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# Abraham Lincoln's 'Daily Treasure'

A vest-pocket book could have had outsized influence on the great president's faith.

By John J. Miller

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President Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C. PHOTO: HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

In 1852, when Abraham Lincoln was a railroad lawyer with an uncertain future, the Religious Tract Society of London published “The Believer’s Daily Treasure.” Small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, this vest-pocket book arranged snippets from Scripture for every day in the year. The 366 brief passages

—including one for leap years—came straight from the King James Bible.

A copy of “The Believer’s Daily Treasure” crossed the Atlantic and found its way into Lincoln’s possession. The poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg speculated that it was a gift from Mary Todd Lincoln, who may have wanted her husband to carry it as he traveled from town to town on the Illinois Eighth Judicial Circuit. But this was only a guess: “How Abraham Lincoln acquired his copy of the devotional,” wrote Sandburg, “we do not know.”

A volume bearing the president’s signature on its front endpaper surfaced in the 1950s. Carl Haverlin, a businessman who collected Lincoln memorabilia, got a hold of it. He wrote to scholars, sending them photostats of the book and asking what they knew about “this little religious item.”

Frederick R. Goff, chief of the rare-books division at the Library of Congress, deemed the “A. Lincoln” signature genuine. Manuscript expert Ralph G. Newman of Chicago’s Abraham Lincoln Book Shop—then and now a hub of Lincoln studies—also endorsed the autograph. He called the book “a most interesting discovery in the field of Lincolniana” as well as “tangible evidence of the development of Lincoln’s faith, and a possible clue to the source of some of his references to religion.”

Books about Lincoln have never gone out of style, and Haverlin worked with Channel Press in 1957 to put out an edition of “The Believer’s Daily Treasure.” This version carried a new title: “Lincoln’s Devotional.” It featured an introduction by Sandburg plus an endorsement from Civil War historian Bruce Catton. A blurb on the cover called it a book Lincoln “used and cherished, revealing a faith you can share.”

Nobody should swear on a Bible that Lincoln “used and cherished” the book, as the blurb claimed. He may not have done either, and he never mentioned “The Believer’s Daily Treasure” in any of his writings. Yet the autograph is suggestive: Lincoln rarely inscribed his name in books. Perhaps this one really was special. A possible contemporary reference comes from John Jay, an antislavery activist who shared a name with his Founding-era grandfather. He once recalled seeing Lincoln read “a pocket edition of the New Testament.”

This would be an inaccurate description of “The Believer’s Daily Treasure,” which reproduced only aphoristic extracts from the Bible, including many lines from the Old Testament. Roughly half of its content is extra-biblical, as short inspirational poems follow the scriptural texts. Sandburg despised these: “The piety in the rhymed verses stinks with cant and hypocrisy and is abhorrent and loathsome,” he wrote privately to Haverlin. “That’s my testimony and evaluation.”

But Lincoln certainly read the Bible and read it well. Lots of eyewitness accounts say so. More important, his rhetoric often drew from it in both obvious and subtle ways. One of his best-known lines—“a house divided against itself cannot stand”—is a plain reference to Mark 3:25 and Matthew 12:25. The famous opening words of the Gettysburg Address—“Four score and seven years ago”—echo Psalm 90:10. To explain the connection between the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the framework of the Constitution, Lincoln turned to Proverbs 25:11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” He meant that the purpose of the Constitution is to preserve the ideas in the Declaration.

Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address bursts with biblical quotes and allusions. "It sounded more like a sermon than a state paper," wrote Frederick Douglass, who attended the 1865 speech. One of its lines, from the Gospel of Matthew, also shows up in "The Believer's Daily Treasure" as the entry for May 13: "Let us judge not that we not be judged."

Every biography involves acts of judgment, and Lincoln scholars have taken various stances on Lincoln's faith, from claims that he was a lifelong skeptic who hid his unbelief to the more conventional view that his Christian convictions grew over time. Whatever the truth, there's a good chance that Lincoln once read what a little devotional book offered for April 14, a simple admonition from John 5:39: "Search the Scriptures."

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