

Sermons on the Death of Abraham Lincoln

April 14th, 1865. Five days earlier, the Civil War officially ended with General Robert E. Lee's surrender of Confederate troops to General Ulysses S. Grant at the Appomattox Court House in Virginia. Five days before that, Abraham Lincoln walked through the streets of Richmond, Virginia after Confederate soldiers abandoned the former capital of the Confederacy. The President had minimal protection, and hundreds of newly freed African Americans and poor whites celebrated and tried to approach Lincoln to shake hands with him, thank him, or just be near him.

On April 14th, which was Good Friday and the start of the Easter holiday, Abraham Lincoln attended a play at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Partway through the play, the actor John Wilkes Booth gained access to the President's private box and shot Lincoln in the back of the head. An ardent supporter of the Confederacy, Booth had vowed to assassinate Lincoln after hearing the President's April 11th speech in which he discussed the possibility of allowing limited black suffrage.

Lincoln never regained consciousness after the fatal shot was fired. He was attended at his deathbed by many prominent members of his government, as well as by the Presbyterian minister Phineas Gurley. Dr. Gurley delivered a sermon at the President's White House funeral, suggesting that the President's assassination was part of God's plan, and that Lincoln's work on earth would continue even after his death.

Hundreds, if not thousands more sermons were delivered after the assassination. Matthew Simpson, a Methodist bishop and friend of the President's, gave the funeral address at Lincoln's burial in Springfield, IL. Simpson's stirring rhetoric contained more overtly political content than Gurley's sermon. Emma Hardinge, a spiritualist and loyal Lincoln supporter, spoke before more than 3,000 people at a popular memorial to the President, directly addressing what she saw as Lincoln's greatest legacy: emancipating enslaved people. The Colored People's Educational Monument Association more explicitly addressed the devastation wrought by slavery on African Americans and on the country as a whole, and praised Lincoln for bringing about the end of that system.

Of course, not all sermons after the assassination cast Lincoln's politics and actions in a positive light. Baptist minister J. Lansing Burrows of Richmond mourned the fallen President but also pushed back hard against accusations that all southerners were responsible for the assassination. Burrows carefully walked a line between respect for Lincoln and critiques of the North, and other southern ministers were even bolder in their hostility towards the Union as they addressed Lincoln's assassination.

Document 1: Dr. Gurley Sermon

Gurley, Phineas Densmore. *Faith in God: Dr. Gurley's Sermon at the Funeral of Abraham Lincoln / from the original manuscript*. Philadelphia: Department of History of the Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., 1940.

PHS Call number: PAM E 457.52 .G93 1940b

Source note: Rev. Phineas D. Gurley (1816-1868) was pastor of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., which Abraham Lincoln and his wife Mary Todd Lincoln attended. Gurley and his wife were often invited to the White House, and Gurley was by Lincoln's bedside when the President died. Gurley said a prayer at Lincoln's death, and gave this sermon at Abraham Lincoln's White House funeral. Gurley then accompanied the president's body on its somber journey by train across the United States to his final resting place in Springfield, Illinois.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Who is the intended audience?
2. According to Gurley, how was Lincoln's assassination part of God's plan (page 18 in 1940 printed sermon)?
3. Just after page 18 is an 1866 painting of Lincoln's deathbed scene by John H. Littlefield. Among those attending the president just before his death is Dr. Gurley himself. How reliable is this painting as a source of information about the subject? What other kinds of sources could you use to corroborate the painting?
4. How did Lincoln's faith in God make him a strong leader of the country during the Civil War, according to Gurley (pages 20, 21)?
5. What is the "sad comfort we have lost" at the death of Lincoln, as quoted from Tacitus (page 25)?
6. What language does Gurley use to describe Lincoln throughout his sermon?
7. What is *not* included in Gurley's sermon? What major legacy of Lincoln's presidency, and result of the Civil War, does Gurley not directly address? What might explain this omission?

Document 2: Matthew Simpson Funeral Address

Simpson, Matthew. *Funeral Address Delivered at the Burial of President Lincoln, at Springfield, Illinois, May 4, 1865*. New York: Carlton & Porter, 1865.
PHS Call number: PAM E 457.52 .S613 1865

Source note: Matthew Simpson (1811-1884) was a bishop of the Methodist church and a close friend and confidante of President Lincoln. Though Lincoln normally attended a Presbyterian church in Washington, D.C., he was not a member of any particular congregation, and Simpson was selected to give the funeral address at the president's burial because of his close ties to the president, and for his renowned oratorical skills. A strong supporter of Reconstruction, Simpson argued that this period of political reform was Lincoln's legacy.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? Who is the intended audience?
2. How did Lincoln's childhood and upbringing shape the man he would become, according to Simpson (pages 9, 10)?
3. One example of Lincoln's moral strength that Simpson provides (page 12) was Lincoln's assurance that preserving the Union was more important to him than abolishing slavery (at least before the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation). What does the use of this example say about contemporary perceptions of the Civil War?
4. In what ways is Simpson's funeral address similar to Dr. Gurley's funeral sermon (Document 1)? In what ways is it different?
5. Why does Simpson point out how stable the government transition was after Lincoln's assassination (page 19)? What point is he trying to make?
6. The last paragraph of Simpson's funeral address became famous after its publication (page 21). What made it resonate with people after Lincoln's death? What tools does it use to make an impact on the listener/reader?
7. What labels or titles for Lincoln does Simpson use throughout his address? What does this language say about how Lincoln was viewed by many Americans?

Document 3: Hardinge Funeral Oration

Hardinge, Emma. *The Great Funeral Oration on Abraham Lincoln by Emma Hardinge; Delivered Sunday, April 16, 1865, at Cooper Institute, New York, before Upwards of Three Thousand Persons*. New York: American News Company, 1865.
PHS Call number: PAM E 457.52 .H372 1865

Source note: Emma Hardinge (1823-1899), also known as Emma Hardinge Britten, was a part of the spiritualist movement and campaigned in support of Lincoln. Britten was born in London and then joined the spiritualist movement in the United States, where renowned spiritualist Horace Day brought her in to lead seances. Hardinge delivered her oration on Easter Sunday to more than 3,000 people just a day after the President's death. In it, she compared Lincoln to Jesus as a martyr for a cause greater than himself, and connected the fatal shooting of Lincoln on Good Friday to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? How does the author differ from those of Documents 1 and 2?
2. Why is it impossible to compare the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and other political assassinations such as that of Julius Caesar (pages 6, 7)? What makes Lincoln's assassination stand apart, according to Hardinge?
3. How does Hardinge describe young Abraham Lincoln's education on the subject of slavery (pages 10, 11)?
4. Why was the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln's crowning achievement, according to Hardinge (pages 16, 17)?
5. Hardinge ends a long passage (pages 21-23) on who (or what) is responsible for Lincoln's death with the phrase "...*the blood of Lincoln lies at the door of SLAVERY!*" (page 23)." What does she mean by this? How does she connect the institution of slavery to Lincoln's assassination?
6. How does Hardinge envision Reconstruction (pages 24-26)?
7. What language does Hardinge use to describe Lincoln?

Document 4: Burrows Discourse and Sermon Excerpt

Burrows, John Lansing. *Palliative and Prejudiced Judgements Condemned: A Discourse Delivered in the First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., June 1, 1865, the Day Appointed by the United States for Humiliation and Mourning on Account of the Assassination of President Lincoln*. Richmond, Va.: Office of Commercial Bulletin, 1865.

PHS Call number: PAM E 457.8 .B97 1865

Source note: John Lansing Burrows (1814-1893) was born into a prominent Dutch American family in Albany, NY. Ordained as a Baptist minister in 1835, Burrows led congregations in Kentucky and Pennsylvania before arriving in Richmond, Virginia to lead a church there just as the Civil War was beginning. In this document, the first source is Burrows’s *Palliative and Prejudiced Judgements Condemned*, a discourse he delivered more than a month after Lincoln’s assassination, on June 1, 1865, which was designated a national day of mourning by the current president, Andrew Johnson. Following the discourse is an excerpt of the sermon that Burrows delivered on April 23rd, 1865, about a week after Lincoln’s assassination.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written and delivered? Who is the intended audience?
2. How does this source differ from the previous sources on this topic?
3. Why does Burrows begin his discourse by condemning people who try to justify an evil act (pages 3, 4)? How does this opening help frame the rest of the speech?
4. Why does Burrows say that he and other southerners should not put themselves out there as “special eulogists” of President Lincoln (page 4)?
5. How does the crime of “condemning the innocent” relate to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln and its aftermath, according to Burrows (pages 5-7)?
6. How does Burrows refute the accusation that the entire South, and the institution of slavery, are responsible for Lincoln’s assassination (pages 7, 8)?
7. What titles or labels does Burrows use to describe Lincoln?

Reading questions for the sermon excerpt:

1. What are the “sentiments of the Southern people,” regarding Lincoln’s assassination (page 10)? Why might Burrows feel the need to speak for all southern people at this time?
2. How does the tone of Burrows’s sermon differ from that of his discourse more than a month later? What might explain this difference?
3. Why is Lincoln’s assassination particularly damaging to the South, according to Burrows (page 11)?

Document 5: Colored People’s Educational Monument Association

National Lincoln Monument Association. *Celebration by the Colored People’s Educational Monument Association in Memory of Abraham Lincoln: On the Fourth of July, 1865, in the Presidential Grounds, Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C.: McGill & Witherow, Printers, 1865.

PHS Call number: PAM E 457.1 .N22 C4 1865

Source note: The National Lincoln Monument Association aimed to commemorate the life of Abraham Lincoln through a permanent monument to the martyred president. Gathered together by Henry Highland Garnet (1815-1882), a prominent African American abolitionist and Presbyterian minister, the Association originally hoped to open a Washington, D.C. school for freedmen and their children that would honor Lincoln’s memory. The school never came to fruition, but the Association eventually organized and had built a small monument to Lincoln in southeast Washington, D.C., in Lincoln Park (the large monument with the seated statue and columned building in the Tidal Basin was built much later, finished in 1922). Included in the Celebration documents is a speech by William Howard Day (1825-1900), an editor and educator who became the first African American school board member and president in the United States. The speech was abridged and edited by association members.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this document? Who is the intended audience?
2. Why was the Fourth of July, 1865 a “memorable day” (page 3)?
3. What similarities are there between the letters sent to the association regarding the July 4, 1865 celebration of Abraham Lincoln? What differences are there?
4. What was “American despotism,” and what were the products of it (pages 14, 15)
5. Day’s speech is not reprinted in full, but is abridged and edited by members of the National Lincoln Monument Association. How reliable is this version of the speech? What may be gained or lost from the original speech?
6. What language do the authors use to describe Abraham Lincoln? What does this say about the Association’s attitudes toward the assassinated president?

Document 6: Moorhead Secondary Source

Moorhead, James H. *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860-1869*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
PHS Call number: BR 525 .M56 1978

**See especially Chapter 5, "Search for the Jordan," pages 173-217.*

Source note: James H. Moorhead is a Presbyterian minister and emeritus professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he started teaching in 1984. He is a senior editor of *The Journal of Presbyterian History* and he continues to research and write about 19th and 20th century American Protestantism.

Reading questions:

1. Who is the author of this source? When was it written? Who is the intended audience?
2. What religious meaning did people find in the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, according to Moorhead (pages 174-176)?
3. What other important lesson did the nation learn from Lincoln's assassination (page 176)?
4. What were typical northern Protestant hopes for Reconstruction, as expressed by Edward N. Kirk of Boston (pages 181, 182)? What did Reconstruction actually accomplish?
5. What is the difference between impartial and universal suffrage, and why did impartial suffrage not guarantee full political equality for African Americans (pages 190-192)?
6. Why did Protestants not push for land reform that would grant freedmen plots of land (pages 194-196)?
7. What did Ulysses S. Grant, Republican candidate for president, promise to America if he were elected (pages 211-212)? How did this attitude affect the progress of Reconstruction?