

LATTER-DAY SAINT INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON COLUMBUS

Introduction

When Brigham Young University (BYU) hosted Clark B. Hinckley’s presentation about his book *Christopher Columbus: “A Man Among the Gentiles”* for Education Week 2019, many community members responded with concern.¹ In his presentation, Hinckley claimed that Christopher Columbus was inspired and guided by God to discover the Americas, which student reporter Emma Benson quoted and publicized in her article “Education Week: Why Christopher Columbus Matters” in *The Daily Universe*, BYU’s newspaper.²

The reverence for the myth of a heroic Christopher Columbus reveals unresolved and festering issues in the relationships with Indigenous people at BYU and in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Roni Jo Draper, a BYU professor of teacher education and a member of the Yurok Tribe, responded to Benson’s article by questioning the teachings and memorialization of Columbus in Church settings.³ The attention to Hinckley’s presentation and its disregard

1. See Clark B. Hinckley, *Christopher Columbus: “A Man among the Gentiles”* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014).

2. Emma Benson, “Education Week: Why Christopher Columbus Matters,” *Daily Universe*, Aug. 22, 2019, <https://universe.byu.edu/2019/08/22/education-week-why-columbus-matters/>.

3. Roni Jo Draper, “Readers’ Forum 9/10/19,” *Daily Universe*, Sept. 5, 2019, <https://universe.byu.edu/2019/09/05/readers-forum-9-10-19/>. See also Anne Wallace, “An Indigenous, LDS Perspective on Columbus,” *Daily Universe*, Oct. 15, 2019, <https://universe.byu.edu/2019/10/15/an-indigenous-llds-perspective-on-columbus/>.

of Indigenous historical perspectives and experiences stirred many in the Latter-day Saint community, including Northwestern Band of Shoshone Chairman Darren Parry, who spoke out on social media against Hinckley's depiction of Columbus.

Hinckley's remarks reflect a common interpretation in the Church. Church officials, General Authorities, and Sunday School manuals, including the 2020 *Come, Follow Me* manual on the Book of Mormon, unquestioningly indicate that Columbus was the man who Nephi saw in 1 Nephi 13:12.⁴ Many Latter-day Saint scholars, including De Lamar Jensen, have portrayed Columbus as a God-fearing man.⁵ Such defenders of Columbus often highlight his letters, wherein he attributes the success of his voyages and fair weather to God: "Thither, by the goodness of God and the wise management of the admiral, we came in as straight a track as if we had sailed by a well known and frequented route."⁶

Columbus credited God as the source of his success, but scholars need to properly contextualize this language. Robert Ellwood II argues that religion is intrinsically embedded in Western language.⁷ Columbus used religious language to secularly speak because religion was his language. His language is not, however, a reliable compass to evaluate his ethics. Rather than relying on Columbus's self-descriptions, it is necessary to gauge his character by his actions, or as Christ taught:

4. See *Book of Mormon 2020: Come, Follow Me—For Individuals and Families* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2019), 15.

5. De Lamar Jensen, "Columbus and the Hand of God," *Ensign*, Oct. 1992, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1992/10/columbus-and-the-hand-of-god?lang=eng>.

6. Doctor Chanca, "Second Voyage of Columbus," in *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus: With Other Original Documents, Relating to His Four Voyages to the New World*, edited by R. H. Major, 2nd ed. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1870), 25.

7. Robert S. Ellwood Jr., *Words of the World's Religions: An Anthology* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 2.

“Ye shall know them by their fruits.”⁸ Ten years after Columbus’s first arrival to what became known as Hispaniola, a young Bartolomé de las Casas visited the island, and he bore witness to the destruction that Columbus’s men inflicted upon Indigenous peoples, including the Taíno.⁹

They forced their way into native settlements, slaughtering everyone they found there, including small children, old men, pregnant women, and even women who had just given birth. They hacked them to pieces, slicing open their bellies with their swords as though they were so many sheep herded into a pen. They even laid wagers on whether they could slice a man in two at a stroke, or cut an individual’s head from his body, or disembowel him with a single blow of their axes. They grabbed suckling infants by the feet, and ripping them from their mothers’ breasts, dashed them headlong against the rocks.¹⁰

Such an account, among many others, tarnishes any claim that Columbus should be considered a hero.

To Indigenous peoples of the Americas, the legacy of Columbus does not resonate the same way that it does with most non-Indigenous Latter-day Saints. Indigenous Latter-day Saints, present and former, often diverge from this traditional narrative because they see depictions of Columbus as genocidal and destructive. In a keynote speech at a luncheon with the leadership of the NAACP in Salt Lake City, Elder Gary E. Stevenson stated: “We do condemn all racism, past and present, in any form.”¹¹ Although he applied this principle to the interpretation

8. Matthew 7:16.

9. Robert Ellsberg, “Las Casas’ Discovery: What the ‘Protector of the Indians’ Found in America,” *America* 207, no. 13 (2012): 6.

10. Bartolomé de las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 15.

11. Sean Walker, “‘We Are All Part of the Same Divine Family,’ Elder Stevenson Tells Salt Lake NAACP,” *KSL*, Jan. 20, 2020, <https://www.ksl.com/article/46706963/we-are-all-part-of-the-same-divine-family-elder-stevenson-tells-salt-lake-naacp/>.

of a Book of Mormon passage that reads, “dark skin as a sign of a curse,” the same principle needs to be applied to the interpretation of settler colonialism and conquest.

Shortly after Hinckley’s address in August 2019, BYU associate professor of history Rebecca de Schweinitz collaborated with other BYU affiliates and Farina King, assistant professor of history at Northeastern State University, to organize an event at BYU to further discuss the topic. On October 16, 2019, BYU professor David-James Gonzales moderated the roundtable “LDS Native American Perspectives on Columbus,” which featured the voices of four Native American scholars, Farina King, Roni Jo Draper, James Singer, and Michalyn Steele.¹² The audience filled the room and some people could not stay because the space was filled to capacity, indicating that even among the BYU community, there is a desire to confront Columbus’s legacy. Much of the content in this published roundtable derives from the “LDS Native American Perspectives on Columbus” roundtable at BYU, with additional discussion by Sarah Newcomb, Darren Parry, Eva Bighorse, and Brian D. King, all of whom have connections with Indigenous Latter-day Saint communities. These essays confront dominant Latter-day Saint understandings of Columbus by offering Indigenous perspectives on his legacy and memorialization. While few doubt that Columbus possessed remarkable skills as a seafaring navigator, these scholars denounce his ethics and treatment of Indigenous peoples whom his crew mercilessly slaughtered, raped, and enslaved, and they question the presence of Columbus mythology within Latter-day Saint teachings.



12. See Nathan Wanlass, “Native American Panelists Discuss Columbus Controversy,” *Daily Universe*, Oct. 20, 2019, <https://universe.byu.edu/2019/10/20/lds-native-american-panel-discusses-perspectives-on-columbus/>; and FHSS Videos, “LDS Indigenous Perspectives on Columbus,” YouTube video, 47:35, Oct. 28, 2019, <https://youtu.be/MYaXk65flaE/>.