

Columbus and Revelation

By Hugh Nibley*

There is a class of men of high academic attainment known as "Columbists." They devote their lives to finding out things about Columbus. Four standard works written by contemporaries of Columbus plus the extensive writings of Columbus himself, preserved and transmitted in various states of perfection, form the nucleus of all studies of Columbus. Among the accepted data on Columbus there is more than enough evidence to make an exciting commentary on the words of Nephi.

First of all, the mere existence of the Columbists after 400 years of controversy and research justifies the assertions of his contemporaries and himself that he was a man of mystery. The experts still disagree not only on minor details but on every major point of his vital statistics: the place and date of his birth, his name, his nationality, his race, his education, his religion, his plans and his accomplishments.

No man knows his history, though his is one of the most richly documented careers on record. Why should this be? The parallel case of Joseph Smith at once springs to mind, and the explanation of the mystery may well be the same. For as Madariaga points out, most of what is mysterious and contradictory in the story of Columbus comes from the refusal of the experts to be-

(Concluded on following page.)

Christopher, a man among the Gentiles.

And it came to pass that the angel said unto me: Behold the wrath of God is upon the seed of thy brethren.

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon the many waters, . . . 1—Nephi 13:11, 12.

Why does the Book of Mormon devote a whole verse to Columbus? America was bound to be discovered, at any rate. What was so wonderful about its discovery? Everything!

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IN RECOGNITION OF EXCELLENCE

(Concluded from page 313.)

MARGARET IPSON KITTO

McCALL'S MAGAZINE in a recent announcement cited Margaret I.

Kitto on an "Honor Roll" of 12 teachers who had made outstanding contributions to the improvement of teaching standards throughout the nation. Her citation read: "Activity is

the word for Mrs. Kitto. She teaches second grade and Sunday School, works in politics and city and state teachers' associations. She also helped develop the city's primary grade courses."

Sister Kitto has been particularly active in the performance of her General Board requirements on the Junior Sunday School committee.

EXPANDING HORIZONS

... eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. 1 Corinthians 2:9.

HISTORY is never made in the abstract. Always it is something someone has done.

History is never a solid mass achievement; it is a mosaic of countless parts, each one perfected by the sacrificial devotion of some particular person. The forces that have made history, and which will continue to make it, are the undying ideals men cherish, the strong-willed plans they discipline themselves to achieve, and the daring hopes by which they activate their souls.

Though it may not be our personal destiny to stand at the crossroads and direct the traffic of history, still we can choose to become integral parts of a determined group

which has espoused some high cause and dedicated its all. Thus are our lives enlarged. They begin to count for something beyond our years. No longer do we live in the limited enclosure of our own efforts and achievements. We become, instead, part of that creative life by which the world is born into new and more glorious existence.

—Dr. W. Waldemar W. Argow.

THE Lord never had—and never will have to the end of time—a Church on the earth without prophets, apostles, and inspired men. Whenever the Lord had a people on the earth that He acknowledged as such, that people were led by revelation.

—Wilford Woodruff.

Answer to
"The Wisdom of the Gospel"
found on page 313:
JOHN TAYLOR

COLUMBUS AND REVELATION

(Concluded from preceding page.)

lieve what he tells them. They say he was an outrageous liar when he was actually telling the truth!

All are agreed that Columbus was an imaginative and a visionary man, often carried away by his own enthusiasm. But on one thing he was clear and specific—he was called for a definite mission. Let us quote two of the latest studies on Columbus, by men who take opposite points of view and refute each other on almost everything else:

*Three features stand out from the glimpses which his contemporaries have let us catch . . . Mystery surrounds him. Pride stiffens him up. A sense of a mission entrusted to him from on high drives and illumines him. No one knows who he is, where he comes from, what he actually wishes to do. No one can brow-beat him, pin him down, make him accept one inch less than the whole of what he demands. No one can fail to feel that he is possessed of an idea, bent on action, bearer of a message, entrusted with a mission. Can we wonder at his success?*¹

Thus Madariaga. And Samuel Eliot Morison:

*For he was not, like a Washington, a Cromwell or a Bolivar, an instrument chosen by multitudes to express their wills and lead a cause; Columbus was a Man with a Mission . . . He was Man alone with God against human stupidity and depravity, against greedy conquistadors, cowardly seamen, even against nature and the sea. Always with God, though . . . Men may doubt this, but there can be no doubt that the faith of Columbus was genuine and sincere, and that his frequent communion with forces unseen was a vital element in his achievement.*²

Specifically, Columbus believed that if he would sail a certain specific distance in a certain specific direction (and there was nothing vague about the distance and the direction) he would discover land. In this he was right; yet he was not right in calling this land the Indies—still, the Indies it had to be if the project was ever to be successfully promoted.

His contemporary and friend, Las Casas, in an oft-quoted passage says he was as certain of finding what he said he would as if he had it already locked up in his trunk. Las Casas tells how ". . . from all sides and in many ways did God give Columbus motives and causes that he should not doubt to undertake so great a deed," and that "God seemed to move him on by constant pushes." Everything else in Columbus' life is subservient to the carrying out of that one mission. The aim and purpose of all his work and suffering was what happened at 2 a.m. on the morning of October 12, 1492, and must not be judged by what happened after (it was "the wrath of God upon the seed of my brethren," says Nephi), or by any other quirks or misadventures. In retrospect we see that this is so—but Columbus himself *always* knew it was: God had chosen him to do this one great deed.

Two facts about Columbus here claim our respectful attention:

(1) He claimed that his discovery of the Indies was the result of revelation: "I have said," he wrote to Ferdinand and Isabella, "that in the carrying out of this enterprise of the Indies neither reason nor mathematics nor maps were any use to me: fully accomplished were the words of Isaiah."³

¹Salvador de Madariaga, *Christopher Columbus* (London, Hollis & Carter, 1949), page 16.

²Samuel Eliot Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1942), page 46.

³Quoted in Madariaga, *Op. cit.*, page 100.

(2) His performance was magnificent and unparalleled: a crackpot or charlatan would have collapsed a thousand times in the painful and humiliating promotion, the arduous and hard-headed preparation, and the dangerous and strenuous execution of his project.

Sailing into a perfect blank on the map, Columbus infallibly did the right thing: "He did not make a single false move in the entire voyage!" says the geographer Professor Nunn. He maintains that Columbus must have been the discoverer of the Trade and prevailing Westerly Winds since it was only by taking full-est advantage of both that his journey was possible—yet his subsequent voyages show that Columbus knew nothing about the wind system.⁴ This was not Columbus's doing. Neither was the flight of birds that appeared just in time to keep the ships from turning back, nor the sudden rising of the sea that at another time inspired the expedition to continue. Call it what you will, Columbus was convinced he was being helped.

Finally a day came when he was forced to give the whole fleet his solemn word that he would turn back within two days if land was not discovered—and on the morning of the second day land *was* discovered. About eight or nine hours before the discovery, at sun-

Christopher Columbus discovers the New World. Neither reason, maps nor mathematics were of use to him, yet he made no false moves.

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set on October 11, Columbus gave a strange and sudden order for a marked change of course. "Why he did this, nobody has explained," writes Professor Morison, a very sober historian and a nautical expert. But he assures us that if he had *not* done it, the great discovery of Oct. 12, 1492 would have been a tragic discovery of deadly reefs that lay but a short distance dead ahead of the little fleet on its original course.

To the King and Queen, Columbus boldly declared: "I say that the Holy Ghost works in Christians, Jews, Moors and all men of any other sect and not merely in the learned, but in the ignorant." It is remarks like this that raise serious controversies as to just what Columbus's religion was. Those who have never had a revelation can easily enough deny that Columbus ever did, but is his own sober and repeated declaration to be brushed lightly aside? "No man alive," says Morison, speaking as a mariner, "limited to the instruments and means at Columbus's disposal, could obtain anything near the accuracy of his results."

Hamlet in a rage denounced the sophisticated Guildenstern for presuming to play on him when he could not do anything so simple as play on a little flute. If any man is going to tell us what made Columbus tick, he had better first show that he can do the equivalent in the way of honest brainwork to handling those crude instruments of navigation with a tenth the knowledge and skill of a Columbus. This man was no impostor and no hysterical neurotic—and no man would have said "Amen" to the words of Nephi more fervidly than he.

⁴G. E. Nunn, *The Geographical Conceptions of Columbus* (N.Y., American Geographical Society, 1924), this work is frequently cited by both Morison & Madariaga.