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A. E. Elmore. *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address: Echoes of the Bible and Book of Common Prayer.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009. xi + 265 pp. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8093-2951-9.

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New Light on the Gettysburg Address

"Forescore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the final resting place of those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. 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 that they have thus far so nobly carried on. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us; that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that the nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom; and that Governments of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth" (The text as written down by Joseph Ignatius Gilbert of the Associate Press just after the speech).

On Thursday November 19, 1863, Abraham Lincoln strode across a makeshift wooden platform in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to deliver the 272 words that have since become immortal. Countless school children have memorized them, and in *Lincoln at Gettysburg* (1992), Garry Wills argued that with this speech Lincoln essentially reconfigured the ultimate purpose of the ongoing American experiment. The first full-length book on the address appeared in 1930–Bruce Barton's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*–and recently some of the foremost Lincoln scholars of our day have taken up the mantle: Gabor Borrit, *The Gettysburg Gospel: The Lincoln Speech That Nobody Knows* (2006); Douglas L. Wilson, *Lincoln's Sword: The Presidency and the Power of Words* (2006); and Ronald C. White, *The Eloquent President: A Portrait of Lincoln through His Words* (2005). In the book under review, however, A. E. Elmore provides the most thorough discussion of the Gettysburg Address ever attempted as he (literally) examines every phrase and virtually every word. It is an impressive undertaking.

Elmore's goal is to present the Gettysburg Address as Lincoln intended it to be heard and as his immediate hearers/readers would (probably) have understood it. The current interpretation of the address suggests that Lincoln modeled his speech along classical lines, such as Pericles's famed oath to the dead at Athens. Elmore disagrees. He argues that the president shaped his address by borrowing heavily from two sources that lay much closer to his hearers: The King James Version of scripture (KJV) and the Protestant Episcopal Church's Book of Common Prayer. Except for the large Roman Catholic minority, the KJV was the most common version of the Bible then in circulation. (Indeed, the Latter-day Saints still consider it the only acceptable translation.) Although less well known, the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer is a 364-page volume that restates many scriptural passages and also contains liturgical readings for such milestones as baptism, marriage, burial, and the

dedication of a church. During his youth, Lincoln memorized numerous passages from the KJV, and Elmore believes that he could have also done so from the Book of Common Prayer–copies of which lay in every pew–when he occasionally attended Episcopal services in Springfield with Mary Todd from c. 1841 to 1850.

During the Civil War era, politics, religion, and sacred language overlapped on a variety of fronts. The Confederacy called for several days of fasting and prayer, and the Union did the same. Such common phrases as "the apple of his eye," "the salt of the earth," and "a land flowing with milk and honey" were all biblically based. Many people felt as close to the figures in the Old and New Testaments as they did to their distant neighbors. Allusions to the Bible were omnipresent.

The twenty-first century has difficulty comprehending this sensibility. Social critics have noted a rapid rise in "biblical illiteracy" as popular culture has largely replaced scripture as the major source of shared metaphors. The predominance in the universities of deconstructionism (which Elmore terms "worthless flotsam" [p. 6]) has not helped; nor has the omnipresence of cinema/video with its simplistic portrayals of both character and language. As a result, many contemporaries find themselves baffled by a speech that reverberates on both political and sacred levels. But, Elmore argues, by echoing both the KJV and the Book of Common Prayer, this was precisely what Lincoln did with his famed address.

Lincoln's controlling metaphor revolved around the theme of the birth, death, and rebirth of the nation, and this resonated with his audience as parallel with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Similarly, Lincoln's reference to "our fathers" recalled not just George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams but also Jesus's heavenly and earthly fathers, Jehovah and Joseph. Likewise the key phrases "brought forth," "conceived," and "dedicated" can be found, in that precise order, in the Book of Common Prayer's litany for the Public Baptism of Infants. As Jesus was conceived, brought forth, and dedicated to serve humankind, so too, Lincoln implied, was the United States conceived, brought forth, and dedicated to the Jeffersonian ideal that "all men are created equal." And, of course, the famed "Forescore" comes directly from Psalm 90.

The parallels continue. The phrase "we are met" echoes the Book of Common Prayer marriage ceremony, "we are gathered"; so too does Lincoln's tendency to couple words–"so conceived and so dedicated," "fitting and proper"–reflect the language of the book. "His echoes of the Prayer Book are every bit as clear and insistent as his echoes of the King James Bible," Elmore notes, "just not quite as frequent" (p. 24). The author has discovered that only 3 of the 272 words–"proposition," "civil" as in "civil war," and "detract" are *not* present in either the KJV or the Book of Common Prayer. This is an absolutely stunning interpretation.

Elmore is a professor of Law and English at Athens State University in Alabama, and both of these disciplines are reflected in his analysis. For example, he devotes entire chapters to semi-legalistic discussions of the phrases "consecrate-dedicate-hallowed," "fitting and proper," "dedicated to the proposition," and "under God." He similarly draws on logic and reason as much as empirical historical evidence to argue that Lincoln's restatement of Jefferson's "all men are created equal" emerged as a deliberate reply to recent Southern Presbyterian/Northern Episcopal pamphlet restatements of John C. Calhoun's attack on the idea as a glittering generality. Elmore also emphasizes the fact that the phrase "new birth"–as in "new birth of freedom"–does not appear at all in the KJV but is found twice in the Book of Common Prayer. But to seek out a literary source for every one of Lincoln's sentences is to overlook a considerable amount of oral history. Lincoln's Ohio River Valley world still had one foot in the Anglo-American oral culture of the eighteenth century, and surely Lincoln heard the phrase "new birth" a number of times before he read it in the Book of Common Prayer, if, indeed, he ever did. The author also suggests that contemporary Episcopalians would likely have recognized Lincoln's borrowing from the book. (In fact, he, himself, did so as a young man.)

Unlike the Baptists, the Methodists, and the Presbyterians, the Episcopal Church (about 160,000 members, sixth largest in the nation) did not officially divide over the issue of slavery. Still, relations between northern and southern churches essentially ceased for the duration. Numerous Confederate officers, and several members of Jefferson Davis's cabinet, including Davis himself, were church adherents; but so too were William Henry Seward, Salmon P. Chase, and Gideon Welles of Lincoln's cabinet. Ohio Bishop Charles P. McIlvaine visited England several times to strengthen the Union cause among Church of England officials. Although these churchmen might well have heard echoes of the Book of Common Prayer in the Gettysburg Address, it is doubtful that words would have resonated in the same way.

Elmore's suggestion that Lincoln deliberately drew

from these two majestic literary sources to reach out to a Catholic-Baptist-Methodist-Episcopal-Presbyterian-Quaker-Jewish-etc. audience is both thoughtful and exceptionally well argued. Whether one agrees with his interpretation or not, this is a genuinely provocative book. Indeed, after one puts this volume down, it will be impossible to read the Gettysburg Address in the same light again. Elmore's *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address* belongs on the shelf of everyone interested in the powerful role that "mere words" played during the American Civil War.

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