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Columbus: "The Spirit Wrought upon the Man"

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Abstract: This article presents the events and inspirations of Christopher Columbus's life. The author argues that, from his birth, Columbus certainly felt the call of the Lord and God's protective hand over all things.

COLUMBUS

"The Spirit Wrought"

Four hundred and fifty-seven years have passed since Columbus discovered America. This is an account of his life.

By
Cyril Drew Pearson

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, who was 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, who were in the promised land. (1 Nephi 13:12.)

SOME Latter-day Saints interpret the reference to the "man" in Nephi's vision to mean Christopher Columbus. What kind of man was Columbus? Did he himself believe he was chosen of God to carry on the Enterprise, as he was wont to call his great undertaking? Did he live and die like a man on whom the Spirit of God had wrought?

In the *Biblioteca Columbina* in Seville, Spain, which the author of this article visited in 1948, there is a volume of *Tragedies* by Seneca, the Roman philosopher who was a contemporary of Paul the Apostle. Seneca was born at Cordova in



—Courtesy M. Knoedler & Co., New York
Columbus
From the Henri Lefort etching of the portrait in the Naval Museum of Madrid.

Spain the same year as the Savior was born in Judea. This very volume in Seville contains Seneca's tragedy, *Medea*, and it was once a prized possession of Columbus. It contains a well-marked passage which, translated into English, reads—

An age will come after many years when the ocean will loose the chains of things, and a huge land be revealed, when Tiphys will disclose new worlds and Thule no more be the ultimate.

Next to the above passage there is a handwritten note in Latin by



Statue of Columbus in Genoa

Ferdinand, the younger of the sons of Columbus. The English translation is—

This prophecy was fulfilled by my father . . . the Admiral in the year 1492.



Seville with River Guadalquivir in right background. Here Columbus lived many years.

Upon The Man⁹⁹

Shortly after Columbus had been brought back in chains from the new world to Spain, he rewrote Seneca's passage to refer more pointedly to himself. The English translation of the Columbus revision is—

At a time far distant in the future, a day shall come when the Ocean will release its bondage, and a great continent will be opened, and a new sea-sailor, like that Tiphys who piloted Jason, will discover a new world.

On February 26, 1501, Columbus wrote to Father Gorrigo in Seville asking that a certain *Book of Prophecies* be rewritten in a rounder hand such as King Ferdinand liked to read. This *Book of Prophecies* was a compilation by Columbus himself of every passage in the Bible that might be regarded as a prediction of the discovery of the new world.



The early home of Columbus, Genoa.

Columbus was hopeful that Ferdinand's wife, Queen Isabella, a woman of undoubted piety, would be convinced by the scriptures that he, Columbus, was the Lord's chosen servant in discovering the new world, and that the queen would be moved to send him on a new expedition.

A study of the life of Columbus will reveal the pattern the Lord often follows in fashioning human vessels for his divine purposes. This pattern frequently includes humble birth; a life setting that both inspires and challenges the chosen ones to fulfil their destiny; periods of toil, despair, and ridicule; sudden achievement of their great missions beyond all compare; then repudiation by their fellow men; finally heartbreak and death; and then in time to come the world sings their praises.

The birthplace of Columbus is Genoa, which the author also visited in 1948. Columbus was born in 1452* in a room in Genoa's watchtower of Olivella where his father Domenico Columbus was keeper of the tower. In 1447, Domenico had temporarily given up the craft of weaver to accept the political appointment as keeper at the Porto dell' Olivella. One year after Christopher's birth the infidel Turks captured Constantinople, and Italian commerce was doomed. Until then the shipping and trade of Genoa were the wonder of the world.

In 1271, Marco Polo had left Italy and traveled east to China. He returned to Italy in 1295. His marvelous stories about the gold and gems of the orient fired the imagination of all Europe. In the Seville *Biblioteca* there reposes Columbus' well-worn copy of



In this Cathedral at Seville, Columbus gave thanks for his successful trip to the "Indies." His remains are buried here.

*Some references list the year of Columbus' birth as "probably 1451."

(Continued on following page)

COLUMBUS—THE SPIRIT WROUGHT UPON THE MAN

(Continued from preceding page)

Marco Polo, with marginal notes in Columbus' own hand. Every boy of fifteenth century Genoa knew by heart the seafaring adventures of elder brothers and kinsmen who had voyaged down the African coast and as far up as Iceland. But after the loss of Constantinople to the Mohammedans, what Italian boy was there who didn't know that the proud ships of Genoa would be forever barred from the wealth of the Indies unless a new route could be found by sea?

The secret of advertising is repetition. The impact of a recurring suggestion on youth is enormous. Every day and moonlit eve of his young life, Columbus could gaze out on the lure of Genoa's robin's-egg-blue harbor and think what lay beyond. And thus was formed the seed of his plan to seek the Indies, and in the Lord's own way was the boy Columbus prepared for the mission foretold by Nephi the Prophet. And at that very time there lay hidden in the new world-to-be some metal plates setting forth the Columbus destiny.

After a significant voyage to Iceland in 1477, Columbus journeyed to Portugal, then an important maritime nation. In Lisbon, Portugal, he obtained copies of a chart and letter dated June 25, 1473, written by Dr. Paul Toscanelli of Florence, Italy, to one Canon Martins, a prelate in the service of Portugal's king. The chart showed the earth as a globe, and the letter described how a ship could sail west around the globe and reach the Indies.*

Columbus, now only twenty-five years of age, on the basis of the Toscanelli globe chart, prepared a plea to King John II which in rude form comprised the Grand Enterprise to the Indies and which was eventually to result in the fulfilment of Nephi's vision. The Columbus presentation was so convincing that the king referred it to his council of engineers. The council's report was unfavorable.

The next few years spent in Portugal were heartbreaking for

*Said Jacques Lochois a hundred years later concerning men's meagre geographical knowledge in those days—

"The maps the ancients drew, ridiculous may seem.
Remember, half they knew, was more than half a dream!"

Columbus. When he was thirty years old, his beautiful young Portuguese wife, Felipa, died, leaving a baby son, Diego. In later years Ferdinand, the second son of Columbus (by a woman from Seville significantly observed of his father's Portuguese days—

In youth his (Columbus') hair was blond, but when he came to his thirtieth year it all turned white.

Even these tribulations played their part in the great enterprise because now Columbus, like many another mortal, tried to forget his

SO BRIEFLY

S. H. Dewhurst

So briefly does it stir
The brittle bough,
It is as if there were
No twilight now;
It barely starts its flight
Through autumn air
Before the grasping night
Is everywhere.

sorrows in his work. He began examining every available book dealing with the shape of the earth. One volume, *Imago Mundi*, by Bishop d'Ailly, containing more than eight hundred marginal notes in Columbus' own hand, is in the *Biblioteca Columbina* in Seville. The following is an example of the notes by Columbus—

A degree is $56\frac{3}{4}$ Roman miles.
India is near Spain.

Says Las Casas, an historian who knew Columbus personally,

D'Ailly is certainly the one who inspired in Columbus the most confidence in his projects.

Although Columbus brought his enterprise to Spanish attention in 1483, his chief approach to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella had its inception in 1485. Possibly fearing arrest for debt, Columbus, with his small son Diego, hastily shipped from Lisbon that year. They landed at Palos, Spain. It was May 1486, before the Spanish monarchs gave Columbus a hearing. Instead of simply saying "No," as the Portuguese king had done, the Spaniards kept him dangling and

waiting. Says Las Casas regarding Columbus during the period 1486-1492—

He began to sustain a terrible, continued, painful, and prolonged battle; a material one of weapons would have not been so sharp and horrendous as that which he had to endure from informing so many people of no understanding, although they presumed to know all about it, and replying patiently to many people who did not know him, nor had any respect for his person, receiving insulting speeches which afflicted his soul.

Later in 1486, Isabella ordered Columbus to place the enterprise before a royal commission at Salamanca University. One Maddonado, who was present, reported that Father Talavera (head of the commission)—

... with other wise and learned men and mariners discussed with the said Admiral (Columbus) about his going to the said islands, and all of them agreed that what the Admiral said *could not possibly be true*, and that contrary to what appeared to the most of them the Admiral persisted . . .

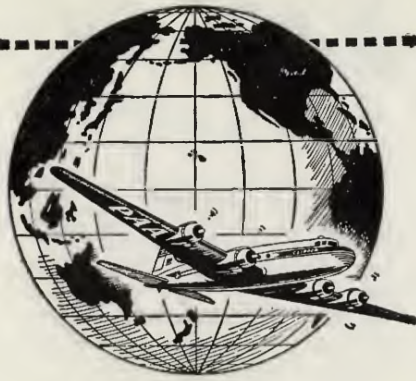
(Is this not mindful of how the Spirit of the Lord wrought when Paul was before Agrippa, and the boy, Joseph Smith, was before the townspeople of Palmyra?)

It took four years—until 1490—for the Talavera commission to render an adverse report. Ferdinand and Isabella neither accepted nor rejected it. They simply informed Columbus that he might bring his enterprise to their attention when the war with the Moors was over. Columbus hung on another few months and then decided to quit Spain forever and join his brother, Bartholomew, at the Court of France. In August, 1491, Father Perez, a prelate to Queen Isabella, persuaded her to command Columbus to appear before her once more. Again the queen referred the enterprise to a royal commission and again the commission rejected it. To soften the blow, the sovereigns invited Columbus to march in the victory procession, that entered Granada on January 2, 1492. A few days later the monarchs let fall the ax. They told Columbus his enterprise was finally and absolutely rejected, but they wished him God-speed.

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"MORMON—PRAEDIKANTER"

(Continued from preceding page)
and mother of the household symbolically with little time for other worldly discussion while the baby in its cradle binds her to earthly cares.

Artist Christen Dalsgaard, you discover, who lived from 1824 to 1907, is not without honor in his own country, where he distinguished himself by painting the daily life of the countryside with a loving and sympathetic realism. "*Mormon-praedikanter*" was not his mature work, but at the time, in 1856, it was the most difficult composition he had attempted. You glance at Knud Söeborg's biography of Dalsgaard for a critical opinion and learn that he considers the painting "well built," "thoroughly thought through in composition," and its color work marked by the "pleasing and surprising authenticity and fullness and pure clarity" which characterized the painter's later productions. As itinerant artist, Dalsgaard executed several studies of the religious dissent which swept Denmark in his day; some of them have been called "too poetic," but the "Mormon painting," you learn, has the distinction of being the most natural and unspoiled.

Says the biography:

At the time the picture was painted, it was for the most part sectarians who attacked conventional Christianity and fanned the smouldering speculation whose flames were nourished through the long winter's and uncertain summer's pent-up existence in the northern home. In Norway it was

the Haugians . . . who at that time admonished the people to holiness. For our generation it was natural to put Mormons in the place of the *Indremissionaerer* or evangelicals.¹

And, in a note that sounds wry to Mormon ears, the biography continues:

We can rejoice in the thought that they [the Mormon elders] will hardly get the better of the old man who has carved his life's conviction from principles as straight and unbending as his oak stick. The poor blind girl, on the other hand, who with a kind of sensual pleasure is letting herself be drawn into a vacuum of fanaticism, would certainly find sister evangelists in the mentally affected we find among us today.²

You leave one man's interpretation and look again at those faces, and you reach your own conclusions. You carry them with you as you leave the museum, along with a fine photographic copy of the painting the director has given you. You leave feeling grateful to Christen Dalsgaard for having lighted this scene from what you feel is your own past, because faces and figures like these, in interiors like this, and in just this manner, did listen to "The Voice of Truth" that was more than a tract, and they came to the valleys to build the meetinghouses where today you can still see these faces and hear the names that go with them. Dalsgaard would surely recognize them.

¹Knud Söeborg, *Christen Dalsgaard og Hans Kunst* (Copenhagen, 1902), p. 24.
²Loc. cit.

COLUMBUS

(Continued from page 642)

He left the court, dazed and stunned with the realization that this was the end of six weary years of being bullied and insulted, of waiting, watching, hoping, and importuning. Six of the best years of his life were gone, wasted, never to return.

But man's extremity is the Lord's opportunity. On the very day Columbus left Santa Fe, just outside Granada, one Luis de Santangel, a Christian Jew, treasurer to King Ferdinand, sought out Queen Isabella and told her very bluntly—

he [Santangel] was astonished to see that her Highness, who had always shown

a resolute spirit in matters of great consequence, should lack it now for an enterprise of so little risk, yet which could prove of so great service to God . . . and if any other Prince should undertake what the Admiral offered to her, it would be a very great damage to her crown and a grave reproach to her.

Isabella decided then and there. She immediately dispatched a courier to intercept Columbus. The courier overtook him at Pinos—Puente, ten miles from Granada on the way to France.

Every American schoolboy knows the next phase of the Columbus saga. On August 3, 1492, under the command of the

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COLUMBUS

(Continued from page 672)

admiral, now forty years old, the ships *Nina*, *Pinta*, and *Santa Maria* left Palos in Spain on what has been called the most fateful voyage in the history of the world. Now Columbus had to make use of the patient methods wrought upon him over the years by the Spirit of the Lord. Beginning with his rebellious captains down to his mutinous crew he had to promise, wheedle, and cajole them hour after hour on the dread and unknown path. On October 12, 1492, Columbus discovered the new world. In later times he describes a dream that came to him as portraying just how he felt, about his accomplishment—

Oh, fool [meaning himself] 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 has ever held thee in special charge.* Marvelously did he cause thy name to resound over the earth . . . Fear not, but have trust; all these tribulations are written on tables of marble, and not without cause. He adds, "I heard all this as in a swoon, but I had no answer to give in definite words, only to weep for my transgressions." (Compare this to the Word of the Lord to Joseph Smith at Liberty Jail, sec. 122, Doctrine and Covenants.)

On January 16, 1493, Columbus began the voyage back. At the Azores, he and his men went ashore to give thanks to God for their safe return. As they were kneeling in prayer before the church altar, the Portuguese inhabitants of the island took them all prisoners. In later years Washington Irving describes this event—

. . . such was the first reception of the Admiral on his return to the Old World, an earnest of the crosses and troubles with which he was to be requited through life, for one of the greatest benefits conferred upon his fellow beings.

Columbus entered Seville on Palm Sunday, March 31, 1493, and celebrated Easter Week at the great cathedral. On Easter Sunday, 1493, the cup of joy of the forty-one year old Italian foreigner was filled to overflowing when a joint letter of thanksgiving and praise arrived from the king and queen in Barcelona. It bore the address: "Don Cristobal

Colon, their Admiral of the Ocean Sea, Viceroy and Governor of the Islands that he hath discovered in the Indies."

When Columbus approached Barcelona about April 15, all the court and city came out to meet him. As he approached the king and queen, they arose and asked him to be seated by them. This was the high tide of his fortunes. Never again in this life would he receive such honors from men. Las Casas says of him at this time—

He seemed very grateful to God for benefits received from the divine hand; hated blasphemy and profane swearing.

He was a gentleman of great force of spirit, of lofty thoughts naturally inclined . . . to undertake worthy deeds and signal enterprises; patient and long suffering, and a forgiver of injuries; most constant and endowed with forbearance in the hardships and diversities which were always occurring and which were incredible and infinite; ever holding great confidence in divine providence.

In all, Columbus made four voyages to the New World. On the third his enemies arrested him and brought him back in chains to Seville. It was from his Seville prison he wrote in October 1500—

In seven years, I by *the divine will*, made the conquest (of those discovered lands). At a time when I was entitled to expect rewards and retirement, I was incontinently arrested and sent loaded with chains. . . .

On November 7, 1504, at the age of fifty-two, he arrived at Seville from his fourth and last voyage. Within the month the crushing news reached him that his benefactress, Queen Isabella, had died. Immediately his pension stopped. He rented a room above a stable at Valladolid where the royal court was in residence. To help the time pass while he was pleading for his rights, he cut a hole in the floor of his room so he could watch his mule stabled below. Racked with the pains of arthritis, he humbly ventured to compare his own sufferings with those of the Savior. On May 20, 1506, in his poor room he died at the age of fifty-four, with the words of the Master on his lips—

Father, into thy hands I commend my Spirit.

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