

James Ussher

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James Ussher (sometimes spelled **Usher**) (4 January 1581 – 21 March 1656) was Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland between 1625–1656. He was a prolific scholar, who most famously published a chronology that purported to establish the time and date of the creation as the night preceding Sunday, 23 October 4004 BC, according to the proleptic Julian calendar.

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Education

Ussher was born in Dublin, Ireland, into a well-to-do Anglo-Irish family.

James Ussher

Archbishop of Armagh, Primate of All Ireland



See	Armagh
Enthroned	1625
Reign ended	1656
Predecessor	Christopher Hampton
Successor	John Bramhall (from 1661)
Other posts	Professor, Trinity College, Dublin, Chancellor, St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, Prebend of Finglas.
Orders	
Ordination	1602
Consecration	1626

Personal details

His maternal grandfather, James Stanihurst, had been speaker of the Irish parliament, and his father Arnold Ussher was a clerk in chancery who married Margaret Stanihurst.^[1]

Ussher's younger, and only surviving, brother, Ambrose, became a

distinguished scholar of Arabic and Hebrew. According to his chaplain and biographer, Nicholas Bernard, the elder brother was taught to read by two blind, spinster aunts.

Born	4 January 1581
	Dublin
Nationality	Irish
Denomination	Church of Ireland

Ussher was a gifted polyglot, entering Dublin Free School and then the newly-founded (1591) Trinity College, Dublin on 9 January 1594, at the age of thirteen (not an unusual age at the time). He had received his Bachelor of Arts degree by 1598, and was a fellow and MA by 1600 (though Bernard claims he did not gain his MA till 1601). In May of 1602, he was ordained in the Trinity College Chapel as a deacon in the Protestant, established, Church of Ireland (and possibly priest on the same day) by his uncle Henry Ussher, the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland.

Ussher went on to become Chancellor of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin in 1605 and Prebend of Finglas. He became Professor of Theological Controversies at Trinity College and a Bachelor of Divinity in 1607, Doctor of Divinity in 1612, and then Vice-Chancellor in 1615 and vice-provost in 1616. In 1613, he married Phoebe, daughter of a previous Vice-Provost, Luke Challoner, and published his first work. In 1615, he was closely involved with the drawing up of the first confession of faith of the Church of Ireland.

Early career

In 1619, Ussher travelled to England, where he remained for two years. His only child, Elizabeth, was born in London in 1619. He became prominent after meeting James I. In 1621, James nominated him Bishop of Meath. He also became a national figure in Ireland, becoming Privy Councillor in 1623 and an increasingly substantial scholar. A noted collector of Irish manuscripts, he made them available for research to fellow-scholars such as his friend, Sir James Ware. From 1623 until 1626, he was again in England and was excused from his episcopal duties in order to study church history. He was nominated Primate of All Ireland and Archbishop of Armagh in 1625 and succeeded Christopher Hampton.

Primate of All Ireland



Archbishop James Ussher
(1581–1656)

After his consecration in 1626, Ussher found himself in turbulent political times. Tension was rising between England and Spain, and to secure Ireland Charles I offered Irish Catholics a series of concessions, including religious toleration, known as the Graces, in exchange for money for the upkeep of the army. Ussher was a convinced Calvinist and viewed with dismay the possibility that people he regarded as anti-Christian papists might achieve any sort of power. He called a secret meeting of the Irish bishops in his house in November of 1626, the result being the "Judgement of the Arch-Bishops and Bishops of Ireland". This begins:

The religion of the papists is superstitious and idolatrous; their faith and doctrine erroneous and heretical; their church in respect of both, apostatical; to give them therefore a toleration, or to consent that they may freely exercise their religion, and

profess their faith and doctrine, is a grievous sin.

The Judgement was not published until it was read out at the end of a series of sermons against the Graces given at Dublin in April 1627. In the end, the Graces were not confirmed by the Irish parliament.

During a four-year interregnum between Lord Deputies from 1629 on, there was an increase in efforts to impose religious conformity on Ireland. In 1633, Ussher wrote to the new Archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, in an effort to gain support for the imposition of recusancy fines on Irish Catholics. Thomas Wentworth, who arrived as the new Lord Deputy in Ireland in 1633, deflected the pressure for conformity by stating that firstly, the Church of Ireland itself would have to be properly resourced, and he set about its re-endowment. He also settled the long-running primacy dispute between the sees of Armagh and Dublin in Armagh's favour.

Ussher soon found himself at odds with the rise of Arminianism and Wentworth and Laud's desire for conformity between the Church of England and the more Calvinistic Church of Ireland. Ussher resisted this pressure at a convocation in 1634, ensuring that the English Articles of Religion were adopted as well as the Irish articles, not instead of

them, and that the Irish canons had to be redrafted based on the English ones rather than replaced by them. Theologically, he was a Calvinist although on the matter of the atonement he was (somewhat privately) a hypothetical universalist. His most significant influence in this regard was John Davenant, later an English delegate to the Synod of Dort, who managed to significantly soften that Synod's teaching regarding limited atonement.^[2]

In 1633, Ussher had supported the appointment of Archbishop Laud as Chancellor of Trinity. He had hoped that Laud would help to impose order on what was, Ussher accepted, a somewhat mismanaged institution. Laud did that, rewriting the charter and statutes to limit the authority of the fellows, and ensure that the appointment of the provost was under royal control. But he also in 1634 imposed on the College an Arminian provost, William Chappell, whose theological views, and peremptory style of government, were antithetical to all that Ussher stood for. By 1635, it was apparent that Ussher had lost de facto control of the church to John Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, in everyday matters, and to Laud in matters of policy.

The traditional view of Ussher is of a slightly-unworldly scholar, who was, at best, a mediocre politician and administrator. In reality he was an effective bishop and archbishop, and politically important,^[3] however, he was reactive and sought conciliation rather than confrontation.^[4] The story that he successfully opposed attempts to reintroduce the Irish language for use in church services by William Bedell, the Bishop of Kilmore, has been refuted^{[5][6]}.

Ussher certainly preferred to be a scholar when he could be. He engaged in extensive disputations with Roman Catholic theologians, and even as a student he challenged a Jesuit relative, Henry Fitzsimon (Ussher's mother was Catholic), to dispute publicly the identification of the Pope with the Antichrist. However, Ussher also wrote extensively on theology, patristics and ecclesiastical history, and these subjects gradually displaced his anti-Catholic work. As well as by his learning, he was also distinguished by his charity and good temper.

After Convocation in 1634, Ussher left Dublin for his episcopal residence at Drogheda, where he concentrated on his archdiocese and his research. In 1631, he had published a *Discourse on the Religion Anciently Professed by the Irish*, a ground-breaking study of the early Irish church, which sought to demonstrate how it differed from Rome and was, instead, much closer to the later Protestant church. This was to prove highly influential, establishing the idea that the Church of Ireland was the true successor of the early Celtic church – a belief which persists down to the present day.

In 1639, he published the most substantial history of Christianity in Britain to that date, *Britannicarum ecclesiarum antiquitates* – the antiquities of the British churches. It was an astonishing achievement in one respect – in gathering together so many previously unpublished manuscript sources. But Ussher was very reluctant to arrive at firm judgements as to the sources' authenticity – hence his devotion of a whole chapter to the imaginative but invented stories of King Lucius and the creation of a Christian episcopate in Britain.

English Civil War

In 1640, Ussher left Ireland for England for what turned out to be the last time. In the years before the English Civil War, his reputation as a scholar and his moderate Calvinism meant that his opinion was sought by both King and Parliament. After Ussher lost his home and income through the Irish uprising of 1641, Parliament voted him a pension of £400 while the King awarded him the income and property of the vacant See of Carlisle.

In early 1641 Ussher developed a mediatory position on church government, which sought to bridge the gap between the Laudians, who believed that bishops were divinely ordained and a separate order from priests and deacons, and the presbyterians, who wanted to abolish episcopacy entirely. His proposals, not published until 1656, after his death, as *The Reduction of Episcopacy*, proposed a compromise where bishops operated in a presbyterian synodal system, were initially designed to support a rapprochement between Charles and the parliamentary leadership in 1641, but were rejected by the King. They did, however, have an afterlife, being published in England and Scotland well into the eighteenth century. In all, he wrote or edited five books relating to episcopacy; the last two, treatises on the Ignatian epistles, were particular scholarly achievements that have largely survived modern scrutiny.

As the middle ground between King and Parliament vanished in 1641-2, Ussher was forced, reluctantly, to choose between his godly Calvinist allies in parliament and his instinctive loyalty to the monarchy. Eventually, in January 1642 (having asked parliament's permission), he moved to Oxford, a royalist stronghold. Though Charles severely tested Ussher's loyalty by negotiating with the Catholic Irish rebels, the Primate remained committed to the royal cause, though as king's fortunes waned Ussher had to move on to Bristol, Cardiff, and then to St Donat's. In June of 1646, he returned to London under the protection of his friend, the Countess of Peterborough, in whose houses he stayed from then on. He became a preacher at Lincoln's Inn early in 1647, and despite his royalist loyalties was protected by his friends in Parliament. He watched the execution of Charles I from the roof of the Countess of Peterborough's London house but fainted

before the axe fell.

Chronology

Main article: Ussher chronology

Ussher now concentrated on his research and writing and returned to the study of chronology and the church fathers. After a 1647 work on the origin of the Creeds, Ussher published a treatise on the calendar in 1648. This was a warm-up for his most famous work, the *Annales veteris testamenti, a prima mundi origine deducti* ("Annals of the Old Testament, deduced from the first origins of the world"), which appeared in 1650, and its continuation, *Annalium pars posterior*, published in 1654. In this work, he calculated the date of the Creation to have been nightfall preceding 23 October 4004 BC. (Other scholars, such as Cambridge academic, John Lightfoot, calculated their own dates for the Creation.) The time of the Ussher chronology is frequently misquoted as being 9 a.m., noon or 9 p.m. on 23 October. See the related article on the chronology for a discussion of its claims and methodology.

Ussher's work is sometimes associated with Young Earth Creationism, which holds that the universe was created several millennia ago. But while calculating the date of the Creation is today in some circles considered a controversial activity, in Ussher's time such a calculation was still regarded as an important task, one previously attempted by many Post-Reformation scholars, such as Joseph Justus Scaliger and physicist Isaac Newton.

Ussher's chronology represented a considerable feat of scholarship: it demanded great depth of learning in what was then known of ancient history, including the rise of the Persians, Greeks and Romans, as well as expertise in the bible, biblical languages, astronomy, ancient calendars and chronology, Ussher's account of historical events for which he had multiple sources other than the Bible is usually in close agreement with modern accounts – for example, he placed the death of Alexander in 323 BC and that of Julius Caesar in 44 BC.

But Ussher's last extra-biblical coordinate was the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, and beyond this point he had to rely on other considerations. Faced with inconsistent texts of the Torah, each with a different number of years between Flood and Creation, Ussher chose the Masoretic version. Partly his reasons were sound scholarly ones – the Masoretic text claims an unbroken history of careful transcription stretching back centuries – but his choice was confirmed for him because it placed Creation exactly four thousand years before 4 BC, the generally accepted date for the birth of Christ; moreover, he calculated, Solomon's temple was completed in the year 3000 from

creation, so that there were exactly 1000 years from the temple to Christ, who was the fulfilment of the Temple.^[7]

Death

In 1655, Ussher published his last book, *De Graeca Septuaginta Interpretum Versione*, the first serious examination of the Septuagint, discussing its accuracy as compared with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. In 1656, he went to stay in the Countess of Peterborough's house in Reigate, Surrey. On 19 March, he felt a sharp pain in his side after supper and took to his bed with what sounds like an internal haemorrhage. He died at one o'clock on 21 March at the age of 75. His last words were reported as *O Lord forgive me, especially my sins of omission*. His body was embalmed and was to have been buried in Reigate, but at Cromwell's insistence he was given a state funeral on 17 April and buried in the chapel of St Erasmus in Westminster Abbey.

Reputation

The fact that Cromwell was content to allow an Anglican bishop to be buried in Westminster is a clear indication of the respect in which Ussher was held, even by those who were theologically opposed to him. And indeed, after his death Ussher's reputation as a saintly scholar ensured that his posthumous endorsement was sought by a wide range of writers and ecclesiastical leaders, from the seventeenth century nonconformists to the nineteenth century Oxford movement. His scholarly achievements remain considerable – his work in sorting out the genuine from the spurious letters of Ignatius was a milestone in the study of that important early-church father; and his pioneering gathering of sources relating to early Irish church history laid the foundation for much subsequent research. Even his efforts to identify the date of creation, often derided these days, gathered together the most up to date scientific, chronological, historical and biblical scholarship in an impressive synthesis. Ironically, many of those who try to uphold the truth of Ussher's dating of creation today, can only do so by ignoring what Ussher deeply respected – the consensus of mainstream contemporary scientific and biblical scholarship.

See also

- Tadhg Og Ó Cianáin
- Peregrine Ó Duibhgeannain
- Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh
- Mícheál Ó Cléirigh

- Sir James Ware
- Mary Bonaventure Browne
- Dubhaltach Mac Fhirbhisigh
- Ruaidhrí Ó Flaithbheartaigh
- Uilliam Ó Duinnín
- Charles O'Connor (historian)
- Eugene O'Curry
- John O'Donovan (scholar)

Footnotes

- ↑ *Dictionary of National Biography*, article Stanyhurst, Richard.
- ↑ Moore, J.D. (2007) *English Hypothetical Universalism*, Cambridge: Eerdmans.
- ↑ Abbott, W. M. (1990). "James Ussher and "Ussherian" episcopacy, 1640–1656: the primate and his Reduction manuscript." *Albion* xxii: 237–259.
- ↑ *James Ussher*, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (2004)
- ↑ O'Sullivan, W. S. (1968). "Review of R. B. Knox, James Ussher Archbishop of Armagh." *Irish Historical Studies* xvi: 215–219.
- ↑ Leerssen, J. (1982–1983). "Archbishop Ussher and Gaelic culture." *Studia Hibernica* xxii–xxiii: 50–58.
- ↑ James Barr, *Biblical Chronology: Legend Or Science? The Ethel M. Wood Lecture 1987*. Delivered at the Senate House, University of London on 4 March 1987. London: University of London, 1987. Pbk. ISBN 7187088644. pp.19.

See also

- Dating Creation
- Anglicanism

Further reading

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- Alan Ford, *James Ussher: theology, history, and politics in early-modern Ireland and England* Oxford University Press (2007)
- Knox, R. Buck (1967), *James Ussher, Archbishop of Armagh*, University of Wales Press
- Gould, Stephen Jay (1996), "Fall in the House of Ussher", *Eight Little Piggies* (New York: W. W. Norton).

External links

- Ussher bibliography and list of secondary sources (<http://www.ucc.ie/acad/classics/CNLS/bibliography/ussherbibl.html>)
- Bishop Ussher Dates the World: 4004 BC (Lockhaven University) (<http://www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/ussher.htm>)
- Armagh Observatory-James Usser (<http://star.arm.ac.uk/history/ussher.html>)
- The Ussher Project (<http://www.tcd.ie/history/Ussher/home.php>) at Trinity College, Dublin

Links to his works

- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://books.google.com/?id=GoZLAAAAMAAJ>) , **I**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://books.google.com/?id=GoZLAAAAMAAJ>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – The Life of James Ussher, D.D.
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.*, **II**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith – incl. De Christianorum Ecclesiarum Successione et Statu historica Explicatio (1613)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe03elriuoft>) , **III**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe03elriuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – some works in English
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe04elriuoft>) , **IV**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe04elriuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – incl. Gotteschalci et Praedestinatione Controversiae abeomotae Historia (1631); Veterum Epistolarum Hibernicarum Sylloge (1632)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli05usshuoft>) , **V**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli05usshuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Britannicarum Ecclesiarum Antiquitates; caput I-XIII (1639)
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- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James*

Ussher, D.D., **VII**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith – Dissertatio non de Ignati solum et Polycarpi scriptis, sed etiam de Apostolicis Constitutionibus et Canonibus Clementi Romano attributis (1644); Praefationes in Ignatium (1644); De Romanae Ecclesiae Symbolo vetere aliisque Fidei Formulis tum ab Occidentalibus tum ab Orientalibus in prima Catechesi et Baptismo proponi solitis (1647); De Macedonum et Asianorum Anno Solari Dissertatio (1648); De Graeca Septuaginta Interpretum Versione Syntagma, cum Libri Estherae editione Origenica et vetere Graeca altera; Epistola ad Ludovicum Capellum de variantibus Textus Hebraei Lectionibus; Epistola Gulielmi Eyre ad Usserium

- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli08usshuoft>) , **VIII**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli08usshuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Annales veteris Testamenti, a Prima Mundi Origine deducti, una cum Rerum Asiaticarum Aegypticarum Chronico, a temporis historici principio usque ad Maccabaicorum initia producto (1650)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (http://books.google.com/?id=YtpKA_nvXo4C) , **IX**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, http://books.google.com/?id=YtpKA_nvXo4C, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Annales veteris Testamenti (contd.)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli10usshuoft>) , **X**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli10usshuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Annales veteris Testamenti (contd.)
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- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli12usshuoft>) , **XII**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli12usshuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Chronologia sacra (1660); Historia Dogmatica Controversiae inter Orthodoxos et Pontificios de Scripturis et Sacris Vernaculis; Dissertatio de Pseudo-Dionysii scriptis; Dissertatio de epistola ad Laodicenses
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://books.google.com/?id=75FLAAAAMAAJ>) , **XIII**, Dublin:

Hodges and Smith, <http://books.google.com/?id=75FLAAAAMAAJ>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – sermons (in English)

- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli14usshuoft>) , **XIV**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/wholeworkswithli14usshuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – Tractatus de Controversiis Pontificiis; Praelectiones Theologicae
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe15elriuoft>) , **XV**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe15elriuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – letters (in English) (incl. first to Richard Stanihurst, his uncle)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1847), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe16elriuoft>) , **XVI**, Dublin: Hodges and Smith, <http://www.archive.org/details/lifeofjamesusshe16elriuoft>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – letters (in English and Latin)
- Elrington, Charles Richard (1864), *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher, D.D.* (<http://books.google.com/?id=bZNLAAAAMAAJ>) , **XVII**, Dublin: Hodges, Smith, and Co, <http://books.google.com/?id=bZNLAAAAMAAJ>, retrieved 2008-08-17 – indexes

Church of England titles		
Preceded by Barnaby Potter	Bishop of Carlisle 1642–1643 <i>in commendam</i>	Succeeded by Richard Sterne

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