

**Ireland and the Old Testament:
Transmission, Translation, and Unexpected Influence**

1. Introduction

A medieval poem, attributed to the eleventh century poet Mael Ísu Ó'Brolcán, begins as follows:

How good to hear your voice again
Old love, no longer young, but true
As when in Ulster I grew up
And we were bedmates, I and you

When first they put us twain to bed
My love who speaks the tongue of heaven
I was a boy with no bad thoughts
A modest youth, and barely seven.¹

¹ Frank O'Connor, "A Priest Rediscovered His Psalm-Book," in *Kings, Lords, and Commons* (London: Macmillan, 1961): 12.

While at first blush this sounds like a romantic ballad, this medieval work is in fact an ode to a long-lost psalm-book rediscovered by a cleric later in life.² This lost love which “speaks the tongue of heaven” will be to many an unexpected object of affection in this verse; not only is it surprising that the Bible – and the Old Testament in particular – shows up in poetry of this sort, but that it does so in the hands of a medieval Irish priest runs counter to much popular opinion. If at all, contemporary readers might expect the Gospels to appear here, not least because of the influence of medieval works such as the Book of Kells, and their place in the contemporary landscape of Ireland and Irish tourism.³ Nevertheless, this poem highlights Ireland’s long, rich, and varied history of engagement with the Old Testament, a history that sometimes confirms our preconceptions, while at other times surprising us and confounding our expectations, as with our medieval priest and his unexpected object of affection.

In what follows I trace the story of Ireland and the Old Testament through several sometimes overlapping historical periods, focusing on transmission, translation, and stories of influence. Taken together, I suggest that the Old Testament has been more influential in

² See Timothy O’Neill, “Psalms and Psalm Books,” in *Treasures of Irish Christianity, Volume II: A People of the Word*, ed. Salvador Ryan and Brendan Leahy (Dublin: Veritas, 2013): 46–49, at 46.

³ See Bernard Meehan, *The Book of Kells* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012); Peter Fox (ed.), *The Book of Kells: MS 58, Trinity College Library Dublin. Commentary* (Lucerne: Faksimile Verlag, 1990). One might also note the collection at the Chester Beatty Library, the most well-known aspect of which is the collection of early Christian papyri; see Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Chester Beatty Biblical Papyri: Descriptions and Texts of Twelve Manuscripts on Papyrus of the Greek Bible: Fasciculus II: The Gospels and Acts* (London: Emery Walker, 1933).

shaping the social, cultural, and religious dynamics of the island than is often assumed, influence that has even spilled beyond the borders of the island.

2. The Transmission of the Old Testament in Early Christian Ireland

The story of the Old Testament in Ireland begins with the introduction and spread of Christianity to the island in the fifth century CE, which brought about the introduction of writing and the flourishing of literature both in Latin and Irish. We are dependent on these Christian sources for much of our information about the society, culture and literature of Ireland before and during these eras.

2.1 Law, Education, and Piety

To begin, it is worth noting that the Old Testament was intimately connected with a number of social and religious developments in this period, including legal traditions, education, and religious practice and piety.

The arrival of Christianity and literacy brought about the writing down of oral traditions, including law, where the intermingling of pre-Christian Irish traditions with new Christian ideal can be seen. For example, on the matter of polygamy, one text which predates the turn of the millennium notes that Christians oppose polygamy, but cites the Old Testament in favour of it: “There is a dispute in Irish law as to which is more proper, whether many sexual unions or a single one: for the chosen people of God lived in a plurality of unions, so that it is not easier to condemn it than to praise it.”⁴

⁴ Quoted in Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 71; cf. the discussion in Martin McNamara, “The Multifaceted Transmission of the Bible in Ireland, 550–1200 CE,” in *Ireland and the Reception of the Bible: Social and*

Christians also brought with them a focus on schooling, and with this the broader development of literacy in Ireland. As Martin McNamara and others have demonstrated, early Irish literacy involved the Psalms among other biblical texts, and these were particularly important in the learning of Latin.⁵ Related, we know that these same Psalms played an important role in the piety of early Christian Ireland. An example of this can be seen in the use of Psalm 118 (Heb. 119), the *Beati*, a text that was often memorised and used in learning Latin in monastic settings.⁶ The religious dimension of this psalm, along with its talismanic properties, are highlighted in a number of early and medieval Irish texts. A recurring theme in these traditions is that this psalm brings salvation, even restoring souls from hell, if recited daily for a year. One such example is recounted in the twelfth century Book of Leinster.⁷

Cultural Perspectives, ed. Bradford A. Anderson and Jonathan Kearney, STr 13 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018): 25–41, at 25–28.

⁵ Martin McNamara, “Psalter Text and Psalter Study in the Early Irish Church (A.D. 600–1200),” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 73 (1973): 201–98, at 264–9; cf. Martin McNamara, *The Psalms in the Early Irish Church*, JSOTSup 165 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

⁶ Elizabeth Boyle, “The *Beati* in Three Middle-Irish Texts,” in Ryan and Leahy, *Treasures of Irish Christianity*, 80. See also Osborn Bergin, “A Mystical Interpretation of the ‘Beati’,” *Ériu* 11 (1932): 103–6.

⁷ See R.I. Best, Osborn Bergin, M.A. O'Brien and Anne O'Sullivan, eds., *The Book of Leinster, Formerly Lebar na Núachongbála* (6 volumes) (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1954–1983); William O'Sullivan, “Notes On the Scripts and Make-up of the Book of Leinster,” *Celtica* 7 (1966): 1–31; Gearóid Mac Eoin, “The Provenance of the Book of Leinster,” *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 57 (2009–2010): 79–96.

In a brief *exemplum*, two clerical students promise that whoever dies first will return to the other and give an account of the afterlife. They both die in quick succession, but the second is returned to life for the space of one year so that he can, following the advice of his dead friend, recite the Beati daily in order to ensure the salvation of the soul. The narrative ends with the statement that ... “the Beati is the best prayer there is.”⁸

Thus, literary traditions suggest that the Old Testament played a crucial role in a number of social and cultural aspects of early Christian and medieval Ireland, including legal traditions, education, and piety.

2.2 Material Culture

Material culture from this period substantiates the important place of the Old Testament in this era.⁹ Continuing with the Psalms, a significant example is the sixth century text *An Cathach*, or the psalter of St Columba, considered to be the oldest existing Irish manuscript, and one of the oldest Latin psalters in the world (see Figure 1).¹⁰ The name *An Cathach* roughly translates as “the battler”, as this relic was often used during times of conflict on the

⁸ Boyle, “The *Beati* in Three Middle-Irish Texts,” 80.

⁹ H. M. Bannister, “Irish Psalters,” *JTS* 12 (1910–11): 280–84.

¹⁰ The *Cathach* is housed in the Royal Irish Academy (RIA MS 12 R 33). See Dáithí Ó Cróinín, “The *Cathach* and *Domnach Airgid*,” in *Treasures of the Royal Irish Academy Library*, ed. Bernadette Cunningham and Siobhán Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 2009): 1–8.

island, taken out to the frontlines of the battle to ensure success. There are also beautiful illustrated psalters from Irish monasteries of the period, and these point not only to the role these texts played in Irish piety of the day, but also to exegetical traditions and veneration for the text which is often assumed to be reserved for the Gospels. An example of this is the Southampton psalter, an insular illuminated psalter from Ireland which dates from the ninth or tenth century. Along with glosses in Latin and Irish, this manuscript has several depictions of David illuminating the psalms, including David as a shepherd and killing a lion, as well as David and Goliath.¹¹ As Thomas O’Loughlin has noted, such manuscripts also point to the technical skill which the monastic tradition valued – from the preparation of writing materials, to learning to copy texts accurately, to binding and preserving these valued artefacts.¹²

[Insert Figure 1 – An Cathach]

¹¹ This now resides in St John’s College, Cambridge. See E. Duncan, “*The Southampton Psalter*”: *A Palaeographical and Codicological Exploration*, Anglo-Saxon, Norse & Celtic Manuscript-Studies 4 (Cambridge: Department of ASNC, 2004). F. Henry, “Remarks on the decoration of three Irish Psalters,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 61 (1960): 23–40.

¹² Thomas O’Loughlin, “Monasteries and Manuscripts: The Transmission of Latin Learning in Early Medieval Ireland,” in *Information, Media and Power Through the Ages*, ed. Hiram Morgan (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2001): 46–64, at 50–52.

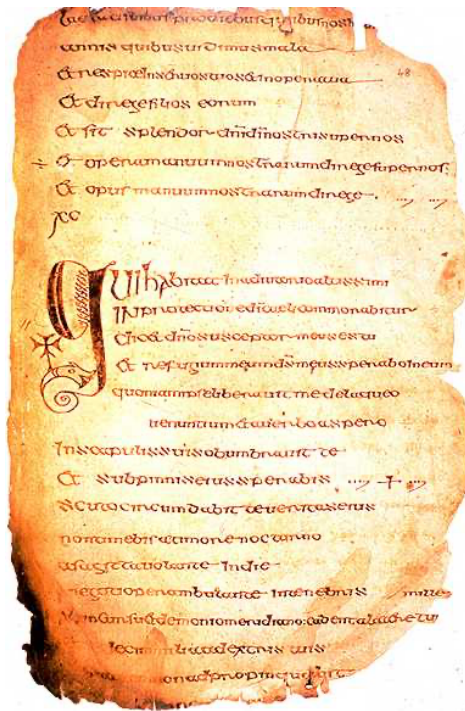


Figure 1: “Cathach of St Columba”. Public domain image available from Wikimedia Commons, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CathachOfStColumba.jpg>.

Somewhat surprisingly, discoveries are still being made that contribute to our understanding of the use of the Psalms in this period. In 2006 a well preserved Latin psalter was discovered during work in a peat bog in County Tipperary. Known as the Faddan More Psalter, or sometimes colloquially as the “bog psalter”, this manuscript likely dates to the ninth century, and contains sixty sheets of vellum, written in insular majuscule lettering, including some decorated opening letters. What is interesting is that the damp environment of the bog allowed for the original leather binding to remain intact, along with buttons on its outside – suggesting this formed a folder or wallet for the manuscript, a rare find from this

period.¹³ Taken together, both the oldest and most revered of Irish manuscripts as well as recent and ground-breaking discoveries witness to the significant place of the Psalms in early Christian and medieval Ireland.

Continuing with the theme of material culture, another interesting element of the transmission of the Old Testament relates to the visual culture of medieval Ireland, and in particular the tradition of illustrated high crosses. These crosses are not unique to Ireland, but have come to be associated with the visual iconicity of the island.¹⁴ Such crosses had varied uses in monasteries, from functioning as boundary markers for monastic sites, to reflecting the wealth or status of a community. However, these crosses also became important vehicles for portraying and illustrating the biblical text, including key elements of the Old Testament story.¹⁵ A fine example of this tradition can be seen in Muiredach's cross in Monasterboice, County Louth, dated to the early tenth century. This cross, which is still situated outdoors, is 19 feet high and made of sandstone. It follows a pattern used on other crosses, with Old Testament scenes on the east face (see Figure 2), and New Testament on the west facing side, each scene given a panel. Muiredach's cross includes numerous New Testament scenes, but also depicts Moses drawing water from a rock (panel 10), David and Goliath (panel 11), Adam and Eve along with Cain and Abel (panel 12), as well as another image of Moses being

¹³ This psalter is now kept in the National Museum of Ireland's History and Archaeology Museum in Dublin. See Martin McNamara, "A Recently Discovered Irish Book of Psalms in its Setting," *SBL Forum*, available online: <http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=568>.

¹⁴ Roger Stalley, "Artistic Identity and the Irish Scripture Crosses," in *Making and Meaning in Insular Art*, ed. R. Moss (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007): 153–66.

¹⁵ See the discussion in Peter Harbison, *The High Crosses of Ireland: An Iconographical and Photographic Survey* (3 vols.; Bonn: R. Habelt, 1992), esp. 1:325–58.

supported by Aaron and Hur (panel 1a). Other crosses in Ireland include Old Testament scenes such as Daniel and the lion's den and the sacrifice of Isaac, as depicted on the Moone cross, in County Kildare.¹⁶

[insert Figure 2: Muiredach's cross, east face]

¹⁶ Finbarr G. Clancy, "Scripture in Stone: The High Cross at Moone," in Ryan and Leahy, *Treasures of Irish Christianity*: 39–42.

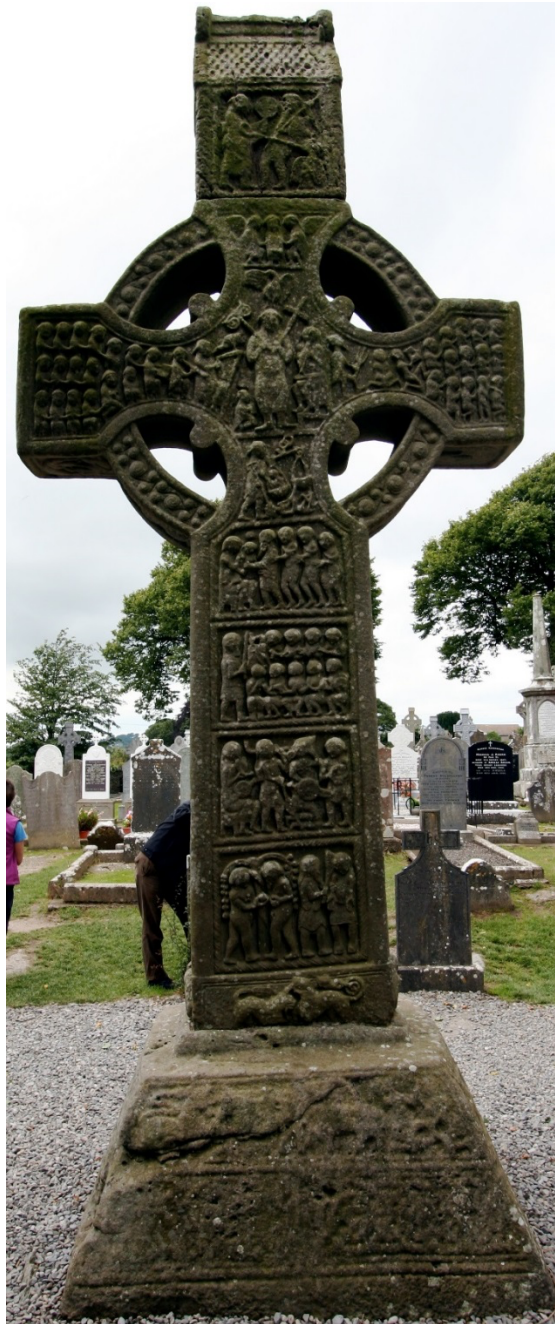


Figure 2: “Muiredach’s High Cross (East Face)”. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. It is attributed to Brianann MacAmhlaidh and can be found here:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muiredach%27s_High_Cross_\(east_face\)_photo](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Muiredach%27s_High_Cross_(east_face)_photo).

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2.3 History and Identity

A further aspect related to the Old Testament in early Christian and medieval Ireland can be found in the various Irish histories that were composed well into the late medieval period. Here one encounters numerous examples of texts which purport to be history, incorporating poetry, prose, and genealogies, and which draw on biblical texts and narratives, along with other Irish histories, myths, and apocryphal tales. What is intriguing in many of these cases is the way in which the biblical history – particularly that of the Old Testament – is woven into the fabric of the story of Ireland and its people. The Old Testament became an important shaper of identity as Ireland’s story was recast in light of these converging stories of origins.¹⁷

One important example is known as *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, the Book of Invasions. The origins of the *Gabála Éirenn* extend back to at least the eighth or ninth century, and it would later be redacted into larger texts such as the twelfth century Book of Leinster, noted above.¹⁸ The Book of Invasions is composed of poetry and prose, and is one of the earliest known examples of written history in Ireland, recounting a succession of invasions of Ireland, from the creation of the world to the arrival of the Gaels.

¹⁷ John Carey, “Native Elements in Irish Pseudohistory,” in *Cultural Identity and Cultural Integration: Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Doris Edel (Blackrock: Four Courts, 1995): 45–60.

¹⁸ The text in its various redactions can be found in *Lebor Gabála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland, Part 1*, ed. and trans. R.A. Stewart Macalister (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1938). Cf. Mark R. Scowcroft, “Leabhar Gabhála, Part I: The Growth of the Text,” *Ériu* 38 (1987): 80–142; Joseph Lennon, *Irish Orientalism: A Literary and Intellectual History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 5–57.

The first part of this text has extensive use of and engagement with Genesis 1–11 and the broader story of the Torah, offering “a mixture of biblical text, imaginative creations, and apocryphal items.”¹⁹ Indeed, the text begins with “In the beginning” (*In principio*), and takes the reader through abbreviated accounts of characters, from Adam and Eve, to Noah and Moses. Beyond retelling and expanding on the biblical text, the Book of Invasions also connects Irish history and identity to the biblical story through genealogies and narratives. An excerpt from the Book of Leinster redaction reads as follows:

§9. [With regard to] Iafeth [son of Noe], of him is the northern side of Asia – namely Asia Minor, Armenia, Media, the People of Scythia; and of him are the inhabitants of all Europe. ... §10. Magog, son of Iafeth [son of Noah], of his progeny are the peoples who came to Ireland ...²⁰

As this account unfolds, the history of the Gaelic peoples is traced all the way back to Noah, including events such as the Tower of Babel and the Exodus. A number of elements are noteworthy. To begin with, the tradition as found in the Book of Invasions aligns the Gaels as descendants of Fenius Farsaid, a Scythian prince who is a descendant of Noah and Magog. This Fenius was one of the chieftains to build the Tower of Babel, and would go on to be a noted linguist. The descendants of Fenius find themselves in Egypt during the time of Moses,

¹⁹ McNamara, “The Multifaceted Transmission,” 30.

²⁰ Macalister, *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, 23. Macalister (pp. xxvii–xxviii) has also demonstrated a parallelism in how the *Lebor Gabála* mimics structurally the early history of Israel as seen in the Old Testament.

and leave Egypt at the time of the Exodus (though they are not themselves part of the people of Israel). These descendants, named Gaels after Fenius' grandson Goidel (Gaidel) Glas, wander for several hundred years before settling in Spain. After a period of time in Spain, a tower is built from which they can see Ireland. This leads the Gaels to Ireland, where they overtake the previous inhabitants. And so we have something of a parallel story where Ireland's ancestors have a history that includes Noah, the Tower of Babel, and the Exodus – and the history as a whole is cast in a biblical mode and framework. Thus, even if the ancient Gaels are not part of the biblical story, they are on its edges in their own retelling.²¹ These stories, as Scowcroft notes, “find a place for Ireland in the biblical history of the world.”²²

Second, in this retelling the development of the Gaelic language is ascribed to the same Goidel Glas, the son of Scota (for whom the Scots are named), a daughter of an Egyptian Pharaoh. This language came from, indeed was a synthesis of, the seventy-two languages that emerged from the confusion of languages at Babel. As Lennon notes, it is remarkable

how sophisticated and intricate are the overlaying, weaving, and (possible) generating of Irish origin legends in a biblical frame by these “literati.” These have had a lasting impact, in part, because of the synthetic or syncretic narrative strategies these writers initiated... it did not refute the dominant biblical episteme, and it gave the Irish

²¹ Another fascinating example of this intertwining of stories in this work relates to the aforementioned Goidel Glas, who is stung by a serpent and is cured after Moses prays for him and touches him with his staff.

²² Mark R. Scowcroft, “Leabhar Gabhála, Part II: The Growth of the Tradition,” *Ériu* 39 (1988): 1–66, at 13.

language, and the linguistic skills of the Irish, a venerable and esteemed position in the world.²³

While farfetched to contemporary ears, these stories of origins remained central to Irish mythology for a protracted length of time. Indeed, up through the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that Irish identity is related to the Milesians – this group of Gaelic ancestry with a biblical past which traces their origins back to Míl Espáine who came to Ireland via Spain – would remain popular even among Irish historians of the period;²⁴ much later, as Brian Murray points out, than similar ideas lasted in many European counterparts.²⁵ The possibility of a past of biblical proportions, it turns out, has a strong allure.

We have, then, fascinating examples of how the Old Testament became an integral part of early Christian Ireland. From the use of the Psalms in education and piety, to the visual imagery of high crosses, to histories that weave the Old Testament story into the fabric

²³ Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 29; cf. the discussion in Umberto Eco, *The Search for the Perfect Language* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1997), 1–18.

²⁴ A broad genealogy as presented in the *Lebor Gabála* from Noah is as follows: Noah – Japheth – Magog – Baath – Fenius Farsaid – Nel/Nuil (Scota) – Goidel Glas – Sru - - - Míl (Milesians) – Éber Fin/Eremon.

²⁵ Brian Murray, “The Last of the Milesians: In Search of Ireland’s Biblical Past, 1760–1900,” in Anderson and Kearney, *Ireland and the Reception of the Bible*: 137–54. This long, complex relationship with Ireland, the Bible, and “the east” offers parallels with colonial and anti-colonial discourse: on this, see Lennon, *Irish Orientalism*, 205–370; and Abby Bender, *Israelites in Erin: Exodus, Revolution, and the Irish Revival* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015).

of the history of Ireland: it is clear that the Old Testament and its transmission played a significant role in social formation as well as in notions of Irish history and identity in early Christian and medieval Ireland.

3. Early Modern Ireland: Translation and the Shaping of Cultural Identities

The history of early modern Ireland is dominated by two overlapping issues. The first is English involvement in Ireland, which dates back as far as the twelfth century and the arrival of Henry II. In the following centuries, the English presence would increase, culminating in the plantations of English and later Scottish settlers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a practice which began under the Tudors. A second and related development is the Reformation; as English settlers were planted in Ireland, these were primarily Protestant. As such, the differences between the native Irish and the English in Ireland were considerable – including political, religious, and class distinctions.²⁶ For a number reasons which continue to

²⁶ The context was, of course, more complex than this binary suggests – there were, for example, landed gentry who were Catholic and loyal to the crown up until the events of the mid-seventeenth century. On developments during this period and beyond, see S.J. Connolly, *Contested Island: Ireland 1460-1630* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); S.J. Connolly, *Divided Kingdom: Ireland 1630-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Raymond Gillespie, *Colonial Ulster: The Settlement of East Ulster 1600-1641* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1985); Philip S. Robinson, *The Plantation of Ulster: British Settlement in an Irish Landscape, 1600-1670* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984); Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early Modern Ireland and England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). The distinctions noted above would be codified with the Penal Laws, a succession of acts (beginning in 1695) passed by the British crown

be debated, the Reformation never took hold in Ireland.²⁷ One attempt to rectify this was the translation of the Bible into Irish, which, it was thought, might aid in the success of convincing the Irish to Reform, and more generally to aid those ministering in Ireland. Not surprisingly, the initiative for this project came almost exclusively – at least at the beginning – from English and Anglo-Irish Protestants.

The story of the Bible in Irish is complex, and begins with the New Testament.²⁸ Work began in earnest on the New Testament in the 1570s, and a translation was presented to the crown in 1602. The Irish translation of the Old Testament came later, with work

that actively discriminated against Catholics in Ireland well into the nineteenth century. Thus, in early modern Ireland, Irish Catholics found themselves disadvantaged in nearly every conceivable manner.

²⁷ Alan Ford, *The Protestant Reformation in Ireland, 1590-1641* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1985). See also the discussion in Nicolas Canny, “Why the Reformation Failed in Ireland: *Une Question Mal Posée*,” *JEH* 30 (1979): 423–50; and K. Bottigheimer, “The Failure of the Reformation in Ireland: *Une Question Bien Posée*,” *JEH* 36 (1985): 196–207.

²⁸ As Fearghus Ó Fearghail has noted, “The history of the Bible in Ireland from the time of Patrick gives ample evidence of the veneration of the Irish for the sacred Scriptures over the centuries, but apart from Old Irish glosses in biblical manuscripts from the seventh to the ninth centuries and extensive biblical and apocryphal material in vernacular manuscripts from the twelfth century onwards, there is little evidence of an interest in a *vernacular* Bible in Ireland before the mid-sixteenth century.” Fearghus Ó Fearghail, “Translating the Bible into Irish, 1565–1850,” in Anderson and Kearney, *Ireland and the Reception of the Bible: 59–77*, at 59. On Irish biblical apocrypha, see Maire Herbert and Martin McNamara, eds., *Irish Biblical Apocrypha: Selected Texts in Translation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989).

beginning around 1628, under the guidance of William Bedell, an Essex born Anglican clergyman.²⁹ Bedell, a Caroline divine, was appointed Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, in 1627, before his appointment as Bishop of Kilmore (1629). As Provost, Bedell introduced prayers in Irish in the college Chapel, and “employed Murtagh King (Muirheartach Ó Cionga), a member of a learned family of scribes and poets of county Offaly, ‘to reade an houre every day’ to the native students destined for ministry in the established church.”³⁰ This introduction of prayers in Irish made clear the need for the Psalms in the vernacular, and so, with King as the primary translator, the work began.

When he was appointed bishop of Kilmore the following year, Bedell took King with him, and they continued with the translation of the Old Testament, with Bedell contributing to King’s work. The Old Testament appears to have been translated from the King James Bible, then only a few decades old. Nevertheless, Bedell knew Hebrew, having studied with a rabbi in Italy, and in fact had brought from Italy a Hebrew text which may have been used in the translation process. The translation of the Old Testament into Irish seems to have been completed near 1640, but the 1641 Rising, and the decade of war which followed, delayed plans for publication.³¹ Indeed, though he had good relations with many Catholics, Bedell was 70 at the time of the uprising of 1641, and he died not long after, a victim of these

²⁹ See Terence McCaughey, *Dr. Bedell and Mr. King: The Making of the Irish Bible* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2010); Fearghus Ó Fearghail, “The First Irish Translation of the OT (1634–85),” *Biblicum Jassyense* 4 (2013): 103–24.

³⁰ Ó Fearghail, “Translating the Bible into Irish,” 64.

³¹ On this period, see Hiram Morgan, “Rising of 1641,” in *The Oxford Companion to Irish History*, ed. S. J. Connolly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 487; Brian MacCuarta, ed., *Ulster 1641: Aspects of the Rising* (Belfast: The Institute of Irish Studies/QUB, 1993).

events.³² The translation of King and Bedell would be revived in the 1680s, with the help of Robert Boyle, the father of Chemistry, who played a significant role in financing the Irish Bible toward the end of the seventeenth century, as well as the then-Provost of Trinity College Narcissus Marsh. By 1685, the Old Testament in Irish (*Leabhuir na Seintiomna*) was in print.

[insert Figure 3: Bedell's Bible]

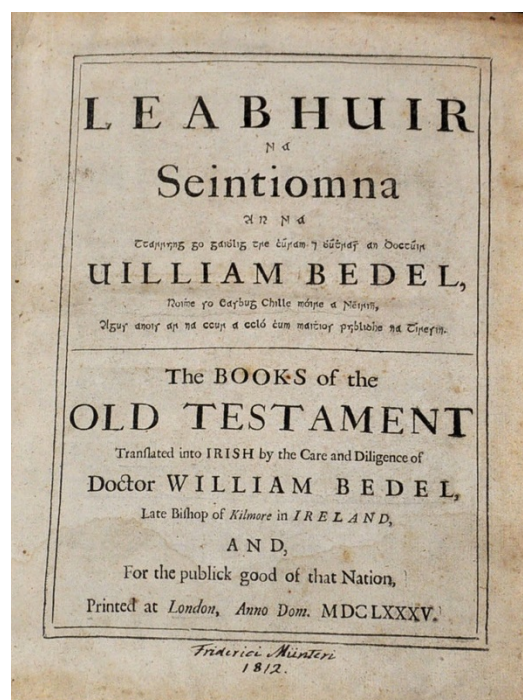


Figure 3: “William Bedell’s *Leabhuir na Seintiomna*”. With the kind permission of www.bawnboy.com.

There are parts of this story which suggest that this project may have had a positive impact on social and religious relations. Boyle, for example, was Protestant, but he was a

³² See H.J. Monck Mason, *The Life of William Bedell, D.D., Lord Bishop of Kilmore* (London: Seeley and Burnside, 1843), 370–5.

lover of the Irish language, and he worked alongside Catholics to bring the project to completion. And going back further, Bedell himself seems to have been well-intentioned and was well liked by his Catholic neighbours. Indeed, correspondence with James Ussher shows that Bedell was much more open minded and humane on these matters than was his more well-known superior – to the point that Bedell was actually accused of being a Catholic sympathizer, or perhaps even a Catholic himself.

Nevertheless, this account of the translation of the Old Testament into Irish highlights many of the complexities of the Irish story. The work of putting the Bible into Irish came not at the instigation of Irish Catholics, but of English and Anglo-Irish Protestants, with all of the related social and political issues that era implied: hostility, mistrust, and conversion. Indeed, several other ominous uses of the Old Testament are found in this era, notably in relation to Irish Catholics and the question of toleration. A few of these are worth noting.

Going back to the late 1590s, one commentator argued against conceding any ground to Irish Catholics, stating: “Trust them not: they will not they can not be good. The contention begunne betwene Edome and Israell in the wombe is never to be pacified: religion and heresie never to be agreed: heaven and hell never to be joyned: God and the divell never to be reconciled.”³³ In the early seventeenth century, James Ussher would again speak to these notions of toleration and would draw on common Protestant notions of Catholicism and idolatry to note that “if we will be partakers of Babylon’s sins, we must look to receive her plagues.” And yet, it was not enough to avoid this idolatry; but rather, according to Ussher,

³³ This anonymous work is transcribed by Willy Maley, “The Supplication of the Blood of the English, Most Lamentably Murdred in Ireland, Cryeng out of the Yearth for Revenge (1598),” *Analecta Hibernica* 36 (1995): 1, 3–77, at 21. See also Ford, *James Ussher*, 29, who notes that Maley mistranscribes ‘Edom’ as ‘Christendom’.

“it is further required that we restrain, as much as in us lieth, the practice thereof of others.” Drawing on Judges 2, he comments that “God telleth the children of Israel what mischief should come unto them, by tolerating the Canaanitish idolaters in their land. ‘They shall be thorns in your sides’, saith he, ‘and their gods shall be a snare unto you.’” Ussher would go on to note that “Only this I must say...I cannot preach peace unto them For, as Jehu said to Joram, ‘What peace, so long as the whoredoms of thy mother Jezebel, and her witchcrafts are so many?’ so I must say unto them: What peace can there be, as long as you suffer yourselves to be led by ‘the mother of all harlots’.”³⁴ In a similar vein, as part of his campaign in Ireland in 1649, Oliver Cromwell is reported to have told his troops at Bristol that they were the new Israelites about to exterminate the idolatrous Canaanites. Cromwell becomes Joshua and the conquest of Canaan becomes the precedent.³⁵ Thus, while important work was being done on translating the Old Testament into Irish, the examples noted above suggest that this same Old

³⁴ These excerpts are drawn from a sermon Ussher preached before the Commons, while in England, in 1621. The text can be found in *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, ed. C.R. Elrington and J.H. Todd (17 vols.; Dublin; London, 1829–64), 2:450, 451, 456. For a discussion of the sermon and its context, see Ford, *James Ussher*, 112–15. It should be noted that Ussher was not opposed to also using the New Testament for such purposes, as he here draws on Revelation, among other texts.

³⁵ D.M., “Cromwell in Ireland,” *The Irish Monthly* 3 (1875): 158–67, at 159; Antonia Fraser, *Cromwell: Our Chief of Men* (London: Phoenix, 2002 [1973]), 408–09; cf. the discussion in R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (Chidester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 32.

Testament was being invoked against native Irish Catholics – they are Canaanites, Edomites, Jezebel.³⁶

Taken together, these examples are a reminder that much of Ireland's engagement with the Bible, even in Irish, has been mediated through difference and conflict. Like much in Irish history, this story raises questions of colonialism, mission, and agency that are complex and fraught, issues which have endured in various forms throughout modern Irish history.³⁷ In this sense, the translation and broader use of the Old Testament in this period not only reflects but, I would suggest, contributed to, contested notions of identity in this highly-charged era. While a fascinating story and a significant work of scholarship, these social and

³⁶ Further examples can be found in Bender, *Israelites in Erin*, 38–41, including a discussion of John Temple's widely discussed work from 1646, *The Irish Rebellion*, where the Irish are compared with the hard-hearted Pharaoh of Exodus.

³⁷ See, e.g., Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The 'Second Reformation' and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800–1840* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). One of the most difficult examples of this would emerge in the nineteenth century, where crusades to make the Bible available to Irish Catholics became intertwined with conversion and provision of food during the great famine, an episode that would leave a long shadow on the island and which was extraordinarily detrimental to Catholic-Protestant relations. See Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–70: A Study of Protestant-Catholic Relations Between the Act of Union Disestablishment* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1978); Miriam Moffitt, *Soupers & Jumpers: The Protestant Missions in Connemara, 1848–1937* (Dublin: Nonsuch, 2008).

cultural factors have meant that, to this day, the Bible in Irish has had a limited role in Irish Christianity.³⁸

4. Stories of Unexpected Influence

We turn finally to the emergence of several ideas from Ireland relating to the Old Testament that would have enduring and unexpected influence on a global scale.

4.1 James Ussher's Dating of Creation

A contemporary of Bedell was James Ussher (1581–1656). Ussher was born in Dublin to a wealthy merchant family and was one of the first to study at Trinity College, Dublin; in fact, he was eventually appointed (somewhat prophetically) Professor of Theological Controversies at Trinity College. He would later become Vice-Provost of Trinity, and then Archbishop of Armagh, Anglican Primate of All Ireland.

Ussher is most well-known for his dating of the world, and creation in particular; his writings on the matter first appeared in 1650, just a few years before his death (English

³⁸ There was, over the next several centuries, engagement with the Bible in Irish, but this was often done outside of Bible translation proper; on this, see, e.g., Ciarán Mac Murchaidh, “The Catholic Church, the Irish Mission and the Irish Language in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Irish and English: Essays on the Irish Linguistic and Cultural Frontier, 1600-1900*, James Kelly and Ciarán Mac Murchaidh (Dublin: Four Courts, 2012): 162–88. On the robust Catholic engagement with the Bible in English in this era, see Brendan McConvery, “Irish Bible Readers Before the Famine,” in Anderson and Kearney, *Ireland and the Reception of the Bible*: 93–106.

translation 1658).³⁹ It is said that this project occupied twenty years of his life, and began during his career in Ireland. He was very specific on these matters, famously noting that creation occurred: “according to this chronology ... at the beginning of the night which preceded the 23rd of October in the year 710 of the Julian period,” that is, the year 4004 BC.⁴⁰

³⁹ See the thorough discussion in James Barr, “Why the World Was Created in 4004 BC: Archbishop Ussher and Biblical Chronology,” in *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library of Manchester* 67 (1985): 575–608; and D.P. McCarthy, “The Biblical Chronology of James Ussher,” *Irish Astronomical Journal* 24 (1997): 73–82.

⁴⁰ J. Ussher, *The Annals of the World* (English trans., 1658), 1. *The Annals* themselves do not offer much by way of explanation of the dates offered. Ussher does, however, give some attention to these matters in the preface, where he writes: “I gathered the creation of the world did fall out upon the 710 year of the Julian Period, by placing its beginning in autumn: but for as much as the first day of the world began with the evening of the first day of the week, I have observed that the Sunday, which in the year 710 aforesaid came nearest the Autumnal Æquinox, by astronomical tables (notwithstanding the stay of the sun in the dayes of Joshua, and the going back of it in the dayes c Ezekiah) happened upon the 23 day of the Julian October; from thence concluded that from the evening preceding that first day of the Julian year, both the first day of the creation and the first motion of time are to be deduced.” As Barr notes, “Ussher’s *Annales* for the most part do not enter into discussion of the problems or into controversy: they tell you the right answer, the system as it has been worked out, but they do not lay out the evidence and work from it towards a solution. The more controversial questions were dealt with by Ussher in his later work, *Chronologia Sacra*, which was left incomplete and published after his death by Thomas Barlow (1607-91)” (Barr, “Why the World Was Created in 4004 BC,” 597). McCarthy suggests that Barlow’s collation

This led to further exactness: for example, Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden on Monday 10 November 4004 BC, and the ark landed on Mt Ararat on 5 May 2348 BC – on a Wednesday.

[insert figure 4: Ussher's Annals]

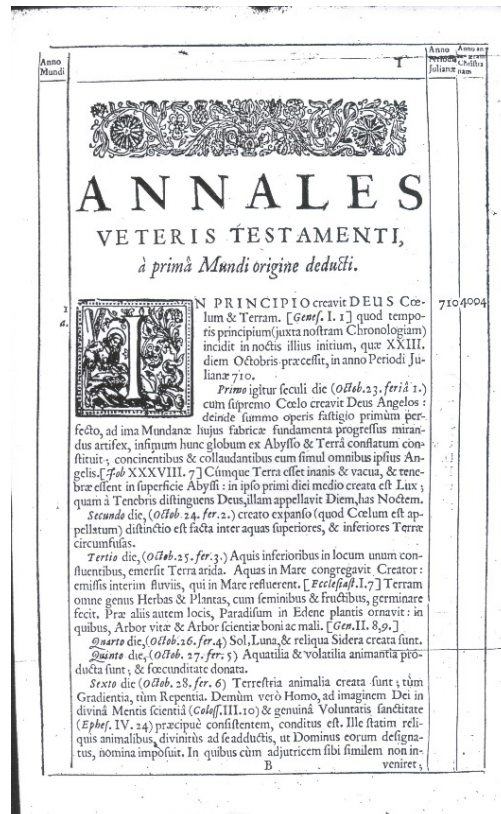


Figure 4: “Annales Veteris Testamenti page 1”. Public domain image available from

Wikimedia Commons,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Annales_Veteris_Testamenti_page_1.jpg

and editing may have led to significant changes in ideas now attributed to Ussher (McCarthy, “The Biblical Chronology of James Ussher,” 77).

This precision seems humorous to contemporary ears, and indeed it has come in for steep criticism over the past several centuries. Nonetheless, some context gives us better perspective. To begin with, as Ford and others have demonstrated, Ussher was extremely well read.⁴¹ Known to collect manuscripts and other ancient texts, he is said to have had a library of over 10,000 volumes in his lifetime. His work on the Bible included close studies of the Masoretic text as well as the Septuagint (though his dating scheme would adhere closely to the Hebrew text). He was also a serious scholar of history, with significant studies on the early church, and is often considered one of the first seriously to explore St Patrick.⁴² In fact, his dating of creation and the biblical world was just part of his reconstruction of world history.⁴³ Further, Ussher was not just using the Bible; rather, his research on dating creation employed comparative work including Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sources that influenced

⁴¹ Ford, *James Ussher*, 32–84.

⁴² There are particular religious reasons for his focus on Patrick, as Ussher sought to appropriate Patrick as both Irish and prototypically Protestant; on this, see Bernadette Cunningham and Raymond Gillespie, “‘The Most Adaptable of Saints’: The Cult of St Patrick in the Seventeenth Century”, *Archivium Hibernicum* 49 (1995): 82–104; Alan Ford, “James Ussher and the Creation of an Irish Protestant Identity,” in *British Consciousness and Identity: The Making of Britain, 1533-1707*, ed. Brendan Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 185–212.

⁴³ “The *Annales* are an attempt at a comprehensive chronological synthesis of all known historical knowledge, biblical and classical, down to just after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Of its volume only perhaps one sixth or less is biblical material” (Barr, “Why the World Was Created in 4004 BC,” 581).

his research in significant ways.⁴⁴ He also became a master of numerous languages, calendar systems, and ancient chronology. Ussher was, then, a serious and wide-ranging scholar. A second contextual factor is that Ussher was working in the spirit of the times.⁴⁵ For centuries, thinkers had been attempting to date the world and many came to conclusions which were not too dissimilar to those at which Ussher arrived.⁴⁶ Martin Luther, for example, favoured an even 4000 BC, while Johannes Kepler had suggested 3992 BC.

There were, then, other notable dates for the creation of the world that were circulating during this period, and several of these came from names much more well-known than Ussher. What gave prominence to Ussher was the fact that his date for the creation of the world was recorded in Bibles, first in 1675 and then notably in the printing of the Church of England's authorized version of 1701, where it would commonly appear for the next several centuries.⁴⁷ With the Protestant focus on biblical authority, Ussher's dating came to be associated for many with the text itself; if the word was true and trustworthy, so too was

⁴⁴ Cf. Barr, "Why the World Was Created in 4004 BC," 579–80, 603–8.

⁴⁵ Stephen Jay Gould commented that Ussher needs to be read and located in the scholarly world of the seventeenth century, where such endeavours were common. Stephen Jay Gould, "Fall in the House of Ussher, *Natural History* 100 (November 1991): 12–21, at 16.

⁴⁶ This includes calculations from the Talmud, the early church, the medieval period, and a growing number of thinkers in the early modern period. This was particularly true of the notion that there were 4,000 years the preceded the coming of Christ. See Barr, "Why the World Was Created in 4004 BC," 578.

⁴⁷ Other dates from Ussher's research were also printed in many Bibles from this era, particularly relating to Old Testament history.

Ussher's date.⁴⁸ And this mind-set would hold, in some circles, for centuries. Indeed, Ussher's dating was at the heart of the Scopes trial on evolution in the twentieth century United States, and there are many who hold not dissimilar views today.⁴⁹

[Insert figure 5: Figure of date in Bible]

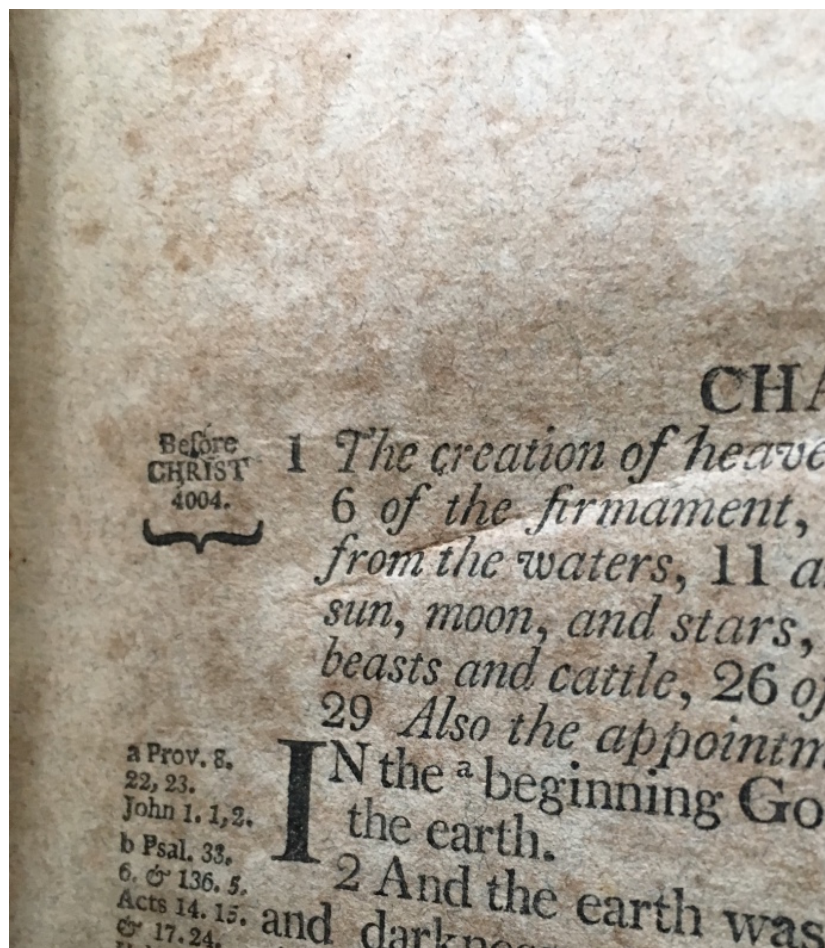


Figure 5: "Before Christ 4004, Family Bible, 19th century". With permission of the author.

⁴⁸ McCarthy, "The Biblical Chronology of James Ussher," 81.

⁴⁹ See discussion in Douglas O. Linder, "Bishop James Ussher Sets the Date for Creation,"

Famous Trials, available online: <http://www.famous-trials.com/scopesmonkey/2102-ussler>.

There is much concerning Ussher that can and should be viewed in critical fashion – not least his views concerning his fellow countrymen and women noted above.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, his scholarship needs to be viewed with contextual awareness. Ussher’s dating of the world is but one part of his larger scholarly output, and the various historical and contextual factors that led to its significance, particularly its placement in printed Bibles, need to be borne in mind.

4.2 John Nelson Darby and Dispensational Hermeneutics

Another way in which Ireland has had a significant, if somewhat surprising, impact on the reading of the Old Testament stems from the nineteenth century work of John Nelson Darby.⁵¹ Darby is a figure who, though not widely known, “has been one of the most important shapers of evangelical thought throughout the last two hundred years,”⁵² a point which is all the more surprising given that Ireland’s evangelical community has been and remains relatively small. As with Ussher, Darby is most famous – or infamous – for a particular set of ideas, in this case dispensationalism and the popularization of the idea of the pre-tribulation rapture, which came out of his dispensationalist theology and its particular,

⁵⁰ On this, see Ford, *James Ussher*, 11–103.

⁵¹ Timothy C.F. Stunt, “Darby, John Nelson (1800–1882), Member of the So-called (Plymouth) Brethren,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, available online: <http://www.oxforddnb.com.dcu.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-7141>.

⁵² Crawford Gribben and Mark Sweetnam, “J.N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism,” *JETS* 52 (2009): 569–77, at 569.

futurist hermeneutic.⁵³ Two elements relating to the Old Testament and its place in this framework have been especially influential.

To begin with, a key aspect of dispensational thought is that world history has been divided into various eras or dispensations, and in each of these God has revealed himself in distinct ways. Darby saw history as divided into seven dispensations – five of these are covered in the Old Testament, the sixth began with Christ and extends to the present, and the final dispensation is yet to come. Scripture, Darby believed, spoke to all of these dispensations. As such, it was important that some prophecies in the Bible refer to the final dispensation and have not yet been fulfilled. Thus, Darby made frequent use of Daniel, Isaiah, and Ezekiel, amongst others, in looking for prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled and which might point to this eschatological dispensation.⁵⁴ This futurist reading of the prophets would become a hallmark of dispensational theology.

⁵³ Also like Ussher, Darby wrote voluminously, including his own translation of both Old and New Testaments based on the Hebrew and Greek. The edited collection of his writing stands at 34 volumes: see William Kelly, ed., *The Collected Writings of J.N. Darby* (34 vols.; Oak Park: Bible Truth Publishers, 1971).

⁵⁴ His general disposition toward the prophets can be seen in the 1829 publication, *Reflections On the Prophetic Inquiry*: “The argument that prophecy is only available as an evidence of revelation after its fulfillment, not to reason upon general grounds, seems to have little weight. All the prophecies testify of facts which require a certain line of conduct at or previous to their fulfillment; and though they are evidence of themselves as a revelation, and of the value of the prophesied fact, there are few instances of this being of importance after their fulfillment. Besides, many of them unequivocally relate to the closing period of the world; and it would be hard to say of what avail these could be for the purpose stated.” J.N.

A second key issue in Darby's thought involving the Old Testament relates to the relationship of Judaism and the Church. For Darby, Jews and Christians represent different aspects of God's action in the world – Judaism points to God's earthly deeds, and the Church his heavenly plans. Because of this, Old Testament prophecy which relates to Israel or Judaism needs to be fulfilled in a literal manner if such fulfilment has not yet taken place. Thus, a key component of the final dispensation in Darby's schema is that the Church is taken away in the rapture, clearing the way for the fulfilment of prophecy relating to the Jewish people. This concern for a literal fulfilment of prophecy relating to Israel led to a fascination with Judaism, Israel, and Jerusalem that has carried on in dispensationalist (and, indeed, broader evangelical) thought down to the present day.⁵⁵

[insert Figure 6: John Nelson Darby]

Darby, "Reflections On the Prophetic Inquiry" [1829], in vol. 2 of Kelly, *Collected Writings of J.N. Darby*.

⁵⁵ Helpful elucidation on these matters can be found in Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, [1960] 2005), 19–36; and Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).



Figure 6: “John Nelson Darby.” Public domain image available from Wikimedia Commons; <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:JohnNelsonDarby.jpg>

While in recent years Darby’s contribution to dispensational and evangelical thought has been more widely recognized, less well known is the fact that Darby’s theological development is rooted in “a particular social, national, and historical context. Darby’s story and the story of dispensationalism are closely imbricated with the contours of Irish history and the fortunes of ascendancy society.”⁵⁶ Though born in Westminster in 1800, Darby was from a family of Anglo-Irish aristocracy, who had land in County Offaly. Darby would eventually make his way to Dublin for his university studies at Trinity College, followed by studies in law at King’s Inn. Here it is worth noting that Darby’s fascination with prophecy and eschatology did not emerge in a vacuum. The nineteenth century was a hotbed for apocalyptic ideas, and Ireland was no exception. In particular, Darby’s time at Trinity

⁵⁶ Gribben and Sweetnam, “J.N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism,” p. 575.

College seems to have been influential in this regard as he was introduced to millennial thinking, even if his own theology would take millennial thought in new directions.⁵⁷

Darby would eventually abandon law and become a Church of Ireland clergyman with a post in County Wicklow. (Darby as well as his biographers would refer to him as an “Irish clergyman”.) Darby’s own spiritual awakening occurred after he was already in parish ministry, following an accident in 1827 in which he was injured. Along with a renewed interest in studying Scripture, this awakening led to an increasing dissatisfaction on Darby’s part with the established Church of Ireland. A particularly frustrating development for Darby was an 1827 decree by his archbishop which declared that all converts to the Church of Ireland must also swear allegiance to the English crown. Darby was incensed, and felt that this was detrimental to his work of evangelisation among Catholics. Additionally, he saw the Church of Ireland’s status as the established church as increasingly problematic for its theology and mission. Striving for what he saw as a more biblically faithful approach to theology and ecclesiology, Darby gave up his position in the Church of Ireland and began to meet with likeminded people, many of whom were also very interested in biblical prophecy and the end times. He soon was part of the leadership of what would become the Brethren movement, and it was at this time that his distinctive theology and approach to biblical interpretation began to take coherent shape.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Gary L. Nebeker, “John Nelson Darby and Trinity College, Dublin: A Study in Eschatological Contrasts,” *Fides et Historia* 34/2 (2002): 87–108.

⁵⁸ During this time Darby was involved in what became known as the Powerscourt movement, a meeting of likeminded people from 1830–38 at the stately Powerscourt manor, also in County Wicklow, part of the early development of the Brethren movement. See

When these biographical elements are taken into consideration, it is clear that Darby's time at Trinity College and his disenchantment with the established church were both key factors in the development of his theology and his reading of Scripture.⁵⁹ Disillusioned with the church, and influenced by the apocalyptic ideas in the air at the time, Darby began to rethink how Scripture should be interpreted and applied. What emerged was dispensationalism and its futurist reading of biblical prophecy, along with ancillary ideas relating to Judaism, Christianity, and the eschaton, as outlined above. These ideas were shaped by Darby's own story and his context as an Anglo-Irish Protestant in nineteenth century Ireland, something often neglected in the history of this influential theological framework.

A final factor to note is the afterlife and impact of Darby's theology. After giving up his position in the Church of Ireland, Darby began to work as an itinerant missionary. Much of his influential work took place during this period, when he was travelling throughout Europe and the United States. It was also during this time that Darby's ideas were introduced to and taken up by several influential leaders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including Dwight Moody and Cyrus Scofield. Moody's revival meetings and Scofield's Bible were both important vehicles for the dispersal of Darby's thought. Indeed,

Winston Terrance Sutherland, "John Nelson Darby: Scholarship that Influenced the Bible College Movement," *Christian Higher Education* 9 (2010): 271–85, at 280.

⁵⁹ As Gribben and Sweetnam note, "One of the most interesting things about the way in which Darby's interpretation of prophetic Scripture emerged is that his development of dispensationalism was a result of his disaffection with the ecclesiastical status quo. ... It was ecclesiological concern that led to Darby's rethinking of prophecy." Gribben and Sweetnam, "J.N. Darby and the Irish Origins of Dispensationalism," 573.

many of Darby's biblical cross-references and interpretive comments were included in the Scofield Bible.⁶⁰ And it is from here that one of the more dominant streams of conservative evangelicalism, that of premillennial dispensationalism, would take root, particularly in the United States.⁶¹ It is difficult to overestimate the influence of this movement. From the far-reaching impact of the Scofield Bible, to popular Christian sub-culture works such as Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and the *Left Behind* series, to political views on the modern state of Israel: Darby's fingerprints can be seen in large swathes of the thought and practice of contemporary evangelical Christianity in North America.⁶² While much of the attention which Darby receives is focused on the rapture, his influence on the reading of the Old Testament and his ideas on the relationship of Judaism and Christianity loom large in the contemporary world, and this is due in large part to the transmission of these ideas in the work of leaders such as Moody and Scofield.

⁶⁰ Also included, coincidentally, was Ussher's date for creation.

⁶¹ Joe L. Coker, "Exploring the Roots of the Dispensationalist/Princetonian 'Alliance': Charles Hodge and John Nelson Darby on Eschatology and Interpretation of Scripture," *Fides Et Historia* 30 (1998): 41–56.

⁶² On some of these trajectories, see Crawford Gribben, "John N. Darby, Dispensational Eschatology, and the Formation of Trans-Atlantic Evangelicalism," *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* 110 (2016): 99–109; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, "How Did Left Behind's Particular Vision of the End Times Develop? A Historical Look at Millenarian Thought," in *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series*, ed. Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004): 33–70; Glenn W. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggles for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

We have, then, two prominent examples of how work done on the Old Testament in Ireland would go on to have a significant, unexpected, and disproportionate impact on a global scale – in fact, these may well be the most influential readings of the Bible to ever emerge from the island. From Ussher’s dating of the world, its incorporation into King James Bibles, and its later use in debates concerning creation and evolution, to Darby’s use of the Old Testament in his dispensational theology, the appropriation of this by leaders such as Moody and Scofield, and its impact on contemporary evangelical thought and practice, few could have predicted the global impact of these Irish-born readings.

5. Conclusion

As John Collins has recently noted,

One does not usually think of the Bible as the book that shaped Ireland. When Ry Cooder put his song “The Sands of Mexico” on the lips of an Irish Catholic soldier on the San Patricio brigade in the American-Mexican war in the 1840s, and had him say “my Bible is my roadmap,” he only showed his ignorance of the men he meant to honor. For an Irish Catholic in the 1840s, to take the Bible as his roadmap would be equivalent to taking soup from proselytizing Protestants.⁶³

This anecdote points to an important truth: Ireland has had an ambivalent relationship with the Bible, a reality that cannot be denied. And yet, this is only part of the story. The examples

⁶³ John J. Collins, Foreword, in Anderson and Kearney, *Ireland and the Reception of the Bible*, xi.

highlighted above demonstrate Ireland's rich and varied history of engagement with the Old Testament. The early use of the Psalms in education and piety, the visualization of the Bible on high crosses, and the incorporation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Irish stories of origins highlight the importance of the Old Testament in early Christian and medieval Ireland. Such diverse usage not only informs our understanding of the transmission of the Bible, but also suggests that the Old Testament played a key role in shaping social and cultural aspects of Ireland as well as Irish history in this period. Meanwhile, the story of the translation of the Old Testament into Irish as well as other uses of the Old Testament in early modern Ireland highlight how the Old Testament contributed to contested notions of identity in this era, a period that would have far-reaching consequences for the island. Finally, the story of Ireland and the Old Testament includes examples of unexpected influence. The work of scholars such as Ussher and Darby, whose ideas concerning the Old Testament were taken up by people around the globe, reminds us that while such influence is often a matter of accident, historical and geographical contexts played a significant role in how these ideas took shape.

The story of Ireland and the Old Testament does not, of course, come to an end in the nineteenth century – there is more of this story to be told, particularly as Ireland joined the conversation of critical biblical scholarship.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the examples noted above highlight the important, if complex, role that the Old Testament has played on the island through the centuries. Tracing this story is a reminder that to overlook the reception and influence of the Old Testament is to ignore a significant component in the shaping of the social, cultural, and religious landscape of Ireland.

⁶⁴ One might note, for example, the development of the Irish Biblical Association, Jacob Weingreen's influential *Hebrew Grammar*, and the role of Irish scholars in the development of Targum studies in the twentieth century, to name but a few areas.