

Columbus: By Faith or Reason?

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1 Nephi 13:12 "I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles, . . . and he went forth upon the many waters."

First Nephi 13:12 tells how the Spirit of God was to come down upon a man who would go "forth upon the many waters" to discover the posterity of Lehi in the promised land. This verse has long been understood as referring to Columbus. In particular, Orson Pratt's references in the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon made this identification explicit. Dominant historical opinion, on the other hand, has seen Columbus led by science, reason, restlessness, and conquest. Recently, historian Pauline Watts has taken a new look at this issue and argues persuasively that Columbus was in fact deeply influenced by prophecy and revelation.¹

Some of Joseph Smith's contemporaries probably would not have disagreed with Nephi's description of Columbus. Clues to the spiritual side of Columbus were already found in a few English sources, though these references were vague and few.² Materials about the life and actions of Columbus by his son D. Ferdinand Columbus were republished several times in England during the eighteenth century, but the availability of sources and Joseph Smith's actual use of them are two entirely different questions.

But if the Book of Mormon's "Spirit of God" that "wrought upon the man" was not especially shocking to some Americans in 1830, it did stand firmly against the intellectual trend of the times, which focused on Columbus's rational, scientific nature and acknowledged the spiritual roots of his quest only grudgingly, if at all. In 1792, for example, Jeremy Belknap gave a commemorative discourse in Boston filled with scriptural references, but he nevertheless chose to emphasize Columbus's logical reasoning. He carefully reconstructed his motivations for sailing based on (1) natural reason, (2) the authority of ancient writers, and (3) the testimony of sailors (following the account of Columbus's son, Ferdinand Columbus). He does mention in passing that Columbus was "guided by th' Almighty hand," but even here all the emphasis is on "Reason's golden ray."³

Washington Irving's 1828 biography of Columbus is the closest in time and place to the publication of the Book of Mormon, and though he duly notes Columbus's "deep religious sentiment," he discounts it as "a tinge of superstition, but . . . of a sublime and lofty kind."⁴ He attributes Columbus's discovery to the "strong workings of his vigorous mind."⁵ Modern attitudes about Columbus and his motivations have been even more heavily influenced by the research of Alexander von Humboldt in the 1830s, who firmly established the image of the scientific Columbus.

Against all of this, the Book of Mormon boldly asserts that whatever else may have been involved, Columbus's *primary* reasons for sailing were *spiritual*. Thus it may be of interest to Latter-day Saints that much recent scholarship has come to agree with the Book of Mormon's original assessment of Columbus.⁶

In her article, Watts investigates the spiritual origins of Columbus's voyages. She discusses the influences of scripture, theology, astrology, apocalypticism, and medieval prophecy. She particularly focuses on a book that

Columbus himself was writing but never completed, called *Book of Prophecies* (the fragments were first edited by Cesare De Lollis in 1894). In this book Columbus set forth views on himself as the fulfiller of biblical prophecies! Columbus saw himself as fulfilling the “islands of the sea” passages from Isaiah and another group of verses concerning the conversion of the heathen. Watts reports that Columbus was preoccupied with “the final conversion of all races on the eve of the end of the world,” paying particular attention to John 10:16: “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold” (see also 3 Nephi 16:3). He took his mission of spreading the gospel of Christ seriously. “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth. . . . He showed me the spot where to find it,” Columbus wrote in 1500.⁷

Watts summarizes her argument by stating that “in the final years of his life, . . . Columbus came increasingly to see himself as a divinely inspired fulfiller of prophecy, the one who inaugurated the age of the *unum ovile et unus pastor*” (“one fold and one shepherd”).⁸ “He came to believe that he was predestined to fulfill a number of prophecies in preparation for the coming of the Anti-Christ and the end of the world”⁹ (which also happens to be the context of Nephi’s prophecies in 1 Nephi 13-14).

Here we have a picture of Columbus as a man who very strongly felt the Spirit of God directing his life and who sought to understand that influence using the best knowledge and resources available to him. Such is not far removed from Nephi’s portrait. Columbus was fulfilling inspired words more precisely than even he imagined.¹⁰

The importance of Pauline Watts’s research for the Book of Mormon was first detected by Grant Hardy, whose report on this topic was the basis of this March 1986 Update.

Footnotes

1. Pauline Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus’s ‘Enterprise of the Indies,’” *American Historical Review* (February 1985): 73-102.
2. See D. Gio. B. Spotorno, *Memorials of Columbus* (London: Treuttel and Wurtz, 1823), 224; A. & J. Churchill, comp., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1704), 2:563.
3. Jeremy Belknap, *A Discourse Intended to Commemorate the Discovery of America by Christopher Columbus* (Boston: Apollo, 1792), 56-57.
4. Washington Irving, *A History of the Life and Voyages of Christopher Columbus* (New York: G. & C. Carvill, 1828), 1:38.
5. *Ibid.*, 1:32; see 32-42. See also *The Life of Christopher Columbus* (Philadelphia, 1838; copyright 1832), 19-21.
6. See also initial notes in this regard by Hugh Nibley, “Columbus and Revelation,” *Instructor* 88 (October 1953): 319-20; reprinted in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 8:49-53.
7. Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery,” 73.
8. *Ibid.*, 99.

9. Ibid., 74.

10. See also Helen Hinckley, *Columbus: Explorer for Christ* (Independence: Herald Publishing House, 1977).