



James Ussher

1581-1656

Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland

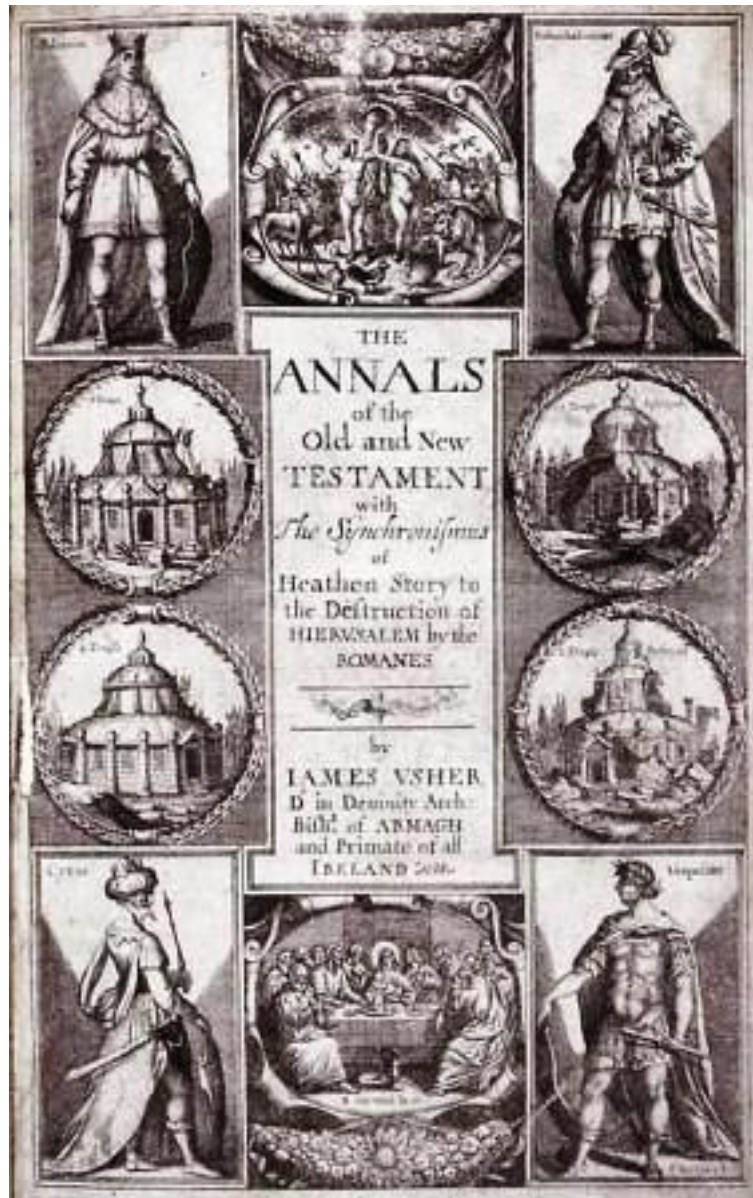
“James Ussher, was one of the greatest scholars and theologians of his time. In his enduring search for knowledge he travelled widely in Britain and Europe, seeking the earliest available manuscripts, buying those he could, and copying others. After his death, his extensive and valuable library, formed the nucleus of the great library of Trinity College, Dublin.

He was the pre-eminent figure in the contemporary Church of Ireland, and a leading patron of scholarship at Trinity College, Dublin. A staunch defender of episcopacy, he was nevertheless respected on all sides during the religious upheavals of the 1640s and 1650s, and regarded as the person most likely to achieve an accommodation between the Presbyterians and the Church of England. As such, he was valued by Hartlib and Dury, both of whom helped him at times with his scholarly work and looked to him as a potential patron for their own schemes.”¹

“Of his many works, his treatise on chronology has proved the most durable. Based on an intricate correlation of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean histories and Holy writ, it was incorporated into an authorized version of the Bible printed in 1701, and thus came to be regarded with almost as much unquestioning reverence as the Bible itself. Having established the first day of creation as Sunday 23 October 4004 BC, by the arguments set forth in the passage below, Ussher calculated the dates of other biblical events, concluding, for example, that Adam and Eve were driven from Paradise on Monday 10 November 4004 BC, and that the ark touched down on Mt Ararat on 5 May 2348 BC ‘on a Wednesday’.”²

¹ Ussher, *Annals of the World*, (p. 247), London, Printed by E. Tyler, for F. Crook, and G. Bedell, 1658.

² Craig, G. Y. and E. J. Jones. *A Geological Miscellany*. Princeton University Press, 1982.

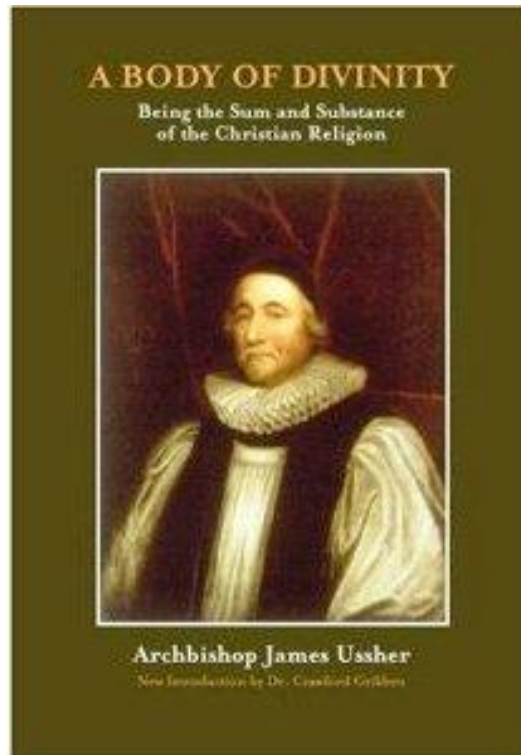


ANNALS OF THE WORLD

“Despite his success as a churchman, Ussher is perhaps most famous for having dated the start of the creation to the evening before 23rd October, 4004 B.C. Ussher calculated this timing in his *Annals*, a work of biblical chronology which he published in Latin in 1650 (Hartlib noted its progress through the press with great interest), and which was translated into English in 1658. The book was the fruit of many years labour; as early as the summer of 1640, Ussher had been reported ‘spend[ing] constantly all the afternoones’ in the Bodleian working at it (Constantine Adams to Hartlib, Hartlib Papers, 15/8/3A–4B).

Illustrated opposite is the title-page from the *Annals*, engraved by Francis Barlow and Richard Gaywood. This shows a number of the crucial figures and episodes from Ussher’s chronology. Adam and Eve are flanked by the figures of Solomon and Nebuchadnezzar, the builder and destroyer of the first Temple, which is also shown both in its glory and after its fall. The engraving also depicts the second Temple, built after Cyrus allowed the return of the Jews to Jerusalem, and its eventual destruction. The figures of Cyrus and of Vespasian (who was Emperor at the time of the destruction of Herod’s Temple, in A.D. 70) flank a depiction of the Last Supper.”³

³ Ussher, *Annals of the World*, (p. 247-248), London, Printed by E. Tyler, for F. Crook, and G. Bedell, 1658.



A BODY OF DIVINITY

Keith Mathison, *Discerning Reader Editorial Review*

“Probably best known for his work on biblical chronology, Ussher was a highly regarded Puritan leader and theologian. In 1615 he drew up the *Irish Articles of Religion*, which were later to become a source for the divines who wrote the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. In 1625, Ussher was appointed Archbishop of Armagh, and he remained in this office until his death.

Ussher’s influence on the work of the Westminster Assembly went beyond the *Irish Articles*. According to A. A. Hodge, Ussher’s book “had more to do in forming the Catechism and Confession of Faith than any other book in the world; because it is well known that although Archbishop Ussher was not himself present in the Westminster Assembly, he was twice invited to attend and sit there, and that this book, which he compiled as a young man, was in circulation in this Assembly among the individuals composing it” (Hodge, *Evangelical Theology*, 165). According to Hodge, then, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and *Catechisms* reflect the theology of Archbishop Ussher.

If this historical relationship to the Westminster Assembly were the only significance of Ussher’s work, it would be sufficient to establish the value of studying it. Thankfully, however, *A Body of Divinity* is worth studying also on its own merits as a richly theological work. Written in a catechetical question and answer format, Ussher covers all of the major topics of systematic theology. Following the main body of the text, this work also includes two brief catechisms, the first a very basic introduction to the Christian faith, the other for those who have devoted more study to the doctrines of the faith.

Ussher’s *Body of Divinity* is a foundational text of Reformed systematic theology. For students of Reformed theology and puritan history, it is a must-read. It is also highly recommended for any Christian who desires a deeper grasp of the essential doctrines of Christianity.”⁴

⁴ Keith Mathison, *Discerning Reader Editorial Review*

J. V. Fesko, *Understanding the Confession: Ussher's Body of Divinity*

“Many who confess the Westminster Standards perhaps do not know how the confession and catechisms were composed. At the time, a common practice in confession writing was to begin with an existing confessional document and proceed to edit, review, and build upon it. This practice was the case with the Westminster Standards. The divines were originally called by Parliament to review the Thirty-Nine Articles but later moved on to write the confession and catechisms. Hence there are some things the Standards have in common with Thirty-Nine articles. On the other hand, there was confession of faith for the Irish Protestant churches called, the Irish Articles, written in 1615 largely by James Ussher (1581-1656). There are certainly many parallels between the Irish Articles and the Westminster Confession.

For example, we can compare the following two statements:

God from all eternity did by his unchangeable counsel ordain whatsoever in time should come to pass: yet so, as thereby no violence is offered to the wills of the reasonable creatures, and neither the liberty nor the contingency of the second causes is taken away, but established rather (Irish Articles, no. 11)

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (WCF 3.1).

There are certainly minor differences, but the two statements are very similar. What this parallel illustrates is that though James Ussher was not a Westminster divine, he nevertheless exercised influence upon the assembly through his theological writings.

This historical fact makes Ussher's *Body of Divinity* an excellent resource for understanding English Reformed theology of the middle seventeenth century. Though there is some debate regarding the authorship of this work, it likely was authored by Ussher. Scholars believe that it was Ussher's private notebook, if you will. Hence, if we want to understand the mechanisms and gears behind the clock face of the Irish Articles, then Ussher's *Body of Divinity* certainly can serve this function.

Ussher treats the full scope of theology under fifty-two chapters, including the doctrines of Scripture, God, the covenants of works and grace, the fall, redemption, a full exposition of the Decalogue, the Lord's Prayer, ecclesiology, sacraments, and the consummation.”⁵

⁵ J. V. Fesko, *Understanding the Confession: Ussher's Body of Divinity*