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ENGL 289B

Topic 5

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Christopher Columbus: *Christoferens* or Pharisee?

To Europeans, Christianity and commerce were intrinsically linked in the discovery of the New World. One such European, Columbus, is commonly portrayed as an exploiter of native peoples who used Christianity as a mere excuse for acquiring personal wealth. However, it is apparent in his *Diario* and subsequent writings that he saw himself as a true messenger of God and deliverer of the Gospel message. His goal of acquiring gold and riches during his journeys seems hypocritical to modern readers, since he depended increasingly on his Christian beliefs. This dichotomy suggests that Columbus believed his desire to acquire trade and wealth was justified by a threefold higher purpose: spreading the Gospel, retaking Jerusalem, and fulfilling apocalyptic prophecy.

In his *Diario*, Columbus stresses his ultimate goal for the first voyage to the monarchs, reminding them that he had advised them to use all of the gold and riches acquired to fund a potential reconquest of Jerusalem. In his December 26<sup>th</sup> entry Columbus wrote that he wanted to acquire riches “all in such quantities that Your Majesties will be able to make your preparations to go to recover the Holy Sepulchre, for Your Majesties may remember my request to you that all the proceeds of this

voyage of mine should be used for the conquest of Jerusalem” (9). In the aforementioned passage, Columbus mentions an earlier request that the Crown supposedly already knew about. According to Carol Delaney, the request could have been first mentioned during the “siege of Granada in 1489 when an embassy from the Sultan of Egypt arrived demanding that the Spanish stop fighting Muslims or he would destroy the Holy Sepulchre” (261). Alternatively Columbus could have mentioned the request to the monarchs “on the eve of his departure from Palos on August 3, 1492” (261). But, if the Crown really did agree with Columbus’s ambition to fund a holy war that would ultimately lead to the reconquest of Jerusalem (“Journal” 9), then why did the Crown not mention that purpose in the *Capitulations of Santa Fe*, where the monarchs bestowed onto Columbus very specific titles and duties (n.p.)? The lack of any reference to a religious purpose in the *Capitulations* (n.p.) shows an apparent lack of concern on the part of the Crown to fulfill Christian duty to “go and make disciples of all nations” (*New International Version*, Matt. 28.19), let alone the Crown’s ‘agreement’ with Columbus’s own purpose that would have added a further religious dimension to the enterprise. In fact, as Margarita Zamora has pointed out, the language in the *Capitulations* is highly imperialistic, “in which hegemony is conceived primarily in economic terms” (27). The focus on the economic instead of the religious dimension of the enterprise becomes especially noticeable in the economic, imperialistic diction used,

such as “discover”, “conquer”, “subdue”, “power”, “commands”, “honour”, “offices”, “oaths”, and “salaries” (Capitulations n.p.). Such use of language in the *Capitulations* is strong evidence that the monarchs did not see Columbus’s journeys as a means to fund a holy war. Unlike Columbus, the monarchs saw the journeys as a means to worldly wealth and commerce, and did not hold any interest in Columbus’s own goal to fund a holy war to retake Jerusalem.

Though the Spanish crown was not interested in the reconquest of Jerusalem, later editions of Columbus’s published letters to the crown include religious and militant overtones that were inserted by Columbus after they were first published, in an attempt to unify them under a common purpose. Critics of Columbus use these modifications to point out his apparent hypocrisy and using of religion as an excuse for his ventures (see Delaney). However, closer examination of Columbus’s letters to the Crown points to an apparent censorship by the Crown. He made the Crown a promise in the letter of March 4<sup>th</sup> to the Sovereigns of Spain, that in “seven years from today I will be able to pay Your Highnesses for five thousand cavalry and fifty thousand foot soldiers for the war and conquest of Jerusalem, for which purpose this enterprise was undertaken” (Zamora 19), forecasting that he would be able to get enough gold and wealth to finance a Holy War of sorts to regain Jerusalem. Apparently the Crown did not share the same purpose for the enterprise, as this statement was taken out of the Santángel version of

the same letter that was released to the Christian public (Zamora 19). In an effort to allow his writings to regain the meaning they had before censorship, which was to “restore the holy temple to the holy Church Militant”, as he wrote later in his *Book of Prophecies* (2), Columbus inserted the first two paragraphs of the preface to his *Diario* that addressed an apparent mission to “see these parts of India and the princes and the peoples of those lands and consider the best means for their conversion” (“Four Voyages” 37), or more specifically, the Gran Khan, who had several times asked for learned men to instruct him about the Christian faith (“Four Voyages” 37). Getting the powerful Chinese empire on the side of the Christians would then pave the way for the military reconquest of Jerusalem and the triumph against the Moors, and lead to the makings of a potential Christian world empire. Because Columbus added such militant overtones to his works, he made them more consistent with his own purpose than with the purpose of the Crown, which is more proof that he was genuine in his desire to support another holy crusade through commerce, with the purpose of regaining Jerusalem and the world.

Columbus believed that attaining wealth through establishing commerce was a pathway to saving souls. To modern readers, this idea that the desire for wealth and the desire to do God’s work can coexist seems contradictory. As Columbus surely would have been aware, a well-known verse in Scripture declares, “No one can serve two masters. Either

you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money” (New International Version, Luke 16.13). His close relationship with the Franciscan order (see Steck) should have also instilled in him a belief in the importance of worldly poverty, a value central to the Franciscan tradition (see Lambert). However, Columbus believed that acquiring gold through trade was not wrong; instead, it was the way that he had chosen to serve God. In his letter to the Crown during his last voyage, Columbus writes that anyone who has “pearls, precious stones and other valuables take them to the ends of the world to sell and turn into gold” (“Four Voyages” 299-300). In essence, trade only exists so that gold can be obtained. In turn, gold exists so that souls can be obtained (see Greenblatt). Columbus believed that “With it [gold] he can succeed in bringing souls to Paradise” (“Four Voyages” 300). By attempting to bring souls to Paradise, Columbus is obeying Jesus’s Great Commission (*New International Version*, Matt. 28.19), which is his first great purpose. In Columbus’s mind, he is convinced that trade exists so that souls can be obtained, and he does not just use this as an excuse for his actions.

On his last voyage, Columbus seems sick and weary of worldly things, especially after the way he saw his loyalty to the Crown ill rewarded. Columbus complains about his ships being worm-eaten, the poor conditions at sea, and loss of hope among his men and himself. Columbus despairs to a point in which he is near death, but he is

comforted in a dream by a messenger from God. The messenger tells Columbus, “all these tribulations are written upon marble and are not without cause” (“Four Voyages” 293). This is an encouragement for Columbus to endure his sufferings and continue what he is doing, which he interprets as continuing his mission to find gold. He is not directly saving souls, but Columbus reasons that getting gold and suffering for it are all part of God’s plan for him. The association of his mission to find gold with personal encouragement from the heavenly realms further serves to justify Columbus’s motivations for acquiring worldly wealth.

In his *Book of Prophecies*, Columbus drew on apocalyptic prophecies and references to scripture and paralleled them to experiences in his own life. He mentioned his belief that the land of Veragua is where Solomon obtained enough gold to make “200 lances and 300 shields” (“Four Voyages” 300). According to Columbus, Solomon’s golden inheritance would aid a Christian in rebuilding the Temple, who he claimed would come from Spain, referencing Abbot Joachin’s prophecy (“Four Voyages” 300). Columbus believed that a likely candidate for this Christian, or the last world emperor, was the Spanish Crown (Delaney 272-273). Believing himself to be the messenger of God selected for this purpose, Columbus kept pushing the monarchs towards realizing his project of funding the reconquest of Jerusalem (Watts 99) and proposed that Columbus himself “offer himself for this task” in the letter to the monarchs during the fourth voyage (“Four Voyages” 301). In

order to unify the idea that the last world emperor was the Spanish Crown, his own role in influencing the Crown, and his dreams of reconquering Jerusalem, Columbus added religious and militant undertones to his writings.

Columbus's dreams of fulfilling apocalyptic prophecy are the culmination of his strong desire to play a significant part in bringing about the end of the world and the coming of Christ. In his *Book of Prophecies*, which was not published and not known to the Crown, Columbus addressed the Catholic monarchs, laying out proof of why the world was about to end and why reconquering Jerusalem would speed it up. It was his honest belief that his discoveries and the acquiring of gold were made miraculous by the Lord ("Book of Prophecies" 3), and to him his interest in gold and empirical discovery "did not conflict with the religious worldview, but rather was easily contained within it" (Delaney 280). Thus, Columbus wrote the entire *Book of Prophecies* about what he deemed fulfillment of prophecy, because the world could not end until "all that had been written by the prophets would have to be fulfilled" ("Book of Prophecies" 5). One such prophecy that was fulfilled by Columbus's discovery of the new world was about a "new sailor like the one named Tiphys, who was the guide of Jason, will discover a new world, and then Thule will no longer be the most remote land" ("Book of Prophecies" 8). According to Roberto Rusconi's introduction to the *Book of Prophecies*, this prophecy came from Seneca's tragedy, *Medea*, and

Tiphys referred to Columbus, while Thule referred to the New World (34). Columbus reassured the rulers that he spoke about the enterprise to reconquer Jerusalem on the authority of Isaiah's prophecy, which involved "neither intelligence nor world maps", and that as long they had faith, God would give them victory ("Book of Prophecies" 6). If Columbus could write this much about his beliefs about apocalyptic prophecy, he certainly was being sincere.

To Columbus, the reason for his journeys was spreading the Gospel, retaking Jerusalem as the church militant, and fulfilling apocalyptic prophecy. Even if it meant that he had to prioritize finding gold and other riches, and convince the Spanish crown to also take up this mission, Columbus was determined to achieve his goals. To him, obtaining riches did not contradict his religious beliefs, because the purpose of obtaining those riches was ultimately for God.