

Understanding Columbus and His Legacy

By Humberto M. Rasi

Certain events have forever altered the course of human history. Among these were the voyages of Christopher Columbus, which marked the beginning of regular contacts between Europe and the continent that was later to be named—quite unjustly—America.

The 500th anniversary of these voyages offers Seventh-day Adventist teachers a unique opportunity to involve students in a fresh study of Columbus from a Christian perspective—to evaluate his motives, his legacy, and the relationship between God's sovereignty and human actions. This article will summarize recent studies on this fascinating topic, explore the religious dimension of Columbus' personality, and offer some suggestions for class projects and discussions.

It is possible that other mariners had visited the New World before Columbus and his crew set anchor off a small island in the Bahamas. However, his voyages captivated the European imagination like nothing before and initiated a series of transatlantic exchanges that eventually affected the entire planet.

Columbus publicized his discoveries broadly, stimulating others to follow the sea lanes he had pioneered. In addition to introducing many kinds of animals and

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plants to the New World, he also returned to Europe with shiploads of America's natural wealth. Fortunately, the admiral was backed by a young kingdom, one that was ready to carry out vigorous exploration and colonization of the newly discovered territory.

In addition, the timing was right. Intrigued by Marco Polo's Asian travels, tempted by the Portuguese explorations of Africa's coast, and blocked by the Turks from using overland trade routes, Europe

was ready to expand its economic frontiers westward.

The key factor in this global shift was an obscure seaman who for seven years had been trying to obtain financial backing to open commercial contacts with the Orient by sailing toward the uncharted West. By the time Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon finally agreed to sponsor his journey, Columbus was a 41-year-old widower with two sons and debts to pay. But his life was about to take a dramatic turn.

Mixed Motives

Interwoven in Columbus' complex personality were three motives that propelled him to undertake four voyages between 1492 and 1504, which led to an ever-expanding coastline. Although these explorations did not confirm his projections of reaching Japan (Cipango), China (Cathay), or India—he had underestimated the distance—they did open a vast continent full of potential for Europe.

The first dimension of his personality is the best known—Columbus the brilliant seaman and inquisitive explorer. Based on his readings and extensive travels—from the island of Chios in the Aegean Sea to Iceland and African Guinea—the admiral conceived a plan

Coffin of Christopher Columbus, Santa Iglesia Cathedral, Seville, Spain.

that would allow his ships to sail in both directions across the Atlantic, pushed by trade winds and westerlies he had carefully plotted. As he explored the coastlines of an emerging continent, Columbus recorded with fascinating detail the vegetation, the fauna, the crafts, the natives, and their customs.¹

The second dimension has become the focus of recent revisionist attacks—Columbus the ambitious and exploitative entrepreneur.² There is no doubt that in his dealings with the monarchs of Castile and Aragon, the astute mariner-merchant obtained important concessions for himself and his descendants in the event that his plan succeeded. He was assured nobility rank, the title of admiral, viceroy, and governor of the territories he conquered for the crown, as well as one-tenth of the enterprise earnings. Moreover, his travel diaries reveal a fixation with gold objects, gold prospects, and the commercial value of the products he observed. In addition, during the second voyage he allowed his associates to impose forced labor on the Hispaniola natives. This cruel treatment, already known in Europe, later brought misery and death, first to the native Indians and later to millions of African slaves.

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The third dimension of this explorer is the least known—Columbus, Bible student and Christian visionary. In spite of evidences of the admiral's spirituality in his writings, many historians have either minimized or ignored this intriguing facet of his personality. Through personal study of the Scriptures and of several commentators, Columbus came to see his voyages as part of God's providential leading in history, as well as in his own life. "The Enterprise of the Indies," as he called his voyage, had for him a double purpose: Spreading the gospel among the unreached people and obtaining the funds necessary to free Jerusalem from the infidels, thus ushering in Christ's second coming.³

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hint of the special role God had assigned to him. In fact, *Christoferens* (the Greek root of his given name) means "Christ bearer," and around 1498 the admiral began to incorporate this meaning into his enigmatic signature.

These three motives—discovery, profit, and evangelism—are interwoven in this fragment of Columbus' log for October 16, 1492—four days after his first landing—as he surveyed the Bahamas:

This island is very large and I have decided to go around it because, as I understand it, either on or near it, there lies a gold mine. . . . These people are like those of the other islands, and [they share] the same language and customs, except these seem more civilized, easier to deal with, and more astute. . . . I am not aware of any religion among them, so I think they could easily become Christians, because they are very intelligent. It's amazing how different the fish here are from our own.⁴

An Unusual Document

In November 1500, after returning from his unfortunate third voyage and before sailing again in May of 1502 on his fourth and final crossing, Columbus had time for study and reflection. During this period, he compiled a broad selection of prophetic passages from the Vulgate Bible and several commentators, which in his view connected his providential understanding of history to his voyages. The original manuscript of this compilation, which has come to be known as Columbus' *Libro de las profecias* (*Book of Prophecies*), was kept by the admiral's son Hernando. It was later placed in the Colombina Library at the Cathedral in

Seville, Spain,⁵ where it remained untranslated for almost five centuries.⁶

The first section of the manuscript consists of an exchange of letters between Columbus and Fray Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk residing in Seville. In his letter, written from Granada (September 13, 1501), the admiral sends the compilation to his friend and asks him to review and expand it.

Gorricio responds from Seville (March 23, 1502), returning the manuscript and adding: "Sir, little have I added and interjected. You will see it in my handwriting; I submit everything to the correction of your spirit and prudent judgment" (Fol. 1, revs.).

After a few quotations that reflect Columbus' hermeneutics, the manuscript includes an important letter written earlier by the admiral to the king and queen. This epistle allows us to reconstruct Columbus' self-image:

At a very early age I went to the sea and have continued navigating until today. The art of sailing is favorable for anyone who wants to pursue knowledge of this world's secrets. I have already been at this business for forty years. I have sailed all the waters which, up to now, have been navigated. . . . I found Our Lord very well-disposed toward this my desire, and he gave me the spirit of intelligence for it (Fol. 4).

The admiral then recounts the way in which God miraculously guided him in planning and executing the voyages to the Indies. Next he urges the monarchs to launch an expedition to rescue Jerusalem from the infidels. The letter reveals Columbus' mature spirituality as he frankly acknowledges his past mistakes:

I will speak of one [scriptural truth] because it is relevant to me, and every time I meditate on it, I feel rest and contentment. I am the worst of sinners. The pity and mercy of our Lord have completely covered me whenever I have called [on him] for them. I have found the sweetest consolation

in casting away all my anxiety, so as to contemplate his marvelous presence (Fol. 5 revs.).

Columbus had a balanced understanding of the role of the individual within a providential view of history:

No one should be afraid to take on any enterprise in the name of our Savior, if it is right and if the purpose is purely for his holy service. . . . The working out of all things was entrusted by our Lord to each person, [but it happens] in conformity with his sovereign will, even though he gives advice to many (Fols. 5 revs., 6).

The bulk of the manuscript consists of Bible quotations and commentaries organized in three parts, which look to the past, the present, and the future. Most of Columbus' quotations come from the Psalms, Isaiah, the minor prophets, and the Gospels. They reveal an unusual acquaintance with the Scriptures for a seaman of humble origins and no formal education.

An Assessment

Columbus' daring enterprise can be

understood as an attempt to escape the extremely poor conditions of his childhood and to establish a noble lineage for his descendants.⁷ It was also stimulated by the creativity of the Italian Renaissance. Columbus was born in 1451, just one year earlier than Leonardo da Vinci and Savonarola, and three years before Amerigo Vespucci. While Columbus was conceiving the idea of reaching the Orient through the West, Michelangelo (1475) and Raphael (1483) were born. A few years later Titian and Palestrina would enter the world.⁸

However, neither his cultural milieu nor his family background can explain Columbus' steady faith in God, his unusual familiarity with the Bible, his providential view of human history, or his clear "Adventist" hope:

The Holy Scriptures testify in the Old Testament, by the mouth of the prophets, and in the New [Testament], by our Savior Jesus Christ, that this world will come to an end: Matthew, Mark, and Luke have recorded the signs of the end of the age, the prophets had also abundantly foretold it. . . . And I say that the sign which convinces me that our Lord is hastening the end of the world is the preaching of the Gospel recently in so many lands (Fols. 5, 6).

The 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyages is being exploited to carry forward some questionable political agendas. For Christian teachers and students, the quincennial offers an opportunity for sober reflection—on the long-range effect of our personal decisions, on our treatment of people who are either different from or weaker than ourselves; and on the frequent contradiction between our professed faith and our daily conduct.⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Samuel Eliot Morison wrote the definitive book on this important facet of Columbus' personality: *Admiral of the Ocean Sea: A Life of Christopher Columbus*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1942).

2. Kirkpatrick Sale's book *The Conquest of Paradise*:

Christopher Columbus and the Columbus Legacy (New York: Knopf, 1990) is representative of this bitterly revisionistic approach. The U.S. National Council of Churches has also joined other anti-celebration groups with a resolution that cited "invasion, genocide, slavery and ecocide [destruction of nature]" as the outcome of Columbus' voyages. It confesses that the church has, by and large, "accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation" (Quoted in *World*, October 26, 1991, p. 18).

3. For a perceptive analysis of this facet of Columbus' motives, see Pauline Moffitt Watts, "Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus's 'Enterprise of the Indies.'" *American Historical Review* 90:1 (February 1985), 73-102.

4. *Relación del primer viaje de D. Cristóbal Colón* (Buenos Aires: Emech Editores, 1942), pp. 32-33.

5. Bound in vellum, the original manuscript consists of 84 numbered leaves (14 are missing), with writing on both the front and reverse sides. The manuscript shows four different kinds of handwriting, including Columbus' autograph (Folio 59). The text appears in Latin, Castilian Spanish, the peculiar Castilian Spanish of the admiral shows Portuguese influences, and a short notation in Italian. The Latin title of the manuscript appears incomplete, due to extensive damage to folio 1: "Bo[ok] . . . [au]thoritative quotations, sayings, pronouncements, and p[ro]phesies] which the Admiral Don Christopher Columbus gathered together concerning the recovery of the Holy City of Jerusalem, and concerning the discovery of the Indies, addressed to the Catholic Monarchs."

6. Kay Bringham has published a reproduction of the original manuscript along with her English translation, *Christopher Columbus's Book of Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1991), from which I have quoted. See also her book *Christopher Columbus: His Life and Discovery in the Light of His Prophecies* (Terrassa, Spain: Libros CLIE, 1990). These books can be ordered from T.S.E.L.F., P.O. Box 8337, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33308. Toll-free telephone number: 800-327-7933.

7. This is the central thesis of Felipe Fernández-Armesto's *Columbus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

8. See Paolo Emilio Taviani, *Columbus: The Great Adventure* (New York: Orion Books, 1991), p. 263.

9. Adapted from Dan Carlinsky, "Christopher Confusion," *Modern Maturity* (February-March 1992), pp. 50-55.

10. Other references that may be useful as background for class study and discussion: "When Worlds Collide: How Columbus' Voyages Transformed Both East and West," Columbus Special Issue, *Newsweek* (Fall/Winter 1991), 84 pp.; Kathleen A. Deagan, "La Isabela, Europe's First Foothold in the New World," *National Geographic* 181:1 (January 1992), pp. 40-53; Paul Gray, "The Trouble With Columbus," *Time* (October 7, 1991), pp. 52-61; Eugene Lyon, "Search for Columbus," *National Geographic* 181:1 (January 1992), pp. 2-39; David Neff, "The Columbus Nobody Knows," *Christianity Today* 35:11 (October 7, 1991), pp. 26-29; Stephan Thernstrom, "Hello, Columbus," *The American School Board Journal* 178:10 (October 1991), pp. 19-23.

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LANDING OF COLUMBUS.

How Much Do You Really Know About Columbus?

Mark Your Answers

1. His name was Christopher Columbus. True False
2. He was born in Italy. True False
3. He set out to prove the world was round. True False
4. Queen Isabella had to pawn her jewels to fund his expedition. True False
5. Columbus was the first to sight land. True False
6. Columbus discovered America. True False
7. Columbus was the second to reach the New World from the Old. True False
8. He was honored for finding a new world. True False
9. Columbus died broken and penniless. True False
10. His remains have been buried in Valladolid, Seville, Santo Domingo, and Havana. True False

Check your answers on page 46.

Columbus' quotations from the Bible reveal an unusual acquaintance with the Scriptures for a seaman of humble origins and no formal education.

Study and Discussion Items

The personality, motives, and legacy of Columbus' voyages offer a variety of study and discussion opportunities for the library and the classroom.¹⁰ Here are some suggestions:

1. **The world from which Columbus sailed.** What was life like in Genoa, Portugal, Castile, and Aragon in the 15th century?

2. **The first Americans.** Describe the culture of the peoples that Columbus and the first Europeans found in the New World—the Taino, the Arawak, the Aztec, the Maya, the Inca, and others.

3. **The seasoned navigator.** On a world map, trace the areas through which Columbus sailed before his Atlantic crossing, then mark his four transatlantic voyages.

4. **The legacy.** Study the positive and the negative effects of Columbus' voyages. Who suffered and who benefited from the Atlantic exchanges he initiated, both short- and long-range?

5. **Bible student.** Review in Columbus' *Book of Prophecies* the Scripture passages he quoted and the religious references he makes in his letter to the monarchs of Aragon and Castile. How would you describe his Christian beliefs?

6. **God's sovereignty and human decisions in history.** Read the following quotations and explain how they relate to Columbus' voyages and their results:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. . . From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek

him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us (Acts 17:24-27, NIV).

*In the annals of human history, the growth of the nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as if dependent on the will and prowess of man; . . . [but] above, behind, and through all the play and counterplay of human interest and power and passions, the agencies of the All-merciful One [are] silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will (Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings*, pp. 499, 500).*

7. **The evangelization of the New**

World. Four main European powers brought Christianity to the New World: Spain, Portugal, France, and Great Britain. Compare the type of societies they established. (See *Christianity Comes to the Americas, 1492-1776*, by Charles H. Lippy, Robert Choquette, and Stafford Poole. Paragon House, 1992.) Discuss the advance of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in North America, Inter-America, and South America. To what extent does the ethnic and religious background of these regions influence the strength and progress of our church?

TRANSATLANTIC EXCHANGE

Columbus' voyages began a revolution in the world's diet and economy by initiating an exchange of plants, animals, and other products in both directions across the Atlantic. Review the list of animals and products given in the center column below. Then, in the left column, write the names of those animals and products that were taken from the New World to the Old. List in the right-hand column those that were taken from the Old World to the New. Check your answers on page 46.

From the New World to the Old World

From the Old World to the New World

avocado
banana
beans
cattle
chicken
chocolate
corn
honeybee
horse
lettuce
manioc (cassava)
oats
olives
peanut
pepper
pineapple
potato
pig
pumpkin
quinine
sheep
soy
sugarcane
sunflower
tobacco
tomato
tulip
vanilla
watermelon
wheat