Christ-Bearer

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Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

**Christ-Bearer**

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 months ago, while my family and I sat around the dinner table, the name of Christopher Columbus came up. Instantly, my thirteen-year-old son volunteered the judgment that Columbus wasn’t really much of a hero, that he was, in fact, the villain behind the extermination of millions of native Americans and the indirect cause of the pollution of the air, water, and soil of the New World.

I can only assume that my son had absorbed this ideological-tripe-masquerading-as-history at our local junior high school, or else, perhaps, during the Columbus Quincentennial of 1992 at his elementary school. Unfortunately, such disinformation is common nowadays, though I confess I had not previously thought it such a problem in the public schools of Utah.

I immediately recommended Arnold Garr’s book, *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective*, to my son. While Columbus’s life was not entirely saintly, and while aspects of his legacy certainly call for reflection and even regret, on balance he
is a remarkable historical figure whose persistence, courage, skillfulness, and spiritual sensitivity are fully deserving of admiration.

Latter-day Saints, of course, have special reason for paying attention to the career of the great “Admiral of the Ocean Sea.” Since the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, it has been virtually universally recognized that 1 Nephi 13:12, quoted as the epigram to this review, refers to Columbus, who thus emerges from the very pages of scripture itself as an important, foreordained actor in the divine plan.

Skeptical readers of the Book of Mormon, to the extent that they have noticed the passage at all, have dismissed it as a cheap and easy instance of prophecy *ex eventu*, written by Joseph Smith (or Sidney Rigdon, or Ethan Smith, or Solomon Spaulding, or whomever) long after Columbus’s career, but postdated, as it were, in order to create a seemingly impressive and self-validating prediction by an ancient prophetic writer. At the very most, some have said, the “prophecy” of Columbus hardly constitutes evidence for the antiquity or inspiration of the Book of Mormon.

On a surface level, such critics are right. It would have taken little talent in the late 1820s for someone to prophesy the discovery of America nearly three and a half centuries earlier. But the description of Columbus provided by 1 Nephi 13:12 remains, in my view, a remarkable demonstration of the revelatory accuracy of the Book of Mormon, and Professor Garr’s book clearly sets out the reasons.

It is only with the growth of Columbus scholarship in recent years, and particularly with the translation and publication of Columbus’s *Libro de las profecciones* in 1991, that English-speaking readers have been fully able to see how remarkably Columbus’s own self-understanding parallels the portrait of him given by the Book of Mormon. Professor Garr’s *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective* uses the resources provided by modern scholarship to provide a well-informed and genuinely Mormon view of the great explorer.

Professor Garr, who teaches in the Department of Church History and Doctrine at Brigham Young University, sets out quite explicitly (see p. xiii) to emphasize seven themes relating to Columbus: (1) His discovery of the New World for Europe fulfilled Book of Mormon prophecy. (2) He served as a forerunner
to the Restoration. (3) The primary motivation for his exploration was not financial gain, but the spread of Christianity. (4) He was guided by the Spirit of God, most especially on his first voyage to the Americas. (5) He himself believed that he was guided by the Spirit. (6) He regarded many of his achievements as a fulfillment of biblical and other prophecy. (7) Many modern prophets and apostles have held Columbus in great respect. In the course of his discussion, the author sets out a clear summary of Columbus's life and career. In this review, I shall highlight a few of the points I found most interesting.

The admiral's son Ferdinand was convinced, as, apparently, was the explorer himself, that the name Christopher Columbus (Italian Cristoforo Colombo) carried significant and divine meaning (see the discussion on pp. 8–10). Columbus means "dove," and Ferdinand was not hesitant to link it with the dove that symbolized the Holy Ghost at the Savior's baptism by John. Even more remarkably, perhaps, Christopher signifies "Christ-bearer," a perfectly appropriate title for the role that Columbus saw himself as playing, and that history did, in fact, assign to him as he opened up the New World for Christian evangelization. The great priest and historian Bartolomé de Las Casas (cited on p. 13) said of Columbus that "He was extraordinarily zealous for the divine service; he desired and was eager for the conversion of [the Indians], and that in every region the faith of Jesus Christ be planted and enhanced." Indeed, based on his feeling that he was living in the last days, Columbus felt a considerable sense of urgency about taking the gospel to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and peoples before the end of the world (p. 31). Writing to Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer for whom (rather unjustly) the Americas would eventually be named, Columbus himself remarked,

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1 Along the way, he aims well-deserved criticism at the persistent myth that the scholars of Columbus's time thought the earth was flat (p. 28) and tells of the astonishing reception that the Indians gave to Columbus and his white, bearded shipmates, a reception perhaps to be connected with legends of Christ's appearance in ancient America (pp. 47–48).

2 I am inclined to agree with Professor Garr (on p. 56) that Columbus also played an important part in the fulfillment of 1 Nephi 13:38.

3 In keeping with his deep beliefs, Columbus tended to give religious names—such as San Salvador ("Holy Savior"), La Navidad ("Christmas"), and Trinidad ("Trinity")—to the places he came across (see pp. 46, 61).
I feel persuaded, by the many and wonderful manifestations of Divine Providence in my especial favour, that I am the chosen instrument of God in bringing to pass a great event—no less than the conversion of millions who are now existing in the darkness of Paganism. (cited on pp. 30, 82)

It is difficult, indeed, to argue with Columbus’s perception of “many and wonderful manifestations of Divine Providence in [his] especial favour.” Students of his first transoceanic voyage, in particular, have been struck by the fact that Columbus made not a single wrong navigational move during the entire journey (p. 39). For instance, despite the fact that the Azores were the westernmost Atlantic islands known in Columbus’s day, and, consequently, the logical point of departure for a westward voyage, Columbus opted to launch his expedition rather from the Canary Islands, off the coast of Africa and considerably to the southeast. In doing so, he caught the tradewinds that blow from the northeast to the southwest and he avoided the headwinds that blow from west to east in the area of the Azores. Indeed, five centuries of sailing have proven Columbus’s route to be the best possible course for a voyage from southern Europe to North America (p. 41). Miraculous sea changes and a pair of fateful (and, in at least one case, rationally inexplicable) course corrections (discussed on pp. 43-44) also seem to bear the mark of divine intervention on Columbus’s behalf. Finally, returning from that important initial voyage, and on the basis of (obviously) no prior transatlantic sailing experience, either his own or anybody else’s, Columbus discovered the optimal return route to southern Europe, this time via the Azores (p. 50).

Referring to his first crossing of the Atlantic, Columbus declared that, “With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to

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4 Professor Garr calls attention (on p. 3) to Orson Hyde’s intriguing notion that it was Moroni, acting in a stewardship role for the Americas, who guided and gave impressions to Columbus; see JD 6:368.

5 As we shall see below, the author feels that Columbus was “wrought upon” by the Spirit of God on other occasions besides his first voyage to the Americas. One incident to which he alludes is Columbus’s remarkable escape from a shipwreck relatively early in his seafaring career (see p. 20).
the Indies, and he opened my will to desire to accomplish the project. ... This was the fire that burned within me. ... Who can doubt that this fire was not merely mine, but also of the Holy Spirit?" (cited on pp. 3, 19, 39, 41, 81). “Our Lord,” he said in 1500, “made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth, ... and he showed me the place where to find it” (cited on pp. 52, 83).

Columbus was a serious and close student of the Bible. Latter-day Saints will be interested to learn (on pp. 31, 65) that John 10:16, a verse with which they too are more than a little familiar, was one of Columbus’s favorite passages of scripture: “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” (as cited on p. 31). This verse provided significant support for his image of himself as a bearer of the gospel to the New World. And, though he was unacquainted with the writings of Nephi, Columbus was convinced that his role had been predicted by ancient prophets:

The Lord purposed that there should be something clearly miraculous in this matter of the voyage to the Indies. ... I spent seven years here in your royal court discussing this subject with the leading persons in all learned arts, and their conclusion was that it was vain. That was the end, and they gave it up. But afterwards it all turned out just as our redeemer Jesus Christ had said, and as he had spoken earlier by the mouth of his holy prophets. (cited on pp. 29, 65, 82)

“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” (cited on pp. 63, 65, 82).

As mentioned earlier, the quite recent publication of Columbus’s Book of Prophecies in English translation now permits us a window into his soul. And what we see therein cannot fail to remind Latter-day Saint readers of the Book of Mormon. Columbus was fascinated by such themes as the recovery of the Holy Land and the rebuilding, there, of the ancient Jewish temple (p. 64). One of his favorite scriptures, in this regard, was Isaiah
2:2, which Latter-day Saints will surely recognize: "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" (as cited on p. 64). He was also, as mentioned, totally committed to the notion that the gospel had to be preached to the ends of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof brought to Christ, before the end of the world (pp. 64–65). For much of this, just as readers of the Book of Mormon might have guessed, Columbus's favorite author was the prophet Isaiah. Indeed, it was in that prophet's book that Columbus thought he could see himself and his voyages divinely foretold. Among the passages that caught his attention were Isaiah 42:1–4: "Behold my servant: I will uphold him. My elect: My soul [de]lighteth in him. I have given my spirit upon him, . . . and the islands shall wait for his law" (as cited on p. 66), and Isaiah 55:5.

For all of its (justifiable) enthusiasm for the great explorer, Professor Garr's book is not blind to Columbus's faults. During his second voyage to the New World, for instance, Columbus, who was under intense pressure to justify the large amounts of money that had gone to support his expeditions—and who was unable to provide gold in the unrealistic amounts that his backers expected—authorized the drafting of native Americans for forced labor and slave sales. "This," says Professor Garr, "was one of the worst decisions Columbus made in his entire life" (p. 59). But it was also a pivotal turning point in his career. The author, who writes quite openly as a faithful Latter-day Saint, and not merely as a purportedly value-neutral historian, notes that,

There is very little evidence in the following few years that [Columbus] received the same kind of divine guidance and inspiration that he had been so blessed with earlier in his life. During the years he served as governor he appeared to be walking by his own light and stumbled along the way. He made several unfortunate decisions and almost everything seemed to go wrong for him. Modern-day revelation teaches that "the

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6 Although it is only a weak defense, we should note—against contemporary Columbus-despisers—that the admiral was merely going along with the prevailing practices of his day.
heavens withdraw themselves” when men “exercise unrighteous dominion” over others (D&C 121:37, 39). (p. 60)

In fact, Columbus returned from his third voyage to the New World not only unsuccessful, but humiliated, under arrest, and in shackles (pp. 61–63). Nevertheless, it would appear that the Lord had not abandoned him utterly. During a very difficult and distressing period on his fourth and last voyage to the Americas, Columbus lay down aboard his ship, the Capitana, off the coast of Panama.

I fell asleep, and heard a compassionate voice, saying, “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 was [sic] obeyed in so many lands, and thou has [sic] won noble fame from Christendom. What more did He do for the people of Israel, when He carried them out of Egypt; or for David, whom from a shepherd He raised to be king over Judea? Turn thou to Him and acknowledge thy faults; His mercy is infinite;”... I heard all this as in a swoon, but I had no answer to give in definite words; so true, only to weep for my transgression. (cited on p. 83; cf. p. 68)

When, on 20 May 1506, Columbus breathed his last in Valladolid, Spain, his final words were in manus tuas, Domine, commendo spiritum meum (“into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit”) (p. 69). And it seems that his deathbed prayer was heard. On 21 August 1877, under inspiration, President Wilford Woodruff received vicarious baptism for Columbus in the St.
George Temple. Three days later, Columbus was vicariously endowed and ordained a high priest in the same temple.

Latter-day Saints, of all people, should not join in the campaign, currently fashionable in some quarters, to denigrate the illustrious Genoese admiral and explorer. The historical record joins with the Book of Mormon to testify that Christopher Columbus, despite his faults, was a chosen and anointed instrument in the hands of God to bring about the divine purpose for the New World. Arnold K. Garr’s *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective* sets out the evidence for this proposition clearly and concisely. It is a credit both to the author and to the Religious Studies Center, which published it.