
The Faith of Columbus

A Lesser-Known Dimension of His Personality

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The Holy Scriptures testify in the Old Testament, by the mouth of the prophets, and in the New [Testament], by our Savior Jesus Christ, that this world will come to an end: Matthew, Mark, and Luke have recorded the signs of the end of the age; the prophets had also abundantly foretold it.

Christopher Columbus
Book of Prophecies, Folio 5

Certain events forever alter the course of human history. The voyages of Christopher Columbus, which marked the beginning of regular contacts between Europe and the continent that was later to be named—quite unjustly—America, was one of those pivotal world events.

It is quite possible that other Old World mariners had visited these lands before Columbus and his crew set anchor off a small island of the Bahamas. However, his voyages captivated the European imagination like nothing before and initiated a series of transatlantic exchanges that eventually affected the entire planet.

Columbus publicized his discoveries broadly, stimulating others to follow the sea lanes he had pioneered. In addition to introducing many kinds of animals and plants to the New World, his ships

returned to Europe carrying America's natural wealth. The Admiral had the good fortune of being backed by a young kingdom ready to carry out vigorous exploration and colonization of the newly discovered territory.

In addition, his timing was good. Intrigued by Marco Polo's Asian travels, tempted by the Portuguese explorations of Africa's coast, and blocked by the Turks in its eastern overland trade routes, Europe was ready to expand its economic frontiers westward.

The key factor in this global shift was an obscure seaman who for seven years had been trying to obtain financial backing to open



commercial contacts with the Orient by sailing toward the uncharted West. By the time Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon finally agreed to become his sponsors, Columbus was a 41-year-old widower with two sons and debts to pay. But his life was about to take a drastic turn.

Mixed Motives

Interwoven in Columbus' complex personality are three motives that propelled him to undertake four voyages between 1492 and 1504, which led to an ever-expanding coastline. Although these

explorations did not corroborate his projections of reaching Japan (Cipango), China (Cathay), and India—he had underestimated the distance—they did open a vast continent full of potential for Europe.

The first dimension of his personality is the better known—**Columbus the brilliant seaman and inquisitive explorer.** Based on his readings and extensive travels—from the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea, to Iceland, and African Guinea—the Admiral had conceived a plan that would allow his ships to sail in both directions across the Atlantic, pushed by trade winds and westerlies he had carefully plotted. As he explores the coastlines of an emerging continent, Columbus records with fascination details about the vegetation, the fauna, the crafts, the natives, and their customs.¹

The second dimension has become the focus of recent revisionist attacks—**Columbus the ambitious and exploitative entrepreneur.**² There is no doubt that in his dealings with the monarchs of Castile and Aragon, the astute mariner-merchant obtains important concessions for himself and his descendents in the event that his plan succeeds. He is assured nobility rank, the title of admiral, viceroy, and governor of the ter-



ritories he conquers for the crown, and one-tenth of the enterprise earnings. Moreover, his travel diaries reveal a fixation with gold objects, gold prospects, and the commercial value of the products he observes. In addition, during the second voyage he allows his associates to impose forced labor on the Hispaniola natives. This cruel treatment, already known in Europe, later becomes the accepted practice bringing misery and death, first to the native Indians and later to millions of African slaves.

The third dimension of this explorer is the least known—Columbus, Bible student and Christian visionary. In spite of evidences of the Admiral's spirituality in his own writings, many historians have either minimized or ignored this intriguing facet of his personality. The fact is that through personal study of the Scriptures and of several commentators, Columbus came to see his voyages as part of God's providential leading in history as well as in his own life. The Enterprise of the Indies, as he called it, had a double purpose for him: Spreading the gospel among the unreached people and obtaining the funds necessary to free Jerusalem from the infidels, thus ushering in Christ's second coming.³

Even in his name, Columbus saw a hint of the special role God had assigned to him. In fact, *Christoferens* (the Greek root of his given name) means "Christ bearer," and around 1498 the Admiral began to incorporate this meaning into his enigmatic signature.

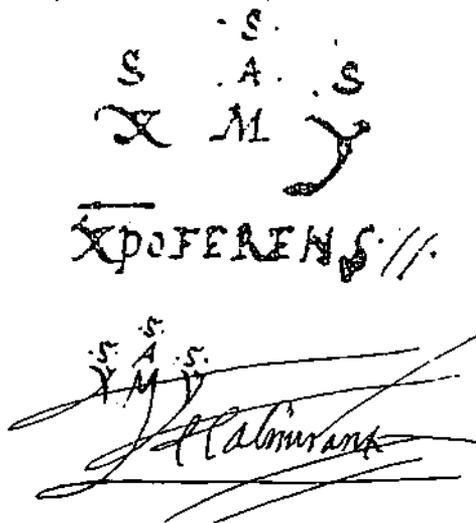
These three motives—discovery, profit, and evangelism—are interwoven in this fragment of his log for October 16, 1492—four days after his first landing—as he surveys the Bahamas:

This island is very large and I have decided to go around it because, as I understand it, either on or near it,

there lies a gold mine. . . . These people are like those of the other islands, and [they share] the same language and customs, except these seem more civilized, easier to deal with, and more astute. . . . I am not aware of any religion among them, so I think they could easily become Christians, because they are very intelligent. It's amazing how different the fish here are from our own.⁴

An Unusual Document

In November 1500, after returning from his unfortunate third voyage and before sailing again in May of 1502 on his fourth and final crossing, Columbus had time for study and reflection. During this period, he compiled a broad



Columbus' intriguing signatures.

selection of prophetic passages from the Vulgate Bible and several commentators, that in his view connected his providential understanding of history to his voyages. The original manuscript of this compilation, which has come to be known as Columbus' *Libro de las profecias* (Book of Prophecies) was kept by the Admiral's son Hernando and was later placed in the Colombina Library at the Cathedral in Seville, Spain.⁵ The *Book of Prophecies* remained untranslated for almost five centuries.⁶

The first section of the manuscript consists of an exchange of

letters between Columbus and Fray Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk residing in Seville. In his letter, written from Granada (September 13, 1501), the Admiral sends to his friend the compilation and asks him to review and expand it. Gorricio responds from Seville (March 23, 1502), returning the manuscript and adding: "Sir, little have I added and interjected. You will see it in my handwriting; I submit everything to the correction of your spirit and prudent judgment." (Fol. 1, revs.)

After a few quotations that reflect Columbus' hermeneutics, the manuscript includes an important letter written earlier by the Admiral to the King and Queen.

This epistle allows us to reconstruct Columbus' self-image:

At a very early age I went to the sea and have continued navigating until today. The art of sailing is favorable for anyone who wants to pursue knowledge of this world's secrets. I have already been at this business for forty years. I have sailed all the waters which, up to now, have been navigated. . . . I found Our Lord very well-disposed toward this my desire, and he gave me the spirit of intelligence for it. (Fol. 4)

The Admiral recounts the way in which God had miraculously guided him in planning and executing the voyages to the Indies. Then he urges the monarchs to launch an expedition to rescue Jerusalem from the infidels. The letter reveals Columbus' mature spirituality as he frankly acknowledges his past mistakes:

I will speak of one [scriptural truth] because it is relevant to me, and every time I meditate on it, I feel rest and contentment. I am the worst of sinners. The pity and mercy of our Lord have completely covered me whenever I have called [on him] for them. I have found the sweetest consolation in casting away all my anxiety, so as to contemplate his marvelous presence. (Fol. 5 revs.)

Columbus had a balanced un-

derstanding of the role of the individual within a providential view of history:

No one should be afraid to take on any enterprise in the name of our Savior, if it is right and if the purpose is purely for his holy service. . . . The working out of all things was entrusted by our Lord to each person, [but it happens] in conformity with his sovereign will, even though he gives advice to many. (Fols. 5 rvs., 6)

The bulk of the manuscript consists of Bible quotations and commentaries organized in three parts, which look to the past, the present, and the future. Most of Columbus' quotations come from the Psalms, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and the Gospels. They reveal an unusual acquaintance with the Scriptures, for a seaman of humble origins and no formal education.

An Assessment

Columbus' daring enterprise can be understood as an attempt to escape the extremely poor conditions of his childhood and to establish a noble lineage for his descendants.⁷ It was also stimulated by the creativity of the Italian Renaissance. He had been born in 1451, just one year earlier than Leonardo da Vinci and Savonarola, and two years before Amerigo Vespucci. While Columbus was conceiving the idea of reaching the Orient through the west, Michelangelo (1475) and Titian (1477) were born. A few years later Raphael and Palestrina would enter the world.⁸

However, neither his cultural milieu nor his family background can explain his steady faith in God, his unusual familiarity with the Bible, his providential view of human history, or his clear "Adventist" hope:

Our Savior said that before the consummation of this world, all that was written by the Prophets must be fulfilled. . . . I say that the sign which convinces me that our Lord is hastening the end of the world is the preaching of the Gospel recently in so many lands. (Fols. 5, 6)

The 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyages is being exploited to carry forward some questionable political agendas. For Christians, the quincentennial offers an opportunity for sober reflection—on the long-range effect of our personal decisions; on our treatment of people who are either different from or weaker than ourselves; on the frequent contradiction between our professed faith and our daily conduct.◊

NOTES

1. Samuel Eliot Morison wrote the definitive book on this important facet of Columbus' personality: *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1942).

2. Kirkpatrick Sale's book *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbus Legacy* (New York: Knopf, 1990) is representative of this bitterly revisionistic approach. The U.S. National Council of Churches has also joined other anti-celebration groups with a resolution that cited "invasion, genocide, slavery and *ecocide* [destruction of nature]" as the outcome of Columbus' voyages. It confesses that the church has, by and large, "accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation" (Quoted in *World*, October 26, 1991, p. 18).

3. For a perceptive analysis of this facet of Columbus' motives, see Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and

Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,' " *American Historical Review*, 90:1 (February 1985), 73-102.

4. *Relación del primer viaje de D. Cristóbal Colón* (Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores, 1942), pp. 32-33.

5. Bound in vellum, the original manuscript consists of 84 numbered leaves (14 are missing), with writing on both the front and reverse sides. The manuscript shows four different kinds of handwriting, including Columbus' autograph (Folio 59). The text appears in Latin, Castilian Spanish, the peculiar Castilian Spanish of the Admiral which shows Portuguese influences, and a short notation in Italian.

6. Kay Brigham has published a reproduction of the original manuscript along with her English translation, *Christopher Columbus's Book of Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1991), from which I have quoted. See also her book *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Discovery in the Light of His Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1990).

7. This is the central thesis of Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

8. See Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Columbus: The Great Adventure* (New York: Orion Books, 1991), p. 263.

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The new Columbus mausoleum and lighthouse built in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.