During this year commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible we can learn something from Abraham Lincoln’s reliance upon its language in his well-known address delivered on the occasion of his Second Inauguration as President. We can learn how Lincoln combines plainness with dignity by drawing upon the moral principles and language made familiar to his American audience from their study and worship in the word of God as rendered in that seventeenth century translation.

You recall the speech occurred as the Civil War still lingered although its outcome in victory for the Union had been pretty much assured. So Lincoln spoke as Commander-in-Chief intent upon animating the North to persist in effort and sacrifice necessary to conclude the struggle. Yet he was also mindful of another responsibility opposite in character, of the need to move his countrymen both North and South to a renewed peace that would not betray sacrifice by vindictiveness. He knew he owed gratitude to those still fighting for the Union as well as to those whose kinsmen had suffered and died in the struggle, knew that to them he owed a reaffirmation of the cause for which they had given and continued to give so much. Yet even in victory the cause might yet be lost if Lincoln did not do all he could to induce the South at least to accept if not more positively embrace the Union that will have been imposed by force of arms. How to begin this effort of healing the wound without dishonoring those North and South who had endured so much whether in victory or in defeat?

Lincoln confronted besides another problem on the face of it seemingly unsolvable. How to appeal to the soon to be vanquished whose very opposition was grounded in their repudiation of that Constitution which had until the war united all sections of the country. Without dishonoring that Constitution Lincoln would have to appeal beyond it, appeal to something beyond the Constitution yet consistent with the supreme law of the land, perhaps indeed appeal to an authority the national constitution might be thought to serve even if the legal document did not expressly avow such an intent to serve. What beyond, yet consistent with, the Constitution? Lincoln turned to the Bible, to the legacy bequeathed by the scholars a British King had provided to make a new
translation for Protestants, including some who had just begun to colonize America at the time of its publication.

In his Second Inaugural Lincoln found his way through this double dilemma by drawing upon the Biblical faith shared by each side in the conflict now, after four bitter years, drawing to its close. He notes that common faith when he speaks of both sides having prayed to the same God for His help during the war. And near the midpoint of his speech he refers to the Bible by name, to the source of the common faith which instructs in those common prayers raised on behalf of incompatible purposes. The Bible to which Lincoln referred we know to have been the King James translation from the passage he cites from the 19th Psalm: “the judgments of the Lord are altogether true and just.” And we recognize the same translated language in the adapted quotation from the New Testament, from Luke 6:37 “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged,” as well as in the exact quotation from Matthew 18:7 “Woe unto the world for offences; for it must needs be that offences come, but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!”

Even when he is not quoting scriptural passages Lincoln intends to evoke the Bible and especially the round phrasing and the cadences so conspicuous in the King James rendering. We see this in the somewhat archaic diction he employs subsequent to the more matter-of-fact first paragraph of the four which make up this terse but sonorous address. The metonymies, “sweat” for labor, “bread” for the meager recompense the slaves received for their labor; “blood” and “lash” for the pains inflicted upon slaves instead of just payment for their work; “sword” for military force, and “blood,” once more, for every form of destruction inflicted by war. These slight archaisms pay tribute to the language of the stylists appointed by James, who, we are told, agreed to produce their work in a language even at that time somewhat remote from the colloquial idiom of their day. We hear running throughout the final three paragraphs a cadence, a rhythm of phrasing somewhat repetitive, somewhat balanced by antitheses. “All dreaded it [war], all sought to avert it.” “Neither party expected… Neither anticipated…” “Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray…” “With malice toward none, with charity for all…” Or note the words I’ve previously cited with respect to biblical diction, but this time in their context hearing the swing and balance of the word order: “Yet, if God wills that [the war] continue until all wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn by the lash shall be paid by another drawn by the sword…” And, finally, tone. Aside from narration of events, the tone of the most striking biblical utterances is that of a judge speaking from his judgment seat. Such is the tone of Jehovah, of his prophets and of Jesus of Nazareth. Lincoln’s tone after the initial paragraph of narrative is that of
prophecy and judgment, prophecy in its full sense combining judgment upon past transgressions with hope for a future of revived fidelity.

Yet the judgment itself is also prayerful and tempered with the charity Lincoln exhorts his countrymen to join him in displaying across their sectional divide. Lincoln’s genius lies in his combining clear insistence upon justice with sincere fellow feeling toward former adversaries now to be once more fellow citizens. To achieve that combination of lucid head and magnanimous heart Lincoln must confront and somehow overcome the dismay that we may suppose threatened believers in either biblical testament or both. For in the earlier Judaic prophets as well as in Jesus, not to mention in their followers, confidence in a just God must after so much suffering contend with dismay over apparent non-fulfillment of God’s mercy and providence. The course of human affairs does not seem to bear out divine promises nor manifest divine justice, at least not in the here and now.

Lincoln must contend with this dismay on the part of his audience but also, presumably, in himself. In himself because he has made such a point of remarking that North and South read the same Bible and prayed to the same God. Lincoln, I have said, must appeal beyond the Constitution to the still higher authority of biblical religion. But has not biblical religion been brought into question by the war? Is it that the Bible is unclear with regard to the injustice of holding slaves? Or is it that though the word of God is sufficiently clear in the matter, the one side read their Bible wrongly? It has been said that slaveholding violates every one of the Ten Commandments. The South could hardly have thought so. But then Lincoln knew the story told of two men disputing a biblical passage, a story that concludes with one of the disputants placing a silver dollar over the passage under dispute and asking his opponent to read it. When the opponent admits he cannot, his adversary proclaims victory: self-interest obscures correct reading. But Lincoln does not make that argument on this occasion. He reads the Bible but with the eyes of faith, giving witness while providing example for his countrymen to follow in summoning up their faith.

The faith to which he appeals is a trust in God’s providence. He knows the peril of assuming providence accommodates itself to one’s own will. As well, he knows the course of divine providence must proceed by perplexing meanders because God’s agents are human beings. Human beings God has created free. Their freedom is at once the glory of the species and its frailty. They are free to follow divine law, but also to defy that law, or, alternatively, though intending to obey, they may fail to perceive how best to obey. Thus, trust in providence must emerge from a steady recognition of human fallibility both of mind and of will. That awareness Lincoln evokes through biblical language when in speaking of earning bread by sweat of the face Lincoln reminds his audience of Adam
and the first fall. Slavery looms up as a second fall of man because it
compounds Adam’s sin against God with sin against neighbor since Lincoln’s
words speak of having one’s bread from the sweat of other men’s faces. Woe to
him from whom such an offence has come. But from whom has it come? Lincoln
does not say the guilt owes to the South alone, though doubtless many of his
audience would have preferred him to have said so. Instead, Lincoln assigns
blame by the most general of references, by identifying the perpetrators merely
as “those by whom the offense came.” When he follows with the phrase “two
hundred and fifty years” he extends the offense in time and space to charge the
entire populace that had four-score and nine years before become a nation.
The sin was general, as was the woe. The woe being proportionate to the sin
Americans are entitled to join with the Psalmist in asserting “the judgments of
the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Something less than two years previously when Lincoln had spoken at
Gettysburg he had in similarly biblical cadences summoned citizens to renew
their dedication to a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the
proposition that all men are created equal.” The war had tested that
proposition. Such a radical proposition required testing and testing by such an
ordeal as the nation had experienced and would continue to endure for yet
awhile longer. Because it had been and continues to be no easy matter to grasp
how liberty and equality are interdependent. The predictable success of Union
arms would promise a practical resolution in terms of national law and policy.
But force of arms though it can compel cannot convince. If the war proved
anything it proved at most the high and stern resolve Lincoln had called for at
Gettysburg. The human record as then it appeared might be thought to support
a view that liberty when, rarely, it had been achieved had been gained at the
expense of equality. Greece and Rome permitted slavery and perhaps depended
upon the institution for such liberty as their free citizens enjoyed. From the
other side, France had come by such equality as its Revolution managed only at
the cost of diminishing liberty for everyone within its borders as well as beyond
its boundaries for any nation France’s revolutionary armies could subdue.
Judaic law provided for a mitigated form of slavery, and St. Paul in his epistles
may seem to say that human bondage is of little consequence either for the
soul of the slave or for that of the slaveholder. Of course the same Jefferson
who had identified America with the proposition of equality had charged Britain
with introducing slavery in the colonies. Thus, the human record both in deeds
and in principles contested Lincoln’s confidence in the interdependence of
liberty and equality.

It may be that to Lincoln himself we owe our confidence that freedom and
equality are so intertwined that neither can be attained without the other. But
we must emphasize that Lincoln’s own words lean upon the authority of the
Bible. In his public speeches Lincoln sees no confusion of testimony in scripture regarding slavery. In fact he seems to identify biblical precept with the principles asserted in America’s Declaration of Independence. He may do so from having understood Christ’s teaching of charity to reconcile or rise supreme over all other precepts Mosaic or Pauline. The King James’ rendering of the second of the two great commandments that Jesus said contained all the others instructs us to “love thy neighbor as thyself.”(Luke 10:27) The parable of the Samaritan which follows makes clear that one’s neighbor can be anyone without qualification. Lincoln could identify Christ’s teaching with Jefferson’s because to state this precept of charity in terms more strictly political is to say “all men are created equal.” Put the other way around, Jefferson’s following words “and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights” equates with Christ’s “as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.” (Luke 6:31) At the time Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural he could rely upon an audience’s recognizing such equivalences because they were about equally familiar with the words of the Declaration and the language of the Bible. In large measure this familiarity owed to similarity in the tone and diction of scriptural and Jeffersonian–Lincolnian speech, a similarity made the more conspicuous by the King James Bible. Such familiarity has in our day declined, has declined whether one looks to Jefferson, to Lincoln, or to the Bible. That decline should concern us, if, as seems likely, the very thought conveyed by America’s chief moral teachers owes something to the very language employed to convey it.