

## WAS BISHOP USSHER'S CHRONOLOGY INFLUENCED BY A MIDRASH?

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In the opening passage of the second chapter of Tanna d'be Eliyahu<sup>1</sup> we find: ". . . The world [in its present form] is to last six millennia; the first two millennia are to be an age of *tohu* (chaos); the next two millennia – an age of Torah, the next two millennia – the age of the Messiah."

James Ussher (1581-1656), Anglican archbishop of Armagh, is primarily remembered for his *Annales Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, published in 1650-1654, in which he presents a complete biblical chronology. If, indeed, this chronology was influenced by a midrash quoted above – as will be explained – it is an additional example of Christian dependence upon the Hebrew Bible and other Jewish documents.

Ussher's chronology was so widely accepted that from the beginning of the eighteenth century it was placed – no one knows by whom – in the margin of many reference editions of the Authorized Version of the Bible. In spite of the fact that Ussher was so rabidly anti-Catholic, his chronology found its way even into some editions of the Douay Bible.

Ussher's date for the birth of Jesus is 4 BCE. While the preponderance of contemporary scholarly opinion tends toward dating the nativity two or three years earlier, there are many New Testament scholars who subscribe to Ussher's date. In the light of Matthew 2:1, the year of Herod's death, 4 BCE, remains the *terminus ad quem* for dating the birth of Jesus.

Ussher's date for the Creation is 4004 BCE. Although no serious scholar today would attach any historical accuracy to this dating, what should be noted, however, is that this chronology places the birth of Jesus exactly 4000 years after the Creation. In keeping with Christian doctrine, this corresponds precisely with the statement of the above-quoted midrash that the fifth millennium will usher in the messianic era!

The question to be dealt with is whether or not Bishop Ussher was aware of this midrash. First of all, it should be noted that this was a well-known midrash that must have enjoyed wide circulation. It is quoted twice in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 97a and Avoda Zara 9a). Secondly, according to

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the verdict of contemporaries,<sup>2</sup> James Ussher was one of the most learned scholars of his day. John Knox Laughton tells us, "His genius as a scholar was shown in his eye for original sources and this on all subjects that he touched."

In addition to this, we know that Ussher studied Hebrew at Trinity College in Dublin, where later, at the age of 26, he was appointed regius professor of divinity. In his writings, he often affirms the general reliability of the Hebrew text. Also, in a letter written in 1655, he says, "excepting Hebrew there was little fruit to be gathered of exceeding labor."

This writer does not claim that he has proven a case. He merely suggests that it is not unlikely that Bishop Ussher gained knowledge (most probably from a secondary source) of this midrash and its messianic chronology and that it influenced his computations. On the other hand, if we assume that he was entirely unaware of the midrash, we are forced to accept a most remarkable coincidence.

#### NOTES

1. William G. Braude, in his *Tanna d'be Eliyahu*, dates this midrashic work to the fourth-fifth centuries. This particular midrash, however, is probably older, as messiah-predictors tended to set their predictions in the near future from their own point of time. According to Jewish traditional chronology (*Seder Olam Rabbah*), the end of the fourth millennium was the year 240 CE.
2. John Selden, a jurist friend, describes him as being *ad miraculum doctus*. Henry Fitzsimon, a Jesuit adversary, offers as much praise as he can muster in calling him *acatholicorum doctissimus*.

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