

I Am Giving Columbus No More of My Time

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In 2017, the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints issued a statement condemning “white supremacist attitudes.”¹ As a member of the Church who also knows the history, erasure, and pain of my Indigenous ancestors,² I find the continued admiration of Christopher Columbus by fellow members of the Church difficult to reconcile with messages that condemn white supremacy.

I have heard many Saints claim that Nephi prophesied in 1 Nephi 13:12 of Columbus. Meanwhile, the wording of the introduction to 1 Nephi 13 (not the scripture itself) describes the chapter as a prophecy of the “discovery and colonizing of America,” which can be quite misleading. The Americas were not discovered, as they were already heavily populated; thus, to describe them as being “discovered” would be very inaccurate.³ Must it be Columbus? Must “the many waters” described in this passage represent the Atlantic Ocean? For Indigenous peoples, there are many waters all around and within the Americas. We know, for example, that the Pacific Ocean is dotted with islands and peopled with great boat builders and ocean navigators with the capacity to make their way to the Americas. There is no reason that we must accept that

1. “Church Releases Statement Condemning White Supremacist Attitudes,” *Mormon Newsroom*, Aug. 15, 2017, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/church-releases-statement-condemning-white-supremacist-attitudes?lang=eng>.

2. Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and the California Indian Catastrophe, 1846–1873* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).

3. See Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Random House, 2005).

Columbus is the referent here, especially when we are aware of his crimes.

My concern is that the celebration of Columbus is not simply about an interpretation of a vague prophecy but rather an expression of white supremacy. Defenders of Columbus sometimes suggest that Indigenous peoples are better off since the arrival of white settlers from Spain, Portugal, England, and other regions of Europe. While Columbus retains credit for opening the Americas for trade, this trade has disproportionately benefited white people at the expense of people of color. Both Indigenous peoples, who were never the recipients of the wealth taken from them and their land, and the African peoples, who were deemed property fit to build the New World, suffered under this trade. The early Indigenous peoples were enslaved, driven out, and/or massacred. Their cultures, languages, ceremonies, and ways of life have nearly been lost due to forced removals, the separation of children from their families, the prohibition of language and ceremonies, and so forth, all designed specifically to solve the “Indian problem.” Much of this violence continues today. Reader, please understand that suggesting that the cultures of non-white peoples were “primitive,” “savage,” “amoral,” or otherwise “uncivilized” until white people “discovered them” and “fixed them” is a narrative steeped in white supremacy.

I find it wonderful to read Nephi’s words of prophecy and promises as oriented toward the future still. He was writing of the possibilities available if people lived with the Spirit of the Lord. Clearly not all of the words of Nephi have come to pass, so maybe there are many things still yet to come, and many waters to cross.

