

PREFACE

JAMES USSHER (1581-1656)

—ARCHBISHOP, SCHOLAR AND THEOLOGIAN

JAMES USSHER was one of the greatest Reformed evangelicals of the seventeenth century, yet, curiously, Christians in Britain have neglected him. His works are largely out of print, apart from an American republication of what is now his most famous work—*The Annals of the History of the World*. Yet Ussher has much to teach all Reformed Christians, and particularly members of the Church of England and the Church of Ireland, about their Reformed protestant roots.

His friend the antiquarian John Selden described Ussher as ‘learned to miracle’, and this is no exaggeration. Ussher was a prodigious scholar, scarcely paralleled even in his own age of unremitting puritan industry, and certainly not since. His complete works, edited by Elrington, run to seventeen volumes, and they do not include a number of works that were published posthumously, of which *A Body of Divinity* is one. Ussher’s life was long by seventeenth century standards, and he held high episcopal and academic office during the troubled times of the early Stuarts and the civil wars. Throughout his crowded life, however, Ussher maintained remarkably consistent principles. He pursued his theological and antiquarian studies against a background of change and unrest, but nonetheless he has left a monumental legacy to the church that deserves to be rediscovered.

James Ussher was born in Dublin on 4th January 1581. His early life was therefore spent in the final years of the reign of Elizabeth 1. He came from a protestant Anglo-Irish family, although there were members of his mother’s family who were Roman Catholics. He received his earliest education from two blind aunts and then at a school in Dublin run by two firmly protestant Scotsmen. Ussher proceeded thence to the newly-founded Trinity College, Dublin as one of its first scholars. Trinity was at that time unequivocally Reformed and protestant and, although episcopalian, tolerant of differences of opinion on matters of church government. This is an apt description of Ussher’s own position throughout his life. Ussher’s main concern was the heart of the Christian faith and where people were in agreement with him on the foundations he would not quibble over the details of ecclesiastical discipline. He was very much the product of late Elizabethan Irish Protestantism and stands as the finest exemplar of that tradition. It is a tradition that upholds some of the greatest truths revealed by God in Scripture.

Ussher’s rise to prominence was spectacular. He became a fellow of Trinity in 1600 at the age of nineteen. He received his MA in 1601. He was appointed the chancellor of St Patrick’s Cathedral in 1605. In 1607, aged 26, he was made a professor of divinity, specialising in theological controversies. He had already criticised the government of the day in a sermon preached in 1602 on Ezekiel 4:6. He predicted a judgment on the nation in forty years for tolerating Romanism. The Irish rising of 1641 and the beginning of the Civil War in England in 1642 remarkably fulfilled this prophetic exposition of Scripture.

Scholar though he was, it was already evident that Ussher was a man of very firm protestant opinions, who was a gifted controversialist. He was chosen vice-chancellor of Trinity in 1615 and vice-provost the following year.

The main work of Ussher's early career was anti-Roman theological polemic. He had built up a formidable knowledge of early Church history and patristics and used this material to attack the Church of Rome's spurious claim to antiquity, demonstrating that many of the distinctive doctrines of Romanism were in fact innovations. Further, Ussher was probably the main author of the 104 Irish Articles, which are published here along with *A Body of Divinity*. They certainly represent his views and many phrases in them correspond to those in his other works. Ussher's chaplain, Nicholas Bernard, says that Ussher was the 'principal person' involved in writing them. The Convocation of Irish clergy passed them in Dublin in 1615. They are an expansion of the theology of 39 Articles and not a contradiction and include some material from the Lambeth Articles of 1595¹. They take essentially the same position as the Elizabethan articles but are more explicitly Calvinistic and, if possible, even more vigorously protestant. Ussher continued to endorse the viewpoint of the Irish articles to the end of his life.

In 1621 Ussher was removed from the more sequestered academic environment of Trinity and consecrated bishop of Meath. He was also appointed a member of the Irish Privy Council. This was a significant step into the limelight and from then on Ussher was a national, rather than merely local, figure. He continued to maintain his implacable opposition to Rome as well as to pursue his scholarly research. In 1625, in the last year of James' reign, he was elevated to the Archbishopric of Armagh.

James I died in 1625 and his son Charles started to pursue policies that were increasingly to disturb the Archbishop. In 1626 Charles offered concessions to Irish Roman Catholics. This met with vigorous and successful opposition from Ussher and a number of his Irish colleagues, including George Downham, the bishop of Derry. In 1633 Thomas Wentworth, the earl of Strafford, arrived as Charles' lord deputy in Ireland. Wentworth, in league with Archbishop Laud in England, sought to pursue a policy that would harmonise the Churches of England and Ireland as well as take them both in a decidedly Arminian and ritualistic direction. Their principal ecclesiastical collaborator in Ireland was bishop Bramhall of Derry. Matters came to a head in 1634 when Wentworth sought to replace the Irish Articles with the 39 Articles of Religion. Ussher was deeply opposed to such a move and the final position was that although the 39 Articles were accepted, the Irish Articles were not revoked. Ussher continued to require that Irish clergy should accept both.

No doubt partly out of concern about the growth of Arminian theology, Ussher published in 1631 a study of the theology of Gottschalk, a ninth century German monk who defended the doctrine of predestination. He also published historical accounts of the growth of Christianity in Britain and Ireland. These books were firmly anti-Pelagian and anti-Roman.

In 1640, at the age of 59, Ussher left Ireland never to return. He spent the last 16 years of his life in England during the turbulent period of the civil wars and the Commonwealth. Although Ussher was a committed royalist he shared many of the theological views of the puritan and parliamentary party. He was friendly with a number of Parliamentary leaders,

¹ The Lambeth Articles were a Calvinistic appendix to the 39 Articles. Dr. Whitaker, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, wrote them. They were formally approved by Whitgift, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Hutton, the Archbishop of York. Elizabeth I, angered by a synod meeting without her permission, did not sanction them. The Dublin convocation of 1615 did, however, accept them.

notably John Pym and the earls of Warwick and Bedford. However, he accompanied Strafford to his execution, and indeed gave an account of his bravery on the scaffold. It was during this period of increasingly high puritan feeling that Ussher published two scholarly defences of episcopacy, again relying on his prodigious knowledge of the early church. He also found time to solve the problem of the true authorship of the Ignatian epistles, coming to conclusions that have been little altered by contemporary scholarship.

In 1642 Ussher moved to Oxford to pursue his scholarly research. Although Oxford was effectively the royalist capital, Ussher sought the permission of Parliament to go. However by 1643 he made it plain that he was a decided royalist. It was a mark of the respect in which the Parliamentary party held him that he was nonetheless invited to attend the sessions of the Westminster Assembly in 1643. Ussher had worked with William Twisse, the assembly's prolocutor, on compiling a report for the House of Lords on Laudian innovations in the church. The members of the assembly were no doubt thoroughly familiar with Ussher's 1615 articles and also, perhaps, with his as yet unpublished *Body of Divinity*, since the final confession appears to draw heavily on their contents and structure². Ussher would undoubtedly have agreed with much if not all of the Westminster Confession and it is therefore something of an irony of providence that he felt unable to attend because of his royalist convictions. After the battle of Naseby in 1645 the royalist military effort was effectively at an end and in 1646 Ussher returned to London under the protection of his friend the countess of Peterborough. He even secured a preaching position at Lincoln's Inn, another signal example of the respect in which he was held by his Parliamentary opponents. There can be no doubt that he deeply disapproved of the execution of the king and is said to have watched and wept at the king's death.

Nonetheless it was during the Commonwealth and Protectorate that Ussher published two of his most famous works—the *Annales Veteris Testamenti* (1650) and the *Annalium Pars Posterior* (1654). The English translation of these two works was published posthumously as a single volume in 1658. This was a complete history of the world from the creation to the destruction of the Jewish temple in 70 AD, based on the Bible and ancient sources. It was also the work in which, famously, he dated the creation of the world to 23rd October 4004 BC.

In 1655 Ussher was chosen to plead the cause of Anglican clergy before Cromwell, who had imposed severe restrictions on the use of the Book of Common Prayer. Ussher did not succeed. He died on the 21st March 1656 in Reigate at one of the countess of Peterborough's houses. His last words were 'O Lord forgive me, especially my sins of omission', an astonishing prayer from a man whose life was characterised by ceaseless labour. It is noteworthy that the Lord Protector paid for a state funeral at Westminster Abbey, where Ussher was buried on 17th April 1656. The service was held, with Cromwell's permission, according to the Book of Common Prayer.

² B. B. Warfield's study of *The Westminster Doctrine of Holy Scripture* demonstrates the extent of the similarity between the Articles' and *Body of Divinity's* statements on Scripture and those of the Confession c.f. *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*—Still Waters Revival Books, 1991.

A Body of Divinity

We have already noted that Ussher was thoroughly Reformed and protestant. This is evident in the present work, to which we have appended the text of the Irish Articles of 1615 and a brief but superb exposition of the incarnation entitled *Immanuel*. The 104 Articles, written when Ussher was in his thirties, represent exactly the same theological viewpoint as *A Body of Divinity*, in a briefer confessional format. *A Body of Divinity* was probably written in 1617, before Ussher left Ireland. He was at the time a fellow of Trinity College Dublin, a DD and a professor of theological controversies. It therefore represents Ussher's considered views as a theologian. It bears some resemblance to an earlier work called *The Principles of the Christian Religion*. This was written by Ussher when in his twenties, and then edited by him and republished in 1654, shortly before his death. The theological outlook of both works is the same, and the fact that Ussher authorised the republication of the earlier work shortly before his death shows that he lost none of his convictions with the passing of the years. Both works are catechetical, although *A Body of Divinity* is considerably longer. It is a fine summary of the Christian faith, which is especially valuable as a statement of Reformed protestant Anglicanism. It is marked by a number of features that contemporary evangelicals would do well to rediscover.

First, it is thoroughly Scriptural. Ussher refers extensively to the Bible on every page of this work. He rejects unequivocally the authority of the apocryphal texts, which are accepted by the Church of Rome. It is clear that he had read and meditated on the text of Scripture deeply and many of the references are fascinating. Ussher cites some compelling texts from the Old Testament in defence of the doctrine of the Trinity, notably Genesis 19:24. At every stage in the work he seeks to establish the truth of his dogmatic position by citing the Bible. If we learn no other lesson from Ussher it is that our theological opinions are worse than useless unless they are firmly based on the teaching of the Word of God.

Second, it is thoroughly Calvinistic. Ussher shared Augustine and Calvin's view that the fall of Adam had left man fatally damaged in every area of his being, including his will. As he vividly puts it, 'Every man is by nature dead in sin as a loathsome carrion, or as a dead corpse, and lieth stinking in the grave, having in him the seed of all sins, Eph. 2:1, 1 Tim. 5:6.' Man needs a sovereign work of God's Holy Spirit to raise him from spiritual death. Nothing else can save him. On the contentious question of predestination Ussher is quite clear that election is not based on any foreseen choice of man but is based only on a free choice made by God, and that none of the elect can be lost. On the question of the extent of the atonement Ussher says that Christ's atonement was made for the elect—'By his most painful sufferings he hath satisfied for the sins of the whole world of His elect, Is. 53:5, 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 2:2.' There can be no doubt therefore that Ussher held to what are now commonly described as the 'five points' of Calvinism.

It is also interesting to note that Ussher was committed to a covenantal understanding of salvation history. The Irish Articles describe Adam before the fall as having 'the covenant of the law ingrafted on his heart'—article 21. Ussher uses the terminology of the Covenant of Works explicitly in *A Body of Divinity*.

Third, it has a clear commitment to the doctrine of the moral law. This classic Reformed view of the law has been challenged both without and within evangelical circles and particularly in evangelical Anglicanism. Contemporary Anglicanism is tainted with an antinomian spirit that Ussher would have abhorred. He rightly saw that the law defines sin and that the so-called

*tertius usus legis*³ is the path of Christian holiness. The two great commandments are made explicit in the Ten Commandments and no Christian can claim to be exempt from any of them. This is particularly true of the doctrine of the Christian Sabbath, which has been all but abandoned within evangelical Anglicanism. Nonetheless Ussher correctly saw that the Sabbath command is a creation ordinance and not only fundamental to the health of the Christian Church but also of society in general. It is because of the importance that Ussher attached to the moral law that he devotes a large part of the work to a detailed exposition of the Decalogue.

Fourth, it is unashamed to treat the Scriptures as works of historical fact. Contemporary evangelicalism has been cowed by the strident voices of modern science telling us, with no solid scientific evidence, that the world is millions of years old and that man is descended from the apes. Yet the Scriptures are clear that this is not so, and accepting the contemporary version of origins is theologically vicious in a number of ways. First, it undermines the consequences of the fall. We are told that the created order before the fall was perfect, yet the evolutionary vision is of millions of years of death and suffering before the emergence of man and before man had sinned. Yet it is vital to grasp that death and suffering, both human and animal, are the results of sin. Second, it undermines the historical integrity of the whole Bible. Jesus and the apostles clearly accepted the plain historical sense of the book of Genesis. Rejecting it undermines the biblical narrative as well as the authority of our Lord and His apostles. Ussher asks, ‘Why is the order of the years of the world so carefully set down in the Scripture? To convince all Heathen that either thought the world was without beginning, or that it began millions of years before it did.’ This is a remarkably prescient answer in the light of modern scientific speculation.

Fifth, it is firmly opposed to the theological errors of the Church of Rome. We have already noted in our brief synopsis of Ussher’s early life that his first endeavours were in the area of anti-Roman theological controversy. He did not regard the Church of Rome as a true church because, although it has some of the marks of a church, it does not have the true biblical gospel. Where there is fundamental disagreement over the nature of the gospel itself there can be no true Christian fellowship. Further, in both the Body of Divinity and the Articles Ussher identifies the Roman Papacy as the Antichrist. The Irish Articles are the only Anglican confession to do so. The Westminster Confession follows Ussher in this identification. Many modern evangelicals however, would think this view either extreme or laughable, or both. Yet Ussher as well as Owen, Turretin, Calvin and Luther shared this view. These men were neither fools nor bigots. They were some of the greatest Christian scholars the world has ever seen. They saw in the papacy a fulfilment of Old and New Testament prophecy⁴, and many of the greatest evangelicals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries followed them. It is striking that evangelicals have only abandoned this doctrine in the late twentieth century, an era largely marked by apostasy. However, the testimony of Scripture favours this identification and a number of important consequences flow from it. If the Pope is the Anti-

³ The Reformers distinguished three uses of the moral law—1 the *usus politicus*, that is the use of the law in the body politic, 2 the *usus pedagogicus*, the use of the law in convicting us of sin and leading to Christ and 3 the *usus normativus* or *tertius usus*, the use of the law as a rule of life for the Christian.

⁴ Bishop Wordsworth’s exposition of 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-13 is one of the most persuasive exegeses identifying the Papacy as the ‘man of sin’ or Antichrist. It is published under the title ‘*Is the Papacy Predicted by St. Paul?*’—Harrison Trust 1985. Strangely, Wordsworth was a High Churchman, although of the old-fashioned protestant kind. He was not Anglo-Catholic.

christ then the Roman system will endure as an enemy of the gospel until our Lord's return. The Papacy will, in a particular way, be Satan's agent in resisting Christ's true gospel, while masquerading as Christ's servant. The Papacy, despite the claims of the Roman Church to the contrary, is a changing institution, and the doctrine of Antichrist teaches us that its last form will be its worst. Protestant evangelicals are not therefore to expect or seek the transformation of the Roman system or to hope for an accommodation with it. They should rather denounce its errors and pray for the salvation of those within it. The exhortation to Roman Catholics who become true Christians should be to leave the Church of Rome and her idolatries for scriptural worship and practice.

James Ussher's magnificent theological legacy belongs to all Reformed protestant evangelicals. It is something of an irony that even evangelicals within the Churches of England and Ireland have neglected the doctrines in the Articles and *A Body of Divinity*. It is by contrast a strange providence that Ussher's doctrinal views have been preserved and spread within Presbyterianism through the Westminster Confession, on which, although not present at the Assembly, he had such a profound influence. Firm episcopalian though he was, Ussher had much in him of the Reformed ecumenist. He devoted his massive talents and energies to promoting the Reformed faith, defending the Bible and attacking error. No Christian leader can have followed more vigorously the great biblical exhortation—'earnestly contend for the faith which was once (for all) delivered unto the saints' (Jude 3). It is the publishers' earnest prayer that many will follow in his footsteps. Soli Deo Gloria!

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