

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

MAN OF MYTH OR MAN OF GOD?

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Published by
Textbook Publishers
Grouse Creek, Utah

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Introduction

For over 500 years Christopher Columbus has been given credit (or ridiculed) for the discovery of America. Dozens of books and thousands of articles have been written about him. Every year Americans everywhere honor him on his own National Holiday, and year after year new films and documentaries attempt to tell of his life and accomplishments. Yet Columbus remains to most people a “man unknown.” Few famous men in modern history are as misunderstood, maligned, and little known as Christopher Columbus (1451-1506).

Writing about his life is one of the most difficult and yet most rewarding challenges an author can undertake. Regardless of one's opinions, some will agree while others will disagree. Most acknowledge, however, that Columbus was a successful explorer. Noted Professor Samuel Eliot Morison of Harvard claims: “Christopher Columbus was one of the greatest seamen and navigators of all time,” and his voyage to America “ranks among history's most important events.” Other authors, on the other hand, attribute his accomplishments to simply “pure luck.” In 1939 Charles Nowell observed that Columbus is “alternately praised and belittled, groomed for canonization and charged with piracy, lauded as a scientist and branded as an ignoramus.” (Charles Nowell, *The Age of Discovery*, 1939)

Why has it been so difficult to learn of this remarkable man? Many situations have contributed to the lack of information, but the greatest hindrance is because Columbus himself was obscure in giving important details of his early life. There are numerous guesses as to why these omissions exist, but as we shall see, it had much to do with the conditions and beliefs of the world in Columbus's time.

In his later years, Columbus kept insisting that his success was because he was guided by “The Holy Spirit.” An unbelieving world of so-called scholars, however, has constantly tried to explain in man's terms why and how Columbus was successful. Folklore, guesses, and even fairy tales, such as the “flat earth theory,” have been the outcome. The results of these approaches have also added confusion and disbelief, thus making Christopher Columbus a *Man of Myth*.

Coming Out of Obscurity

Thanks to modern research now available, new and important documentation has emerged that sheds much light on Columbus. Many details now remove a great deal of the mystique about Columbus, his life, and his accomplishments.

A number of years ago, we were teaching a seminar entitled “American History and the Constitution” in Tulsa Oklahoma, at a

lovely Methodist Church. A seminar participant gave us a copy of a book that has led us into a whole new study concerning the life of Christopher Columbus. The book is called *The Light and the Glory*, by Peter Marshall, Jr. and David Manuel. As many know, Peter Marshall, Jr. is the son of Peter Marshall, the famous former Chaplain of the United States Senate.

The main emphasis of *The Light and the Glory* is that God had a lot more to do with the discovery and settling of America, than many people have thought.

As we studied this book, we were intrigued with all the references demonstrating that Columbus claimed divine inspiration and guidance in his explorations and discoveries. Though this book was not all inclusive, it did bring to light that God's hand guided the life of Columbus. It also awakened within us a new interest to pursue our own academic journey to find the real Christopher Columbus. We extend many thanks to Peter Marshall, Jr. and David Manuel for their hours of research and writing on this vital subject.

Over the years, following our first reading of *The Light and the Glory*, many additional writings have become available, adding much documentation to the original thesis of the book. Our continuing studies have clearly opened our minds and solidified in our hearts that Peter Marshall, Jr. and David Manuel were correct: The discovery of America was not by chance. Christopher Columbus was exactly what he claimed to be-- an "emissary of the Holy Ghost!"

The Early Years of Columbus

"The exact date of Columbus's birth is not known. He was born sometime between August 25 and October 31, 1451, in Genoa, then the capital of an independent Italian republic. The date is obscure because it was customary to celebrate the national date of one's patron saint. Since Columbus was named after St. Christopher, the patron saint of travelers, he celebrated June 25th and received his birthday gifts on that occasion.

His English name Columbus is actually the Latin form of his family name *Colombo*. After he settled in Spain years later, he called himself *Christobal Colon*. His father, Domenico Colombo, was a wool weaver and his mother, Susanna Fontanarossa, was the daughter of a wool weaver. It was natural that as a youth, Christopher helped his father at the loom, However, on one or more occasions, Christopher's father was also appointed keeper of the Olivella Gate on Genoa's east side. This was a paid position suggesting that, as a master clothier, he was the possible recipient of political patronage. We may assume therefore, that Domenico was a respected artisan and businessman.

Christopher was the oldest of five children. He had three brothers and one sister. His brother Giovanni Pellegrino, died as a young man. His other two brothers Bartholomew and Guaiacum (better known by the Spanish equivalent, Diego), were very close to Columbus. Bartholomew helped Columbus plan his Enterprise to the Indies, and Diego accompanied Columbus on his second voyage to the New World. Very little is known of Christopher's only sister Bianchinetta.

Of his early life, Morison says:
“Christopher had little schooling. The Genoese dialect that he spoke was almost a different language from Italian. When he went abroad and had to speak Spanish, he learned to read and write it. He also taught himself Latin because geography books were written in Latin. No record is left about what sort of boy he was. But judging from his later life, he was dreamy and sensitive. He said his prayers several times daily and attended Mass whenever possible.” (*New World Book encyclopedia*, 1979, Vol. 4, pp. 690-696, Samuel Eliot Morison)

A description of him in his adult years also gives understanding about his youth. “By 1501, Columbus was described as “a tall man and well built, ruddy, of a great creative talent, and with a long face.’ His son Ferdinand added: ‘He had an aquiline nose and his eyes were light in color: his complexion too was light, but kindling to a vivid red. In youth his hair was blond but when he came to his thirtieth year it all turned white.’ He was simple in dress, and moderate in eating and drinking. His manners were pleasant but dignified.” (*New World Book Encyclopedia, Op. Cit.*) Ferdinand also wrote that his father, “was so great an enemy to cursing and swearing” that he “never heard him utter any other oath than by St. Ferdinand!” (Ferdinand Columbus, *The Life of the Admiral Christopher Columbus*. Translation: Benjamin Keen; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1959, p. 9).

The fact that little else is known of his early years is indeed fascinating, but we do know that Columbus claimed that in his youth he “had a special spiritual experience” where he was permitted to hear “the voice of the Lord”

as well as some of the “Old Testament prophets.” Columbus also believed that the “Holy Spirit had spoken to him, saying that his name would be proclaimed throughout the world.” (Delno C. West and August King. *The Book of Prophecies of Christopher Columbus*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1991, pp. 53-54)

Twentieth century scholar Spencer W. Kimball said “God inspired a little boy, Christopher Columbus, to stand on the quays in Genoa, Italy, and yearn for the sea. He was filled with the desire to sail the seas, And so when he was mature, opportunity was granted to him to brave the unknown seas, to find this land ... and to open the door, as it were.” (Spencer W. Kimball. *The Teachings of Spencer W Kimball*. Bookcraft, 1982, p. 427)

Following an extensive study of Columbus, nineteenth century scholar, Orson Hyde declared that in his opinion, “God gave Columbus deep impressions, by dreams and by visions, respecting this New World.” Continuing he said, “God helped him—was with him on the stormy deep, calmed the troubled elements, and guided his frail vessel to the desired haven.” (*Journal of Discourses*. 26 volumes, 1854-86; vol. 6 p. 368) Even though the extent of Columbus’s inspiration in his youth is not fully known, we do know that very early in his adult years he was already fixed in his beliefs that he had a special mission pertaining to a new land and the peoples that would be found there.

Columbus quoted Seneca, saying: “The years will come...when the Ocean will loose the bonds by which we have been confined, when an immense land shall lie revealed” (Pauline Moffitt Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of