JAMES USSHER’S INFLUENCE ON THE SYNOD OF DORDT

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Introduction

Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656) is today perhaps most well known for his 1654 groundbreaking work in biblical chronology, entitled The Annals of the World, dating the creation of the world and the “beginning of time” to “the entrance of the night preceding” Sunday, 23 October, 4004 BC.¹ In his own day, however, and well before the publication of his work of chronology, Ussher was revered equally as a learned and erudite theologian and churchman, as well as a great scholar. Ussher’s towering theological influence on the seventeenth-century church flowed out from his formidable scholarly attainments, and has been widely recognised by both his contemporaries and modern scholars alike.

From the far right, arch-Puritan William Prynne in his Anti-Arminianisme treatise of 1630 hailed Ussher as “that reverend, that incomparable learned Irishman, the glory of our Church, and honor of his Nation.”² And from the left-wing even his detractor Peter Heylyn acknowledged, if grudgingly, that Ussher was “the ablest Scholar” of Ireland.³ Most recently Ussher’s latest modern biographer, Professor Alan Ford, has stated that “the depth and breadth of his knowledge rightly earned him the admiration and respect not just of his contemporaries in the republic of letters across Europe, but also of politicians and ecclesiastical leaders of all persuasions.”⁴

³ Peter Heylyn, Cyprianus Anglicus: Or the History of the Life and Death, of the most reverend and renowned Prelate William by divine Providence, Lord Archbishop of Canterbury (London, 1668), p. 206.
In terms of that theological influence leading to the development of dogma and creedal formulations in the seventeenth century, traditional historiography has naturally focused on Ussher’s influence on the Irish Articles of 1615 and, through these articles, upon the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647, which borrowed heavily from the Irish Articles. However, that Ussher may have had a significant influence on the Canons of Dort has not been properly recognised. This is especially pertinent in light of the fact that Ussher’s influence on the Irish Articles has been vastly overstated by scholars, following uncritically as they have the largely unsubstantiated claims of Ussher’s first biographers and critics.

The fact is, Ussher—still not even a bishop—was at most a key contributor and scribe in the drawing up of the Irish Articles, and there is no

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Citations from this dictionary are henceforth referred to simply as ODNB and refer to the article on the person in question.


6 This is already beginning to change. Anthony Milton has recently suggested that Ussher’s tract on the death of Christ was one of a number of manuscripts that were to have “an important impact on the contribution of the British delegation” at Dort. Crawford Gribben has gone so far as to claim that “it was at the Synod of Dort that Ussher’s opinions would enjoy their greatest influence” (Anthony Milton, ed., The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618–1619) (Woodbridge, UK, 2005), p. 56; Crawford Gribben, ‘Rhetoric, Fiction and Theology: James Ussher and the Death of Jesus Christ,’ The Seventeenth Century 20 (2005), 53–76, there 70). This essay summons new and wider evidence to substantiate and consolidate this emerging line of thought.

7 Nicholas Bernard, The Life & Death of the most reverend and learned Father of our Church Dr. James Ussher, late Archbishop of Armagh, and Primate of all Ireland (London, 1656), pp. 49–50; Bernard in James Ussher, The Judgement of the late Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland, 1. Of the Extent of Christs Death, and Satisfaction, &c. 2. Of the Sabbath, and Observation of the Lords Day. 3. Of the Ordination in other Reformed Churches. With a Vindication of him from a pretended Change of opinion in the first; some Advertisements upon the Latter; and, in Prevention of further injuries, a Declaration of his judgement in several other Subjects (London, 1657), 1: 67; Nicholas Bernard, Clavi Trabales; Or, Nailes fastned by some great Masters of Assemblyes confirming the Kings Supremacy (London, 1661), p. 62; Peter Heylyn, Cyprianus Anglicus (see above, n. 3), p. 206; Peter Heylyn, Historia Quinqu-Artilucaris: Or, a Declaration of the Judgement of the Western Churches, and more particularly of the Church of England, in the five controverted Points, reproached in these last Times by the Name of Arminianism (London, 1660), 3: 101; Peter Heylyn, Aerius Redivivus: Or, the History of the Presbyterians (Oxford, 1670), p. 394; William Laud, The Works of the most reverend Father in God, William Laud, D.D. sometime Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, ed. William Scott & James Bliss, 7 vols. (Oxford, 1847–1860), 7: 75; Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, with