

ZARAHEMLA RECORD



Issue 63
Sept/Oct 1992

Christopher Columbus: Man of Vision and Faith

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As school children we all learned the rhyme "In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." The discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus five hundred years ago is recognized as one of the events which most changed the world. Columbus Day, October 12, has been observed as an official U.S. holiday since 1934. This year—1992—marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's first landfall in the New World.

Was the discovery made by accident, or was Columbus led by God? The Book of Mormon says he was led by the Holy Spirit, and now we have confirmation of this in Columbus's own words, as well as additional new insights. An authentic Columbus manuscript has gone virtually unexamined until recent years. In Columbus's *Book of Prophecies*, translated into English in 1991, he provides his own answers about Divine influence in his accomplishments.

This article in two parts will present the momentous event of the discovery of the New World in the light of prophecy, exploring Columbus's vision and faith, the role of the prophecies of Isaiah, the search for isles of the sea, hidden lands and the restoration of the house of Israel—themes which are familiar to all Book of Mormon believers.

First, however, let's briefly review Columbus's life and experiences which set the stage for his great journey.

Christopher Columbus, as he is known to English speakers, was born Cristoforo Colombo in the seaport of Genoa, Italy, in 1451. His sailing career began when he was about 13 or 14 years old. He became a skilled seaman and navigator on merchant ships which traveled the Mediterranean Sea. In 1476, he joined his brother Bartholomew in the Portugal city of Lisbon, where they worked together on map-making. His Portuguese name was Cristovão Colom.

During his eight years in Lisbon, Columbus expanded his sailing experience into the Atlantic Ocean. He married, became the father of a son, Diego, and shortly thereafter was widowed. It was also during this period that his "vision" of sailing to new lands and saving lost souls germinated. He sought backing for his proposed venture from King John II of Portugal who turned him down.

Undaunted, he went to the port city of Palos de la Frontera in Spain, taking his young son with him. They were befriended by the friars of the monastery at La Rábida, and then at Las Cuevas in Seville, who embraced and encouraged his ideas.

His name took on the Spanish form, Cristóbal Colón.

The magnitude of his intended enterprise soon opened the doors to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. Their interest did not wain even though other matters kept them from following through with their approval for seven years.

During that prolonged period, he made his home in Córdoba (Cordova) where he met a young woman who became the mother of his second son, Ferdinand. [Note: He is still known throughout the Spanish-speaking world as "Cristóbal Colón." Christopher Columbus, the English form, comes to us by way of the early colonists. Whatever the version of his name—Cristoforo, Cristovão, Cristóbal or Christopher—the meaning is the same: "Christ bearer" (Sale 1990: 254n)].

Finally, on April 17, 1492, the Spanish sovereigns signed the document granting all of Columbus's requests for finances and authority. He embarked on his famous voyage into history on August 3, 1492 in his flagship, the *Santa Maria*, accompanied by two small ships, the *Niña* and the *Pinta*, and a total of ninety men and boys. Just thirty-three days after leaving the Canary Islands he made his first landfall on an island he named "San Salvador."

It is most likely that the island of Samana Cay in the Bahamas was the

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site of Columbus's first landing, though there have been years of debate over which of nine islands can claim that honor (Judge 1986). Before returning to Spain on March 15, 1493, Columbus explored a total of two large islands and four smaller islands.

Three additional voyages followed—1493-1494, 1498-1500 (from which he returned in chains) and 1502-1504 (which ended in a shipwreck in Jamaica). On this last voyage, Columbus was accompanied by his thirteen-year-old son, Ferdinand. It was this voyage which brought him nearest the Book of Mormon lands—an island off Honduras. He then sailed along the coastline to Panama before turning to Jamaica.

He died on May 20, 1506, Ascension Day (observed as the day the Savior ascended after his resurrection), in Valladolid, Spain. His last words were, "Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit."

In His Own Words

Columbus's title for what is called his *Book of Prophecies*, conveys the essence of his vision: *Notebook of authorities, statements, opinions and prophecies on the subject of the recovery of God's holy city and mountain of Zion, and on the discovery and evangelization of the islands of the Indies and of all other peoples and nations. To Ferdinand and Isabella, our hispanic rulers* (West and Kling 1991:2, 101).

The book is a personal collection of letters, scriptures (from both the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Apocrypha) and quotations from Biblical commentators such as St. Isidore, Rabbi Samuel and St. Augustine, and other sources. It was prepared for the benefit of the King and Queen of Spain to assure them that his mission, and their support, had been a fulfillment of prophecy. Columbus divided his material into four parts. The first is introductory, followed by three sections entitled: "Concerning the Past," "Concerning the Present and Future" and "Concerning the Future. In the Last Days."

Columbus compiled this work in 1501-1502 between his third and fourth voyages to the New World, using many handwritten notes as well as marginal notes he had made in books in his personal library. These notes lead West and Kling to conclude that "[t]here can be little doubt that Columbus's systematic study of Bible history and prophecies began at least as early as 1481, concurrently to forming his great plan" (1991:91). Columbus's *Book of Prophecies* culminated a lifetime of deep religious conviction and intense scriptural study and interpretation.

Today the original manuscript resides in Spain in the Biblioteca Colombina at the Cathedral of Seville. In 1894—four hundred years after Columbus's first voyage to the New World—it was finally published in Spanish. Two translations of Columbus's *Book of Prophecies* are now available in English for the first time (Brigham 1991; West and Kling 1991).

Kay Brigham presents a reproduction of the original Latin and Spanish manuscript followed by the English translation; a companion biography is published separately (Brigham 1990). Delno West and August Kling place a transcription of the original text with the English translation on facing pages, introduced by historical/biographical information and commentary.

Other writings by Columbus include logs he kept of each of his voyages. His logs have been published many times and are well studied. They reveal a fascinating picture of a man skilled in the "mariner's arts," astronomy, geometry, arithmetic, in drafting spherical maps, and drawing "the cities, rivers, mountains, islands and ports"—a man learned in "geographies, histories, chronologies, philosophies and other subjects" (West and Kling 1991:105). Many biographers and historians have focused on his numerous accomplishments in these areas.

However, more significant is his

deep spiritual life, knowledge and interpretation of scripture, especially his fervent conviction that he had been chosen by God to fulfill one of the most significant missions in history, a "holy enterprise"—taking the message of Christ to the nations, which would then usher in the return of the Savior.

The spiritual side of Columbus has been treated as at odds and in conflict with "scientific rationale." The content of the *Book of Prophecies* with its emphasis on the spiritual has been virtually ignored or dismissed as "mad ravings," "delusions," "bizarre," an "accute embarrassment," "mental hallucination" or "temporary 'dark and sordid stupor' . . . or a clever ploy . . . to convince the gullible queen that he was 'the chosen man of destiny to conquer an Other World'" (Sale 1990:188-189).

This unbalanced treatment of Columbus is now changing with the English translation of his *Book of Prophecies*. Restoration Christians, as well as non-Restoration Christians, will find it significant, because "[t]he discovery of America was a triumph of Christianity" (Slater and Adams 1992:2). Many Christians believe that this nation is God's instrument for taking the gospel to the world, a vision also shared by Columbus.

Led by the Holy Spirit

Nephi's vision in the Book of Mormon clearly shows that "a man among the Gentiles"—Columbus—was led by the Holy Spirit to make his voyage of discovery.

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles which were separated from the seed of my brethren by the many waters; And I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; And he went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren which were in the promised land. 1 Nephi 3:147

Columbus's own testimony that he was led by the Holy Spirit was

made available in English when Peter Marshall and David Manuel published in their book, *The Light and the Glory* (1977:17), excerpts from an earlier private translation of the *Book of Prophecies* by Kling (see also West and Kling 1991:105).

Brigham's recently published translation reads:

... our Lord opened to my understanding (I could sense his hand upon me), so that it became clear to me that it was feasible to navigate from here to the Indies; and he unlocked within me the determination to execute the idea. ... Who doubts that this illumination was from the Holy Spirit? I attest that he [the Spirit], with marvelous rays of light, consoled me through the holy and sacred Scriptures, ... encouraging me to proceed, and, continually, without ceasing for a moment, they inflame me with a sense of great urgency (Brigham 1991:179).

Columbus's "sense of great urgency" is embodied by West and Kling as "his vision." They characterize him as a "seer" who saw himself as gifted with "spiritual intelligence." They point out in their introduction that "few know the story of [Columbus's] vision." This has led some to propose that because advances in reasoning and technology made the timing ripe, had Columbus not made the voyage someone else would have. However, West and Kling emphatically disagree with the latter supposition, believing that "one important ingredient was missing: a vision so strong that nothing could deter its holder from the attempt" (West and Kling 1991:3, 22).

The timing *was* ripe for the discovery of the New World—however, it was God's timing. And He selected the man to do the job. Columbus's vision grew as he gathered numerous scriptural passages, seeing the role of his discovery in their prophetic fulfillment. The vision permeates the most predominant themes of his

selections: islands of the sea, hidden lands, ends of the earth, the scattering and gathering of Israel, Zion and Jerusalem. And as we realize that Columbus was moved upon to fulfill his vision in God's timing, the Book of Mormon also reveals that God's timing was involved in keeping knowledge of the New World from other nations.

Hidden Lands

In the Book of Mormon, Lehi explains God's wisdom in keeping their lands hidden:

And behold, it is wisdom that this land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations; For behold, many nations would overrun this land, that there would be no place for an inheritance.

Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise,

That inasmuch as they which the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments,

They shall prosper upon the face of this land;

And they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves.

And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments, they shall be blessed upon the face of this land,

And there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance;

And they shall dwell safely for ever.
2 Nephi 1:16-21

Lehi goes on to say, that when the time comes that "they shall dwindle in unbelief," i.e., "reject the Holy One of Israel" (vv. 22-23), the Lord would bring judgment upon them and "bring other nations unto them" (vv. 23-24). This calls to mind a particular reference which Columbus included in his *Book of Prophecies*: "Woe to the land shadowing with wings, which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia, ... a nation meted out and trodden down ..." (Isaiah 18:1-2). The "land shadowing with wings" in

this Isaiah reference has long been equated by Book of Mormon believers (and others) with the New World because the shape of the North, Central and South American continents resembles a bird with its wings spread. Besides fitting the description, the location of the New World is "beyond the rivers of Ethiopia."

Columbus believed that God had kept knowledge of these lands hidden until he—Columbus—was led to make their discovery. He cites such scriptures as Matthew 11:27 [25]: "O Lord ... because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and hast revealed them to the little ones" [babes; innocent; i.e., Columbus] (West and Kling 1991:107), and comments, "This I offer on my own behalf, together with the results that one has discovered by personal experience" (West and Kling 1991:109).

Brigham points out that Columbus also saw himself in a poem by a first-century Spanish-Roman writer who prophetically described, "An age will come after many years, when the Ocean will loose the chains of things, and a great land will lie revealed; and a mariner. ... will discover a new world." Columbus's son, Ferdinand, made a marginal note beside Columbus's copy of the poem which reads, "This prophecy was fulfilled by my father. ... the Admiral in the year 1492" (Brigham 1990:116).

Lehi prophesied "that there shall be none come into this land save they should be brought by the hand of the Lord" (2 Nephi 1:10). In addition to Columbus, Nephi saw that others would also be brought to the New World.

And it came to pass that I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles;

And they went forth out of captivity upon the many waters;

And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles which had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of other nations.
1 Nephi 3:148, 155

The other Gentiles which Nephi saw in his vision were most likely the Puritans and Pilgrims who fled their homelands in Europe to find freedom from oppressive religious, governmental and economic control. God had decreed that this land would be a land of liberty for those who served Jesus Christ (Ether 1:29-35).

In part two we will explore the significance of Columbus's interest in the prophecies of Isaiah, the isles of the sea and the restoration of the house of Israel, as interpreted through insights from the Book of Mormon. ZRF

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Mayan Bible Prepares the Way

In honor of the 500th anniversary of Christianity in Latin America, the Bible Society of Mexico is publishing the Bible in the Yucatec Mayan language.

According to the February 1992 issue of the *American Bible Society Record*, there are approximately 900,000 Mayas living in the Yucatan (southeastern Mexico) who speak the Yucatec Mayan language. (There are about 29 Mayan languages still spoken by over four million Maya Indians.)

Dr. Edesio Sanchez Cetina, one of the coordinators for the translation, explained in the *Bible Society Record*, that Mayan speakers

recently developed an alphabet unique to their language. The Society used that alphabet in their translation, which began in 1983. Dr. Sanchez said, "Because it is the same orthography [system of spelling] that is used in secular publications, the biblical text will be a basic element in the resurgence of the Maya language."

Second Nephi 2:18 states that the Book of Mormon will go to the Lamanites after the Bible "shall have already gone forth among them." This first complete Bible in a Mayan language is a significant step in preparing the way for the Mayas to receive the Book of Mormon.

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