

Inauguration to feature Lincoln, Trump Bibles

January 18, 2017

NASHVILLE (USA Today Network/RNS)—When President-elect Donald Trump takes his oath of office on Inauguration Day, his hand will rest on his family Bible and the Abraham Lincoln Bible.

Alex Stroman, the deputy director of communications for the 58th Inaugural Committee, confirmed the picks. The Lincoln Bible, used during the 16th president's first inauguration, was most recently a part of President Obama's first and second inauguration ceremonies and is a part of the Library of Congress' collection.

Trump received his Bible, a Revised Standard Version, in 1955 from his mother upon graduation from Sunday Church Primary School in New York.

Trump showed off the Bible in an early 2016 campaign video, thanking evangelicals for their support. Exit polls showed four out of five white evangelicals voted for Trump.

"My mother gave me this Bible—this very Bible many years ago," Trump said in the video. "In fact, it's her writing, right here. She wrote the name and my address, and it's just very special to me."

Trump, a Presbyterian, has called the Bible his favorite book and referred to it often on the campaign trail. But his Bible literacy has been questioned, including when he cited "two Corinthians" rather than saying "Second Corinthians" while speaking at Liberty University.

Chief Justice of the United States John Roberts will administer the oath.

Longstanding presidential tradition

It's not a requirement for the country's commander in chief to take the oath of office using a Bible, but it's a presidential inauguration tradition started by George Washington, said Allison Brown, an Oklahoma-based writer and editor for the Museum of the Bible.

The country's first president took the oath of office on a Masonic lodge's altar Bible. At least four other presidents have used that King James Version, now referred to as the Washington Bible, at their inaugurations.

"Washington was very aware that he was setting a precedent with everything he did," Brown said.

Swearing an oath on a Bible or other object of importance is an ancient act, Brown said. It is symbolic of the oath taker's authority, importance and truthfulness, she said.

The U.S. Constitution only says the president-elect must swear or affirm the presidential oath of office. It doesn't mention the Bible or another book. So, some presidents have chosen something other than the Christian holy book, or went without.

The sixth president, John Quincy Adams, a lawyer, took the oath on a law book. Teddy Roosevelt didn't use a book following William McKinley's assassination, and Lyndon B. Johnson was sworn in on a Roman Catholic missal found aboard Air Force One in the aftermath of John F. Kennedy's assassination.

For many of the country's early presidents, historical records are thin on whether a Bible was used, Brown said. But nearly all of the presidents from Lincoln to Obama have used the Bible during their inaugurations, she said.

Opened or closed?

Many swore on a Bible opened to a specific verse, like Ronald Reagan who

used 2 Chronicles 7:14 for both inaugurations. Some quoted Bible verses in their inaugural addresses, too.

“Most of the verses that presidents have chosen have been about government, have been about humility, about wisdom,” Brown said. “A lot of these verses are about how they’re going to govern a nation.”

A handful opened the Bibles at random, and others have kept the book closed. George W. Bush had hoped to use the Washington Bible like his father, but inclement weather prevented it, and he kept his family Bible closed during his first oath of office. Some presidents used more than one. Dwight Eisenhower swore on the Washington Bible and his own West Point Bible during his first inauguration.

Swear on a stack of Bibles

The Bibles will be closed and stacked on top of each other, while Trump takes the oath of office.

A few swore on the Bible provided by the clerk of the U.S. Supreme Court. Some used other presidential Bibles or made symbolic selections, like Obama, who swore his oaths on the Bibles of Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. And many used their family Bibles.

Trump’s Bible selection certainly will leave inauguration day with greater importance, said Mark Dimunation, the chief of the Library of Congress’ rare book and special collections division. The division houses some inauguration Bibles, including Lincoln’s.

“It’s a moment of such national significance that it imbues this otherwise modest—can be a modest—book with a level of importance that makes it forever a significant piece,” Dimunation said. “They actually do have a certain kind of electricity, a certain kind of meaning when you can hand somebody a Bible and say, ‘This is the Bible that Lincoln was sworn in on.’”