

ARNOLD K. GARR. *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective*. Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992. xv; 103 pp. Maps, appendix, bibliography, index. \$8.95.

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It has been a difficult year for Columbus in most respects but not within the LDS Church. Special firesides, sacrament meeting talks, a fifty-foot, four-panel mural in the Los Angeles Temple Visitors Center, and even a laudatory statement in President Gordon B. Hinckley's discourse in the October 1992 general priesthood meeting have been part of the commemoration of the discovery of the Americas. Columbus would have appreciated the affirmation that he was inspired by religious motives and experiences to make the voyage. The way Mormons, in general, view Columbus is probably similar to the way he would have wanted.¹

Curiously, although Latter-day Saints have long used Book of Mormon prophecy to identify Columbus as a man "wrought upon" by the Spirit of God, members of the Church have done little research prior to this past year on the religious elements of Columbus's life. Even though recent Columbus scholars generally have not taken his religious views and belief of spiritual guidance seriously and consequently have not written about them, those views have been available in his published diary and his work, *Libro de las profecías* (Book of Prophecies).² Typically, LDS commentators have used limited secondary sources to support the claim that Columbus felt himself to be inspired, rather than drawing from the rich primary documents where Columbus several times alluded to his feelings of spiritual guidance.³ Given this weakness in Mormon Columbus research, the volume by Arnold K. Garr, assistant professor of Church History at Brigham Young University, was anticipated.

This book must be understood as a volume oriented to the general Church population and not the scholar. For this audience, the volume provides what was intended. It is a short biography (about seventy pages of text excluding maps and blank pages) asserting that Columbus was an inspired instrument who accomplished the purposes of the Lord in the

discovery of the Americas but acknowledging the Admiral's lack of inspiration in attempting to govern the colonies. Those with even a limited knowledge of Columbus, however, will be left wanting more.

Garr primarily has two objectives in the volume. The first is to give a historical sketch of Columbus's life and his voyages to the Americas. Using recent scholarship on the topic, this part is well done. The second purpose is to outline Columbus's religious convictions and demonstrate that he believed himself an instrument in the hands of the Lord. This section has some deficiencies. There is only a limited discussion of his religious views and background. Columbus had a scholastic Catholic view of the universe as permanent and unchanging, and of a world that was divided into three parts: Europe, Asia, and Africa. As Garr points out, Columbus believed in the prophecies of the Old and New Testament regarding the conversion of all of the world's peoples to Christianity, the final recovery of the Holy Land, and the return of the Messiah. A major stimulus for his travel and discovery was a striving to fulfill prophecy. He believed that his understanding of the world came about through inspiration and that his subsequent discoveries were inspired by and influenced by God. He believed himself to be selected and predestined to fulfill this important quasi-final scene in the world's history.⁴

The author draws some statements on Columbus from early writers who recognized this important religious component. His first biographers, his son Ferdinand and Bartolomé de Las Casas, both emphasized his religious training and convictions.⁵ In his study of the European discovery and exploration of the Americas, Alexander von Humboldt felt that Columbus was a "strange combination of ideas and sentiments. . . gifted with a high intelligence and with an invincible courage in adversity, nourished on scholastic theology."⁶

Garr includes little concerning those who influenced Columbus and recognizes only briefly the religious climate and millennial fervor that was part of his environment. Columbus's religious feelings and beliefs were not atypical, but representative of an important faction of the Catholic Church who anticipated the spread of the gospel and the subsequent apocalyptic end of the world. Even Sir Isaac Newton spent time with the numerology of the Apocalypse attempting to determine the second coming of Christ. Many of the educated and prominent

people of Europe believed the discovery of the New World was one of the final events to occur before the end. Columbus's beliefs were not unique, but typical of his time.⁷

The greatest disappointment in the volume is its failure to examine seriously the *Libro de las prophecías*. The author devotes a brief five pages to the document. For Mormons its translation and publication in English may be the most significant event of the quincentenary. In it we learn much about Columbus's feelings and emotions about his role in religious history. We learn that he loved to read and believed the foundation of all learning was in the Bible. We recognize clearly that he saw himself as the chosen messenger of God, destined to open the way for the evangelization of the newly discovered lands. His search for gold is justified because it would be used by the sovereigns of Spain to reclaim the Holy Land. Garr's approach to the document is descriptive with some discussion of the scriptures Columbus used. Greater analysis is needed to clarify how the scriptures were understood by Columbus and to address other questions Columbus's account raises for Latter-day Saints. An explicit comparison with LDS beliefs would also have been helpful.

The volume includes maps and appendixes with a Columbus chronology and a brief list of Columbus quotes related to his spiritual beliefs and experiences. Also included are a list of quotes by Latter-day Saint prophets and apostles on Columbus and a list of the one hundred "eminent men" baptized by proxy in the St. George Temple in 1877 of whom Columbus was one.

The book will provide Church members with a summary of the life of Columbus and a brief discussion of his religious perceptions within the framework of the Book of Mormon prophecy. An in-depth study of his religious beliefs and activities and how they relate to LDS thought has yet to be written.

NOTES

¹ In her study of Columbus's spiritual background, Pauline Moffitt Watts indicated that Columbus had strong feelings about his place in religious history. He felt strongly about the scientific and discovery advances he had brought about but felt equally strong about his spiritual accomplishments: "He came to believe that he was predestined to fulfill a number of prophecies in preparation for the coming of the Antichrist and the end of the world." See "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies,'" *American Historical Review* 90 (February 1985): 74. Garr includes the work in his bibliography. The work is also discussed in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 32-35.

² One of the reasons may be that of language. His diary has been available in English for years. The *Libro*, however, was published in 1894 in the original Spanish and Latin. It was translated into English only in 1991. A copy of the 1894 version has been part of the rare books collection at Brigham Young University for several years. BYU also recently acquired a facsimile of the original manuscript.

³ A favorite Columbus quotation used by Mormons is drawn from a biography published in English in 1930 by the German author, Jacob Wasserman, which was described by a reviewer as "not a biography of Columbus based upon the sources, but a picture made up of personal impressions having almost no relation to the known facts." See "Jacob Wassermann, *Columbus, Don Quixote of the Seas*, trans. Eric Sutton (Boston: Little, Brown, 1930); and P. Biggaritt, "Recent Books on Columbus," *Canadian Historical Review* 12 (March 1931): 61. An article in the *Improvement Era* quoted his visitation experience during the fourth voyage. That reference was not mentioned by other Mormon writers. See Hyde M. Merrill, "Christopher Columbus and the Book of Mormon," *Improvement Era* 69 (February 1966): 135.

⁴ Watts, 79.

⁵ Ferdinand Columbus (Colón), *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus by His Son Ferdinand*, trans. and annotated by Benjamin Keen (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1959); and Bartolomé de Las Casas, *History of the Indies*, trans. and ed. Andrée Collard (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

⁶ Alexander von Humboldt, *Examen critique de l'histoire de la géographie du Nouveau Continent et des progrès de l'astronomie nautique aux quinzième siècles* (Paris: Librairie de Gide, 1836), 110. See also Alejandro de Humboldt, *Cristóbal Colón y el descubrimiento de America* (Madrid: Librería y Casa Editorial Hernando, 1926).

⁷ For studies of the religious environment see Margorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969); Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1979); and John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).