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Almost Chosen Prophet: Mercy Otis Warren, Abraham Lincoln, and the American Covenant

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Most Americans are familiar with the John Trumbull painting entitled *Declaration of Independence*. It rivals perhaps only Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* as the quintessential artistic rendering of the American Revolution and is surely the quintessential rendering of the Revolutionary political moment. It appears in nearly every primary and secondary school American history textbook and hangs in pride of place in the US Capitol rotunda. In it Jefferson stands at the fore with the rest of the Committee of Five (John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Robert R. Livingston, and Roger Sherman), who, with Jefferson as principal author, together wrote and revised the Declaration. The great document lies atop the table next to them. To those who know this painting, who can see it in their mind's eye even with this meager description, it is immediately evocative. It is a photorealistic depiction of a nearly mythological event, the painted memory of something that changed the entire course of the world, coterminal in its meaning with the promises of the Declaration itself. This is what Americans imagine when they remember the historical event known as the Fourth of July.

This painting is also, as any good red-jacketed Capitol tour guide will inform his charges, not exactly true to life—or, rather, true to history. While many, if not most, Americans believe that this

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painting depicts the July 4 signing of the Declaration, Trumbull meant to illustrate the document's presentation to the Second Continental Congress by the Committee of Five, which occurred, not on July 2 (the day the Congress voted to declare independence) or July 4 (the day Congress approved the specific text of the Declaration of Independence), or even August 2 (the day the Congress actually signed the Declaration), but on June 28, 1776. This misconception is not Trumbull's doing; rightfully attributable to him, though, are the inaccuracies within the painting. A number of the men shown in the audience, including Connecticut delegates William Williams and Oliver Wolcott, and Philip Livingston of New York, were not present in Congress on June 28.[1] Further, Trumbull gets the layout of the room wrong—there is only one door on the side of the room he depicts, and his placement of the windows is askew.[2] This painting, which so many Americans associate with July 4, or the signing of the Declaration, represents neither but in fact represents even June 28 with a degree of error.

All this, of course, is irrelevant to the meaning of the painting for most Americans. What matters to Americans is not the history behind this painting—who precisely sat in the "room where it happened" or which phase of the Declaration's approval it depicts—but the memory of the Revolution that it represents. Where history and its attendant empirical study often purport to aim at truth and fact, memory is malleable, fuzzy at the edges, and aspires, above all, to a truth of feeling. Looking at Trumbull's painting makes one feel the moment of the declaration of independence. It offers up the great figures of a national history in life-size form, inviting observers to step into the moment, to feel themselves standing there alongside those who pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to the righteousness of the American cause. It tells a dignified story of brave men in a visually balanced room, attesting to principles that almost every American would know by heart even two hundred fifty years later: that all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among them life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This painting is an invitation to remembrance.

When Americans "remember" July 4, 1776, by looking at Trumbull's painting, they obviously do not consult their own memories. All the men who stood in Independence Hall that day are dead; no one who sees Trumbull's painting today has any ability to recollect these events as they happened in time. This is, in part, why it makes little difference to us that Trumbull included delegates who did not attend the session he painted, or that he painted a scene from June 28 and not July 4. When Americans "remember" the Fourth of July, they do not call upon their own personal memory—which Susan Sontag describes as the "individual, unreproducible" thing that "dies with each person."[3] Rather, they call upon what is termed "collective memory," which, for Sontag, "is not a remembering but a stipulating: that *this* is important, and this is the story about how it happened, with the pictures that lock the stories in our minds."[4] This stipulating, in turn, is the result of what Jeffrey Olick calls a "fluid process" that includes the intentional efforts of cultural "memory-makers."[5] If collective memory is bound up with stories, as Sontag posits, then there are storytellers who are responsible, at least in part, for constructing this memory. It is to this detail, the role of the storytellers, that this particular essay is attuned.

Trumbull's painting illustrates a well-documented idea: that collective memory is politically powerful.[6] This painting encourages Americans to remember something specific about the founding of the United States; this remembrance potentially shapes the attitudes of Americans toward the American political project. It also illustrates a seemingly obvious, though comparatively less well-documented secondary idea: that the collective memory of the American Founding specifically holds political power for American citizens.[7] What remains implicit in this vignette, and what remains relatively unexplored in the literature, is *who* shaped the collective memories of the American Founding and *how* these individuals approached the task.[8] This essay reaches back into the history of American political thought and identifies two thinkers, one at the beginning of the American political project and another at its most serious inflection point, who clearly understood the political power

of collective memory and sought to actively shape the American memory of the Founding. These two thinkers are Mercy Otis Warren and Abraham Lincoln.

Warren, who lived from 1728 to 1814, was a woman of the Revolutionary era. Though in proximity to political power (her family comprised a significant number of the canonical Founders), Warren had few rights of political participation during her lifetime. What power she exerted over politics, she exerted by way of her pen. Warren was an accomplished essayist, poet, and playwright—accomplishments she often put to work in service of the Anti-Federalists, who opposed national consolidation of political power and, by extension, the Constitution. Though well known and well regarded in her day, Warren is an oft-forgotten figure in American history, her role in the history of American politics lost in the zeitgeist of the canonical Founders and their activities. Abraham Lincoln, comparatively, is perhaps the most famous and most consequential American president of all time. No one would ever describe Lincoln as "lost to history" in the same way as Warren. Moreover, Lincoln is famous for his centralization of power and his defense of the Constitution, contra Warren. Nevertheless, both of these thinkers exhibited, throughout the course of their political writings, a sense of the importance of collective memory in American politics and, in particular, sought to shape American collective memories of the Founding to resonate with Christian political theology. For both Warren and Lincoln, collective memory was the political tool that could rescue the United States from ruin and preserve its best theories, ideas, and impulses. This collective memory, for both of them, would need to imbue the United States with a divine destiny and situate it within the Christian tradition that, during their lifetimes, was universally familiar to almost all Americans.

By examining Lincoln and Warren in conversation with each other, this essay underscores the significance of collective memory, particularly as understood within the tradition of covenantal Christianity, in the history of American political thought. Further, it provides models for contemporary American politics, offered by

giants of American political history, for the rectification of social and political ills through the advancement of shared memory. Finally, by identifying Warren as an intellectual ancestor to Lincoln, this essay rightfully recasts Warren as a foundational voice in the history of American political thought. This essay proceeds by outlining Warren's and Lincoln's efforts to shape American collective memory, and it concludes by elucidating the differences between their two approaches and positing the implications of both theories for American politics and American political thought in the modern day.

Mercy Otis Warren and the Divine Providence of Liberty

Mercy Otis Warren, forty-eight at the signing of the Declaration of Independence, wife to one influential politician and family member to three more, had a mature and unusually close vantage point from which to observe the formation of the new nation. She maintained correspondence with some of the most important of the Founders, many of whom sought her opinions on matters of politics, and she was a well-regarded literary figure of her time. In 1805, at the age of seventy-seven, Warren wrote one of the first authoritative accounts of the Revolutionary War—her magnum opus, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*.[9] While this work is often beaten with the modern historian's cudgel for its failure to clear present-day academic standards, Warren's *History* is not simply a work of history. Warren's *History* "served as a means to unite her ethical, political, and philosophical concerns; it joined her personal religiosity with her ideological commitments; and it provided a vehicle for a female intellectual to be useful in a republican culture."[10] Of all the things this work may be, a history may be the least important.[11] Taken summarily, Warren's *History* is a work of political theory—or, perhaps more properly, political theology—that addresses American memory more than American history.[12] Warren's project is not necessarily to provide an objective factual account of the Revolution. Rather, this work is Warren's attempt to enshrine in the public consciousness a particular collective memory of the American Revolution, just as Lincoln would later attempt to enshrine

a particular collective memory of the Founding in the years surrounding the Civil War.[13] To echo Sontag, Warren's project is an assertion that certain things mattered, especially during the Revolutionary era, and it was these things that ought to capture the American imagination of that moment. For Warren, this collective memory could break the wheel of history, tempering the individualistic, materialistic, and self-aggrandizing impulses of free men and thereby protecting the "gifts of providence" bestowed on the United States, as well as fulfilling its role in the unfolding of a divine plan for the freedom of all humankind.

Warren's historiography is cyclical; she suggests that people, and on a greater scale nations, tend to make the same political mistakes. The great, repeated mistake of nations was, for Warren, the tendency toward forgetfulness, and specifically forgetfulness regarding freedom. As she writes in her "Observations on the New Constitution," "Mankind may amuse themselves with theoretic systems of liberty, and trace its social and moral effects on sciences, virtue, industry, and every improvement of which the human mind is capable; but we can only discern its true value by the practical and wretched effects of slavery."[14] Moreover, Warren often aligns liberty or freedom with providence; she reiterates throughout her *History* that the freedom of humankind is not merely a worthy human pursuit but the teleological destiny of the created world, determined by its Creator.[15] The fates of nations are tied to this destiny, their success or failure determined by their commitments to liberty—commitments that often erode in times of relative wealth and comfort. Many nations have served, Warren warns, as "occasional instruments for the completion of the grand system of Providence" while seeking primarily "the bubble of *fame*, the lust of *wealth*, or some contemptible passions that centres in *self*."[16] These nations remain occasional instruments of providence and generally fall from grace. Warren names several historical examples in her *History*, writing:

> The speculative of every age have theorized on a system of perfect republicanism, but the experiment has much oftener failed in practice, among all mankind, than been crowned

> with success. Those that have come nearest thereto, the free states of Greece, the Achean league, the Amphyctions, and other confederacies, fell under the power of Philip, Alexander, and their successors. The republic of Athens, the most conspicuous among the ancients, corrupted by riches and luxury, was wasted and lost by the intrigues of its own ambitious citizens.

She continues:

> The Roman commonwealth, the proud boast, the pattern, and the exemplar of the republics, fell under the despotism of a long line of Caesars, generally the most debauched and brutal race of emperors that ever disgraced human nature. More modern experiments, Venice, and indeed all the Italian states, who boasted their freedom, were subjected to the tyranny of an oligarchy or aristocracy, frequently more severe and cruel than that of monarchy. In England, the struggles of Hampden and his virtuous associates were lost, and the strong reasonings of the patriots of that day in favor of freedom were obliterated, after the death of Charles, by the artful, the hypocritical, and the arbitrary Cromwell; and the most voluptuous of kings was restored, and re-seated on the throne of Britain.[17]

The case in point in her *History* was, of course, Great Britain. The final paragraph in this series of thoughts hammers home her point:

> Thus, from the first of the Stuarts to the last of the line of Brunswick who have yet reigned, their republican opinions and the freedom of the nation have been in the wane, and have finally sunk into an empty name under the tyranny George the third. Indeed the most enlightened, rational, and independent characters in Great Britain continue still to defend the principles of liberty with their pens, while they have had reason to apprehend its total extinction through the realm.[18]

While perhaps no one was more opposed to the British Crown than Warren, her analysis is less straightforwardly accusatory and damning of Great Britain and more mournful and disappointed. Great Britain had once hoisted the standard for freedom in the world. The Magna Carta remains the blueprint for establishing the rights of citizens and served as a model for the US Constitution. Great Britain was the birthplace of John Locke, the philosopher of liberty who was the centerpiece of Warren's own political philosophy. Great Britain had, in history, risen up from the inhumanity of oppression, and the corresponding British system of rights and liberties had elevated the tiny island country to the world's foremost superpower.

As Britain spread its empire throughout the world, however, the rot of forgetfulness took hold. The British people, their rulers and politicians, secured in their rights and liberties, began to care less for these essentials than for the luxuries brought about by increasing wealth and influence. In its colonies throughout the world Great Britain, forgetful of the inhumanity of oppression, began to restrict the freedom of other peoples and nations. As Warren tells it in her *History*, "England has indeed been long celebrated for magnanimity, clemency, and humanity; but it is with nations as with individuals, when human nature falls from virtue, it generally sinks into the extremes of vice, in proportion as it was before conspicuous for superior excellence."[19] Desire for increased wealth lay at the heart of British vice leading up to the American Revolution. Unwilling to part with improved profit margins, the empire became increasingly oppressive. It was this greed that led Britain to institute the Stamp Act, which was for Warren the first offense against the liberty of Americans on the road to revolution.

This oppressive treatment was not unique to Britain's North American colonies; per square mile, British holdings in India were almost certainly more valuable, and Britain's treatment of indigenous Indian peoples was certainly worse.[20] The abuse and oppression of its subjects throughout the world made Britain and its political officials, as Warren put it, "author of all the calamities a

just Providence had seen fit to inflict on a nation, who at the close of the preceding reign had considered all the world at their feet."[21] The American colonists, who were, by and large, British emigrants, would serve as the key instrument of providence in this regard.[22] They had a sense of the rights and liberties afforded British citizens (which they were, ostensibly) and understood any encroachment on these rights. As Warren writes, by 1767 "few of the executive officers employed by the king of Great Britain, and fewer of their adherents, were qualified by either education, principle, or inclination, to allay the ferment of the times, or to eradicate the suspicions of men who, from an hereditary love of freedom, were tenderly touched by the smallest attempt, to undermine the invaluable possession."[23] The revolution was a moment of providential destiny for the United States. Britain's moment as the occasional instrument of providence ended when it failed to uphold and defend the sanctity of human liberty. Providence required a new instrument and sought it by way of revolution. "The sudden rotations in human affairs," Warren wrote to this effect, "are wisely permitted by Providence, to remind mankind of their natural equality, to check the pride of wealth, to restrain the insolence of rank and family distinctions, which too frequently oppress the various classes in society."[24] The time had come for Britain to be reminded. At the end of the war, Warren marvels at the "designations of Providence, that one day lift to the pinnacle of human triumph, and another, smite the laurel from the brow of the conqueror, and humble the proud victor at the feet of his former prisoner."[25]

Britain, in forgetting what it meant to *not* be free, unwittingly passed the torch of this knowledge to the American colonists. Lit with the fire of liberty and bolstered by its want, the colonies became a powder keg. The fuse smoldered for ten years, but when it burnt up, the explosion changed the face of history. Warren writes of the lead-up to the Revolution:

> Perhaps the story of political revolution never exhibited a more general enthusiasm in the cause of liberty, than that which for several years pervaded all ranks in America, and

> brought toward events little expected by the most sanguine spirits in the beginning of the controversy. A contest now pushed with so much vigour, that the intelligent yeomanry of the country, as well as those educated in the higher walks, became convinced that nothing less than a systematical plan of slavery was designed against them. They viewed the chains as already forged to manacle the unborn millions; and thought every one seemed to dread any new interruption of public tranquilities, the impetuosity of some led them into excesses which could not be restrained by those of more cool and discreet comportment.[26]

Later, when Warren wrote that "the principles of the revolution ought ever to be the pole-star of the statesman, respected by the rising generation," she meant precisely this mnemonic sense of freedom and the keen awareness of its absence.[27] In lieu of its direct presence, only the collective memory of oppression keeps the love of freedom alive. If Britain's great sin lay in its forgetting of first principles of liberty and individual freedom, then this was the sin the United States should avoid. Free nations rarely last, Warren wrote, because they too often turn away from the preservation of freedom in the pursuit of material gain. This happens all too easily, goaded by the greed of some and the apathy of others. "A superfluity of wealth, and a train of domestic slaves, naturally banish a sense of general liberty, and nourish the seeds of that kind of independence that usually terminates in aristocracy," said Warren within the first twenty pages of her *History*.[28] Would the United States, like Great Britain, serve as only the occasional instrument of the divine providential quest for freedom? Or could it align itself to providence's ends and thus avoid the fate of its predecessor? For the United States to flourish, Warren maintained, Americans should internalize the memory of political oppression and allow this memory to foster virtue and guide their actions in every sector of life. Should the new United States continue to remember the desire for freedom that begat the war of independence, it would flourish as a nation of liberty; should it

forget this oppression, Americans would not only risk losing their own liberty but find themselves in peril of becoming oppressors.

The United States would need to establish more than a passing relationship with liberty—it would need to forge a covenantal relationship. Americans would need to recognize that freedom was not merely a desirable political outcome but also the teleological direction of the world, as determined by Divine Providence itself. Providence, Warren warned, would continue to smile on the United States so long as it retained its commitment to liberty. She wrote:

> Under the benediction of *Divine Providence* America may yet long be protected from sanguine projects, and indigested measures, that have produced the evils felt or depictured among less fortunate nations, who have not laid the foundations of their governments on the firm basis of public virtue, of general freedom, and that degree of liberty most productive of the happiness of mankind in his social state. But from the accumulated blessings which are showered down on the United States, there is reason to indulge the benign hope, that America may long stand a favored nation, and be preserved from the horrors of war, instigated either by foreign combinations or domestic intrigue, which are equally to be deprecated. . . . The principles of the revolution ought ever to be the pole-star of the statesman, respected by the rising generation; and the advantages bestowed by Providence should never be lost, by negligence, indiscretion, or guilt.[29]

Warren's *History* is less a history than a narrativization of the American Revolution, which highlights those values that would for Warren be essential to the nation's continuance. This work invites Americans to remember not the Revolution as it happened in time but the Revolution in terms of what it *meant*, and what it could continue to mean for the American people. This kind of remembering, for Warren, was essential and would need to be culturally and institutionally ingrained in the American people to ensure that the

United States maintained its covenantal relationship to freedom. Immersion in this memory by way of ritual remembering (in education, in national holidays, in the inculcation of particular values) would shape the day-to-day habits of the heart of the American people. The everyday habits of the people would, in turn, influence their politics and culture and would allow the American political project to remain oriented toward liberty and within the favor of Divine Providence. In short, to preserve the gifts of providence lavished on the United States, Americans would need to develop a robust civil religion to keep their politics in check.

The central values of this civil religion included, as Warren wrote in her "Observations on the New Constitution" (quoting the Abbé Morellet), "an heroic love for the public good, a profound reverence for the laws, a contempt of riches, and a noble haughtiness of soul," which "are the only foundations of a free government."[30] To inculcate these values through ritual remembering, Warren prescribed that the Declaration of Independence "ought to be frequently read by the rising youth of the American states, as a palladium of which they should never lose sight, so long as they wish to continue a free and independent people."[31] In particular, Warren hoped that this continued remembrance of liberty would guard against denigrating effects of wealth accumulation on the new nation. Luxury had been the downfall of Britain as an instrument of providence, and the same could be true of the United States. Warren warns:

> It is an unpleasing part of history, when "corruption begins to prevail, when degeneracy marks the manners of the people, and weakens the sinews of the state." If this should ever become the deplorable situation of the United States, let some unborn historian in a far distant day, detail the lapse, and hold up the contrast between a simple, virtuous, and free people, and a degenerate, servile race of beings, corrupted by wealth, effeminated by luxury, impoverished by licentiousness, and become the *automatons* of intoxicated ambition.[32]

Such a fate was easy for Warren to imagine, knowing as she did that "men profit little by the observations, the sufferings, or the opinions of others" and "[allow] their foolish passions to generally predominate over their virtues; [furthermore,] this civil liberty, political and private happiness, are frequently bartered away for the gratification of vanity, or the aggrandizement of a few individuals who have art enough to fascinate the undistinguishing multitude."[33] Luckily, Warren contended that Americans had an advantage in maintaining the values necessary to uphold a free republic, since many of these tenets of civil religion were already tied to the actual religious practices of the American people.[34] Indeed, Warren's civil religion shares much with the New Testament theology that undergirds her political thought more broadly writ. It demands that American citizens act with virtue, remain cognizant of their own good fortune, and hold their neighbors to account. But most of all, it requires loyalty to the will of providence—to liberty—above and beyond loyalty to the nation itself.

For Warren's civil religion, the transcendent idea that made the United States exceptional—its ultimate alignment with human freedom, the object of Divine Providence—is the central object of devotion. Because she carefully traced the rise and fall of liberty's torchbearers throughout history, Warren understood that the United States could as easily fail to fulfill its promise as succeed. As such, she tied her civil religion not to the specific laws of the country but to the animating principle of liberty upon which those laws were built. Like the Christians of the New Testament, Warren's civil religion could forsake national identity for the preservation of transcendent ideas. Warren, preceding Lincoln, understood that for a people to be a people—and even more so for a people to protect their freedom—they must possess a shared memory of their past that informs their present and protects their future.

Lincoln and the American Exodus

There is no record that Abraham Lincoln ever encountered Warren's *History*, but the two speak to each other across time as a result of their shared, keen-eyed observance that political orders

are often built, not with heavy stone of fact, but with the malleable clay of collective memory. Moreover, the two share much in their assessment that the collective memory of the Founding in particular could play a significant role in the operation of American politics; both turned their attentions to the same moment, both recognizing that great, sacred documents written in great rooms by great men mean little if the people they govern do not regard them as sufficiently great and sacred and that a people are only a people if they share a common memory of their past. If the necessity of such a memory was evident to Warren in 1805, it must have been doubly evident to Lincoln, who faced the desecration of the entire American project.[35] Lincoln's project regarding American collective memory is encapsulated in a single turn of phrase: "almost chosen people."[36]

One wonders if, at the time he penned his address to the New Jersey State Senate, then-President-elect Abraham Lincoln anticipated how powerfully the language of an "almost chosen people" would resonate with Americans even centuries after his death.[37] Of course, one might wonder such things about any number of Lincoln's publicly issued sentiments: "four-score and seven years ago," "a new birth of freedom," "with malice toward none and charity toward all," and so on. Even so, Lincoln's "almost chosen" characterization of Americans stands out among his myriad quotable lines. For one thing, this line does not appear in any of the speeches (among Lincoln's hundreds) usually considered his masterpieces. Diana Schaub's work *His Greatest Speeches: How Lincoln Moved the Nation*, for example, includes only Lincoln's 1838 Lyceum Address, 1863 Gettysburg Address, and 1865 Second Inaugural Address as the titular "greatest" in Lincoln's repertoire. Even the Lyceum Address, Schaub allows, is a "lesser-known Lincoln production."[38] His address to the New Jersey State Senate in 1861, comparatively, is virtually unknown but for that one turn of phrase, situated in an altogether peculiar sentence:

> I recollect thinking then, boy even though I was, that there must have been something more than common that those

> men struggled for; that something even more than national Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this, his *almost chosen people*, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.[39]

Lincoln's decision, in this otherwise unremarkable address, to link the American and ancient Hebrew people is perhaps the hermeneutical key to understanding Lincoln as a political thinker. Namely, this moment lifts the veil on two key tenets of Lincoln's political thought, which bear out in his writing both before and after this moment: first, that he read the Christian Old Testament as an instructive model for an evolving American political order; and second, that he took to heart the political tools of that ancient nation, especially collective memory. It reveals Lincoln, like Warren, as a self-conscious architect of American memory, ensconced in the project of crafting meaning from history that would, in turn, direct the course of the future for the United States. He, too, was a stipulator of meaning—of which elements of the Founding ought to be considered important, significant, or essential wisdom for the American people.

Despite Lincoln's documented skepticism and unorthodox Christian practice throughout the course of his life, Reinhold Niebuhr told true when he concluded that Lincoln possessed a "religious awareness of another dimension of meaning than that of the immediate political conflict."[40] Lincoln's ability to fuse politics and religion is, in part, why he is one of the foremost architects of civil religion in American history.[41] Harry Jaffa famously depicted Lincoln as straddling the Old and New Testaments in his political rhetoric, hearkening back to a glorious, liberatory past (the American Revolution, an exodus from bondage wherein the

Founders are imbued with Mosaic characteristics) while also suggesting a future deliverance (with Lincoln as the prophesied messiah) from the political evils that threaten liberty.[42] These religious influences give way to what Jaffa identifies as Lincoln's theory of "political salvation," wherein through reverence for good laws the people develop "a discipline in virtue" that allows them to rightfully use their liberties.[43]

While Jaffa's assertion that "Lincoln's moral imagination worked in and through a kind of conflation of the symbols of the Old and New Testaments" is incontrovertible, it is clear that the Old Testament loomed large in Lincoln's imagination. Lincoln's oeuvre is speckled with invocations of covenantal language and repeated allusions to the central scenes of ancient Hebrew history, usually from the book of Exodus. When Lincoln makes connections to the Old Testament, they are quite direct; his invocations of the New Testament are often less explicit. Mentions of Moses, Egypt, and Israel far outstrip any mention of Christ across Lincoln's collected works.[44] A pre-presidency essay, Lincoln's "First Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions," is essentially a work of Old Testament exegesis; he wrote nothing comparable regarding the New Testament. It does appear that in general Lincoln had particular attraction to the Old Testament.[45]

Jaffa's account of Lincoln's political theology downplays the influence of the Old Testament on Lincoln's thought and misses Lincoln's understanding of collective memory, which scents more of ancient Israel than modern Christianity. William J. Wolf mostly closely circles Lincoln's treatment of memory in his assessment of Lincoln's reading of *The Christian's Defense* by Rev. James Smith in the early 1850s. Wolf argues that in reading James's work, Lincoln learned that "God accommodated Himself in revelation to the cultural level of his people" and that to understand this at work, "the history of the Jews and of the early Christian community" were essential.[46] According to Wolf, Lincoln likely learned from Smith that "there is no wall between an embalmed 'sacred' history and a current 'secular' history. History is all of one piece, with the Bible its key."[47] "History" is the word Wolf uses here, not "memory,"

and while the two are uncomfortable bedfellows, this situates them in their proper proximity. It was memory, not precisely recorded and fact-checked history, that provided the context of time for the ancient Hebrew people. Beyond just drawing parallels between ancient Hebrew society and American politics in his rhetoric, Lincoln understood the power of collective memory as a political force for this antique nation, and he sought to make use of collective memory in similar ways for the American people throughout the Antebellum, Civil War, and early Reconstruction periods.

Lincoln's writing and rhetoric reveal his deep familiarity with the thought of the Founding generation, especially its most fertile minds—the likes of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. There is a good case (most recently argued by Lucas Morel) that nothing influenced Lincoln's thought more than the American Founding.[48] While it is altogether likely that Lincoln studied the Founding out of reverence, it is also true that knowledge of the Founding equipped Lincoln to engage in the unique political debates of his moment. The Civil War was a relitigation of the American Founding, and Lincoln, cast in the familiar role of lawyer, won the case handily.[49] Those who live on the other side of Lincoln see the Founding through the Lincolnian looking-glass—the Constitution as the "picture of silver" around the "apple of gold" that is the Declaration of Independence; the Bill of Rights as refracted through the Reconstruction Amendments; the Three-Fifths Compromise as nullified by the Emancipation Proclamation.[50] All these things Lincoln did and said in the name of the American Founders. In the years surrounding the Civil War, in public venue after public venue, the lawyerly Lincoln crafted a case for the Union (and later, for abolition) that used the American Founding as its lynchpin piece of evidence and the American Founders as its star witnesses. He made his case so effectively that it forever shaped the way Americans would remember the Founding generation.

Lincoln's opposition also called upon the memory of the Founding. In 1858 future President of the Confederacy Jefferson Davis proclaimed in Boston that "it appears that the founders of this government were the true democratic States Rights men. That

Democracy was States rights, and States rights was Democracy, and it is today. . . . The Declaration of Independence embodies the sentiment which had lived in the hearts of the people for many years before its formal assertion. Our fathers asserted that great principle—the right of the people to choose the government for themselves—that government rested upon the consent of the governed."[51] That same year, Stephen A. Douglas invoked the American Founders ad nauseum during the Lincoln–Douglas debates. "We believe these truths to be self-evident," he averred at the first debate in Ottawa, Illinois, "that when parties become subversive of the ends for which they are established . . . it is the right and duty of the people to dissolve the political bands by which they may have been connected."[52] Later in that same debate Douglas called "Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison, Hamilton, Jay" to his aid, recalling that with regard to slavery, "they knew when they framed the Constitution that in a country as wide and broad as this . . . the people necessarily require different laws and institutions in different localities."[53] Further, this stunning remark at the third debate, in Jonesboro:

> Now, I say to you, my fellow-citizens, that in my opinion the signers of the Declaration had no reference to the negro whatever when they declared all men to be created equal. They desired to express by that phrase, white men, men of European birth and European descent, and had no reference either to the negro, the savage Indians, the Fejee, the Malay, or any other inferior and degraded race, when they spoke of the equality of men. One great evidence that such was their understanding, is to be found in the fact that at that time every one of the thirteen colonies was a slaveholding colony, every signer of the Declaration represented a slave-holding constituency, and we know that no one of them emancipated his slaves, much less offered citizenship to them when they signed the Declaration, and yet, if they had intended to declare that the negro was the equal of the white man, and entitled by

> divine right to an equality with him, they were bound, as honest men, that day and hour to have put their negroes on an equality with themselves. Instead of doing so, with uplifted eyes to Heaven they implored the Divine blessing upon them, during the seven years' bloody war they had to fight to maintain that Declaration, never dreaming that they were violating divine law by still holding the negroes in bondage and depriving them of equality. . . . My friends, I am in favor of preserving this government as our fathers made it.[54]

These are but a few of the endless challenges Lincoln's contemporaries lodged against his interpretation of the American Founding. Curiously, the words of Davis and Douglas echo in later critiques of the Founding generation by the likes of Winthrop D. Jordan, David Brion Davis, and David Waldstreicher, all of whom critique the American Founders for their perpetuation of chattel slavery and the hypocrisy of this choice among the Founders' many philosophical appeals to liberty and equality.[55] Academic consensus, seemingly, has not disproved the way Lincoln's opponents read the Founding, but in a post-Lincoln world, these readings have a distinctly critical flavor. If this is the correct interpretation of our nation's founding, then modern sensibilities inform us that the United States was built on a shaky foundation indeed. Such are the conclusions of academic-adjacent projects such as the *1619 Project*, which, across the board, aligns itself with Davis and Douglas more than Lincoln with regard to the American Founding.

This, however, is not the dominant academic or cultural memory of the Founding among American citizens, which is partly attributable to Lincoln's unwavering belief that he had the Founding right. Also in 1858, Lincoln offered up one of his most extensive allocutions on the Founding generation, declaring:

> This was their majestic interpretation of the economy of the Universe. This was their lofty, and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His

> creatures. Yes, gentlemen, to *all* His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows. They grasped not only the whole race of man then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the farthest posterity. They erected a beacon to guide their children and their children's children, and the countless myriads who should inhabit the earth in other ages. Wise statesmen as they were, they knew the tendency of prosperity to breed tyrants, and so they established these great self-evident truths, that when in the distant future some man, some faction, some interest, should set up the doctrine that none but rich men, or none but white men, were entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, their posterity might looked up again to the Declaration of Independence and take courage to renew the battle which the fathers began—so that truth, and justice, an mercy, and all the humane and Christian virtues might not be extinguished from the land; so that no man would hereafter dare to limit and circumscribe the great principles on which the temple of liberty was being built.[56]

Davis's and Douglas's Founders prized popular sovereignty and regional variation; they did not include nonwhite people in their proclamations of liberty and equality. Lincoln's Founders were universalists concerning liberty and equality and established in the Union a "temple of liberty" (curious language indeed) that ought not to be torn asunder. Davis and Douglas extoll the Founders of the Constitution and its Three-Fifths Compromise; Lincoln's Founders are the signers of the Declaration, maintaining above all else that "all men are created equal." Who, then, gets the Founding right? Lincoln's opponents and the critical theorists of the modern day? Or Lincoln himself and the seemingly infinite number of scholarly works that affirm his vision of the Founding?[57]

Lincoln's accuracy in interpretating the Founders' motivations is both irrelevant and nearly impossible to determine. The Founding generation was not a monolith; even its brightest stars vehemently disagreed, especially over the topics of slavery and federalism. There are many Founders whose writing supports Douglas and Davis. There are some as well whose writing supports Lincoln. But historical accuracy was not Lincoln's goal. Those who proclaim Lincoln's incontrovertibly true interpretation of American Founding neglect to remember Lincoln's own words in the (much-overlooked) First Inaugural Address when he implored his listeners that "the *mystic chords of memory*, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature."[58] Lincoln was aware that a people without a shared memory—not necessarily a shared knowledge of facts, but a shared memory—of their past could not be a people. As learned as Lincoln was, and as well versed in the writings of the Founding, he did not, and in fact could not, know for sure that his interpretation of the Founding was factually airtight or incontrovertibly true—and it did not matter.[59] Lincoln's arguments about the Founding were plausible, and they attempted only to enshrine a particular memory of those events and men, a memory powerful enough to hold the Union together in its darkest hour and shepherd it toward a post-slavery future. By the time of his first inauguration, Lincoln apparently retained hope that the nation at large would buy into his memory of the Founding, which was the necessary one to preserve the Union. When that hope collapsed, it took winning the Civil War for Lincoln win the battle over the memory of the American Founding. The saying goes that the victors write the histories, but perhaps, more accurately, victors write the collective memories.

Lincoln understood that he was dealing with collective memory in his treatment of the Founding, and in this, his predilection for the Christian Old Testament, and particularly the story of Exodus, is instructive.[60] Exodus is one of the most frequently mentioned biblical vignettes in Lincoln's oeuvre (he

did not mention many), but beyond this, Lincoln drew comparisons to Moses even his own day.[61] Reportedly, he received a gift from a Jewish American in 1861 of a painted American flag, interspersed with Hebrew words from the book of Joshua reading "As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee," and accompanied by a letter in which the writer proclaimed Lincoln as "the destined Moses of the slaves and saviour of his country."[62] To the extent that Lincoln can be connected to the Christian Old Testament, he is tied to Exodus. Leon Kass, in his quintessential work on ancient Hebrew political history, highlights one particular element of the Exodus story that imparts the power of shared memory for the ancient Hebrew people. Kass writes that as the Jews exit Egypt,

> Moses, we are astonished to learn, is also carrying the bones of Joseph (!) in fulfillment of the deathbed promise Joseph had extracted from his brothers several hundred years earlier. . . . Moses's act honors the importance of memory in Israel. Joseph had prophesied that God would *remember* the Children of Israel, and he charged them to *remember* him. Moses *remembers* Joseph—how he learned of this obligation is a deep mystery—and in doing so pays tribute also to God's remembering and keeping His promises."[63]

Moses not only liberated his people in the Exodus—he fulfilled a generations-old promise kept alive by the collective memory of the Hebrew people. The Hebrews preserved not only the memory of this promise but also Joseph's physical bones to that end. When Moses leaves Egypt, he carries the literal and metaphorical past with him, refusing to forget or forsake the forefather so instrumental to God's covenant with the Hebrews.

Assuming, as one should, that this detail did not escape Lincoln's keen eye, it contextualizes and deepens Lincoln's treatment of the American Founding. If the years surrounding the Civil War serve as a kind of Exodus for the United States, with Lincoln cast as Moses, then the Founders serve as the ancestors whose

bones Lincoln carried out of a metaphorical Egypt. The Founders did not—perhaps could not—lead the United States to the fulfillment of its destiny, a promised land of complete universal freedom. And yet, like Joseph and his father, Jacob, they were the covenantal ancestors of the American political project, and Lincoln could not abandon them. A people without a collective memory, without promises kept and prophecies come true, cannot be a people at all. And so, Lincoln cultivated a particular memory of the Founding generation—a plausible narrative of the covenantal order they established, validated by enough historical record to be compelling—that could justify and validate his own political choices and future trajectory of the United States. The American covenant that Lincoln enshrines in collective memory is one that primarily promises universal individual liberty, and popular sovereignty perhaps secondarily. Its holy text is the Declaration of Independence, its core teaching that "all men are created equal," and the Constitution exists in service of both.

One imagines again Moses leading God's chosen people out of Egypt into liberation and the promised land, with Joseph's bones in hand. Blink, and Moses becomes Lincoln, leading the God's almost chosen people out of the throes of the Civil War into liberation from American chattel slavery and into a new birth of freedom. If one squints, the bones of Jefferson are just visible, tucked under the arm of the Great Emancipator. As they departed from Pharoah, Moses said to the Hebrews: "*Remember* this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand the LORD brought you out from this place."[64] And, as the tides of the Civil War turned, Lincoln said to the Americans: "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can *never forget* what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced."[65] The American covenant, perhaps, was born from the memory Lincoln constructed of the Founding as much as it was from the Founding itself. Lincoln built his own legacy atop this memory, extending its reach, recasting its light, layering atop it new days of remembrance, and ultimately

becoming as essential to the collective memory of Americans as any of the greatest of the Founders.

Like Warren, Lincoln also detailed how he hoped Americans would engage with ritualistic remembrance of the Founding. In his 1838 Lyceum Address, Lincoln most clearly lays out his vision for civil religion—the price for preserving the collective memory of the American covenant:

> Let every American, every lover of liberty, every well wisher to his posterity, swear by the blood of the Revolution, never to violate in the least particular, the laws of the country; and never to tolerate their violation by others. As the patriots of seventy-six did to the support of the Declaration of Independence, so to the support of the Constitution and Laws, let every American pledge his life, his property, and his sacred honor;—let every man remember that to violate the law, is to trample on the blood of his father, and to tear the character of his own, and his children's liberty. Let reverence for the laws, be breathed by every American mother, to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap—let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges;—let it be written in Primmers, spelling books, and in Almanacs;—let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the *political religion* of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars.[66]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lincoln's civil religion is, ultimately, an Old Testament religion. The law, for Lincoln as for the ancient Hebrews, is a manifestation of the covenant, to be religiously revered. Lincoln's civil religion demands blood sacrifices to cleanse infractions of this law if need be. The collective memory of this society for Lincoln would revolve around these precious, revealed truths and cling to them as the very word of God himself. Perhaps

this was the civil religion that Lincoln saw as necessary in 1838, as the divisions deepened between states. Or, perhaps Lincoln simply developed a civil religion based on the part of the Bible he seemed to prefer. Either way, the United States and its laws were, for Lincoln, the objects of reverence within his political religion, inseparable from the religion itself. This civil religion could not allow for the potential failure of the United States and its laws; while Lincoln would describe the nation as "almost chosen," his civil religion makes it seem very chosen indeed.

Two Covenants: Warren and Lincoln

How curiously these two thinkers compare: Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the best-known American in history, and Mercy Otis Warren, little known even to those who study the American Founding. A generation apart, both thinkers recognized the political power of collective memory, and both identified the need to actively shape Americans' memory of their national origins. One of these thinkers succeeded in crafting the memory of the Founding that would endure in American history ever after. Lincoln is perhaps the most consequential American president; if anyone could have single-handedly crafted the narrative of America's past, present, and future, it was him. The other thinker, a woman who knew the power of collective memory from both religious education and firsthand female experience, had seemingly little effect on the way Americans would remember the Revolution she so desperately wanted to preserve.

Both Lincoln and Warren maintained that some form of civil religion would be necessary to preserve the fragile promise of the American political project. The preservation of collective memory would require ritual—sacred remembrance, common prayer, and holy days of obligation. Lincoln and Warren, however, crafted from the basis of these collective memories models of civil religion that look quite different. Whereas the center of Warren's civil religion is a transcendent concept—liberty—that persists regardless of the success or failure of the United States to uphold it, the center of Lincoln's civil religion is the nation itself. Warren's American

covenant is grounded in alignment with liberty; Lincoln's is coequal with the laws of the land.

Despite their different models of civil religion, Warren and Lincoln had one important thing in common: They both used Christianity as their models. While there might be myriad reasons for this, including their personal religious beliefs, perhaps the most compelling is that Christianity was universally familiar to all Americans during Warren's and Lincoln's lifetimes. Collective memory is based in shared stories, and no shared story was more all-encompassing for Warren and Lincoln than the story of the Bible. Their intentional crafting of collective memory required a common cultural thread, which came ready-made in the form of Christianity.

No such cultural thread exists in the United States today. Warren and Lincoln both maintained that a people could not be a people without a common collective memory of the past, and in order to furnish this, both made use of the infrastructure of Christian religiosity that was already familiar to the overwhelming majority of Americans. Lack of such consensus leaves the modern United States in perilous territory. Lincoln and Warren both wrote at turning points in American history, where divides between Americans often seemed as insurmountable as the ones we face today; in Lincoln's case, his crafting of collective memory was instrumental to rescuing the nation from the brink of ruin. But modern Americans cannot call upon collective memory to unite them in face of division if there is no basis upon which to construct this memory. Indeed, a fractured American culture has produced, in only recent years, narratives of the American political project that range from the *1619 Project* to Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again." Once again we find ourselves at war over our national memories. If Warren and Lincoln were right, and a people cannot be a people without a collective memory of their past, then perhaps rectification of America's modern political ills will come only through a new memory-maker—a person (or persons) who can effectively reconstruct the collective memories of the American past. While surely not uncontroversial (as Lincoln

and Warren were not, in their time), such a storyteller would need (as Lincoln and Warren did) to prioritize not just one fractured subset of Americans but all Americans, reuniting them, as Lincoln did in 1865, "with malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right." Then, and only then, Americans might once again be free to "strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the nation's wounds" and "achieve and cherish a lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."[67]

Notes

1. "Unsullied by Falsehood: No John Trumbull," Declaration Resources Project, 2016, https://declaration.fas.harvard.edu/blog/trumbull.
2. "Declaration of Independence: One of Four Revolutionary Period Scenes in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda," n.d., https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence. These architectural mistakes may have been unintentional (Trumbull used a sketch of the hall drawn by Jefferson from memory to construct his painting), or they may have been artistic license.
3. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003), 86.
4. Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 86.
5. Jeffrey K. Olick, introduction to *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick (Duke University Press, 2003), 5–7.
6. See Ethan Alexander-Davey, "Constitutional Self-Government and Nationalism: Hobbes, Locke and George Lawson," *History of Political Thought* 35, no. 3 (2014); Ethan Alexander-Davey, "Nationhood and Constitutionalism in the Dutch Republic: An Examination of Grotius' Antiquity of the Batavian Republic," *History of Political Thought* 38, no. 1 (2017); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, 2006); Duncan Bell, "Agonistic Democracy and the Politics of Memory," *Constellations: An International Journal of Critical & Democratic Theory* 15, no. 1 (2008); Philip J Brendese, *The Power of Memory in Democratic Politics* (Boydell & Brewer, 2014); Katharine Hodgkin, *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (Routledge, 2003); Jan Kubik and Michael Bernhard, "A Theory of the Politics of Memory," in *Twenty Years After Communism: The Politics of Memory and Commemoration*, ed. Jan Kubik and Michael

Bernhard (Oxford University Press, 2014); Paul A. Shackel, "Public Memory and the Search for Power in American Historical Archaeology," *American Anthropologist* 103, no. 3 (2001).

7. This is, in part, because academic work on the politics of collective memory has generally orbited Europe. The limited works on collective memory and American politics that center the American Revolution and American Founding include L. Y. N. Spillman, "When Do Collective Memories Last?: Founding Moments in the United States and Australia," in *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick (Duke University Press, 2003); Jeremy K. Yamashiro, Abram Van Engen, and Henry L. Roediger III, "American Origins: Political and Religious Divides in US Collective Memory," *Memory Studies* 15, no. 1 (2019).
8. Many studies on American collective memory examine this phenomenon from a modern vantage point. See, e.g., Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2004); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton University Press, 1992).
9. The only significant account of the Revolution that predates Warren's is David Ramsay's *History of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: R. Aitken & Son, 1789).
10. Lester H. Cohen, introduction to *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*, ed. Lester H. Cohen (Liberty Fund, 1988), xvi.
11. Lester H. Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution: Ideology and Ethics in Mercy Otis Warren's Historical Theory," *William and Mary Quarterly: A Magazine of Early American History* 37, no. 2 (1980).
12. Warren is rarely discussed in political theory, though notable exceptions to the dearth of Warren scholarship in theory include Lawrence J. Friedman and Arthur H. Shaffer, "Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism," *New England Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1975); Mary Kathryn Mueller, "Mercy Otis Warren: Republican Scribe and Defender of Liberties," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History* 3, no. 1 (2020); Steve J Shone, "Mercy Otis Warren, the So-Called 'Republican' Patriot," in *Women of Liberty* (Brill, 2019); Rosemarie Zagarri, "Mercy Otis Warren on Church and State," in *The Forgotten Founders on Faith and Public Life*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison (ISI Books, 2012); Daniel Kapust, "The Society of the Cincinnati and Exemplarity in Late 18th-Century America," *Polis: The*

Journal for Ancient Greek and Roman Political Thought 40, no. 1 (2023); Daniel Kapust, "Three Images of Rome: Republicanism, History, and the American Experiment in Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution*," in *Regards croisés sur la Rome ancienne et les Lumières*, ed. Ida Gilda Mastrorosa (Classiques Garnier, 2023).

13. Because Warren was a self-professed historian, several accounts exist of her historiography, but none of these accounts address the role of collective memory in Warren's political theory. See Friedman and Shaffer, "Mercy Otis Warren and the Politics of Historical Nationalism"; Jennifer Blizin Gillis, *Mercy Otis Warren: Author and Historian* (Capstone, 2005); Judith B. Markowitz, "Radical and Feminist: Mercy Otis Warren and the Historiographers," *Peace & Change* 4, no. 2 (1977); Janis L. McDonald, "The Need for Contextual ReVision: Mercy Otis Warren, a Case in Point," *Yale JL & Feminism* 5 (1992): 183; Michelle Wheeler, "Mercy Otis Warren: The Historiographical Motivation of an Unlikely Patriot," *Saber & Scroll Historical Journal* 2, no. 4 (2013); Cohen, "Explaining the Revolution."
14. Mercy Otis Warren, "Observations on the New Constitution, and on the Foederal [*sic*] and State Conventions, by a Columbian Patriot; Sic Transit Gloria Americana" (Thomas Greenleaf, 1788; repr. Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership, 2011), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N16431.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext
15. Mercy Otis Warren, *History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution: In Two Volumes*" (Liberty Fund, 2012), 485, 631, 686–96. Hereafter cited as *History*.
16. Warren, *History*, 1:71. Italics in original.
17. Warren, *History*, 2:678–79.
18. Warren, *History*, 2:679.
19. Warren, *History*, 1:135.
20. Warren, *History*, 1:337–38.
21. Warren, *History*, 2:523; see also 2:485.
22. For additional claims of the providential nature of the revolution, see Warren, *History*, 1:1:97, 1:130, 1:391, 2:489, 2:505.
23. Warren, *History*, 1:25.
24. Warren, *History*, 1:199.
25. Warren, *History*, 2:485.
26. Warren, *History*, 1:24–25.
27. Warren, *History*, 2:696.

28. Warren, *History*, 1:14. This passage also illustrates Warren's concerns with regards to the institution of American chattel slavery, which she viewed as antithetical to the project of human liberty.
29. Warren, *History*, 2:696. Emphasis mine.
30. Warren, "Observations on the New Constitution." Emphasis mine.
31. Warren, *History*, 2:631.
32. Warren, *History*, 2:646.
33. Warren, *History*, 2:645.
34. Warren, *History*, 2:686–87.
35. There are some studies of collective memory that concern Lincoln, but these generally focus on how Lincoln himself is remembered in American political history, as opposed to how Lincoln shaped American collective memory and used it to achieve his political ends. See Harold Holzer, *Emancipating Lincoln: The Proclamation in Text, Context, and Memory* (Harvard University Press, 2012); Merrill D. Peterson, *Lincoln in American Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Scott A. Sandage, "A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939–1963," in *Race and the Production of Modern American Nationalism*, ed. Reynolds J. Scott-Childress (Routledge, 2014); Barry Schwartz, "Iconography and Collective Memory: Lincoln's Image in the American Mind," *Sociological Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1991); Barry Schwartz, "Memory as a Cultural System: Abraham Lincoln in World War II," *American Sociological Review* 61, no. 5 (1996); Barry Schwartz, "Postmodernity and Historical Reputation: Abraham Lincoln in Late Twentieth-Century American Memory," *Social Forces* 77, no. 1 (1998); Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln in the Post-Heroic Era: History and Memory in Late Twentieth-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Barry Schwartz, "The Limits of Gratitude: Lincoln in African American Memory," *OAH Magazine of History* 23, no. 1 (2009); Barry Schwartz and Howard Schuman, "History, Commemoration, and Belief: Abraham Lincoln in American Memory, 1945–2001," *American Sociological Review* 70, no. 2 (2005); Kirt H. Wilson, "Debating the Great Emancipator: Abraham Lincoln and Our Public Memory," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2010). The accounts of Lincoln that have come closest to this are those that view Lincoln as an active participant in the crafting of his own mythology. See Richard Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth," in *The Best American History Essays on Lincoln* (Springer, 2009); Dwight G. Anderson, *Abraham Lincoln: The Quest for Immorality* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

36. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this obscure Lincolnian moment has a unique hold on the imagination of academics. The phrase has lent itself to innumerable book and article titles—the title of this essay notwithstanding—some of which reckon with the quote itself, and others that borrow its interpretive meaning for rhetorical purposes. See Tiziano Bonazzi, "A People 'Almost Chosen' by God: Understanding Abraham Lincoln in Post-Secular Italy," *RSA Journal* 17, no. 18 (2007); Paul Johnson, "The Almost-Chosen People," *Wilson Quarterly (1976–)* 9, no. 5 (1985); Russel Blaine Nye, *This Almost Chosen People: Essays in the History of American Ideas* (Michigan State University Press, 1966); George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010); James Sellers, "The Almost Chosen People: A Theological Approach to American Society," *Journal of Religion* 45, no. 4 (1965); Grant Wacker, "Early Pentecostals and the Almost Chosen People," *Pneuma* 19, no. 1 (1997); William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Doubleday, 1959); Michael Zuckerman, *Almost Chosen People: Oblique Biographies in the American Grain* (University of California Press, 1993).
37. Richard Hofstader certainly thought he did. See Hofstadter, "Abraham Lincoln and the Self-Made Myth."
38. Diana Schaub, *His Greatest Speeches: How Lincoln Moved the Nation* (St. Martin's Press, 2021), 59.
39. Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the New Jersey Senate at Trenton, New Jersey," in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (Rutgers University Press, 1953), 235–36. Emphasis mine.
40. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 171.
41. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005), 47, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20028013.
42. Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided: An Interpretation of the Issues in the Lincoln–Douglas Debates* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 236–74; Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War, with New Foreword* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018). See also Joseph Robert Fornieri, *Biblical Republicanism: Abraham Lincoln's Civil Theology* (Catholic University of America, 1996); Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Eerdmans, 1999); D. Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (Harper & Row, 1973); Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*.

43. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 226.
44. Throughout his collected works Lincoln mentions Moses six times. See Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 3:360, 3:60, 4:130, 6:40. He also mentions Egypt (as in, ancient Egypt) six times (at 2:438, 2:439, 2:441, 2:442, 5:529) and Israel four times (at 2:10, 2:379, 2:409, 2:441). He mentions "Christ" but once (at 2:10), and Jesus never.
45. There may be myriad reasons for this. E.g., perhaps Lincoln found the historical accounting of the Old Testament to be more acceptable to his skeptical sensibilities than the miraculous and mystical New Testament. Such a reading is friendly to characterizations of Lincoln as the (literal) spiritual successor of Jefferson, who famously excised Christ's miracles from his personal Bible. See Sellers, "The Almost Chosen People," 276.
46. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 84.
47. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People*, 84.
48. Lucas E. Morel, *Lincoln and the American Founding* (SIU Press, 2020).
49. Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (W. W. Norton, 2019).
50. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4:169.
51. Jefferson Davis, "Speech at Boston," in *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Mississippi Dept. of Archives & History, 1923), 3:315–32.
52. Stephen A. Douglas, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (1953), 3:4.
53. Douglas, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 3:8.
54. Douglas, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 3:113.
55. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Cornell, 1975); Winthrop D. Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (UNC Press Books, 1968); David Waldstreicher, *Slavery's Constitution: From Revolution to Ratification* (Hill & Wang, 2010).
56. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2:546–47.
57. To name a few: Herman Belz, "Abraham Lincoln and American Constitutionalism," *Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (1988); Richard Brookhiser, *Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln* (Basic Books, 2014); John P. Diggins, *On Hallowed Ground: Abraham Lincoln and the Foundations of American History* (Yale University Press, 2000); Foner, *The Second Founding*; J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Allen Jayne, *Lincoln and the American Manifesto* (Prometheus Books, 2010); Morel, *Lincoln and the American Founding*.

58. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 4:271.
59. See also George P. Fletcher, *Our Secret Constitution: How Lincoln Redefined American Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
60. Jaffa indicates that Lincoln viewed the Founders as the Mosaic lawgivers and himself as a cultural and spiritual continuation of their tradition. Alternatively, I argue that Lincoln, to some extent, saw the Civil War as more similar in spirit to the Exodus than was the Founding, and therefore is himself the more appropriate Mosaic figure. See Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, 211–32.
61. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 2:10, 2:409, 2:438–42.
62. Meir Soloveichik, "Lincoln's Almost Chosen People," 2020 Erasmus Lecture, *First Things* (2021).
63. Leon R. Kass, *Founding God's Nation* (Yale University Press, 2021), 194–95. Emphasis mine.
64. Exodus 13:3 (KJV). Emphasis mine.
65. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 7:20. Emphasis mine.
66. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 1:112.
67. Lincoln, *Collected Works*, 8:333.