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The Exegesis of Empire: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of Christopher Columbus's  
*El libro de las profecías*

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Introduction

What a difference a century makes! In 1892, Pope Leo XIII celebrated the Columbus Quadricentennial in the following words:

Now that four centuries have sped since a Ligurian first, under God's guidance, touched shores unknown beyond the Atlantic, the whole world is eager to celebrate the memory of the event, and glorify its author. Nor could a worthier reason be found where through zeal should be kindled. For the exploit is in itself the highest and grandest which any age has ever seen accomplished by man; and he who achieved it, for the greatness of his mind and heart, can be compared to but few in the history of humanity. By his toil another world emerged from the unsearched bosom of the ocean: hundreds of thousands of mortals have, from a state of blindness, been raised to the common level of the human race, reclaimed from savagery to gentleness and humanity; and, greatest of all, by the acquisition of those blessings of which Jesus Christ is the author, they have been recalled from destruction to eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

In 1990, anticipating the Columbus Quincentennial of 1992, the Governing Board of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. adopted a very different tone

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Quarto Abeunte Saeculo* on the Columbus Quadricentennial (July 16, 1892). Available on the World Wide Web at: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_16071892\\_quarto-abeunte-saeculo\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_16071892_quarto-abeunte-saeculo_en.html).

in its resolution entitled, “A Faithful Response to the 500th Anniversary of the Arrival of Christopher Columbus:”

In 1992, celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the “New World” will be held. For the descendants of the survivors of the subsequent invasion, genocide, slavery, “ecocide”, and exploitation of the wealth of the land, a celebration is not an appropriate observation of this anniversary... The Church, with few exceptions, accompanied and legitimized this conquest and exploitation. Theological justifications for destroying native religious beliefs while forcing conversion to European forms of Christianity demanded a submission from the newly converted that facilitated their total conquest and exploitation... Therefore, it is appropriate for the church to reflect on its role in that historical tragedy and, in pursuing a healing process, to move forward in our witness for justice and peace.<sup>2</sup>

While this is surely not the place to reopen the Pandora’s box of controversy over the Columbus Quincentennial,<sup>3</sup> it may well be salutary at the outset to recall both the non-innocence and the non-neutrality of biblical interpretation and scholarship.<sup>4</sup> It has often been said that the *conquistadores* arrived in the Americas with the sword in one hand and the Bible in the other. Much attention has been devoted, and rightly, to how the colonizers wielded the sword, yet comparatively little energy has been invested in considering the ways in which the Bible was understood and employed in the colonial

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<sup>2</sup> National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., “A Faithful Response to the 500th Anniversary of the Arrival of Christopher Columbus” (May 17, 1990). Available on the World Wide Web at: <http://www.indians.org/welker/faithful.htm>. Pope John Paul II, Leo XIII’s successor, expressed similar sentiments in 1992: “The Church has always been at the side of the indigenous people through her religious priests and bishops; in this Fifth Centenary how could she possibly forget the enormous suffering inflicted on the peoples of this Continent during the age of conquest and colonization! In truth there must be a recognition of the abuses committed due to a lack of love on the part of some individuals who did not see their indigenous brothers and sisters as children of God their Father.” (John Paul II, “Message to Indigenous People,” in Fourth General Conference of Latin American Bishops, *Santo Domingo Conclusions* [Washington, DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993] 185).

<sup>3</sup> On this, see, for example, Allan Figueroa Deck, “The Trashing of the Fifth Centenary,” *America* 167 (1992) 499-501.

<sup>4</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic: the Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis : Fortress, 1999).

undertaking. On the one hand, the Bible furnished the substance of colonial evangelization efforts in the sermons and catechetical materials directed to the colonized by the colonizers. At the same time, the Bible played a crucial role among the colonizers themselves as they sought to frame their enterprise in the terms of a worldview shaped in large measure by their understanding of the Bible. While several important studies address the religious dimension of the conquest of the Americas, scholars of religion have devoted relatively little attention to this period in the history of biblical interpretation, or to the place of the Bible in shaping the Spanish colonial enterprise in the Americas.

Among the earliest and most fascinating witnesses to the latter is a manuscript of eighty-four folios, dated between September 13, 1501 and March 23, 1502, and now preserved in the *Biblioteca Columbina* in Sevilla. It begins:

This is the beginning of the book or collection of *auctoritates*, sayings, opinions, and prophecies concerning the need to recover the holy city and Mount Zion, and the discovery and conversion of the islands of the Indies and of all peoples and nations, for Ferdinand and Isabella, our Spanish rulers.<sup>5</sup>

This manuscript, commonly known as *El libro de las profecías*, the *Book of Prophecies*, was compiled by Christopher Columbus himself, in collaboration with Gaspar Gorricio, a Carthusian monk of Italian origin who belonged to the monastery of Santa María de las Cuevas in Sevilla. The manuscript begins with Gorricio's

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<sup>5</sup> “Incipit liber sive manipulus de auctoritatibus, dictis ac sententiis et prophetiis circa materiam recuperande sancta civitatis et montis Dei Syon ac inventionis et conversionis insularum Indye et omnium gentium atque nationum, ad Ferdinandum et Helysabeth reges nostros hispanos” Roberto Rusconi, ed., *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, translated by Blair Sullivan (Repertorium Columbianum 3; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) § 003. Cited hereinafter as *LP*. All English translations of material from the *Book of Prophecies* are taken from this edition. Another critical edition and translation into English of the *Book of Prophecies* is Delno C. West and August Kling, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1991).

transcription of the September 13, 1501 letter in which Columbus explained the project and asked for his assistance:

Reverend and very devoted father: When I came here [*to Granada*], I began to collect in a book excerpts from authoritative sources that seemed to me to refer to Jerusalem; I planned to review them later and to arrange them appropriately. Then I became involved in my other activities and did not have time to proceed with my work; nor do I now. And so I am sending the book to you so that you can look at it. Perhaps your soul will motivate you to continue the project and our Lord will guide you to genuine *auctoritates*. The search for texts should be continued in the Bible and the *Commentary*<sup>6</sup> is often useful and should be used for clarification.<sup>7</sup> (*LP* § 001)

Gorricio also includes his March 23, 1502 reply to Columbus in the manuscript, explaining, “My lord, you will see in my handwriting the few things that I have added and inserted. I submit everything to the approval of your intelligence and your prudent judgment” (*LP* § 002). The contributions of Gorricio are somewhat more substantial than his modesty suggests, and these are identified by scholars of the manuscript by Gorricio’s distinctive handwriting.<sup>8</sup> The manuscript proper is a collection of biblical texts, ancient and medieval commentaries, fragments of Spanish poetry, and occasional comments by Columbus himself.<sup>9</sup> Its intended addressees, as the *incipit* indicates, were Ferdinand and Isabella, before whom Columbus hoped that the *Book of Prophecies*

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<sup>6</sup> This is a reference to the work of Nicholas of Lyra (c.1270-1349).

<sup>7</sup> Reverendo y muy devoto padre: Quando vine [aquí] comencé a sacar las autoridades que me parecía que hacían al caso de [Jerusalem en un] libro para después tornarlas a rrever e las poner en rrima en su lugar en los [sea] al caso. Después sucedió en my otras ocup[aciones, por donde no ovo lugar de proseguir my obra, ni lo hay. E ansy os lo [enbió que le vedieses. [Podrá ser que el anima os] incitará a proseguir en él e que nuestro [Señor vos alunbrará auctoridades muy a]unténticas. En la Biblia es de continua[r, e en muchos lugares la Glosa a]provecha e alumbrá, e es de haçer d’ella muncha [memoria, al tiempo se oviese se s]acar en lympio.”

<sup>8</sup> Rusconi, “Introduction,” in *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> See the outline of the *Book of Prophecies* in West and Kling, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus*, 98-99.

would justify his imperiled project, for the work took shape after Columbus's far from glorious return from his third voyage (May 1498-October 1500).<sup>10</sup>

The letter of Columbus to Gorrício suggests that, in its extant form, the *Book of Prophecies* represents only a draft that Columbus intended to revise. He writes, "I began to collect in a book excerpts from authoritative sources that seemed to me to refer to Jerusalem; I planned to review them later and to arrange them appropriately" (*LP* § 001).<sup>11</sup> Some have gone so far as to suggest, based on this letter, that Columbus intended to incorporate the material in the *Book of Prophecies* into a poem ("para después tornarlas a rrever e las poner en rrima").<sup>12</sup> Whatever the intended genre of the projected revision might have been, there is no evidence that the *Book of Prophecies* was ever actually sent to the king and queen, or that the manuscript was ever revised or further redacted or edited.<sup>13</sup>

The *Book of Prophecies* has received very mixed reviews among Columbus scholars and biographers. For example, in 1866 Henri Harisse described it as "a

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<sup>10</sup> The third voyage concluded with the arrest of Columbus and his return to Spain in chains.

<sup>11</sup> "Començé a sacar las autoridades que me parecía que haçían al caso de [Jerusalem en un] libro para después tornarlas a rrever e las poner en rrima en su lugar en los [sea] al caso."

<sup>12</sup> Hector Avalos follows mainstream Columbus scholarship in suggesting that "Columbus intended to integrate the prophecies into a poem" and adds, "This poem, however, was to be nothing less than an epic with Columbus as the hero" ("Columbus as Biblical Exegete: A Study of the *Libro de las profecías*," in *Religion in the Age of Exploration: The Case of Spain and New Spain. Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization*, eds. Bryan F. Le Beau and Menachem Mor [Studies in Jewish Civilization, 5; Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1996] 72). Also see West and August Kling, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus*, 35. Rusconi disagrees (Rusconi, "Introduction," in *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 6, n. 25).

<sup>13</sup> On the history of the manuscript, see Rusconi, "Introduction," in *The Book of Prophecies Edited by Christopher Columbus*, 8-11.

deplorable lucubration which we hope will never be published.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, it was not until 1892, in the full fervor of the Columbus Quadricentennial, that a modern edition of the *Book of Prophecies* appeared.<sup>15</sup> In 1906, Filson Young complained, “Good heavens! In what a dark and sordid stupor is our Christopher now sunk—a veritable slough and quag of stupor out of which, if he does not manage to flounder himself, no human hand can pull him.”<sup>16</sup> As late as 1985, biographer Gianni Granzotto suggested that the *Book of Prophecies* is evidence that Columbus had, with his advancing years,

drifted farther and farther away from reality...In his mild delirium he came to believe that he had been chosen by God for his exploits...He also projected these convictions—or delusions—into the future. He started compiling a Book of Prophecies, collecting passages from the Bible in which he found some connection to his discoveries and designs. If he had once been able to fulfill biblical prophecy by shattering the ocean’s barriers, who was to say that new exploits, foreseen by the scriptures, were not within his grasp.<sup>17</sup>

More measured assessments of the *Book of Prophecies* have also appeared in recent decades from the pens of historians and others who rightly regard it as a document that offers valuable insights into Columbus and his times.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the *Book*

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<sup>14</sup> Henri Harisse, *Notes on Columbus* (New York, 1866), as cited in Delno C. West, “Wallowing in a Theological Stupor or a Steadfast and Consuming Faith: Scholarly Encounters with Columbus’ Libro de las Profecías,” in *Columbus and His World: Proceedings, First San Salvador Conference*, ed. Donald T. Gerace (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: College Center of the Finger Lakes, 1987) 50.

<sup>15</sup>This was the edition of Cesare de Lollis, *Autografi di Cristoforo Colombo con prefazione e trascrizione diplomatica* (Raccolta di documenti e studi pubblicati della R. Commissione Colombiana per il quarto centenario della scoperta dell’America; Roma: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1892-94).

<sup>16</sup>Filson Young, *Christopher Columbus and the New World of His Discoveries* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1906) 146, as cited in West, “Wallowing in a Theological Stupor,” 50.

<sup>17</sup>Gianni Granzotto, *Christopher Columbus*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 246.

<sup>18</sup> So, for instance, Pauline Moffatt Watts, “Prophecy and Discovery: On the Spiritual Origins of Christopher Columbus’ ‘Enterprise of the Indies’,” *American Historical Review* 90:1 (1985) 73-102; Leonard I. Sweet, “Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World,” *Catholic Historical Review* 72:3 (July 1986) 369-382; Djelal Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe’s Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

of *Prophecies* has received very little attention from biblical scholars or from historians of biblical interpretation.<sup>19</sup> The essay by Hector Avalos, “Columbus as Biblical Exegete: A Study of the *Libro de las profecias*,” is an especially noteworthy exception to that rule.<sup>20</sup>

The approach I will employ in this study works at the intersection of two convergent methodological currents. The first of these is the turn to the reader—not the intratextual implied reader of formalist literary criticism, but the real reader, the “flesh and blood reader, historically and culturally conditioned, with a field of vision fundamentally informed and circumscribed by such a social location.”<sup>21</sup> This study will consider Columbus as just such a reader of the Bible, addressing the ways in which his field of vision was both informed and circumscribed by the particulars of his social location. The second methodological current is the influence of postcolonial theory on biblical studies, the development of postcolonialist biblical criticism, which, according to R. S. Sugirtharajah “is roughly defined as scrutinizing and exposing colonial domination and power as these are embodied in biblical texts and in interpretations.”<sup>22</sup> Sugirtharajah cites Sanjay Seth, Leela Gandhi and Michael Dutton, who suggest that the term

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<sup>19</sup> See Francisco Álvarez, “Cristóbal Colón y el estudio de la Sagrada Escritura,” *Archivo hispánico* 17 (1952) 129-140; John V. Fleming, “Christopher Columbus as a Scriptural Exegete,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5:2 (1991) 187-198.

<sup>20</sup> Hector Avalos, “Columbus as Biblical Exegete: A Study of the *Libro de las profecias*,” 59-80. Also see Hector Avalos, “The Biblical Sources of Columbus’s ‘Libro de las Profecias’,” *Traditio* 49:331-335.

<sup>21</sup> Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) 22.

<sup>22</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah, “Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation,” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (The Bible and Postcolonialism, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 16.

postcolonialism is “undeniably and necessarily vague, a gesture rather than a demarcation, [and] points not towards a new knowledge, but rather towards an examination and critique of knowledges.”<sup>23</sup> An analogous eclecticism characterizes postcolonialist biblical criticism. Sugirtharajah explains that

Postcolonialism’s critical procedure is an amalgam of different methods ranging from the now unfashionable form-criticism to contemporary literary methods. It is interdisciplinary in nature and pluralistic in its outlook. It is more an avenue of inquiry than a homogenous project. One of the significant aspects of postcolonialism is its theoretical and intellectual catholicism.<sup>24</sup>

Postcolonial biblical criticism assembles this eclectic tool kit in the service of several tasks. Sugirtharajah identifies three such tasks:

First, the scrutiny of biblical texts for their colonial entanglements: the Bible as a collection of documents which came out of various colonial contexts—Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, Hellenistic and Roman...

The second task of postcolonial criticism is to engage in reconstructive reading of biblical texts. Postcolonial criticism will reread biblical texts from the perspective of postcolonial concerns such as liberation struggles of the past and present...it will interact with and reflect on postcolonial circumstances such as hybridity, fragmentation, deterritorialization, and hyphenated, double or multiple, identities...

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<sup>23</sup> Sanjay Seth, Leela Gandhi and Michael Dutton, “Postcolonial Studies: A Beginning,” *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 1:1 (1998) 8, as cited in R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 246. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995). Helpful introductions to postcolonial theory are available in Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); as well as Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998). Many of the “foundational” texts of postcolonial theory are excerpted in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). I am especially interested in the postcolonial theory arising from the context of Latin American reflection on imperialism and neocolonialism. See J. Jorge Klor de Alva, “The Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience: A Reconsideration of ‘Colonialism,’ ‘Postcolonialism,’ and ‘Mestizaje,’” in *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, ed. Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 241-275; Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories / Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>24</sup> Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 258.

The third task of postcolonial criticism is to interrogate both colonial and metropolitan interpretations. The aim here is to draw attention to the inescapable effects of colonization and colonial ideologies on interpretative works such as commentarial writings, and on historical and administrative record which helped to (re)inscribe colonial ideologies and consolidate the colonial presence.<sup>25</sup>

The *Book of Prophecies* offers a valuable opportunity to attend to the third of these tasks, for it represents the first efforts to bring the Bible to bear on the nascent European colonial enterprise. While Columbus's first voyage (1492-93) could be construed as a modestly equipped voyage of discovery, a modest expedition of three ships and a crew estimated at between 90 and 120; the second voyage (1493-96) already represented a significant investment in a process of colonization, with its seventeen ships carrying 1200 crew and colonists.

#### Columbus and his Bible

Because Columbus was neither a cleric nor an academic, a study of the *Book of Prophecies* gives us some idea of how the Bible and late medieval biblical scholarship were appropriated by one especially well-read layman.<sup>26</sup> The Latin Vulgate was the version of the Bible used by Columbus and his collaborators in the *Book of Prophecies*,

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<sup>25</sup> Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 251, 252-253, 255.

<sup>26</sup> Among the books known to have been owned by Columbus are: Pierre d'Ailly, *Imago Mundi* (published between 1480 and 1483), with 898 marginal notes in Columbus's own hand; Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, *Historia rerum ubique gestarum* (Venice, 1477), with 861 marginal notes in Columbus's own hand; Marco Polo, *Consuetudibus et conditionibus orientalium regionum* (Antwerp, 1485), with 366 marginal notes in Columbus's own hand; Pliny, *Historia naturalis* in the Italian translation of Cristoforo Landino (Venice, 1489), with 24 marginal notes in Columbus's own hand; an anonymous fifteenth century concordance of the Bible, *Concordantiae Biblicae Cardinalis S.P.*, with markings in the margins that highlight texts Columbus found important; Saint Antoninus of Florence, *Summa confessionis* (1476); a fifteenth century palimpsest containing Seneca's *Tragedies*; Abraham Azcuto, *Almanach perpetuum, cuius radix est annus, 1473*, including folios copies by Columbus (See West and Kling, *The Libro de las profecias of Christopher Columbus*, 24).

perhaps in an edition that also included the *Postilla litteralis* of Nicholas of Lyra.<sup>27</sup> The importance of the Bible for Columbus and his project becomes clear in the letter to the Spanish sovereigns that is included in the *Book of Prophecies*. There he explains:

I have studied all kinds of texts: cosmography, histories, chronicles, philosophy, and other disciplines. Through these writings, the hand of Our Lord opened my mind to the possibility of sailing to the Indies and gave me the will to attempt the voyage. With this burning ambition I came to your highnesses.” (*LP* § 011)<sup>28</sup>

As for the reception his project received, he confesses,

Everyone who heard about my enterprise rejected it with laughter and ridicule. (*LP* § 011)<sup>29</sup>

It was from the Bible and not from other writings, Columbus suggests, that his illumination came, and it was that illumination that ultimately gained his project a favorable hearing from the king and queen:

Neither all the sciences I mentioned previously nor citations drawn from them were of any help to me. Only Your Highnesses had faith and perseverance. Who could doubt that this flash of understanding was the work of the Holy Spirit, as well my own? The Holy Spirit illuminated by his holy and sacred Scripture, encouraging me in a very strong and clear voice from the forty-four books of the Old Testament, the four evangelists, and twenty-three epistles from the blessed apostles, urging me to proceed. (*LP* § 011).<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See Hector Ignacio Avalos, “The Biblical Sources of Columbus’ *Libro de las Profecías*,” *Traditio* 49 (1994) 331-335. On the various editions of Nicholas of Lyra, see Edward A. Gosselin, “A Listing of the Printed Editions of Nicolaus of Lyra,” *Traditio* 26 (1970) 399-426.

<sup>28</sup> “...he yo visto e puesto estudio en ver de todas escrituras: cosmografía, ystorias, corónicas e fylosofia e de otras artes, a que me abrió nuestro Señor el entendimiento con mano palpable a que era hasedero navegar de aquí a las Yndias, e me abrió la voluntad para la hesección d’ello. E con este fuego vine a vuestras altezas.”

<sup>29</sup> “Todos aquellos que supieron de mi ynpresa con rixa le negaban burlando”

<sup>30</sup> “Todas las çiencias de que dise arriba non me aprovecharon ni las abtoridades d’ellas. En solo vuestras altezas quedó la fee e constança. ¿Quién dubda que esta lumbre non fuese del Espíritu santo , asý como de mí? El qual con rrayos de claridad maravillosos consoló con su santa e sacra Escritura a vos muy alta e clara con quarenta e quarto libros del Viejo Testamento, e quarto hevangelios con veynte e tres hepístolas de aquellos bienaventurados apóstoles, abinbándome que yo prosiguiese e de contino sin çesar un momento me abíban con gran priesa.” On the number of books in Columbus’s canon, see John V. Fleming,

He further insists:

I am not relying on my lifetime of navigation and the discussions I have had with people from many lands and religions, or on the many disciplines and texts that I spoke of previously. I base what I say only on holy and sacred Scripture, and on the prophetic statements of certain holy persons who through divine revelation have spoken on the subject. (*LP* § 011).<sup>31</sup>

Columbus willingly confessed his unlettered state as a layman:

Perhaps Your Highnesses and all the others who know me and to whom this letter may be shown will criticize me, publicly or privately, as an uneducated man, an uninformed sailor, an ordinary person, etc. (*LP* § 011)<sup>32</sup>

Defending himself against this anticipated critique, he identified himself with the innocents mentioned in Matthew 11:25, “Oh, Lord, how many things you have kept secret from the wise and have made known to the innocent”<sup>33</sup> and Matthew 21:15-16, “As our Lord entered Jerusalem, the children sang, ‘Hosanna, son of David!’ In order to test him, the scribes asked him if he had heard what they were saying and he answered that he had, saying, ‘Don’t you know that truth comes from the mouths of innocent

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“Christopher Columbus as a Scriptural Exegete,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 5 (1991) 189-193. For a list of the biblical books and other materials cited in the *Book of Prophecies*, see West and Kling, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus*, 23).

<sup>31</sup> “Digo que yo deso todo mi navegar desde hedad nueva e la pláticas que yo aya tenido con tanta gente en tantas tierras e de tantas setas, e dexo las tantas artes e escrituras de que yo dyxe arriba; solamente me tengo a la santa e sacra Escritura, e a algunas abtoridades proféticas de algunas personas santas, que por revelación divina han dicho algo d’esto.”

<sup>32</sup> “Pudiera ser que vuestras altezas, e todos los otros que me conosçen, e a quien esta escritura fuere amostrada, que en secreto o públicamente me reprehenderán de la reprehension de diversas maneras: de non doto en letras, de lego marinero, de hombre mundanal, et cetera.”

<sup>33</sup> “¡O, Señor, que quisistes tener secreto tantas cosas a los sabios e rebelástalas a los ynoçentes!”

children?”<sup>34</sup> Despite these protestations, it is quite clear that Columbus read the Bible through the lenses supplied by late medieval biblical interpretation

For Columbus, the canon-within-the canon of the Bible takes shape around the eschatological urgency of his enterprise:

Holy Scripture attests in the Old Testament, through the mouths of the prophets, and in the New Testament through our redeemer Jesus Christ, that this world will end. The signs of when this must happen are described by Matthew and Mark and Luke, and the prophets frequently predicted the event. (*LP* § 011)<sup>35</sup>

Relying on the calculations of Pierre d’Ailly, Columbus was convinced that only 155 remain of the 7,000 years in which, according to the authorities cited above, the world must come to an end. Our redeemer said that before the consummation of this world all that had been written by the prophets would have to be fulfilled. (*LP* § 011).<sup>36</sup>

To this Columbus adds a clue to his own hermeneutical strategy as a reader of the prophets:

The prophets wrote about the future as if it were the past and about the past as if it were yet to happen, and similarly with the present. Sometimes they spoke figuratively, other times more realistically, and on occasion quite literally. One says more or less than another or expresses it in a better way. (*LP* § 011)<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Yendo nuestro Señor en Iherusalem cantaban los mochachos: ‘¡Osana hijo de David!’ Los scribas por lo tentar le preguntaron sy oyá lo que desían, e él les respondiò que sí disiendo: ‘¿No sabéys vos que de la boca de los niños e ynocéntes se pronunçia la verdad?’”

<sup>35</sup> “La sacra Escritura testifica en el Testamento viejo, por boca de los profetas, e en el nuebo por nuestro redentor Ihesu Christo, qu’este mundo a de aver fin: las señales de quando esto aya de ser diso Mateo e Marco e Lucas; los profetas abondosamente también lo avian predicado.”

<sup>36</sup> “Segun esta cuenta no falta salvo çiento e çinquenta e çinco años para conplimiento de siete mill, en los quales dise arriba por las abtoridades dichas que avrá de feneçer el mundo. Nuestro Redentor diso que antes de la consumaçion d’este mundo se abrá de conplir todo lo qu’estava escrito por los profetas.”

<sup>37</sup> “Los profetas escribiendo fablavan de diversas maneras el de por venir pasado e el pasado por venir, e asymismo del presente, e disieron munchas cosas por semejança, otras propincas a la verdad e otras por entero a la letra, e uno más que otro, e uno por major manera, e otro no tanto.”

If the prophets are at the heart of Columbus’s canon-within-the-canon, Isaiah is at the core of the innermost canon. With the exception of the Psalms, Isaiah is the biblical book to which the *Book of Prophecies* refers most, with more than forty citations of various portions of the book.<sup>38</sup> Columbus tells the Spanish sovereigns that

Isaiah is the prophet who is most highly praised by St. Jerome and St. Augustine and the other teachers and is appreciated and greatly revered by all. Concerning Isaiah, they say that he was not just a prophet, but also an evangelist; he put all his efforts into describing the future and calling all people to our holy Catholic faith. (*LP* § 011)<sup>39</sup>

In a similar vein, in a letter to Doña Juana de la Torre, the nurse of Prince Juan, Columbus explained:

I came to serve this King and Queen with profound affection, and I have rendered service never before seen or spoken of. God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke through Saint John in the Apocalypse, after having spoken of it through Isaiah, and he showed me to that location. There was disbelief in everyone, and spiritual intelligence gave to the Queen my Lady its inspiration and great power and made her the beneficiary of everything.<sup>40</sup>

Some of the quotations from Isaiah in the *Book of Prophecies* are quite extensive, while others are briefer citations grouped under the heading of “The following things

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<sup>38</sup> The *Book of Prophecies* cites Isaiah 2:2-3; 5:26; 6:11-13; 8:9; 11:10-12; 11:11; 12:4-6; 14:32; 18:1-7; 19:19-20; 22:20-25; 23:1-2, 12; 24:14-16; 24:15; 25:6a, 7, 9a, 9c-10a; 26:1-3; 27:13; 28:22; 30:18b-19a, 27a; 33:13-14a, 7, 20; 35:1a, 2b, 9b-10a; 40:1, 5, 9a, 17; 41:1-5; 41:1a, 5a; 42:1-4, 6-16; 42:3-4; 43:1-7a; 44:1-3, 23, 25b-28; 45:1-6a; 46:10b-13; 49:1-4a, 5b-6; 49:1a; 51:1-13a, 16-18, 22b-23a; 52:1-3, 7-15; 55:1a, 3-5, 13b; 57:13b; 59:18b-20a; 60:1-22; 60:9a; 62:1-12; 63:1a; 66:18-24; 66:19a.

<sup>39</sup> Ysaías es aquel que más alaba san Gerónimo e san Agustín e los otros doctores, a todos apruevan e tienen en grande reverençia: de Ysaía disen que es no solamente propheta, más hevangalista; este puso toda su diligençia a escrevir lo venidero e llamar toda la gente a nuestra santa fee católica.”

<sup>40</sup> “Yo vine con amor tan intrañable a servir a estos Principes, y e servido de servicio de que jamás se oyó ni vido. Del nuevo cielo y tierra que dezía Nuestro Señor por San Juan en el Apocalipsi, después de dicho por boca de Isaías, me hizo mensajero y amostró aquella parte. En todos ovo incredulidad, y a la Reina, mi Señora, dio d’ello el espíritu de intelligençia y esfuerzo grande y lo hizo de todo heredero” (from Consuelo Varela, ed., *Cristóbal Colón: Textos y documentos completos* [Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1982], 243). Translation from Djelal Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth: Europe’s Prophetic Rhetoric as Conquering Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 153.

have been written about the islands of the sea in sacred Scripture” (*LP* § 248).<sup>41</sup> Of Columbus’s presentation of his enterprise as a mission informed by Isaiah and the Apocalypse, Djelal Kadir observes

Isaiah’s prophecy of “new heavens and a new earth” (65:17) is a source Columbus cites repeatedly. We find it in his letter to Doña Juana de la Torre and in the preamble letter to his book of prophecies. In both instances he joins John the Divine to Isaiah as prophets of his own mission and New World enterprise. The connection he forges between those prophetic voices and his project is clearly typological and figurative and his procedure is in keeping with the hermeneutic procedures of the medieval tradition. We have an idea of how licit such connections are, and how pervasive the ideological force authorizing them, from the fact that Father Bartolomé de Las Casas, commenting on Columbus’s invocation of Isaiah in his letter on the third voyage, states simply that since Isaiah was a prophet he could well have been prophesying the discovery of the New World (*Historia* Bk. 1, chap. 127). Columbus was clearly laboring under the aegis of perfectly licit and canonically legitimate criteria.<sup>42</sup>

It is curious, though, given the apocalyptic urgency of Columbus’s argument, that the *Book of Prophecies* only cites the Apocalypse of John three times, referring to Revelation 1:9; 6:14 and 16:20, in a list of biblical texts “about the islands of the sea” (*LP* §§ 272-274).

While, in its present form, the *Book of Prophecies* appears to be a somewhat haphazard collection of materials drawn from many sources, the exegetical principles that shape the materials and the comments by Columbus clearly reflect mainstream late medieval practices of biblical interpretation. Several additions to the manuscript by Gorrício reinforce this. After the letter from Columbus to Gorrício and Gorrício’s reply, and after Gorrício’s superscription, we find, first, a quotation on the fourfold

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<sup>41</sup> See note 38 above.

<sup>42</sup> Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*, 146.

interpretation of Scripture taken “From the *Summa angelica*, under the rubric ‘exposition’,” that is, the 1499 *Summa angelica de casibus conscientiae* of Angelus de Clavasio. (LP § 004)<sup>43</sup> This is reinforced by a quotation of the well-known trope on the fourfold interpretation of Scripture attributed to Jean Gerson, “Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, moralis quid agas, quo tendas allegoria,” “The literal teaches the facts; allegory, what you should believe; the moral what you should believe, the anagogical where you are going.” (LP § 005)<sup>44</sup> The equally familiar illustration of the fourfold meaning of Scripture from the 1482 *Rationali divinorum officiorum* follows:

The fourfold interpretation of Holy Scripture is clearly implicit in the word Jerusalem. In a historical sense, it is the earthly city to which pilgrims travel. Allegorically, it indicates the Church in the world. Tropologically, Jerusalem is the soul of every believer. Anagogically, the word means the Heavenly Jerusalem, the celestial fatherland and kingdom. (LP § 006)<sup>45</sup>

This evidence confirms the judgment of Avalos that “Columbus was conservative in his exegetical principles, following earlier medieval exegetical traditions without much deviation.”<sup>46</sup> Particular attention is given in the *Book of Prophecies* to the hermeneutics of the prophets, beginning with the observation, “In Sacred Scripture one tense is often

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<sup>43</sup> Angelus de Clavasio, *Summa angelica de casibus conscientiae* (Venice: Paganinus de Paganinis, 1499)

<sup>44</sup> Jean Gerson, *De sensu litterali Sacrae Scripturae* in Palémon Glorieux, ed., *Oeuvres complètes, Volume 3: La oeuvre magistrale* (Paris: Desclee, 1962) 333-340. On medieval exegesis, see the magisterial work of Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2 Volumes, Volume 1 translated by Marc Sebanc, Volume 2 translated by E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, 2000).

<sup>45</sup> “Quadruplex sensus Sacrae Scripturae aperte insinuatur in hac dictione Ierusalem. Hystorice enim significant, civitatem illam terrestrem ad quam peregrini petunt. Allegorice, significant Ecclesiam militantem. Tropologice, significant quamlibet fidelem animam. Anagogice, significant celestem Ierusalem, sive patriam, ve regnum celorum.” Translation from West and Kling, *The Libro de las profecías of Christopher Columbus*.

<sup>46</sup> Avalos, “Columbus as Biblical Exegete,” 61.

used in place of another; for example, the past tense instead of the future, etc.” (LP § 008).<sup>47</sup> As Avalos explains,

This was an ancient and pervasive exegetical principle that allowed Columbus to claim as prophecies many texts that, judging by the original grammar and context, otherwise refer to past events. Thus, in a section devoted to passages concerning ‘The Future’ (*De futuro*), one finds many passages dealing with places (e.g., Tarshish) involved in events that occurred in the days of the Old Testament (e.g., 1 Kings 10:21-22; Jonah 1:3). However, those past events are viewed as prophecies that oblige Columbus to seek lost biblical lands.<sup>48</sup>

Later, also in Gorrício’s hand, the *Book of Prophecies* includes a lengthy quotation from Isidore’s *Etymologiae* on the seven different kinds of prophecy:

There are seven kinds of prophecy. The first is “There are seven different kinds of prophecy. The first is ecstasy, a transport of the mind; for example, when Peter, in a state of mental confusion, saw the vessel containing various animals being lowered from heaven [*Acts 14:10-11*]. The second kind is a vision, exemplified by the words of Isaiah, “I saw the Lord seated on a lofty throne” [*Isaiah 6:1*]. The third is a dream; for example, Jacob, sleeping, saw a ladder leading to heaven [*Genesis 28:12*]. The fourth kind of prophecy occurs in a cloud, for example, when God spoke to Moses and to Job after his misfortune [*See Exodus 19:16-24; Job 38-40*]. The fifth is a voice from heaven, like the one that spoke to Abraham saying, “Do not lay a hand on that boy” [*Genesis 22:11-12*], and to Saul on the highway, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” [*Acts 9:4*]. The sixth kind is received through a parable; for example, Solomon in Proverbs and Balaam when he was commissioned by Balak [*See Numbers 22-24*]. The seventh kind of prophecy is permeation by the Holy Spirit, experienced by nearly all the prophets. (LP § 079).<sup>49</sup>

Immediately afterwards we find a further quotation of Isidore, distinguishing among three kinds of vision:

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<sup>47</sup> “Notandum quod in sacra Scriptura aliquando ponitur tempus pro tempore, sicut preteritum pro futuro et cetera.”

<sup>48</sup> Avalos, “Columbus as Biblical Exegete,” 61.

<sup>49</sup> Biblical citations inserted.

Others have said that there are three kinds of vision. The first is received by means of the eyes of the body; etc. Another is received through the mind when we form mental images of those things that the body experiences; etc. The third kind of vision involves neither physical sensation nor any part of the mind in which images of physical things are conceived, but comes through an intuitive understanding of truth, and so forth, in the same selection. (*LP* § 080)

On the basis of Columbus's own claims to divine illumination and inspiration, it is hard to avoid the impression that this quotation serves both to provide an appropriate hermeneutical framework for the interpretation of the texts marshaled in the *Book of Prophecies* and also to validate the role of Columbus himself both as an interpreter of biblical prophecy and as the chosen instrument of its fulfillment through his journeys. As he claimed in his letter to Doña Juana, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke through Saint John in the Apocalypse, after having spoken of it through Isaiah, and he showed me to that location."<sup>50</sup> Columbus reads and announces the fulfillment of Scripture by *traveling*.

### Columbus the Exegete of Empire

John Leddy Phelan writes, "The discovery and conquest of America was the last crusade."<sup>51</sup> Leonard I. Sweet adds, "If Columbus is to be taken at his word, he needs to be understood as a chiliastic crusader."<sup>52</sup> The *Capitulaciones de Santa Fé*, the charter

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<sup>50</sup> See Delno C. West, "Christopher Columbus, Lost Biblical Sites, and the Last Crusade," *Catholic Historical Review* 78:4 (October 1992) 519-541. On Columbus as visionary, see Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*, 157-160. Also see Claude Kappler, "La vocation messianique de Christophe Colomb," in *Voyage, quête, pèlerinage dans la littérature de la civilisation médiévale. Sénefiance* (Cahiers du CUERMA 2; Université de Provence, 1976) 255-271; Alain Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesianica en el ambiente franciscanista español* (Cuadernos Colombinos 11; Valladolid: Museo de Coloón y Seminario Americanista de la Universidad de Valladolid, 1983).

<sup>51</sup> John Leddy Phelan, *The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, revised: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970) 22.

<sup>52</sup> Leonard I. Sweet, "Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World," *Catholic Historical Review* 72:3 (July 1986) 371.

granted to Columbus by Ferdinand and Isabella on April 17, 1492, was drafted at Santa Fe de la Vega, in the military camp from which the sovereigns mounted their assault against Moslem Granada, where the curtain fell on final episode of the *reconquista* on January 2, 1492. March 30, 1492 saw the promulgation of the edict that expelled from Spain all Jews who refused Christian baptism, and that edict was enforced beginning on July 31, 1492. By ironic coincidence, Columbus sailed from Palos on his first voyage only three days later. In the journal of that first voyage, he wrote:

Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians, and princes who love and promote the Christian faith, and are enemies of the doctrine of Mahomet, and of all idolatry and heresy, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the above mentioned countries of India, to see the said princes, people and territories, and to learn their disposition, and the proper method of converting them to our holy faith; and furthermore, directed that I should not proceed by land to the East, as is customary, but by a westerly route, in which direction we have hitherto no evidence that anyone has gone. So, after having expelled the Jews from your dominions, your Highnesses, in the same month of January, ordered me to proceed, with sufficient armament, to the said region of India, and for that purpose granted me great favors, ennobled me that thenceforth I might call myself Don, and be High Admiral of the Sea, and perpetual Viceroy and Governor in all the lands and continents which I might discover and acquire.”<sup>53</sup>

The agenda Columbus undertook was nothing less than the completion of a totalizing imperial design, scripted in specifically and exclusively Christian terms. With competing Jewish and Muslim discourses forcibly eliminated from the Iberian peninsula by the expulsion of Jews and Muslims and Christian hegemony solidly established there,

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<sup>53</sup> Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *Writings of Christopher Columbus Descriptive of the Discovery and Occupation of the New World* (New York, 1892) 28-29, as cited in Sweet, “Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World,” 372. On the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, see Lewis A. Tambs, “Expulsion of the Jewish Community from the Spains, 1492,” in *Religion in the Age of Exploration: The Case of Spain and New Spain. Proceedings of the Fifth Annual Symposium of the Philip M. and Ethel Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization*, eds. Bryan F. Le Beau and Menachem Mor (Studies in Jewish Civilization, 5; Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1996) 39-57; Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

the imperial project turned toward expansion of that hegemony in a colonial enterprise that was conceived from the outset as a matter of discovery *and conquest*.<sup>54</sup>

Commenting on the *Capitulaciones de Santa Fe*, Kadir points to a certain irony in the privileges conferred on Columbus:

The Catholic monarchs granted Columbus, in exchange for “discovering and conquering” islands and mainlands in the Ocean sea, the privileges of their realms’ Admiralty and the viceroyalty and governorship of territories to be discovered and conquered. Clearly, then, the would-be New World already has a governor even before its discovery and conquest outside of the charter that engendered it. What their Highnesses capitulate to Columbus is not merely a patent for exploratory activity, or even for a mercantile and exploitive venture, but a charter for the founding of an empire.<sup>55</sup>

Constructed as an exegesis of incipient empire, the *Book of Prophecies* maps the enterprise of discovery and conquest in deliberately biblical terms along the axes of time and space. Along the axis of time, Columbus works within the framework of an urgently millennialist eschatology, while, along the axis of space, Columbus maps his project according to an explicitly biblical cosmology. For the former, the influence of Joachim of Fiore looms especially large, while for the latter it was the work of Pierre d’Ailly that had the greatest impact. While this is not the place to embark on an extended

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<sup>54</sup> In his important book, Henry Kamen offers the following telling observation: “While Castilians enjoyed almost unlimited political horizons, they contracted their cultural perspectives by defining in a wholly exclusive sense what it meant to be a ‘Spaniard.’ Unlike the Roman Empire before them and the British Empire after them, they attempted to exclude from their midst all alternative cultures, beginning with two of the great historic cultures of the peninsula. From the year 1492, which marked the capitulation of Granada and the expulsion of the Jews, both Islam and Judaism were effectively excluded from the Spanish concept of the universe” (Henry Kamen, *Empire: How Spain Became a World Power 1492-1763* [New York: Harper Collins, 2003] 342).

<sup>55</sup> Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*, 71. A few pages earlier, Kadir observes (66) that “So compelling are the linkages between ideological conviction and its worldly realization that in the case of Columbus certain historians of eminence have been persuaded that the Genoese mariner “discovered” the New World in 1492 for the second time, having already *realized* the undertaking he so relentlessly and, in the end, persuasively peddled to European royalty.” Among such historians Kadir ranks Juan Manzano Manzano, *Colón y su secreto: el predescubrimiento* (Madrid: Ediciones Cultura Hispánica, 1982).

consideration of the influence of Joachim of Fiore, we cannot proceed without acknowledging the profound and pervasive influence of Joachimism on Spain generally and on Columbus in particular.<sup>56</sup>

As Kadir notes,

ultimately the eschatological scaffolding that sustains the edifice of explanation and self-sanction for the Old World's enterprise in the New is constructed with the lapidary and scriptural elements of Europe's prophetic tradition and Judeo-Christian mythology. And this is why the most significant manual that guides Columbus in his obsessive project is the spectral and majestic *Imago Mundi* of the Cardinal Pierre D'Ailly. Columbus's personal copy contains 898 marginal notations in the Admiral's hand, a relatively preponderant referential base when we consider that the total number of postils Columbus made in all his books amount to 2,125... Pierre D'Ailly epitomizes that enchanted blend of Medieval mythos and scientific ethos that, eventually, would naturalize and appropriate the New World and, in doing so, legitimize its own enterprise *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*.<sup>57</sup>

While he operated within the framework of known and accepted principles of biblical interpretation, to be sure, by charting his voyages of discovery and conquest according to the coordinates of biblical maps, Columbus was in fact employing the Bible in a radically new way. It furnished both as the ideology of conquest and as the rationale for his millennialist and messianic designs.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the *Book of Prophecies* functions, to borrow an expression from Michel de Certeau, as an instance of “writing that conquers.”<sup>59</sup> Columbus's voyages of discovery and conquest were framed in

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<sup>56</sup> The classic work on the influence of Joachim of Fiore is Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969). Also see Bernard McGinn, *The Calabrian Abbot: Joachim of Fiore in the History of Western Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1985).

<sup>57</sup> Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> See Milhou, *Colón y su mentalidad mesianica en el ambiente franciscanista español*.

<sup>59</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), translated from: *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975). As Kadir suggests, “Christianity and its

eschatological terms as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and as necessary undertakings at the end of the ages to hasten the millennium. Along the axis of space, Columbus's voyages of discovery and conquest served to confirm and to claim for Catholic Spain the "islands of the sea" that were already presumed to exist on the basis of their mention in the Bible.<sup>60</sup>

### Some Provisional Conclusions

Postcolonial theorists are among their own harshest critics. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton, who would not consider himself a postcolonial theorist despite his sympathy for the emancipatory agenda(s) advanced by postcolonial theorists, quips, "There must surely be in existence a secret handbook for aspiring postcolonial theorists, whose second rule reads: 'Begin your essay by calling into question the whole notion of postcolonialism' (The first rule reads: 'Be as obscurantist as you can decently get away with without your stuff going absolutely unread')." <sup>61</sup> The quibbling goes on at frustrating lengths, extending to such weighty matters as whether to hyphenate, viz., "post-colonial," or not to hyphenate, viz., "poscolonial."<sup>62</sup>

Eagleton's critique of "postcolonialism" (in "scare quotes") takes a more serious turn when he suggests that " 'Postcolonialism', like postmodernism in general, is among other things a brand of culturalism, which inflates the significance of cultural factors in

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providential rendering of human time and worldly events purvey the *ideological givens* that make *imperial taking* a natural right needing no further justification. In other words, prophetic history and its apocalyptic rhetoric serve as ideological shield for intricate and mixed motives for Europe's project in the New World" (*Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*, 30).

<sup>60</sup> See West, "Christopher Columbus, Lost Biblical Sites, and the Last Crusade"

<sup>61</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Poscolonialism and 'Postcolonialism'," *interventions* 1:1 (1998) 24.

<sup>62</sup> See Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 3.

human affairs. This is a vice to which literary intellectuals are especially prone.”<sup>63</sup> One might add that biblical scholars are by no means immune from the same tendency. Here Arif Dirlik adds a strong materialist critique, “Methodologically, one of the interesting byproducts of postcolonial criticism seems to be that there is little significant difference between the world and its representations in fiction....Contrary to the promise of a ‘new historicism,’ that wished to historicize literature, historical thinking over the last decade has been converted into a subfield of literature, with emphasis shifting from questions of evidence to questions of narrativization and representation, with consequences that undermine epistemologies in both literature and history.”<sup>64</sup>

While these cautions urge against collapsing the world into textual projections and representations, postcolonial literary criticism does serve to underscore the entanglements of texts and other cultural products in their larger sociopolitical contexts of empire, of the mapping and remapping of metropolis and margins. Postcolonial *biblical* interpretation, for its part, foregrounds the place of Christian discourses in the construction and legitimation of western colonial-imperial expansion in Africa, Asia and the Americas.<sup>65</sup> To that end, it mobilizes an eclectic collection of tools and methods, to the extent that it appears “undeniably and necessarily vague, a gesture rather than a demarcation, [and] points not towards a new knowledge, but rather towards an examination and critique of knowledges.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Eagleton, “Postcolonialism and ‘Postcolonialism,’” 26.

<sup>64</sup> Arif Dirlik, *The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997) 5.

<sup>65</sup> See Kadir, *Columbus and the Ends of the Earth*; Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*.

<sup>66</sup> Seth, Gandhi, and Dutton, “Postcolonial Studies: A Beginning,” *Postcolonial Studies: Culture, Politics, Economy* 1:1 (1998) 8, as cited in Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 246.

By opening Christopher Columbus’s *El libro de las profecías*, I have begun to do just this sort of thing, taking advantage of the unusual opportunity that the book provides to start to examine the biblical “charts” of the Spanish colonization of the Americas at the very earliest stages of that process.<sup>67</sup> Columbus’s manuscript may not itself have exerted any measurable effect either on the admiral’s royal patrons or on other participants in the political and religious conquest of the Americas, yet its retrieval and re-examination yields much valuable testimony to the foundational (and abiding) implication of the Bible (as visionary charter and as the vehicle of a sometimes violent evangelism) in the construction of the Spanish empire and its colonial legacy in the Americas.

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<sup>67</sup> See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, ““Cardinal Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros and Bartolomé de las Casas, the ‘Procurator and Universal Protector of all the Indians in the Indies,’” *Journal of Hispanic / Latino Theology* 9: 9 (February 2002) 60-77; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995).