

Ussher's Date for World's Beginning



Scores of attempts have been made to compute the actual date of the earliest Biblical event--the creation. The most famous was undoubtedly that made by Bishop James Ussher in the seventeenth century.

James Ussher was born in Dublin, Ireland in 1581 and died in England in 1656. He lived through a time of tremendous political and religious upheaval in his native Ireland and in England. Though he was a Puritan in theology, he was a royalist in his steadfastness to the king and the principle of divine right of kings. Invited to participate in the Westminster Assembly, which eventually wrote the *Westminster Confession* and *Catechism*, Ussher refused because he thought the assembly itself was illegal.

In his day Ussher was an eminent scholar known to the foremost thinkers and statesmen in England. His collected works total seventeen volumes; the most famous of these is his *Annals of the Old and New Testament*, published in the 1650's. The work is a detailed chronology and dating of Biblical history. It is in this work that Ussher said God created the world on the morning of this day, October 23, 4004 B.C.

He arrived at this date, in part, by adding the ages of Adam and his descendants found in Genesis 5 and 11. He assumed that the Old Testament genealogies did not omit any names and that the periods of time in the texts were all consecutive. Scholars today question both assumptions. Although Ussher went by the best knowledge of his day, pouring deep learning into the subject, even then there were strong reasons to doubt his conclusions. The Jewish calculation of the creation of the world placed it at 3761 B.C. and Byzantine calculations placed it at 5509 B.C.

Nevertheless, Ussher's chronology is the earliest and the most celebrated attempt at Biblical chronology in English. Someone incorporated Ussher's chronology into the margins of the Authorized Version of the Bible, and it was printed in many Bibles well into the twentieth century.

Exact dates and chronology for ancient and Biblical times are often difficult to arrive at because dates of particular events are frequently given relative to other events of unknown date. For dates to be convertible to our modern calendar, they must relate to a fixed event.

Years are reckoned by eras, which start at a fixed point in history. The years preceding or following that point are numbered from that point. For example, the ancient Romans numbered their years from the founding of the city of Rome.

Five hundred years after Christ, a monk in Rome named Denys le Petit proposed that the birth of Christ be the fixed point or reference for the Christian era. According to his careful research, le Petit felt Christ was born in the Roman year 753. It was not until three or four centuries later that le Petit's suggestion came into general use in the West. Today the Christian reckoning is used throughout the world, though non-Christians prefer to call this the "common era."

Interestingly enough, some historians studying the events around Christ's birth and relating them to the most probable date for King Herod's death, have concluded that Jesus was born as early as 6 B.C. or as late as 2 B.C. Strange sounding, isn't it, that Jesus would be born "before Christ"? It just goes to show that pinning down Bible dates is often pretty iffy.