

JOHN MASON AND HENRY MAURICE: A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY BUCKINGHAMSHIRE FRIENDSHIP

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John Mason, rector of Water Stratford, predicted the second coming of Christ at Ascensiontide 1694. While the story of the strange events at Water Stratford makes a fascinating episode in the history of Buckinghamshire, Mason's friendship with Henry Maurice, rector of Tyringham-cum-Filgrave, casts light on the wider context of late seventeenth-century English church history. Mason and Maurice represent two conflicting understandings of Christianity, Puritan/Evangelical and High Church Anglican, which are still relevant today.

EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS AT WATER STRATFORD

About 1690, John Mason, rector of Water Stratford near Buckingham, began to preach that the second coming of Christ was imminent.¹ Although he still prepared sermons, he began increasingly to lay his text aside in the pulpit, saying 'that the Spirit mov'd him to discourse of the *mystery of the Kingdom*, and of nothing else'.² In 1691, he allowed a friend to publish his sermon entitled 'The Midnight Cry' on the parable of the wise and the foolish virgins in Matthew 25:1-13.³ While refraining from predicting the exact timing of the second Advent, he urged his hearers to prepare in haste for judgement. He preached the sermon in several country churches, and people began to flock to Water Stratford to hear more of his message.⁴ Some families sold up their homes, farms and businesses and moved to the village, setting up a communistic encampment first in the rectory, then in barns as their numbers swelled.⁵ By Easter 1694, about a hundred disciples had arrived in Water Stratford, where they laid in twenty quarters (160 bushels) of wheat, ten quarters of malt, and twenty or thirty hundredweight of cheeses, enough to last 'till the good Time should come'.⁶ About one o'clock in the morning on Monday 16 April, during the night following Low Sunday, Mason turned over in bed, too exhausted to sleep, and beheld a vision of Christ.⁷ Without speaking, the figure in the vision, whose purple robe seemed to have been 'dipp'd in the blood of His Enemies', communicated to Mason that he had come 'to judge and condemn the greatest part of

the world', but that 'He would save *Sion*, and the *holy Ground*', meaning '*Water-Stratford and its Borders*'.⁸ A week later, Mason told a crowd of perhaps 1,500 people assembled in the village that the millennium, the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth with his saints predicted in Revelation chapter 20, had begun.⁹

An article on the extraordinary story of John Mason written by John L. Myres appeared in *Records of Buckinghamshire* over a century ago.¹⁰ During the last three years, much time has been devoted by the present author to a deeper study of John Mason than Myres was able to present in the space of a journal article, and it is hoped to publish the full results of this research as a book sometime in the next year or two. Since Myres's article is still accessible in the library of the Buckinghamshire Archaeological Society and the local history collections of the Buckinghamshire County and Milton Keynes Libraries, it is not proposed to write at length about the strange episode at Water Stratford here. Rather, the purpose of this article is to explore Mason's friendship with Henry Maurice, who was rector of Tyringham-cum-Filgrave from 22 October 1675 until his death in April 1699.¹¹ Myres gave only a little space to Henry Maurice, understandably since he would have been almost without historical interest had he not written *An Impartial Account of Mr. John Mason of Water-Stratford, and his Sentiments* soon after Mason's death. Maurice emerges, however, both from the biographical details discovered about him by the present author and from what he reveals of his own mind in his book about Mason, as an interesting

figure in his own right. Additionally, his friendship with John Mason helps us to place both of them within the broad and complicated context of late seventeenth-century English Christianity and to see how the traditions they represent – Puritan/Evangelical for Mason and rational High Church Anglican for Maurice – would continue to flourish into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and even in our own time.

JOHN MASON: CALVINIST COUNTRY PARSON

In October 1668, John Mason was presented to his first living, the vicarage of St Peter's, Stantonbury.¹² His patron was Sir John Wittewronge,¹³ whose grandfather James Wittewronge had fled from the persecution of Protestants in the Netherlands by King Philip II of Spain to begin a new life in Elizabethan England. The Wittewronges had been members of the Dutch Reformed Church at Austin Friars in London, but, after James's son Jacob had made a fortune as a brewer, they acquired property in Essex, Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and began to worship at the parish churches near their estates. Sir John Wittewronge, Jacob's son, built a new home at Rothamsted, near Harpenden, where he lived until his death in 1693, but he also built a manor house at Stantonbury, between 1662 and 1668, for his son, John Wittewronge, Esq., and his bride, Clare Alston.¹⁴ There was very little population at Stantonbury, since it had been enclosed and depopulated by Sir Nicholas Vaux in the early sixteenth century,¹⁵ so there was not much pastoral work for Mason to do. Neither does there seem to have been a parsonage house, so Mason apparently lived in the manor house with the Wittewronges, almost as their family chaplain.¹⁶ When Clare Wittewronge died in October 1669, only a year after Mason's arrival, he preached her funeral sermon and later published it under the title 'The Waters of Marah Sweetened'; it shows that he was already eagerly interested in the second coming of Christ.¹⁷

The Wittewronges were staunch Calvinists, followers of John Calvin, the reformer of Geneva, who taught the doctrine of double predestination. According to Calvin, the entire human race is irreversibly divided between a very small group of the elect, who will be saved and enjoy everlasting bliss

in heaven, and a much larger group of the reprobate, who will be damned and suffer everlasting punishment in hell. The Dutch Reformed Church was Calvinist and distrustful of Arminianism,¹⁸ an alternative Reformed theology of salvation, the teaching of the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius that all men and women who repent of their sins, turn to Christ in faith, and cooperate through their own will with the grace of God will be saved. Calvinism allows very little scope for free will, but the elect must have an experience of conversion, acknowledging their own sinfulness and accepting the gift of saving faith, before the righteousness of Christ can be imputed to them personally. Arminianism places more emphasis on following the example of Christ and on the reception of sacramental grace in baptism and Holy Communion. During the second half of the sixteenth century, most Anglicans were Calvinists, but, during the seventeenth century, High Church Anglicanism became increasingly identified with Arminianism. Puritans, especially Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Particular Baptists, remained Calvinist in their doctrine of salvation, however. Mason was definitely a Calvinist, and, as such, must have been theologically acceptable to the Wittewronges. As we shall see, he was also unusually tolerant of Calvinist Dissenters at a time when the Church of England was struggling to re-establish its dominant position in society by insisting on uniformity.

Mason was a complex character, and influences other than Calvinism can be seen in his life and work. The child of a family which included several clergymen, his education began at the little grammar school kept by the vicar of Strixton, near his native Irchester in Northamptonshire. From there, he went up to Clare Hall, Cambridge, in 1661,¹⁹ when the college was still recovering from the turmoil of the Civil War and Interregnum. Between 1644 and 1651, ten fellows and the master had been ejected by Parliament for royalist sympathies, but four fellows had just been reinstated.²⁰ One of the restored fellows was Barnabas Oley, who had been a younger friend of another Clare man, Nicholas Ferrar.²¹ Ferrar's family community at Little Gidding had attempted to live the religious life according to the theology and devotion of the Book of Common Prayer from 1625 until their house was destroyed by a Puritan raid in 1646.²² Just before the Anglican poet-priest George Herbert died in

1633, he bequeathed the manuscript of his poems, *The Temple*, to 'brother Ferrar' with instructions to publish it 'if he can think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul' or else to 'burn it, for it and I are less than the least of God's mercies.' Ferrar did publish the poems, which became classics of Anglican theological poetry, but died himself in 1637.²³ His friend Oley continued his work by editing Herbert's *A Priest to the Temple; or the Country Parson* in 1652 with a biographical note on Herbert.²⁴ The *Country Parson* sets out the Anglican ideal of a parish priest, living amongst his people as their pastor, preaching and administering the sacraments to them in great love and humility.²⁵ While it is not known whether Oley was Mason's tutor or had any direct influence on him, Mason's combination of pastoral ministry with the writing of poetry is reminiscent of Herbert at Bemerton. Although Mason's poetry is of a much lower standard than Herbert's, he was definitely influenced by Herbert as a writer of devotional verse.²⁶ But Herbert, Ferrar and Oley were all High Churchmen and Arminians; whatever their influence on Mason might have been, they were surely not responsible for his Calvinism and millenarianism.

HENRY MAURICE: RATIONAL HIGH CHURCHMAN

As a result of the Wittewronge family's patronage, Mason formed a close friendship with Henry Maurice.²⁷ The manor and advowson of Tyingham had been acquired in about 1670 by the London alderman Edward Backwell, a goldsmith and banker, who had made a fortune by inventing the system of issuing banknotes in return for deposits of gold.²⁸ The Wittewronges became relatives of the Backwells when John Wittewronge married Martha Sebrook, a niece of Alderman Backwell, soon after Clare's death.²⁹ Tyingham is only three miles north-east of Stantonbury, so the two families were able to visit each other frequently. Although Mason had been presented to the rectory of Water Stratford in January 1675, nine months before Maurice became rector of Tyingham, he frequently visited the Wittewronges after his move and would have met Maurice then.³⁰ Myres suggests that Maurice had been curate of Tyingham before becoming rector, which would have allowed Mason to meet him before Mason moved from Stantonbury to Water Stratford, but the parish reg-

isters supply no evidence to support this suggestion.³¹ On the other hand, Maurice does say that the two families with whom he and Mason lived were nearly related, allowing the two ministers frequent and intimate discourse, so perhaps Maurice was at Tyingham, in some capacity, before Mason went to Water Stratford.³² Maurice can have had only a little more pastoral work to do than Mason had at Stantonbury and must have stood in rather the same relationship to the Backwells as Mason did to the Wittewronges. Alderman Backwell, however, Maurice's patron, spent a good deal of time in London, and there is an unsubstantiated family tradition that he fled to Holland to escape his creditors for several years and may have died there,³³ so Maurice would not have seen quite as much of him as Mason did of his own patron's son. Maurice also had his own rectory house: built in 1637 on high ground at Filgrave, it had a fine view of the surrounding countryside.³⁴ St Peter's, Tyingham, had been the parish church for the two tiny neighbouring hamlets of Tyingham and Filgrave since their rectories were united in 1639.³⁵

Henry Maurice was the son of William Maurice of Bishop's Stortford in Hertfordshire.³⁶ If the 'Wm. Morris, cutler' of Bishop's Stortford who was presented in the court of the archdeacon of Hertford for failure to receive Communion in 1683³⁷ was his father or perhaps brother, then Maurice may have travelled some distance from a Puritan upbringing in an artisan's home. After beginning his education at Thomas Leigh's famous school in his home town, Maurice went up to Christ's College, Cambridge, at the age of sixteen in 1666; he took his B.A. degree in 1669-70 and his M.A. in 1673.³⁸ During Maurice's time at Christ's, Ralph Cudworth was master of the college and Henry More was a fellow,³⁹ although it is not known whether More was Maurice's tutor. Cudworth and More were members of a school of philosophical theologians known as the Cambridge Platonists.⁴⁰ In reaction to the heated disagreements between Puritans and High Church Anglicans which were still causing painful divisions within English Christianity, the Cambridge Platonists stressed the importance of human reason, a God-given faculty within each human soul which they called 'the candle of the Lord'.⁴¹ Since they wished to judge both the Bible and contemporary Christian opinions by the light of human reason, they were accused of 'Latitudinarianism', a

term of derision applied by partisans on both sides to those who believed that dogma, church order and liturgy were of less importance than 'the life of Christ as the pith and kernel of all religion'.⁴² Maurice's *Impartial Account* extols the disciplined use of human reason. After bitterly criticizing Mason for abandoning reason and indulging in an undisciplined use of imagination in biblical interpretation, he says that '*right Reason* is the illumination of the Mind; and when *it* is in a calm Spirit, [it] is the best Inspiration we have grounds to expect.'⁴³ He also quotes Henry More approvingly on the dangers of 'enthusiasm',⁴⁴ the seventeenth-century term for the kind of pretentious and bogus spirituality which Maurice eventually attributed to Mason. These comments would seem to indicate considerable agreement with Cambridge Platonism, although the pragmatic Maurice completely disregards More's own version of mysticism and millenarianism.

Henry Maurice did not, however, share the relaxed attitude of the Cambridge Platonists towards the structure and establishment of the Church of England. The title page of the copy of the *Impartial Account* in Dr. Williams's Library, London, is inscribed 'Read February. 1. 1753 I believe the Author is a High Churchman'. This seems to be an accurate description of Maurice's views on church order when we consider the slender evidence for his agreement with two influential High Church Anglicans, John Sharp and Joseph Hall. Maurice's first year at Christ's coincided with John Sharp's⁴⁵ final year of graduate research there, and the two were still in contact as late as the autumn of 1694, when Maurice wrote the *Impartial Account*.⁴⁶ Sharp had come to Christ's as a rigid Calvinist but had been rapidly disabused of his position by Cudworth and More, who were Arminians. Despite his continuing friendship with Cudworth and More, Sharp came to disagree with their advocacy of comprehension and toleration within the established Church of England. Sharp was a stout High Churchman who refused to accept any bishopric made vacant by the deprivation of a Nonjuror, one who could not accept King William III's royal supremacy of the Church of England following the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Only the death in 1691 of Archbishop Thomas Lamplugh of York allowed Sharp to accept that metropolitan see, easing the king's anger against him. Sharp later encouraged a High

Church view of the Church of England in his role as spiritual advisor to Queen Anne. In his lesser position as a country rector, Maurice shared some of Sharp's opinions, specifically expressing his strong support for the establishment of the Church of England, episcopacy and the Book of Common Prayer.⁴⁷ In the *Impartial Account*, Maurice also refers approvingly to 'the Devout Bishop Hall'.⁴⁸ While bishop of Exeter from 1627 to 1641, Joseph Hall had been suspected by Archbishop Laud of favouring Calvinism and Puritanism, but he had strongly defended episcopacy by divine right in 1640. Translated to Norwich in 1641, he was imprisoned in the Tower by Parliament before he could take up the duties of his new see, and he died, deprived of his bishopric and impoverished, in 1656.⁴⁹ Although Maurice does not specifically cite it amongst his quotations from Bishop Hall, he was almost certainly familiar with *The Revelation Unrevealed* of 1650, a book which Hall had written refuting the millenarian speculations of Johann Heinrich Alsted, who, as we shall see, was a major influence on Mason.⁵⁰

TWO CLERICAL CAREERS

About eight years younger than Mason, Maurice was of a more stable character than his friend, but he formed a high opinion of Mason's devotion, and the two enjoyed theological discussion. Maurice tells us that Mason was a 'rigid Calvinist' who inclined towards Antinomianism. Maurice comments that 'His Preaching did commonly border upon the Predestinarian Points, and did often make his Hearers Melancholy, and now and then in danger of Despair.' People often came to Mason asking him to help them resolve their doubts about Christianity, but how he was able to help them 'from *his* Principles', Maurice could never learn. It was Mason's extreme Calvinism which led him into Antinomianism, which literally means 'against the law' and teaches that the elect are released by grace from keeping moral laws. Antinomians believe that sinning will not prevent the elect from being saved, thus making immoral behaviour of no consequence. Mason told Maurice that the only difference between St Peter and Judas was 'what *decrees* and *irresistible* Grace had made'. On another occasion, he asserted 'That *it was all one, whether he had kept the Commandments or broke them all, since Christ had observ'd them.*'⁵¹ Considering

how frequently Mason begged sinners to repent of their sins and turn to Christ for salvation, these seem rather odd, even deliberately shocking, statements. Perhaps Mason felt that Maurice placed too much emphasis on free will and too little on election. While Maurice never says clearly that he himself is an Arminian, his manifest shock and disgust at these pronouncements by Mason lead us to assume that he believed the responsible use of free will and cooperation with the grace of God to be essential for salvation.

Although they were both Anglican incumbents, Mason and Maurice had very different attitudes towards members of other Christian denominations in England. While he valued the Book of Common Prayer, Mason was sympathetic towards Dissenters' emphasis on extempore prayer, which he practised in family devotions.⁵² John Hammet, his successor-but-one at Stantonbury, wrote that 'he was far from a bitter Spirit against Dissenters. So great was his Love to *Christ*, that he had a Value for any one who spoke a savoury Word of him'.⁵³ On the other hand, Mason loathed Roman Catholics and identified the papacy with Babylon in the Book of Revelation.⁵⁴ Conversely, Maurice was worried that toleration of Dissenters would encourage sectarianism and was shocked by Mason's 'coldness' and 'indifferency' to the Book of Common Prayer.⁵⁵ His attitude towards Roman Catholics was also very different from Mason's. In addition to being rector of Tyringham, Maurice was Anglican chaplain to the earl of St Albans,⁵⁶ a francophile Roman Catholic courtier who owed his earldom to the favour of Queen Henrietta Maria, the wife of King Charles I and mother of King Charles II. In 1669, Charles II used St Albans as an ambassador to Louis XIV to negotiate the secret treaty of Dover, which made England virtually a client of the French crown. Since Edward Backwell was entrusted by the king with the financial aspects of these negotiations,⁵⁷ we might guess that he knew the earl well enough to recommend Maurice to him as an Anglican chaplain, although no surviving documentary evidence supports this conjecture. In his later years, the earl was devoted to 'gambling and good living' and was rumoured to have been secretly married to the queen mother after the execution of Charles I in January 1649. The present writer has found no record of Maurice's relationship with this rather unsavoury nobleman, but he presumably would not have

accepted the post of chaplain to the earl if he despised Roman Catholics as Mason did.

While Maurice was clearly a scholarly man, Mason was the more productive writer and his work had a more enduring influence than Maurice's single title. In addition to his published sermons, Mason wrote unpublished biblical commentaries, a catechism for little children, edifying letters to family and friends, some of which were published soon after his death, aphorisms on Christian themes, and hymns and poems.⁵⁸ The aphorisms and a complete collection of letters were first published as Mason's *Select Remains* in 1741 by his grandson, also called John Mason, who was a Dissenting minister. The second edition of 1742 included a warm letter of recommendation from the Congregational divine Isaac Watts;⁵⁹ the work went through twenty-two editions by 1830⁶⁰ and was greatly admired by both Anglican and Dissenting Evangelicals. The aphorisms, such as 'Nothing grieves Christ more than to have his Love slighted; nothing pleaseth him more than to have it accepted',⁶¹ emphasize the gravity of sin, but also stress the welcome which awaits penitent sinners when they turn to Christ for salvation. The letters are missives of encouragement, but they do contain the odd ominous phrase, such as 'Be of good Comfort, *Sister*, it is but yet a very little while, and he that shall come, will come, and will not tarry'.⁶² Many modern Christians will have sung Mason's hymn 'How shall I sing that majesty' without realizing that it is part of the first hymn in his collection of *Spiritual Songs*. The three or four fine verses printed in modern hymnals have been carefully selected from a twelve-verse hymn of varying quality. The last verse, which begins:

Thy bright Back-parts, O God of Grace,
I Humbly here Adore;
Shew me the Glory of thy Face,
That I may praise thee more.⁶³

would be unsingable by any modern congregation! Mason's poetry also includes a 'Sacred Poem on Dives and Lazarus' and a paraphrase of the Song of Solomon.⁶⁴ The third edition of his poems, published in 1692, contains a collection of 'Penitential Cries', begun by Mason and completed by Thomas Shepherd, who was curate of Haversham in 1691 but later became a Dissenting minister.⁶⁵ While the literary quality of Mason's poetry is rather poor, a

recent writer on hymnody, J. R. Watson, has shown how he 'stands between Herbert and Charles Wesley, particularly in his use of metaphor, his ardour, and his insistence on personal and practical religion.' Watson also suggests the influence of Mason on John Newton of Olney.⁶⁶ At the end of his life, Mason wrote embarrassingly poor millenarian hymns for his disciples to sing at Water Stratford as they danced in a circle ready to embrace Christ as he descended from the clouds.⁶⁷

THE SECOND COMING AT WATER STRATFORD

While Maurice expresses approval of the writings of More and Hall and seems to have been friends with Sharp, it is much harder to determine which writers, other than Herbert, might have influenced Mason. He never mentions reading any book other than the Bible, but Maurice helps us to understand one other major influence on Mason's thinking. Mason had busied himself while at Stantonbury by ministering to the people at Haversham, whom he felt to be neglected by their rector Daniel Rogers, and, after becoming rector of Water Stratford in January 1675, he continued to visit his beloved 'Haversham Christians'.⁶⁸ Rogers died in June 1680 and was succeeded in September by Samuel Holton, a pluralist who resided at Hampstead, where he was curate. A succession of curates therefore, including John Hammet in 1680 and Thomas Shepherd in 1691, looked after the cure of souls in Haversham.⁶⁹ When James Wrexham arrived as assistant to the curate in January 1682, he became firm friends with Mason. Maurice thought Wrexham was 'A melancholy Divine ... and very often *disturb'd*' and clearly disapproved of the friendship. Often spending as much as three months together, Mason and Wrexham studied a book which Maurice calls '*Alsted's Chronology*'.⁷⁰ This was in fact a Latin work entitled *Thesaurus Chronologiae* by Johann Heinrich Alsted, professor of theology at Herborn in Germany, which was published in 1628. Alsted was a rigid Calvinist who expected the imminent end of the world, which he saw as a time for the vindication of the godly elect and the destruction of the reprobate, and the *Thesaurus Chronologiae* was the culmination of his millenarian predictions.⁷¹ Wrexham was soon busy adding his own extravagant details to Alsted's prophecy that the second coming of Christ would

occur in 1694. He laboriously made a new chronology of the Bible, predicting the imminent end of the world, which he presented to Bishop Thomas Barlow of Lincoln, expecting his approval. The bishop, however, reproved him 'for wasting so much time and pains in a fruitless study', and Wrexham was greatly distressed. He became increasingly distracted until he died insane at the end of September 1684. The Haversham parish register suggests that he had fallen into 'ye Snare of ye Divill', and we may think that he pulled Mason into that snare with him. Maurice records that Wrexham's '*death fill'd Mr. Mason with excessive grief*'. From that time onwards, Mason was deeply preoccupied with millenarian thoughts.⁷²

The earliest Christians had expected the ascended Christ to return in glory within their own lifetime, but even in the letters of St Paul we can see some change in Christian thinking about the timing of the second coming of Christ. The Council of Ephesus in 431 decreed that the thousand-year reign of Christ with his saints on earth described in Revelation chapter 20 should be equated with the history of the church militant on earth. The millennium therefore had already begun and consequently no period of earthly bliss should be expected following a second coming of Christ.⁷³ Although that understanding of how the world would end was occasionally challenged during the middle ages, it dominated western Christian thinking until the Reformation. Luther and Calvin added a new dimension by advocating an historical exegesis of the Book of Revelation, understanding its prophecies as fulfilled in the history of the church up to the sixteenth century and especially equating the papacy with the Antichrist, but they stopped short of predicting the imminent end of the world.⁷⁴ However, Calvin's successor at Geneva, Theodore Beza, and his English disciple William Perkins took the Book of Revelation much more literally. Through their influence, English Calvinism became strongly millenarian, and many Puritans, especially Independents, Baptists and Fifth Monarchists, believed that the Civil War and Interregnum were directly preparatory to the second coming of Christ. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the thinking of Puritan Dissenters turned more to church order and survival under persecution, but Mason and Wrexham were far from being the only Calvinists, whether Anglicans or Dissenters, to continue to take an

interest in the millennium. The danger of a restitution of Roman Catholicism in England under James II particularly encouraged millenarianism amongst extreme Protestants during the 1680s.⁷⁵ Alsted became one of the English millenarians' favourite authors and his writings were deeply influential on Joseph Mede, the most important English millenarian thinker of the seventeenth century.⁷⁶ The very copy of *'Alsted's Chronology'* over which Wrexham and Mason had pored was later sent to Henry Maurice by his bookseller in Northampton, convincing Maurice that Wrexham had taught Mason 'to be mad by Book'.⁷⁷ No wonder Maurice turned for assistance to the writings of Bishop Hall, who had written a fierce rebuttal of Alsted's predictions and particularly criticized his specific dating of the millennium.⁷⁸

On Monday 23 April 1694, a week after Mason's vision of Christ, his sister-in-law Mrs Margaret Holms, who had come to keep house for Mason and look after his six children when his wife Mary died in February 1688, wrote to her cousin Mr Ives of Northampton. Chancing to receive a visit from Maurice, Ives showed him the letter describing Mason's vision and the group of disciples at Water Stratford expecting the imminent end of the world. Maurice called at Water Stratford rectory on Saturday 28 April, and was surprised on his arrival by unexpected noises in the yard. A number of people were all singing very loudly, some to one tune and some to another. Inside the house, a scene of *'Spiritual Bedlam'* filled him with horror. Men, women and children were running up and down, throwing their arms up to catch and embrace their appearing Saviour. Some were exhausted and had turned black in the face, but when they collapsed they were replaced by another relay who had been resting. With some difficulty, Maurice gained access to Mason, who was lying in bed in the 'darkish garret' where the vision had taken place.⁷⁹ Maurice was bitterly disappointed that his previously loving friend had become 'froward in his Converse, reserv'd in Discourse, and impatient of a Contradiction; yea, and seem'd to damn all Mankind but a few in his own way'.⁸⁰ Mason was unwilling to speak of his vision, except to exclaim, *'By the Eternal God I saw Him with these Eyes'* and *'By the Living God 'tis true'*.⁸¹ Maurice was sent down to a lower chamber to speak with the 'Two Witnesses', Mason's chief disciples who took their title from

Revelation 11:3 and who had written a pamphlet in support of *'The Midnight Cry'*.⁸² One of these witnesses must have been Valentine Evans, and the other was probably Thomas Harris, a deputy for Thomas Ward, who was lying ill and died within a week.⁸³ Mrs Holms and many spectators were also present at this meeting. The witnesses affirmed that Mason was the second Elijah who was to appear before the great and terrible day of the second coming. When Christ came, he would be visible only to a very few, 'but with the Prophet [Mason] he would daily Converse, and be very Familiar; and his chief Residence would be in the Clouds.' Those of the elect who had never heard of Water Stratford and Mason's preaching 'would be *hall'd* thither, without their consent, by Angels.' Maurice irritably challenged the extreme confidence of the witnesses, saying that they were deluded. This sent them into a 'furious transport', and they said he would surely be damned for his unbelief. Out of temper, Maurice left, picking his way through thirty dancers in the parlour below, who were accompanied by 'Vagabond-Fidlers, Singing-Boys or Wenches' whom they had hired 'because they thought our Saviour would have all sorts of Musick to attend Him.' Maurice never saw his friend again.⁸⁴

AN IMPARTIAL ACCOUNT

On 23 April,⁸⁵ the same day that Mrs Holms wrote to Cousin Ives, Mason developed a ranula (a cystic tumour under the tongue, caused by the obstruction of the salivary ducts or glands), making speech very painful, and it soon developed into a 'quinsey' or severe tonsillitis.⁸⁶ Despite his followers' belief that he was immortal,⁸⁷ Mason died on 20 or 21 May and was hurriedly buried on the 22nd in Water Stratford churchyard.⁸⁸ Not long after Mason's death, the London publisher John Dunton brought out a little volume entitled *Some Remarkable Passages in the Life and Death of Mr. John Mason, Late Minister of Water-Stratford*. The *'Original Paper'*, which was 'Published to Prevent False Reports', had been *'Drawn up by a Reverend Divine'* whom Dunton does not name, although he invites 'any who please' to visit him and examine the document. He is sure that anyone who does so will 'be thoroughly satisfied that this is an *Impartial Narrative'*.⁸⁹ The present author suspects that the 'Reverend Divine' may have been either John Hammet, vicar of Stantonbury

from 1678 to 1685,⁹⁰ or Richard Mayo, vicar of Great Kimble, who wrote a biography of Mason which was never published and is apparently lost,⁹¹ and who was probably also the 'R. M.' who edited 'The Midnight Cry'. He had interviewed the dying Mason, and it is interesting to contrast his courteous reception with the painful experience of Henry Maurice. Maurice was further distressed when rumour identified him with the 'Reverend Divine'. *Some Remarkable Passages* contains a selection of Mason's letters, and Maurice tells us that there was speculation that he had published them. He had been planning to write a book designed 'to silence the Incredulity of the Atheist and Deist', but decided to 'contract my thoughts' in order 'to undeceive more Readers'. He seems to have been in touch with his old friend John Sharp about the matter, as he addresses his book to the archbishop of York and says that he writes in obedience to his wishes.⁹²

Maurice was particularly eager to respond publicly to four letters he had received. The first 'desir'd a Representation of Matters of Fact at Water Stratford' and the second an account of Mason's character. The third asked for Maurice's thoughts about the impulses and vision to which Mason pretended and what might occasion them, and the fourth enquired how it could be consistent with the goodness of God to suffer a person who meant well to be as deluded as Mason apparently was.⁹³ In responding to the first, Maurice used the evidence of his own visit to Water Stratford on 28 April as well as Mrs Holms's letter of 23 April to Mr Ives.⁹⁴ Mrs Holms also wrote to Maurice in response to a request for information, but she refused to send him Mason's papers. Instead, she referred him to 'The Midnight Cry' for a full statement of her brother-in-law's message, remarking that Mason knew himself to be the 'Harbinger sent before Christ's Face'.⁹⁵ In answering the second letter concerning Mason's character, Maurice noted that he had encountered a variety of opinions. Some people said that Mason was no less than an apostle and divinely inspired, while others insisted that he was a horrid imposter or diabolically possessed. Maurice painstakingly traced every story to its origin and looked at the credit of the informer before accepting or rejecting it.⁹⁶ He collected information about Mason's old schoolmaster at Strixton, wrote to Henry Gray, Mason's 'Chamber-Fellow' at Clare Hall, and to Francis Sawyer, whose curate Mason had been at

Isham, Northamptonshire, and spoke with the Wittewronge family.⁹⁷ He also reflected on his own long friendship with Mason, who had originally had a 'complexional goodness' which 'secur'd him from the bad effects of ill Principles'. In the early days, Maurice had loved him because 'he was not only temperate but mortify'd, not only true and just, but kind and charitable . . . very affable in Carriage, Meek in his Converse, and never over-earnest unless (where he thought he could not exceed) for God'.⁹⁸ His character had begun to deteriorate, however, as his physical health weakened and he gave himself over to millenarian speculation. From the time of his vision of Christ, 'he contracted (as he thought) such a Friendship with God, as might warrant him to despise Men. For from that very time his *good nature* left him'.⁹⁹ After careful investigation, Maurice could find no grounds for stories that Mason was guilty of cupidity or insincerity, but he concluded his answer to the second letter by saying that 'though I deny him to be a Counterfeit, I grant him to be culpable'.¹⁰⁰

Addressing the third question, 'the nature of the Impulses and Vision to which he pretended, and what might be the occasions of 'em', Maurice was 'thoroughly satisfied 'twas mere Delusion'.¹⁰¹ Mason had failed to exercise self-discipline over the 'burthen of his own *Idiosyncracy*, or peculiar temperament' and had indulged a 'dismal Idea' of God.¹⁰² On Low Sunday night, he had probably lain down thinking of the Prayer Book gospel for the day (John 20:19-23), which describes the appearance of Christ to his disciples in the upper room.¹⁰³ Mason 'had, by much thinking about it, drawn the perfect figure in his own imagination . . . his earnest desire had as confidently set it afore him'.¹⁰⁴ Mason could have resisted the delusion better had he been willing to 'Discourse with Men of Sense', but he preferred to associate with 'poor ignorant Creatures of *great Faith . . . but of little Reason*' who believed his nonsense. Maurice thinks that any man's 'parts will *rust* if they have not sometimes the *whet* of a generous Conversation' to save him from melancholy or vanity and emptiness.¹⁰⁵ Finally, Maurice addresses the question 'how it may consist with the Divine Goodness to permit a Person of *no ill* meaning to fall into so great Delusion?'¹⁰⁶ Although he grants Mason's sincerity, he faults him for not suspecting his private judgement and doing all he can to know the truth.¹⁰⁷ Maurice suggests that Mason's melancholy had occasioned a partial 'Eclipse of the Light

of Reason' and that he had cherished his own 'Phantasms and Imaginations' brought on by too much fasting and meditation. He had made 'over-curious and anxious enquiries into future Events' and then brooded on them.¹⁰⁸ Mason had indulged in 'an ostentation of a higher kind of Power' by attributing his vision directly to God, and he had interpreted the Scriptures, which were clearly meant to be taken spiritually, in an earthly sense.¹⁰⁹ Sincerity 'must take in *moral Prudence*', but Mason's phantasms and conceits had led 'Men who pretend to Sense . . . and Religion too' to question the goodness of God. Maurice cannot forbear 'expressing my resentment and indignation against all such, as would rob, as would dethrone God, that they may Deifie a Man, and that chiefly for being out of the way.'¹¹⁰ Maurice then goes on seriously to question Mason's goodness: 'If he instructs *his Hearers* amiss, it may (it is likely) extenuate *their* Guilt in some measure, but I can't but think, that *He himself* must pay for it.'¹¹¹ He had led others into sin by neglecting 'the Rites and Offices of the *Church*' and thereby encouraging others to neglect them, by causing 'many of the neighbouring Parishes to forsake their Pastors', and by occasioning 'many worthy Ministers of Christ to be censur'd, because they would not violate their Consciences, and do as he did'. 'He occasion'd a Separation, and encourag'd *Schism*', a great sin 'because *his* main business is to preach up *Union*' at a time when many Dissenters were taking advantage of the Act of Toleration to form new sects. His Calvinism had encouraged his hearers to desire the damnation of 'the major part of Mankind', and he had led many people to neglect their families and businesses and to live idly.¹¹²

Still, 'God might have several good Ends in suffering this Delusion.' He might make some people more satisfied to accept nothing but his revealed will and 'be the more heartily thankful for . . . *sound Reason*.' He might use Mason's preaching to bring some people of 'earthy and heavy Complexions . . . into the ways of Holiness'. Occasion is given to the church's bishops to magnify 'the Ministry of the Gospel, in all Genuine and Apostolical methods of its promotion' by careful 'discerning of Spirits', especially at a time when '*Enthusiastick Principles*' pose a danger to both church and state.¹¹³ Mason 'had made so great a progress in the right way' but had been overtaken by 'the *Deceiver*' while he was '*languishing almost for a more blissful estate*'.¹¹⁴ Maurice concludes that:

. . . it should be a warning to every one (that is not quite rid of his Senses) never to cleave to any Man's Opinion out of admiration to his Person, but to make God only Sovereign Lord of his Faith. It should teach us, that *right Reason* is the illumination of the Mind; and when *it* is in a calm Spirit, is the best Inspiration we have grounds to expect. That the Method for our Salvation being long since establish'd, we have no reason to look for any farther Revelation. In a word, it should teach us to be careful in matter of Religion, to keep within the due bounds of God's Revealed Will, and so to endeavour the advancement of the common Good, *as* that a pious Zeal may not draw in Confusion, nor by a mistake rear up the Walls of *Babel*, whilst we intend *Jerusalem* . . .¹¹⁵

Henry Maurice is the voice of rational Anglicanism in the face of Calvinist and millenarian extremism. He is shocked that his Cambridge-educated friend has neglected his own mental health and eschewed educated company and conversation. He is deeply annoyed that Mason has given encouragement to sectarianism at a time when the established Church of England has lost some of its privileges. Most of all, he is disgusted at Mason's pride and ill nature; his whole pamphlet is redolent of the pain of injured friendship.

TWO LIVING TRADITIONS

Neither John Mason nor Henry Maurice had a great influence on succeeding generations of English Christians, but both are good examples of a transitional period between the fierce religious conflicts of the seventeenth century and the gentler divisions of the eighteenth. As a Calvinist and Antinomian, Mason was more like an early seventeenth-century Puritan than a late seventeenth-century Anglican, but Calvinism would become popular again amongst both Anglican and Dissenting Evangelicals from the mid-1730s, and the little lasting influence Mason had would come through their interest in his writings. His millenarianism, too, seems fifty years out of date but would prove a major component of the Evangelical Revival. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Evangelical missionary and philanthropic societies were founded largely to convert as many people as possible to Christianity

before the imminent second coming of Christ, although this belief was held in a much soberer fashion amongst later Evangelicals than it had been amongst Mason's disciples. Evangelical Christianity has developed considerably from its eighteenth-century roots, but it may rightly count John Mason, the preacher of God's love for the individual sinner, as one of its precursors. Probably very few people read Henry Maurice's *Impartial Account* after the stir at Water Stratford had died down, but he is an excellent example of an Arminian High Churchman with a strong interest in the rationalism which would oppose the 'enthusiasm' of Evangelicals in the next century. He also forms a small part of the tradition of High Churchmanship which sees the Church of England as both Catholic and Reformed and finds authority in both the Bible and the Fathers of the

first six hundred years of the church's history. Without that continuing tradition, the Oxford Movement of the 1830s would not have been possible, and the liturgical revival within nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglicanism would not have taken place. John Mason and Henry Maurice were friends in Buckinghamshire more than three hundred years ago, but their friendship was seriously damaged by disagreements over the essential nature of Christianity. English Christians today still find some of the same difficulties in agreeing on the relative importance of the Bible as opposed to church traditions built up over the centuries, of the individual as opposed to the corporate, institutional nature of the church, of election and grace as opposed to reason and free will, and on whether the second coming of Christ is an event to be interpreted spiritually or expected literally.

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