

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SECTION

COLUMBUS AS A WRITER

It has been said that the motives which led the Spaniards to America may be summed up in the three words, "gospel, glory, and gold". The writings of Columbus support such a statement, for these three words permeate his journal and his letters concerning the new world. He was continually writing of the great possibilities of the gospel among the natives of the islands, of the glory of the sovereigns of Spain in their new-found possessions, and of his constant and vigilant search for gold. In fact, take from Columbus's writings his references to "gospel, glory, and gold" and there is little left. It would be like eliminating the words "love" and "light" and "life" from the gospel of John. One paragraph, which is typical of all his writings, will illustrate and confirm the above statement :

In all the countries visited by your Highnesses' ships, I have caused a high cross to be fixed upon every headland, and have proclaimed, to every nation that I have discovered, the lofty estate of your Highnesses; and of your court in Spain. I also tell them all I can respecting our holy faith and of the belief in the holy mother Church, which has its members in all the world; and I speak to them also of the courtesy and nobleness of all Christians, and of the faith they have in the Holy Trinity. May it please the Lord to forgive those who have calumniated and still calumniate this excellent enterprise, and oppose and have opposed its advancement, without considering how much glory and greatness will accrue from it to your Highnesses throughout all the world. They cannot say anything in disparagement of it, except the expense, and that I have not immediately sent back the ships loaded with gold.¹

Columbus was an interesting writer. His journal of the first voyage and his letters to the king and queen as well as those to the nurse of Prince John and to the treasurer of the crown, both of which were also intended for the eye and ear of the sovereigns, are as interesting as any of the writings of globe trotters the world over. His vivid descriptions of the picturesque islands, his characterization of the native peoples, his narration of his dangerous experiences and almost superhuman struggles, and his argumentative appeals to the crown for justice are difficult to surpass. Take, for example, his description of a storm encountered among the islands while on his fourth voyage :

¹ *Hakluyt Society Publications*, 1st series, II. 142. In a letter to Ferdinand and Isabella written from Hispaniola while on his third voyage.

Never did the sky look more fearful; during one day and one night it burned like a furnace, and every instant I looked to see if my masts and my sails were not destroyed; for the lightning flashed with such alarming fury that we all thought the ships must have been consumed. All this time the waters from heaven never ceased descending, not to say that it rained for it was like a repetition of the deluge. The men were at this time so crushed in spirit that they longed for death as a deliverance from so many martyrdoms.²

Who could have written a more vivid description of that storm? It is almost the equal of Luke's account of Paul's journey and shipwreck.

Columbus is no less interesting in the masterly way in which he defended himself against his powerful enemies. These constantly opposed him and intrigued against him at the court and one, Bobadilla, even imprisoned him unjustly and sent him to Spain in irons. He does not lack words, however, to describe these experiences and to express his feelings most effectively, asserting that the king had ordered

inquiries to be made respecting me with reference to imputed misdeeds, such as were never invented in hell.³

And on that journey home in irons, when the master of the ship out of regard for Columbus offered to remove the chains, Columbus replied:

Since the king has commanded that I should obey his governor, he shall find me as obedient to this, as I have been to all his orders; nothing but his command shall release me. If twelve years' hardship and fatigue; if continual dangers and frequent famine; if the ocean first opened and five times passed and repassed, to add a new world, abounding with wealth, to the Spanish monarchy; and if an infirm and premature old age, brought on by these services, deserve these chains as a reward, it is very fit I should wear them to Spain and keep them by me as memorials to the end of my life.⁴

In reference to some "evil" men who had come out to the Indies and whom he discovered on his fourth voyage, he writes:

I declare solemnly that a great number of men have been in the Indies who did not deserve baptism in the eyes of God or men.⁵

² *Ibid.*, p. 179.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 158. In a letter to the royal nurse of Prince John.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. LXII. Quoted in the introduction.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

And on another occasion he writes forcefully and not without a subtle touch of humor of his enemies, who gloat over his having to battle storms in a worm-eaten leaky boat :

I wish they now had this voyage to make. I verily believe that another journey of another kind awaits them, if there be any reliance to be placed upon our holy faith.⁶

Probably the keenest rebuke for his ill treatment is found in the closing words of his letter to the royal nurse written for royal consumption, "God our Saviour retains his power and wisdom as of old, and, above all things, he punishes ingratitude".⁷

Another point of interest of Columbus's writings lies in their manifestation of his faith and missionary zeal. His journal and letters teem with expressions evidencing that he was a man of simple, sincere faith in God and of burning missionary zeal. He constantly thanks God for evidences of his favor. The Lord sends the wind in fair weather.⁸ He found a river and harbor at a most opportune time for fresh water and shelter "by the mercy of God which he has always extended me".⁹ "The Lord gave the spirit of intelligence to the queen", hence she listened to his plea for a commission to set out.¹⁰ "The support which I have found in our Lord and in his Highness has made me persevere".¹¹ In all his experiences, whether small or great, common or extraordinary, he sees the hand of the Almighty. After describing a terrible storm that he had to face because a Spanish governor did not allow him the protection of the harbor he writes :

What man was ever born, not even excepting Job, who would not have been ready to die of despair at finding himself as I then was, in anxious fear for my own safety, and that of my son, my brother and my friends and yet refused permission either to land, or to put into harbor on the shores which by God's mercy I had gained for Spain with so much toil and danger?¹²

Again, when he was suffering under the injustice of Bobadilla, and that, in irons, he says :

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 113, 114, 119, 128, and in many other places.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 177.

But God is above, who with so much wisdom and power rescued Daniel and the three children, and who, if he please, can rescue me with a similar manifestation of his power, and to the advancement of his own cause.¹³

When he was becalmed among the islands, and the sailors complained that there was no great sea near, and that they would never have a wind to take them back to Spain, Columbus tells how the great sea rose without any wind and then continues :

The high sea was very necessary to me, such as had not appeared but in the time of the Jews when they went out of Egypt, and murmured against Moses who delivered them out of captivity.¹⁴

In similar vein he refers to Abraham and David.¹⁵ Their experiences were his experiences and, to Columbus's mind, he received personal aid from the Deity just as did the Hebrews of old.

A note of optimism, probably arising from this belief, is stamped upon all his writings. When the sailors complained to him and tried to turn him back, he said that however much they might complain, he had to go to the Indies, and that he would go on until he found them, with the help of the Lord.¹⁶ When his vessel was wrecked, "he knew that the Lord had caused the ship to stop here [on a reef] that a settlement might be formed".¹⁷ And concerning those who had to be left behind because of the wreck,

He trusted in God, that when he returned from Spain, according to his intentions, he would find a ton of gold collected by barter by those he was to leave behind, and that they would have found the mine, and spices in such quantities, that the sovereigns would, in three years, be able to undertake and fit out an expedition, to go and conquer the Holy Sepulchre.¹⁸

He writes in the same optimistic strain in face of those personal conflicts that seemed at times about to overwhelm him. In one place he says :

The Holy Spirit encompassed St. Peter and the rest of the twelve, who all had conflicts here below, they wrought many works, they suffered great fatigues, but at last they obtained the victory.¹⁹

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1st series, LXXXVI. 28.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II. 144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, LXXXVI. 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, II. 137.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

His letters not only ring with faith but also with missionary zeal. One is apt to question at times whether his utterances were inspired by real missionary zeal, or whether they were only intended to relieve his sovereigns in case the gold they hoped for and for which he hunted so assiduously was not obtained; or whether they were part of the stock in trade of a great promoter. However, it is well to give him the benefit of the doubt especially after reading his reports and appeals to the Spanish rulers relative to the evangelization of the natives. And one must remember also that such expressions were not uncommon in the Spain of Columbus's time, for the contest between Moor and Christian fostered them. It was to gain success in their conversion that he treated the Indians at first so kindly. It was for the same purpose that he seized certain natives and carried them to Spain that they might be trained in the Spanish tongue and become messengers of the gospel to their own people; notwithstanding that, in spite of his high motive, Las Casas severely condemned him for this, asserting that Columbus suffered on that account all the ills which later befell him.²⁰ But listen to the appeal of this zealot:

I hold, most serene princes, that if devout religious persons were here knowing the language, they would all turn Christian. I trust in our Lord that your highnesses will resolve upon this with much diligence, to bring so many great nations within the church, and to convert them, as you have destroyed those who would not confess the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.²¹

Two questions arise as one reads the words of Columbus and ponders his actions, namely: was he truthful or was he fanciful? One can scarce keep back some tinge of suspicion at Columbus's deception in keeping two logs of his voyage. In one log he kept an accurate account of the distance; in the other he reduced the distance actually covered, so that the sailors would not realize that they were so far from home. When his own record was seven hundred and seven leagues, the log prepared for the sailors recorded only five hundred and eighty-four.²² This was not his first offense in deception, for once before, according to his own statement, he had changed the points of the compass and had taken his vessel to Tunis although the sailors thought that in accordance with their demands, they were sailing for Marseilles.²³

²⁰ *Ibid.*, LXXXVI. 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²² *Ibid.*, LXXXVI. 30.

²³ *Ibid.*, II. XXXIII.

Was he fanciful? He seemed so in some respects. Such conclusion is almost inevitable in face of his arguments and conclusions concerning Eden and the fourth river of the garden and concerning the new heaven and the new earth. Columbus, from his study of the scriptures and other writings and from his observations, concluded that the fresh waters of the Orinoco pouring out into the sea formed the fourth river mentioned in Genesis.²⁴ He was just as certain, also, to judge from his writings, that in the Indies he had discovered the new heaven and the new earth of the Apocalypse of John.²⁵ A quotation from the letter written on his fourth voyage to the Catholic kings is in point. He had sent his men to get fresh water, but these had been attacked by the natives and the sea had become so high that they could not return. He says:

I was alone, outside, upon that dangerous coast, suffering from a severe fever and worn with fatigue, all hope of escape gone. I toiled up to the highest part of the ship, and, with a quivering voice and fast falling tears, I called upon your Highnesses' war-captains from each point of the compass to come to my succor, but there was no reply. At length groaning with exhaustion I fell asleep, and heard a compassionate voice address me thus: "O fool, and slow to believe and to serve thy God, the God of all! What did He more for Moses, or for David his servant, than he has done for thee? From thine infancy He has kept thee under His constant and watchful care. When He saw thee arrived at an age which suited His design respecting thee, He brought wonderful renown to thy name throughout all the land. He gave thee for thine own the Indies, which form so rich a portion of the world and thou hast divided them as it pleased thee, for He gave thee power to do so. He gave thee also the keys of those barriers of the ocean sea which were closed with such mighty chains, and thou hast obeyed through many lands, and gained an honorable name throughout Christendom. What more did the Most High do for the people of Israel, when he brought them out of Egypt? or for David whom from a shepherd He made to be king in Judah? Turn to Him, and acknowledge thine error—His mercy is infinite. Thine old age shall not prevent thee from accomplishing any great undertaking. He holds under His sway the greatest possessions. Abraham had exceeded a hundred years of age when he begat Isaac: nor was Sarah young. Thou criest out for uncertain help. Answer, who has afflicted thee so much and so often, God or the world? The privileges promised by God, He never fails in bestowing: nor does He ever declare after a service has been rendered Him, that such was not agreeable with His intention, or that He had regarded the matter in another light, nor does He inflict suffering in order to give effect to the manifestation of His power. His acts answer to His words; and it is His custom to perform all His promises without interest. Thus I have told you what the Creator has done for thee, and what He

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II. 135-137.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

does for all men. Even now He partially shows that the reward of so many toils and dangers incurred by thee in the service of others''.

I heard all this as it were in a trance; but I had no answer to give in definite words, and could but weep for my errors. He who spoke to me, whoever it was, concluded by saying, "Fear not, but trust: all these tribulations are recorded on marble, and not without cause".²⁶

But above all, a study of the writings of Columbus show him to have been a man of high intellectuality. He was familiar with the bible from Genesis to Revelation. He was also well acquainted with Josephus, St. Augustine, Ambrose, Isidore, Bede, Strabo, Scotus, Comestor (whom he calls the master scholastic of history), Ptolemy, Aristotle, Seneca, Pliny, Marco Polo, John Mandeville, Cardinal Petro Aliaca, and others.²⁷ His mind must have been saturated with the writings of these men for he did not write from a library, but on shipboard and from far off islands of the sea.

In fact, it was not any ordinary skipper who had gained the ear of the famous rulers and in face of the adverse criticism and the determined opposition of the *literati* of Spain had convinced those rulers of his own trustworthiness and of the feasibility of his project. To his mind he was not setting out on any uncertain journey when he set sail for the Indies. He was following a firm conviction based on the most thorough study of the evidences of the best geographers and astronomers. To judge from his writings, one must conclude that Columbus was one of the really learned men of his time.

ROBERT PARK.

Geneva College,
Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania.

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ARGENTINA

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Summary: Instrucciones para la inspección técnica en 1927. La laguna "Epecuén" en Carhué. Una colonia escolar en el parque Balbuena de Méjico.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-140.