



Type: Book Chapter

Later Voyages: Columbus as Governor

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Source: *Christopher Columbus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective*

Published: Provo, UT; Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University,
1992

Page(s): 53-62



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CHAPTER SIX

Later Voyages: Columbus as Governor

The world owes most to the men, great and small, who in the name of truth have dared to challenge tradition. . . . Yet, when [Columbus] challenged the geographical tradition of his day, he was scorned by compatriots; and even when he had discovered America, jealousy and misunderstanding landed him in prison and left him brokenhearted. Nevertheless, the greater era of geographical exploration and discovery may well be dated from Columbus.

—John A. Widtsoe

Christopher Columbus was certainly at a high point in his life when he returned from his first voyage to the Americas and was honored by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. He remained with the royal court at Barcelona for several weeks thereafter. During this time he advised the crown on diplomatic matters, made plans for a second trans-atlantic voyage, interviewed people who wished to sail to the New World, and attended royal social functions (Morison 2:14).

One of the most significant and memorable events that the Admiral attended at this time was the baptism of the six native Americans he had brought back with him from the Indies. Ferdinand, Isabella, and their son, the Infante Don Juan, acted as god-parents to the new converts. They named one Indian after

the king, another after Don Juan, and a third, the Admiral's interpreter, they christened Don Diego Colón. "Don Juan" became a part of the royal household, where he was "well behaved and circumspect" according to Oviedo (Morison 2:14). Unfortunately, Don Juan died just two years later. The other five natives returned to the Americas with Columbus on his second voyage.

Another notable function that the Admiral attended during the interlude between the first and second voyages was a magnificent banquet given by Don Pedro Gonzales de Mendoza, Archbishop of Toledo and Grand Cardinal of Spain. Mendoza was a powerful and loyal supporter of the crown, and was probably the most important man in Spain after the king. On this night the Cardinal had Columbus seated at the place of honor and treated him with ceremonial custom usually reserved for royalty; this meant that every dish served to the Admiral was first tasted by Mendoza, himself, and was then passed, with a cover, to Christopher.

It was also at this auspicious occasion that the oft-repeated "egg incident" was supposed to have taken place. This anecdote is perhaps the best-known tale told about Columbus. As the story goes, during the party a jealous Spanish nobleman, attempting to minimize Christopher's accomplishments, approached the Admiral, and said: "Señor Cristóbal, even if you had not undertaken this great enterprise, we should not have lacked a [Spaniard] who would have made the same discovery that you did" (Morison 2:15).

Columbus said nothing in reply, but instead placed an egg on the table and challenged all the men present to make the egg stand on its end by itself, without the aid of salt, crumbs or any other support. When everyone failed and the egg returned to Christopher, he tapped it on the table slightly crushing one end of the shell, then stood it on the crushed end with no props. The message of this simple demonstration was that when someone shows you how to break beyond self-imposed limits, anyone else can copy the great feat, but it takes a person of vision,

courage, and determination to do something that has never before been done (Morison 2:15).

This story was originally printed in *Historia del Mondo Nuovo* (1565), the first Italian history of the New World. The American writer Washington Irving claimed that the “universal popularity of this anecdote is proof of its merit,” but others have concluded that the account might be apocryphal (Morison 2:15). Latter-day Saints would be interested to know that Joseph Smith was aware of the story and applied it to himself. In speaking of the insignificance of man’s opinions relative to God’s wisdom, the Prophet said, “I break the ground; *I lead the way like Columbus* when he was invited to a banquet where he . . . took an egg and . . . [illustrated] that when he had once shown the way to the new world nothing was easier than to follow it” (Smith, Joseph 304; emphasis added).

The Second Voyage: Columbus the Christ-bearer

Despite the regal lifestyle he enjoyed while residing at court, the Admiral could no longer stay at Barcelona because the monarchs were anxious for him to embark on another voyage to the New World. Inasmuch as Columbus was at his height of glory, he experienced no difficulty, whatsoever, in financing his second voyage. In fact, his second fleet was much larger than the *Santa Maria*, *Niña*, and *Pinta*, which had set sail in 1492. In 1493 the Admiral commanded 17 vessels, carrying between 1,200 and 1,500 male colonists. He also took a six months’ supply of food and provisions. No European nation had ever before ventured to sponsor a colonizing effort of such magnitude (Morison 2:49–50). It was a truly impressive fleet that sailed in 1493 on Columbus’ second voyage to the Americas.

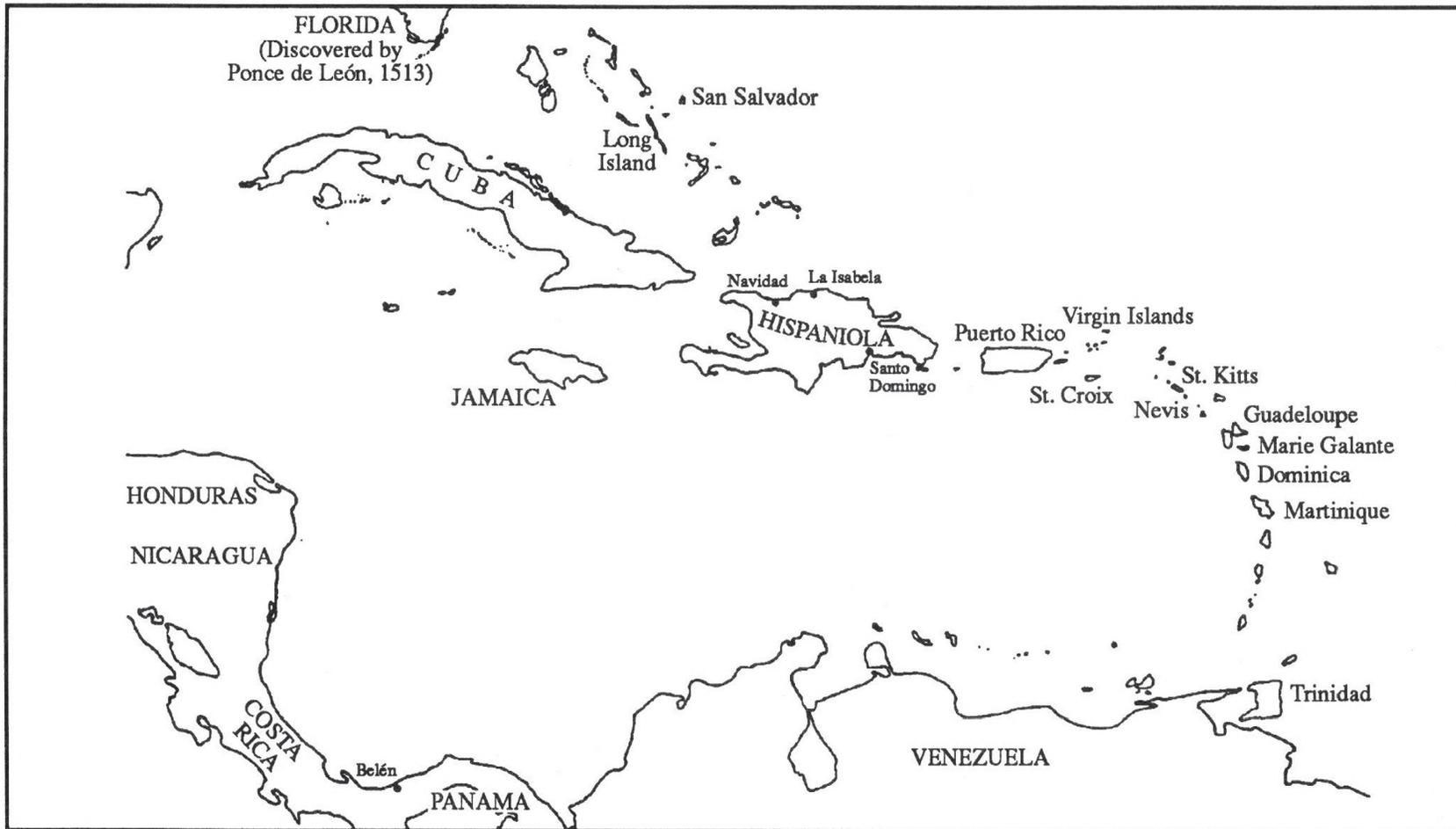
The objectives of this second expedition were several: convert the natives; colonize Hispaniola; further explore the Caribbean (in hopes of reaching Asia’s mainland); and search

for gold. While much has been said of the imperial and financial considerations of the journey, the Admiral's desire to spread Christianity among the natives was one of his preeminent purposes. By starting the process that would eventually lead to the conversion of vast numbers of native Americans, Columbus was, in fact, partially fulfilling yet another Book of Mormon prophecy. Latter-day Saint scholars have always acknowledged Columbus' role in the fulfillment of the familiar prophecy of America's discovery in 1 Nephi 13:12, but have frequently overlooked the vital role he played in fulfilling yet another notable ancient prophecy as he and the Spanish priests who accompanied him on the second voyage were the first Christian missionaries known to have brought the Bible to the inhabitants of the Americas, thus initiating the fulfillment of the prophetic vision given in 1 Nephi 13:38. Nephi, in describing this vision, said: "I beheld the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the book of the Lamb of God [the Bible], which had proceeded forth from the mouth of the Jew, that it came forth from the Gentiles unto the remnant of the seed of my brethren."

Evidence that spreading the faith was foremost in Columbus' mind can be found in a letter he wrote to the monarchs prior to the trip, wherein he outlined his recommendations for colonizing Hispaniola. He suggested to the sovereigns "that there be a church [in the new colony] and priests or friars [be sent] for the . . . observance of divine worship and the conversion of the Indians" (Thacher 3:101). The Admiral also suggested "that one per cent of all the gold obtained be taken for the building of the churches and . . . for the maintenance of the priests or friars" (Ibid 105).

Christopher also expressed concern, and rightfully so, that too many colonists would become consumed with searching for gold and hence would soon become derelict in all other responsibilities. He therefore recommended "that the search for gold should be forbidden during some period of the year so that an opportunity be given for the performance of other necessary and profitable labors" (Thacher 3:108). He also suggested "that no

The America That Columbus Encountered



one be allowed the privilege of getting gold except those who settle there and build houses for their dwelling-place in the town” (Ibid 101).

The monarchs’ prime interest in this expedition was also of a religious nature, as evidenced by their formal instructions to Christopher, dated 29 May 1493. Acknowledging Columbus’ opinion that the natives were “very ripe to be converted,” Ferdinand and Isabella directed him “that by all ways and means he strive and endeavor to win over the inhabitants of the said Islands and Mainland to be converted” to Christianity (Morison, *Journals*, 203–04). The crown further commanded Christopher to take with him “the learned father, Fray [Bernardo] Buil, together with [four] other *Religiosos*,” for the express purpose that the Indians would be “carefully taught the principles of Our Holy Faith . . . and [that the Admiral himself] provide for their instruction as best he can” (Ibid 204). A further charge from the king and queen concerning the natives was that the Europeans “treat the said Indians very well and lovingly and abstain from doing them any injury, arranging that both peoples hold much conversation and intimacy, each serving the others to the best of their ability” (Ibid.)

The fleet sailed from Cadiz, Spain, on 25 September 1493, stopping briefly at the Canaries, and crossing the ocean in a remarkable 21 days (Morison 2:65). Arriving in the Indies on 3 November, Columbus called all hands to the quarter-deck to offer prayers and sing hymns, “thanking God for His mercy in letting them reach that land” so quickly and safely (Ferdinand 110–11). The Admiral named the site of their first layover after his flagship, the *Mariagalante*. Enroute to Hispaniola, the fleet also passed Dominica, Guadeloupe, Nevis, St. Kitts, St. Croix, the Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, among others.

When the fleet finally landed at La Navidad, where Columbus had left 39 of his men from the previous voyage, they found ghastly evidence of the fate that had befallen these original settlers. No buildings were visible, and no surviving sailors were to be found. A short search revealed that the Spaniards’

fort was now only a charred shell. All the settlers had been killed by neighboring natives, who had rebelled because of mistreatment by the Europeans (Morison 2:91–92).

Saddened but undaunted by this discovery, Columbus abandoned La Navidad and sailed eastward in search of a more suitable place for permanent colonization. Finally, on 2 January 1494, he decided to settle on the northern coast of Hispaniola, in today's Dominican Republic, about 28 miles west of present-day Puerto Plata. Columbus named the site Isabela, which became the first planned European settlement in America (Deagan, "La Isabela," 40–53). Anxious to continue exploring and to find gold in order to justify the expense of this huge expedition, Columbus left this colony in the care of a council headed by his brother, Don Diego, and on 24 April set sail in search of treasure and new lands.

While Christopher was away from Isabela for the next five months, he explored Cuba and discovered the island of Jamaica. When he returned to Isabela on 29 September 1494, he came back to a colonial nightmare (Morison, *Journals*, 404). The Admiral found the island in a state of turmoil, a result of his subordinates' frustration over governing the native Americans as well as the self-serving European settlers, many of whom acted viciously toward the Indians, and maliciously toward their own leaders. Though Columbus may have been the greatest navigator in the world, he was not a very successful governor. He and his brothers could control neither internal rebellion among the settlers nor external fighting with the Indians. Las Casas once said that "the Archangel Gabriel would have been hard put to govern those first colonists of Hispaniola" (Brigham, *Life*, 31). One of the problems was that the Europeans never found enough gold to satisfy their unrealistic expectations. Because of this lack of revenue, the Admiral succumbed to pressure to provide a profitable export to Spain, and therefore consented to the establishment of forced labor and enslavement of native Americans (Morison 2:168–69). This was one of the worst decisions Columbus made in his entire life.

Columbus as Governor: A Turning Point

This decision also seems to have been a turning point in Columbus' career. There is very little evidence in the following few years that he 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 heavens withdraw themselves" when men "exercise unrighteous dominion" over others (D&C 121:37, 39).

Whatever the case, Columbus spent the entire year of 1495 struggling to establish and maintain peace and order on the island of Hispaniola. Then early in 1496 he made plans to return to Spain. By this time he had given up on the idea of establishing Isabela as the main settlement of Hispaniola. Consequently, he gave instructions to his brother, Bartholomew, to look for a new site to serve as the capital of the island and then sailed for Europe on 10 March 1496. While he was gone, Bartholomew founded the city of Santo Domingo on the southeast coast of Hispaniola (Morison 2: 177, 181–82). Within a few years Isabela died out as a colony but Santo Domingo lived on and today owns the distinction of being the oldest European City in the western hemisphere (Pons 2:615).

The Third Voyage: Columbus in Chains

The Admiral's third voyage to the New World took place between 1498 and 1500. This time he commanded a fleet of six ships, and his primary objective was to find a continent and, hopefully, a motherlode of gold. He departed on 30 May and sailed a more southerly course than on his previous voyages. On 13 July the fleet ran into the doldrums and was stalled at sea for eight days, not reaching the Americas until 31 July 1496 (Morison 2:230–43, 246).

The first body of land they sighted was an island that Columbus named Trinidad; however, they did not go ashore at that time. Instead, they sailed through the night and, on 1 August 1498, the Admiral caught his first glimpse of the American mainland, the continent of South America. After sailing through the “Serpent’s Mouth,” the strait between Trinidad and the continent, Columbus crossed the Gulf of Paria and finally anchored in a harbor on the northeast coast of present-day Venezuela (Morison 2:246–54). When Christopher and his crew went ashore at Venezuela, they became the first Europeans known to history to set foot on the mainland of South America. Columbus would never set foot on the North American continent; the first known European to set foot in what is now the United States was a former shipmate on Columbus’ second voyage—Ponce de León went ashore at Florida in 1513 (Ibid 2:56).

It took Columbus a little over three weeks to work his way from Venezuela to Hispaniola, where he anchored on 31 August 1498 at Santo Domingo, the new capital of the island. The Admiral had hoped to rest and recuperate from his difficult voyage when he arrived at Hispaniola; instead, he found the settlement and the island in a state of chaos and rebellion. The Spanish settlers complained that they could not find enough gold, they did not have enough food from Spain, and that the foods indigenous to the Americas were inedible. They also resented the strict rule of the Admiral’s brother, Bartholomew, who was, after all, not a Spaniard but a foreigner from Genoa. A man by the name of Francisco Roldán appeared to be the leader of the rebellion (Taviani, *The Great Adventure*, 204–05).

Instead of dealing firmly with the rebels, Columbus, who was tired and sick, tried to pacify them by giving them land grants and allowing them to enslave native Americans. However, many settlers remained discontented and returned to Spain and spread hateful stories about Christopher, accusing him of incompetent leadership (Morison 2:299–301).

In the summer of 1500 the Spanish Monarchs sent Francisco de Bobadilla to Hispaniola to investigate. Bobadilla was given full authority to do whatever he deemed necessary to bring order to the island. An over-zealous government appointee, Bobadilla took full advantage of his new powers on arriving at Hispaniola. He ordered Columbus and his two brothers sent back to Spain in chains to stand trial (Phillips and Phillips 225). Thus, Christopher's third return to Spain contrasted strikingly with the glorious homecoming he experienced after the first voyage, only seven years previous. This third voyage found him in the depths of humiliation and shame, and the experience was definitely a low point in Columbus' life.

The king and queen were shocked when they learned that their Admiral had been humiliated and sent home in shackles. They had Columbus and his brothers released, but they also appointed Nicolás de Ovando to replace Christopher as governor. Ovando sailed to Hispaniola with 30 ships and approximately 2,500 colonists, soldiers, and sailors (Morison 2:310–11, 314). Columbus remained in Spain and began work on his *Book of Prophecies*.