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Later Voyages: the Book of Prophecies and the Final Voyage

Author(s): Arnold K. Garr

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Later Years: the Book of Prophecies and the Final Voyage

I pointed out that for the execution of the journey to the Indies I was not aided by intelligence, by mathematics or by maps. It was simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied.

—Christopher Columbus

Even though he returned to Spain in chains and was replaced as governor of the New World, Christopher Columbus used the time he had in Spain between his third and fourth voyages to meditate on the events of his life. The circumstances of his latest arrival at court were an obvious contrast to the tremendous rush of fame he had experienced on his first return. Whereas the monarchs had once praised and embraced him, the Spanish crown was now “gracious, but evasive” (Morison 2:311). Having been dismissed from his position as governor of the New World, Columbus set about searching the scriptures and the writings of great philosophers for evidence of his role in the fulfillment of divine destiny. He never published the results of his research, but the manuscript was published in Rome in 1892–94 by Cesare de Lollis as part of an Italian collection of documents entitled *Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana per quarto cen-*

tenario della scoperta dell'America. It was not published in English until in 1991, and interestingly enough, two separate translations appeared that year: *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus* by Delno C. West and August Kling, and *Christopher Columbus's Book of Prophecies* by Kay Brigham.

Christopher never put a title on his manuscript, but its introductory statement outlined two inter-related purposes for his preparing the work. First, it contained prophecies concerning the final recovery of Jerusalem from Moslem rule and the restoration of the ancient temple (West and Kling 101, 261 n10). Second, it contained passages which prophesied of the discovery and conversion of all “peoples and nations” to Christianity. Other statements in the manuscript make it clear that Columbus believed his own achievements were also a fulfillment of prophecy, and he attempted to place those accomplishments within the framework of divine history, which he believed had a predetermined, unchanging timetable.

The section of the book that gives the most insight into Christopher's thoughts and feelings on these subjects is his introductory letter intended for the Spanish sovereigns. In this letter, the Admiral tried to convince the monarchs to sponsor a crusade to reclaim the Holy Land for Christianity and to restore the temple, an event that he believed was divinely destined to take place.

Columbus substantiated his position by quoting numerous passages from the Old Testament. (I quote the West and Kling and Brigham translations of Columbus' Latin text which occasionally is slightly different from the King James Version.) Isaiah 44:28 reads: “Thou art my shepherd, and thou shalt perform all my pleasure. Who say to Jerusalem: Thou shalt be built. And to the temple: Thy foundations shall be laid” (West and Kling 173). And Isaiah 2:2 reads: “And in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared on the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills: and all nations shall flow unto it” (Ibid 217).

Concerning the theme of the converting all nations to Christianity, Columbus quoted, among others, the following New Testament passages: Matthew 24:14, “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world, for a testimony to all nations”; Mark 16:15, “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”; and Acts 1:8, “You shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth” (West and Kling 153). The biblical passage to which Columbus referred most often has also become a Latter-day Saint favorite: John 10:6, “And other sheep I have that are not of this fold: them also I must bring. And they shall hear my voice: and there shall be one fold and one shepherd” (West and Kling 229).

Columbus’ understanding of a divine time table for the earth’s history gave him a sense of urgency in fulfilling these prophecies. As a result of his studies of Saint Augustine and Pierre d’Ailly, Columbus believed that the earth had a predetermined life span of 7000 years, that all the prophecies in the Bible had to be fulfilled before that time expired, and that “only one hundred and fifty years [remained] for the completion of the seven thousand years which would be the end of the world” (Ibid 109). In short, Columbus believed not only that Jerusalem would be redeemed and that Christianity would be preached to all nations, but he also maintained that these two great events had to be completed in a short period of time.

Perhaps the most intriguing part of the book is where Columbus quoted prophecies from scriptures and learned men that he believed pertained to his own achievements. In his introductory letter to the Spanish monarchs, Columbus stated that the Enterprise of the Indies “all turned out just as our redeemer Jesus Christ had said, and as he had spoken earlier by the mouth of his holy prophets” (West and Kling 107). A little later in the letter, Christopher again declared that “the execution of the journey to the Indies. . . . was simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied” (Ibid 111).

Columbus does not specify which of Isaiah's prophecies he had in mind, but among the more than two dozen listed was Isaiah 42:1–4: "Behold my servant: I will uphold him. My elect: my soul lighteth in him. I have given my spirit upon him. . . . and the islands shall wait for his law" (West and Kling 171). Another passage was Isaiah 55:5: "Behold thou shalt call a nation which thou knewest not: and the nations that knew not thee shall run to thee, because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he glorified thee" (Ibid 169). He also quoted several passages from Psalms that seem to point to his own life: Psalms 2:8, "Ask of me and I will make nations your inheritance, and the ends of the earth your possession"; and 18:43–44: "You have made me the head of nations; people I did not know are subject to me. . . . Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O Lord" (Brigham, *Book of Prophecies*, 184–85).

In addition to quoting passages in the Bible, Columbus also quoted nonscriptural writings that he believed pertained to his Enterprise to the Indies. One of the most fascinating of these was Seneca's tragedy *Medea*, which predicted that "In the latter years of the world will come certain times in which the Ocean Sea will relax the bonds of things, and a great land will open up, and a new mariner like the one who was the guide of Jason, whose name was Typhis, will discover a new world" (West and Kling 227). The Admiral's son, Ferdinand, also quoted this passage in his biography of Columbus, and added, "Now it is considered certain that this prophecy was fulfilled in the person of the Admiral" (Ferdinand 18).

Notwithstanding his belief that such great prophecies pertained to his life and to his discovery of the New World, Columbus was simultaneously humbled by his search of the scriptures. This fact is demonstrated by one of his final remarks in his introductory letter to Ferdinand and Isabella. In a candid assessment of his spiritual condition, Christopher confessed: "*I am only a most unworthy sinner*, but ever since I have cried out

for grace and mercy from the Lord, they have covered me completely” (West and Kling 111; emphasis added).

It seems obvious that preparing the *Book of Prophecies* had given Columbus significant opportunity to ponder his spiritual well-being and standing before the Lord. With the benefit of such a period of introspection and study, Christopher felt himself again prepared to brave the seas and travel to the New World.

The Fourth Voyage: A Call to Repentance

Commanding a fleet of four ships and 140 men, Columbus set sail for America for the fourth and final time on 9 May 1502 (Morison 2:319–22). The Admiral’s son and future biographer, Ferdinand, was one of the crew members of the expedition. The objective of this voyage was to discover a passage through the recently discovered American continent to the Indian Ocean (Lemos 2:720). On his way to explore the American coast, Columbus made landfall at Martinique, then continued on, making history as he discovered present-day Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (Morison, *Journals*, 406–07).

In the midst of his exploration of the coast of Panama, Columbus anchored the fleet on 6 January 1503 at the mouth of a river he named Belén. He decided to remain in the area at least until the end of the rainy season, and sent patrols to search for gold. Upon discovering entire “mines of gold,” the Admiral decided to establish a settlement at Belén; Christopher would leave his brother, Bartholomew, in charge while he returned to Spain. The men set out in February to establish the settlement on the river shore, but their efforts were soon interrupted by aggressive natives, who hoped to kill the intruders (Morison 2:366–71).

On 6 April, the day that Christopher was to sail for Spain, the majority of his party accompanied the Admiral to his ships to bid farewell, leaving only 20 men and a dog on the shore.

With a large numerical advantage, 400 heavily armed natives descended on the small guard party, killing one and wounding several, including Bartholomew. In the meantime, ignorant of the attack, Columbus sent a group of men ashore to take on a final load of water for the return voyage. The men of this party walked right into the Indians' hands, and all but one of this company were killed (Morison 2:372–73).

During the fight, the Admiral was left alone aboard his ship, the *Capitana*, which was anchored about a mile off shore. Physically sick and, no doubt, greatly distressed over the plight of his men, Columbus climbed to the top of the vessel and tried desperately to attract the attention of his war captains. After calling, unsuccessfully, for his men, he eventually succumbed to exhaustion and fell asleep (Ibid 373–74).

Slumbering aboard the *Capitana*, Christopher had perhaps the most remarkable, and sobering, spiritual experience of his life. He “heard a compassionate voice,” calling him to repentance:

O fool, and slow to believe and serve thy God, the God of every Man! What more did He do for Moses or for David His servant than for thee? From thy birth He hath ever held thee in special charge. When He saw thee at man's estate, marvelously did He cause thy name to resound over the earth. The Indies, so rich a portion of the world, He gave thee for thine own, and thou hast divided them as it pleased thee. Of those barriers of the Ocean Sea, which were closed with such mighty chains, He hath given thee the keys. . . . Thou hast won noble fame from Christendom. . . . Turn thou to Him and acknowledge thy faults; His mercy is infinite. (Morison, *Journals*, 378)

Columbus, obviously humbled by this admonition, said that he had “no answer to give in definite words,” leaving him only “to weep for [his] transgressions.” The final words spoken by the voice gave Christopher a feeling of hope and comfort: “Fear not, but have trust” (Ibid).

This incident was, in fact, a moving call to repentance for the Admiral. The records of his earlier life make clear that Christopher had a keen spiritual sense about him; his expressions of faith and gratitude to the Lord were both impressive

and numerous. However, from the time that he assumed the trying duties of governor of the Indies during his second voyage (1494) until this climactic call to repentance during the fourth voyage (1503), his life seemed little directed by spiritual influence. The impact of this experience seems to have directed Christopher back to the level of spiritual awareness and devotion that he had enjoyed earlier in his life.

With these poignant thoughts to ponder, the Admiral returned to Spain in November 1504 to live out the last year-and-a-half of his illustrious, yet turbulent, life. He died in Valladolid, Castile, on Wednesday, 20 May 1506. His last words were “*in manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum*” (‘into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit’)” (Taviani, *The Great Adventure*, 248).