proclamation (207).

Thinking more deeply about Lincoln's references adds another layer to the president's preaching. Adam's punishment for the Original Sin extends beyond having to work the ground—he and Eve also suffer banishment from Eden. For Lincoln to invoke Adam's sin, he alludes to the grave possibility of exile. Such a suggestion carries cataclysmic weight, as at the time of the United States' inception, many viewed the New World as a new Eden where humanity would undo the Original Sin. Regarding eighteenth century America, poets Philip Freneau and Hugh Henry Brackenridge declared:

No dangerous tree or deathful fruit shall grow  
No tempting serpent to allure the soul  
From native innocence; a Canaan here,  
Another Canaan shall excel the old. (Freneau and Brackenridge)

Americans at the time of the country's inception trusted the New World to birth a new Adam who would maintain the purity and righteous innocence Europe had lost. Such a narrative generally prevailed over the next few decades until the fight over slavery split the New Eden.

Although Lincoln warned against the division of the Union, he never mentioned a threat of exile until the Second Inaugural<sup>6</sup>. Such a shift in perception becomes noticeable when comparing Lincoln's Gettysburg remarks in 1863 and his Second Inaugural two years later. At

<sup>6</sup> See "Lyceum," 1838; "House Divided," 1858; as mentioned above, "Lewistown," 1858

Gettysburg, Lincoln declared “we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it” (Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address”). His speech exudes positivity, confidently portending a “new birth of freedom” for the United States government that “shall not perish from the earth.” After the blood of war filled the streets of America for two more years, Lincoln uprooted his statements at Gettysburg by referencing not God’s sanctification of the ground but His cursing of it in Genesis. The horrors of the Civil War by its end portray a Divine judgment of America as not innocent but perhaps as stained as the Old World.

With his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln expressed regret over personal actions as well as suggested taking a second look at the United States’s religious destiny. Winger writes that the speech proposed that "America was no longer the culmination of the world history: merely one nation among many that, while endeavoring to remain firm in the right, remained no closer to the Kingdom of God than any other. All alike remained under the judgment of God" [208]. The Second Inaugural declared that the New Adam had fallen and brought the security of the New Eden into question for the first time. Thus, as Jeremiah of the Old Testament beseeched his corrupt nation to repent and do what is right by God (Jeremiah 22: 3), Lincoln advised his people to do nothing but what is “in the right, as God gives [them] to see the right.” As Jeremiah berated Israel for abusing the widow and the orphan (Jeremiah 7: 6, 22:3), Lincoln tells every American citizen to “to care for . . . his widow, and his orphan.” Lacking the confidence of Gettysburg that promised a sound future for his country, the New Eden’s Jeremiah, the presidential prophet, ends his Second Inaugural as a conditional, that only by performing “charity for all” will the United States “achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

## Conclusion

Holbreich and Petranovich suggest Lincoln foresaw that a successful post-slavery rebirth of the United States, like the nation's original birth through the Revolution, would require violence and the shedding of blood (146). However, understanding Lincoln's deliberate Biblical references and their contexts suggests the president did not anticipate the horrors that the Civil War would bring and began to consider that America may never be reborn after all. If both the North and the South do not put their trust in God and repent for their multiple sins, God may expel them from the New World as He did Adam and Eve from Eden. As a result, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address acts not as a statement of confidence in the country he intended to lead for another four years but a plea to his nation to atone for its errors and save its beloved country by ending the Civil War with unity and putting its faith in Divine grace.

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## Jews of the Confederacy

Taking into consideration the profile of an average Confederate soldier during the times of the Civil War, the first person to come to mind would not likely be a young Jewish male. And that assumption would be quite reasonable. After all, the vast majority of the Southern population at the time of the Civil War was made up of predominantly white Anglo-saxon Protestants. However a number of various ethnic backgrounds were represented in the war on the Southern side including Hispanics, Irish, Chinese and most importantly for our discussion, those of Jewish origin. Virtually all of these Jewish Confederates had a long history of residing here in the U.S as in most cases, they descended from first, second or third generations Southern Jewish families.

Nevertheless, the notion of Southern Jews fighting on the side of the Confederacy begs a clear and vitally important question. The question is of course one that can be asked of any morally-conscious individual fighting for the Confederacy, but for our intents and purposes will focus mainly on the Jewish cause as the practice of slavery and systematic persecution is one that has unfortunately been all too familiar to the Jewish nation throughout time and history. Therefore, with this perspective in mind, what were the driving factors that led these Southern Jews to support and stand firmly behind the institution of slavery? Since if this ideology of senseless and brutal enslavement of another is something that is so antithetical to who we are as a nation, how it is possible that there were American Jews who lived as relatively free-men in the Southern US only a mere 150 years ago who promoted, fiercely defended, and even sacrificed their very lives for what they stated was their “right” to own and practice slavery? Presumably, there must have been more than one particular motive for their backing of slavery that may have included a combination of both cultural adaptation and economic pressure too.

Although there may not be a single definitive explanation as to what led the Jews of the South to adopting the institution of slavery as their own, there appears to be a couple of common patterns and themes that permeate throughout the stories of many of the famous Jewish Confederates. First and foremost, many of the Jews in the South, who were of Sephardic descent of Spain and Portugal, were deeply embedded in their culture and way of life in the South and became accustomed to a heritage and Southern identity. This Southern identity was rather quickly adopted into their own. Additionally, since Jewish presence had been well established in the South for nearly two centuries prior to the Civil War, it should not come as a surprise that many Jews worked their way up on the socio-economic ladder and found themselves in prominent positions with the social elite--whether it was financially, militarily, or politically as well. Moreover, because of their early presence, Southern Jews were far advanced compared to their Northern brethren, in terms of how fast they were granted religious and political liberties and freedoms (Sarna, Mendelsohn).

However, it is perhaps equally just as important to recognize that the entire issue of the Jewish Confederates and the ensuing moral and religious dilemma that we as twenty-first century Jews are forced to contend with, is by no means one which is clear-cut and straightforward. The reality was that for many faithful Americans all across the nation during this time period, there was an internal struggle that many had to deal with. The decision had to be made whether it was better to fight for peace and harmony through diplomacy and avoid battling against friends and sometimes even one's own family across the enemy-line or if it was preferable to remain a loyal Jewish Yankee or Confederate fully committed to their respective causes. And for those American Jews who remained neutral throughout the entirety of the war, it

may only be logical to assume that such positions were taken as to not offend the wrong people in power above them, or even more seriously, to risk their very lives.

In order to understand who the Jewish Confederates were, it is vitally important to understand their roots in the South and what led them to journey there in the first place. To trace back the lineage of Southern-American Jewry, it takes us back over one hundred and fifty years prior to the outset of the Civil War. As we know, one of the oldest Jewish communities in America was of course located in Charleston, South Carolina where early Jewish migrants settled as early as 1690. At the same time, other states like Louisiana boasted one-third of the entire Jewish community in America at the outbreak of the Civil War (Sarna, Mendelsohn).

By the time the Revolutionary War came around, many Jews who had already been living in the colonies joined together to fight for the cause of Independence. Some of the most notable Jews who fought during the war hailed from the South, especially from cities like Charleston, SC which up until 1830 had the largest population of Jews of any state in the Union. Francis Salvador was perhaps most noteworthy of them all. Salvador was the first Jew to be elected to public office in the colonies for the Provincial Congress and was also the first Jew to fall in the Revolutionary War while on the battlefields in South Carolina. We can see from men like Salvador that already almost a century before the outbreak of the Civil War, prominent Jewish land-owner and figures were already becoming established in the deep South. This would set the stage for the next generation of Southern Jewish patriots to take their spot in a place and environment that quickly became their home. (Jewish Virtual Library)

In 1860, the total number of Jews in all eleven states of the Confederacy was roughly between 20,000- 25,000 (Rosen). And this next generation of Southern Jews showed promise in their abilities to advance in any one of their given fields of work. Whether it was becoming

leaders in the Confederate military or rising in the ranks of Southern Senate, Jewish Confederates clearly stood out as a minority group that succeeded in many areas of society. Two of the most prominent examples were Samuel Yates Levy and Judah P. Benjamin. The Levy family had been living in the South for more than two hundred years prior to the start of the Civil War. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Samuel Levy went on to become a captain of the Confederate army and famously stated, while being held captive as a prisoner of war, “I long to breathe the free air of Dixie (Rosen) .”

Then, of course there was Benjamin who served as the state senator from Louisiana and eventually went onto become one of the most important leaders of the Confederacy during the war, serving as their very own Secretary of State. Benjamin’s main role took on the form of being a sort of spy on the Union army and their military tactics that they planned to carry out against Confederate soldiers. He was famous for sending political propagandists to the North to promote the Southern cause for slavery as well sending agents to Ireland to halt the movement of Irish volunteers from entering the Union forces (Rosen). As it is clearly evident in these two cases, prominent Jewish figures in the South were granted essentially the ability to rise to the same level of power as nearly any other white man during this time period. And this is greatly in part due to the fact that the Southern Jews were granted this level of toleration and acceptance by their non-Jewish neighbors. As the traveling journalist I.J Benjamin explained, the white inhabitants of the South felt closer to the Jews, since they ““did not perform the humbler kind of work that the negro did (Rosen).”” However, these are just examples of the wealthy Jewish confederate leaders of society. It is also necessary to consider the following question: What were the attitudes of the average Jewish confederates?

In the words of a Jewish Confederate himself, Oscar Straus, he stated as follows: “As a boy brought up in the South, I never questioned the rights and wrongs of slavery. It’s existence I regarded as a matter of course, as most other customs or institutions (Rosen).” Furthermore, American Jewish historian, Leonard Dinnerstein, explained that “Acceptance of slavery was an aspect of Southern life common to nearly all its white inhabitants.” But just because it was “accepted” by most, what did that practically mean for Jewish-Southerners? After all, most of Southern Jewry’s population were still poor immigrants from Europe, working as peddlers, merchants, and tradesmen, and therefore did not even own slaves. In fact, the free blacks of Charleston owned three times the number of slaves than did southern Jews (Sarna, Mendelsohn)! So what exactly were these Southern Jews fighting for if not for the right to keep their slaves?

In truth, there are many answers to this question that rang from having their own self-interests in mind to seeing it to be an obligation to fight on behalf of their fellow Confederate brethren. As the well-known American historian Robert Rosen stated, the main reasons for the average Southern Jew to fight was “to do their duty, to protect their homeland, to protect southern rights and liberty, and, once the war began, to support their comrades in arms.” Therefore, we can see that upholding the institution of slavery in and of itself was not the sole driving factor that led many Jewish Confederates to fight in the war. Perhaps, one can even argue that it was not the main motivating factor as we know most Southern Jews were too poor to own slaves. Of course, there were the wealthy Jewish elitist families in the South like the Pembers, Yulees, and the Baruchs who surely would have liked to keep their slaves, yet this did not represent the majority of the Jews living in the Confederate states at the time (Sarna, Mendelsohn).

Thus, interestingly, the will and rationale to fight for many Southern Jews was much more of a practical and rational one, than it was based off a moral defense for the institution of Southern slavery. It is true that one of the main reasons they fought was purely to fight alongside and defend the lives of their fellow slave-owning neighbors in war, as it was their duty to do so, but if you were in their position would you have really acted any differently? Of course, it is very easy to claim what we would have done if we were in their place, however, there really is no way of knowing what our decisions would have been unless being in their exact situation in that precise moment in time.

Interestingly enough, there are several well-documented accounts of American Jews who had ties to both the Union and the Confederacy and had to make extremely difficult decision on which side they would support and which they would not. One of the most famous stories was that of a young Union soldier named Alfred Mordechai. A native North Carolinian, Mordechai had his roots deeply connected to the South with his immediate family still residing their at the outbreak of the war. Mordechai was an individual who seemed to have his military career set for him, graduating as a top student from West Point Military Academy at age 19 and going onto become a major during the American-Mexican War. (Falk)

All had been going perfectly that is until April of 1861, when the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter by Confederate troops toward Federal forces. At that moment, Mordechai was faced with the greatest moral and emotional dilemma he would ever face in his life. Would he decide to bear arms in battle with the only military he knew for his entire life in the Union or would he remain loyal to his family back home. The decision was seemingly impossible to make--how was he ever supposed to come to terms with aiding and supporting a military that would targeting his own family members? Although he was offered positions to fight from both Union and for the

Confederacy, Mordechai ultimately decided to resign from his post in the military--after his attempt to move to an army post in California was denied. Like many others with similar backgrounds and stories, Mordechai chose to watch the war unfold from the sidelines. (Falk)

In his letter of resignation, historian Stanley Falk states, that Alfred expressed his mixed emotions and attitudes toward the predicament he was faced with. “[He expressed]... his condemnation of extremists on both sides; his opinion that secession was unnecessary but legitimate, and his conclusion that splitting the nation would be a a spectacular tragedy.” Of course, the truth of the matter is that this was a struggle that was not unique to Jewish soldiers during the war but to many all across the House that was now Divided. But it truly must have been a tremendously difficult choice to make as Mordechai and many others like him had to walk this incredibly fine balance of not alienating either his comrades whom he had grown with in the military, and of course his own family back home. This desire to remain neutral throughout the course of the war was indeed pursued by many before the war broke out, but was difficult to actually maintain throughout the entire duration of the war, like Alfred actually accomplished doing.

Taking note of both the stories of the average Jewish Confederates and the reason why so many decided to fight for the war, as well as the stories of those to opted out of the fight both instill different yet vitally important lessons regarding collective responsibility and personal freedoms and liberties. It is true that for the wealthy Jews of the Confederacy, their high ranks in society and social class placed them in a position to be leaders of the Southern cause. However, as the facts show, this was not the story for the vast majority of Jews in the South. When it came to exploring the various reasons why Jewish Confederates were risking their lives to fight in battle, historians are in agreement that what it really came down to for most was a protection of



one's own property, livelihood, and family. These were the main objectives to not just for the Jewish Confederates, but really for so many other poor Confederate soldiers who had no slaves to even fight for keeping. For the average Jewish Confederate, fighting for the Dixie was genuinely a decision that was made out of a sense of collective responsibility for their communities and most importantly their immediate families.. That is not to say that many, if not most, also saw it to be their duty to fight to uphold the laws of the South, but this cannot be seen as the sole driving factor behind their cause.

And lastly, stories like that of Alfred Mordechai also show the power of personal freedom that one is granted, even in such a grave hour, to make a consciousness decision that one is able to live with for the rest of their lives. He could have chosen and may very well have been justified to fight for either the North or the South, but his choice to rise above that and resign from his post in the military is what makes his story so unique and stand out in history as a lesson for future generations to learn from too.

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Jonathan Fenster

## The Slavery Debate: From the Ancient Bible to the Rabbi's Pulpit

In 1861, on the heels of the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln, slavery was at the forefront of debate in America, with civil war looming. The issue of slavery was contested all over the nation, and the argument snuck its way into what may be considered an unlikely place; the synagogue. Through the lens of the Bible, different rabbis shaped their views on numerous aspects of slavery and applied it to the modern day. Interestingly, the Jewish view of slavery was no different than that of their fellow Americans; In general, the Jews of the North were antislavery and fought for the Union, while the Jews of the South were proslavery and fought for the Confederacy. In this essay, we will explore the different views of prominent rabbis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and we will discover the methodology and reasoning that was used in their analysis of the most important issue in America at that time.

It was “The Bible View of Slavery”, the address delivered by Rabbi Morris J. Raphall on January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861 in New York's Bnei Jeshurun Synagogue, that triggered the national slavery debate amongst Jewish clergymen. In his sermon, Raphall delved deep into the Hebrew Bible's discussion of slavery, and concluded that in theory, slavery would be permitted according to Jewish law.

How dare you denounce slaveholding as a sin? When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty conversed, with whose names He emphatically connects His own most holy name, and to whom He vouchsafed to give the character of “perfect, upright, fearing G-d and eschewing evil” (Iyov 1:8)—that all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy? And if you answer me, “Oh, in their time slaveholding was lawful, but now it has become a sin,” I in my turn ask you, “When and by what authority you draw the line?” Tell us the precise time when slaveholding ceased to be permitted, and became sinful?” When we remember the mischief which this inventing a new sin, not known in the Bible, is causing.

Raphall continued his address and explained three important points. First, slavery has existed from the “earliest time”. Second, “that slaveholding is no sin.” And lastly as well as most importantly:

That the slave is a person, and has rights not conflicting with the lawful exercise of the rights of his owner. If our Northern fellow-citizens, content with following the word of G-d, would not insist on being "righteous overmuch," or denouncing "sin" which the Bible knows not, but which is plainly taught by the precepts of men—they would entertain more equity and less ill feeling towards their Southern brethren. And if our Southern fellow-citizens would adopt the Bible view of slavery, and discard the heathen slave code, which permits a few bad men to indulge in an abuse of power that throws a stigma and disgrace on the whole body of slaveholders—if both North and South would do what is right, then "G-d would see their works and that they turned from the evil of their ways;”.

Seemingly, Raphall concluded that slavery in America, by definition of the Bible, was indeed permitted. However, he himself made clear that according to his own moral beliefs, that the slavery practiced in America could not possibly be permitted according to Torah law.

My friends, I find, and I am sorry to find, that I am delivering a pro-slavery discourse. I am no friend to slavery in the abstract, and still less friendly to the practical working of slavery. But I stand here as a teacher in Israel; not to place before you my own feelings and opinions, but to propound to you the word of God, the Bible view of slavery. With a due sense of my responsibility, I must state to you the truth and nothing but the truth, however unpalatable or unpopular that truth may be.

Raphall’s sermon understandably sparked much uproar amongst Jews and non-Jews alike. One of these critics, Rabbi David Einhorn of Baltimore offered a piercing response, stressing the ethical elements of the Bible, rather than just its literal text:

The question exclusively to be decided, is whether Scripture merely tolerates this institution as an evil not to be disregarded, and therefore infuses in its legislation a mild spirit gradually to lead to its dissolution, or whether it favors, approves of and justifies and sanctions it in its moral aspect?

After theorizing that the Bible in no way condoned slavery, Einhorn disassembled Raphall’s speech point by point. He explained that although Abraham had slaves, one cannot extrapolate that modern slavery would be permitted because Abraham also had two wives, and bigamy does

not fit within the confines of Jewish law. Therefore, the precedent of slavery in Judaism does not necessarily prove that it would in fact be legal today.

Next, Einhorn used moral logic to attack Raphall's position by delving into Jewish laws, which seem to take into account the most minute sensitivities of all beings. He discusses the law which commands one to send away the mother bird from her nest before taking her eggs, as she shouldn't have to see her children being taken away.

A religion which exhorts to spare the mother from the bird's nest, cannot consent to the hear-trending spectacle of robbing a human mother of her child... To proclaim in the name of Judaism, that God has consecrated the institution of slavery! Such a shame and reproach the Jewish religious press is in duty bound to disown and to disavow, if both are not to be stigmatized forever... Had Dr. Raphall searched for the spirit of the law of God, he would have given due honor to it... he would have preferred to trace his way as far back as the history of creation, where the golden words shine: God created man in His image. This blessing of God ranks higher than the curse of Noah. A book which sets up this principle and at the same time says that all human beings are descended from the same human parents, can never approve of slavery and have it find favor in the sight of God.

Einhorn's congregants were appalled by his sermons. As people of the Confederacy, the constituents rioted. They destroyed Einhorn's press, and ultimately forced him to flee to Philadelphia, where he resettled and became rabbi of Congregation Knesset Israel.

Rabbi Bernard Illowy, the religious leader of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation, defended the status quo. In general, he didn't like change, and when it came to slavery his position was no different. On June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1861, as President James Buchanan instituted the National Day of Fast, Illowy addressed his congregants:

The ends for which men unite in society and submit to government, are to enjoy security for their property and freedom for their persons from all injustice or violence... Who can blame our brethren of the South for seceding from a society whose government cannot, or will not, protect the property rights and privileges of a great portion of the Union against the encroachments of a majority misguided by some influential, ambitious aspirants and selfish politicians who, under the color of religion and the disguise of philanthropy, have thrown the country into a general state of confusion, and millions into want and poverty?

R' Illowy went on to express his own negative attitude towards slavery, an attitude he believes is found in the Torah itself. Yet, like R' Raphall, he notes that great people of the past owned slaves and thus we cannot disapprove of its existence in places where the practice is accepted:

Why did not Moses, who, as it is to be seen from his code, was not in favor of slavery, command the judges in Israel to interfere with the institutions of those nations who lived under their jurisdiction, and make their slaves free, or to take forcibly away a slave from a master as soon as he treads the free soil of their country? Why did he not, when he made a law that no Israelite can become a slave, also prohibit the buying and selling of slaves from and to other nations? Where was ever a greater philanthropist than Abraham, and why did he not set free the slaves which the king of Egypt made him a present of? Why did Ezra not command the Babylonian exiles who, when returning to their old country, had in their suit seven thousand three hundred and thirty-seven slaves, to set their slaves free and send them away, as well as he commanded them to send away the strange wives which they had brought along?

With this, Rabbi Illowy concluded his sermon that, “All these are irrefutable proofs that we have no right to exercise violence against the institutions of other states or countries, even if religious feelings and philanthropic sentiments bid us disapprove of them.”

The last figure that we must discuss is Rabba Sabato Morais. In 1851, he became *Hazzan*, and the spiritual leader of the Spanish Portuguese Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia. Not much has been written about Morais, and his speeches are undated. However, we do know that he was a supporter of President Lincoln and opposed slavery in every sense. During a sermon given on Thanksgiving Day, 1864, Morais preached as follows:

Not the victories of the Union, but those of freedom my friends, do we celebrate. What is Union with human degradation? Who would again affix his seal to the bond that consigned millions to that? Not I, the enfranchised slave of Mitzrayim. Not you, whose motto is progress and civilization. Cast, then, your vision yonder, and behold the happy change wrought by the hand of Providence... Thy name shall no longer be called Maryland, but Merry-land for thou hast verily breathed a joyous spirit into the soles of all thy inhabitants.

Of course, Morais faced heavy backlash. He wrote about the events that took place shortly after his fiery sermon.

A history is connected with it- Copperheads became so enraged by reason of it that I got a hornets' nest around my ears. Men... would've stopped my speaking altogether but I appealed to my constituents and after three months silence renewed my free speech as formerly.

The New York Times described him as “the most eminent Rabbi in this country.” He even paralleled Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation to the teachings of Hillel the Elder who stated that “to forebear doing unto others what would displease us.”

The issue of slavery instigated discussion, debate, and ultimately war, in which the North and the South fought for their beliefs. The subject of slavery was so pronounced, that it found its way into religious sanctuaries across America as well. At the forefront of this debate, was whether the Bible permitted, tolerated, or prohibited the practice of slavery. In this discussion, it is important to note that a distinction must be made between the Bible as a literal text, and the Bible as a moral apparatus. Within the textual analysis of the bible, one may determine that according to the strict letter of the law, American slavery could have been legal in theory. However, in practice, Jewish clergymen unanimously agreed that the slavery exercised in America was undoubtedly unethical and morally wrong.