

# JOHN MASON: ANGLICAN MILLENARIAN AND FRIEND OF DISSENTERS<sup>1</sup>

MARILYN LEWIS

*In an earlier article,<sup>2</sup> John Mason, the millenarian rector of Water Stratford, was depicted as an old-fashioned Puritan within the Church of England who was friendly with Dissenters and much admired by later Evangelicals. Here, his relationships with contemporary Dissenting, and barely conforming, friends and his influence on later Evangelical admirers and critics, both Anglican and Nonconformist, are explored in greater depth. His career shows that the boundaries between the Church of England and Dissent were less sharply demarcated than is often supposed. The Buckinghamshire writer of the much-loved hymn 'How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire?' emerges as a fascinating case study in the history of English Protestantism.*

John Mason, rector of Water Stratford near Buckingham, gained notoriety for predicting the second coming of Christ at Ascensontide 1694 and gathering a group of perhaps 500 disciples to wait for it. He died three or four days after Ascension Day, but a few of his followers remained at Water Stratford until the early eighteenth century. Mason would probably be remembered only as a mistaken enthusiast if he had not written hymns, a few of which are still sung, and had his grandson not published a collection of his sayings and letters, which were treasured by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Evangelicals. Beyond this pious legacy, however, lies a web of Dissenting and Evangelical contacts, the exploration of which deepens our knowledge of the evolving relationship between the Church of England and Dissent from the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 until the middle of the nineteenth century. In this paper, four aspects of Mason's relationships with Dissenters and Evangelicals will be explored. We begin with his education and early patronage, noticing especially the influence of the Puritan Wittewronge and Alston families. Secondly, we examine the influence of his writings – hymns, a children's catechism, and a collection of sayings and letters – to see how they nourished the devotion of both Dissenting and Anglican Evangelicals after his death. We note particularly the way in which the famous Independent divine and hymn writer Isaac Watts helped to popularize Mason's work and his friendship with the Independent minister Thomas Shepherd. Thirdly, after looking briefly at Mason's

millenarianism to ask whether his theology was influenced by Dissent, we see how later Dissenters and Anglican Evangelicals generally criticized his preaching of the second Advent. Finally, we notice the Dissenters among Mason's descendants, including his great-great-great-grandson John Mason Neale, who was a catholic dissenter within the Church of England.

Before looking in detail at Mason's relationships with Dissenters, it is necessary to place his career within the context of seventeenth-century English church history. Mason was born in the 1640s, when the Long Parliament was attempting to impose a Presbyterian system of church order and worship on the Church of England. He was a schoolboy during the Protectorate of Oliver Cromwell, when voluntary 'gathered churches' of Independents or Congregationalists and Baptists flourished and Quakers and other radical sects appeared. He went up to Clare Hall, Cambridge, in 1661, a year after the Restoration had signalled the end of this rich period of diversity and experimentation. By 1667, when Mason was ordained deacon, the Cavalier Parliament had tried to impose uniformity on, and conformity to, the restored Church of England by a series of enactments known as 'The Clarendon Code'. Most of Mason's ministry passed during the reigns of Charles II (1660–85) and James II (1685–8), a period of severe persecution for Dissenters. Following the Glorious Revolution, the Act of Toleration of 1689 gave Protestant Dissenters limited freedom to worship and order their churches as they desired. The strange events at

Water Stratford occurred only five years after the passage of 'King William's Toleration'. The second half of the seventeenth century was a period of intolerance and persecution, and the Act of Toleration marks only the beginning of acceptance of religious pluralism and voluntarism. Many people declared their unwavering adherence to either the Church of England or one of the Dissenting denominations, but there were other individuals and families who occupied an uncertain boundary between the Church and Dissent. John Mason is remarkable during this period as an Anglican clergyman well known for his friendliness towards Protestant Dissenters.

#### JOHN MASON'S EDUCATION AND EARLY PATRONAGE

In Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*, Prebendary H. Leigh Bennet of Lincoln Cathedral describes John Mason as 'the s. of a Dissenting Minister'.<sup>3</sup> Since Mason was born about 1642,<sup>4</sup> twenty years before Parliament created the legal category of Dissent, this statement is nonsense, and Leigh Bennet presents no evidence to support it. Mason came from a family of churchmen in the Kettering and Wellingborough area of Northamptonshire, and his education indicates that his parents probably intended him for the Church. Although little can be discovered about Mason's childhood, we can see the influence of his schoolmaster, the rector of the hamlet of Strixton, as likely to have contributed to his sympathy for Dissent. The destruction of the Strixton parish registers in a fire at Bozeat vicarage in 1729 makes for some uncertainty, but Mason's schoolmaster was probably William Farrow,<sup>5</sup> rector of the parish from 1628 until 1680. The writer has found no records of disruption to the living during the Civil War or Interregnum. Farrow was a graduate of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, a Puritan college founded in 1584 by Sir Walter Mildmay for the training of Protestant preachers. When Farrow was at Emmanuel between 1619 and 1623, the college was known for its Calvinist theology and severely reformed liturgical practices which amounted to nonconformity to the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>6</sup> If Farrow was Mason's schoolmaster, and if he accepted the Emmanuel ethos, he may have instilled his own theological preferences in an impressionable and devout child.

Mason went up to Clare Hall, Cambridge, in

1661, where the moderately Puritan Theophilus Dillingham<sup>7</sup> was master, but there is no evidence of Puritan influences during his time as an undergraduate. Indeed, the main influence on him seems to have been that of the royalist High Churchman Barnabas Oley,<sup>8</sup> editor of George Herbert's *The Country Parson*, who was restored to his Clare fellowship in 1660. Yet Mason had a conversion experience at Cambridge similar to those reported by many Puritan diarists. His 'Chamber-Fellow', Henry Gray, who later succeeded his father as vicar of Heyford, south-west of Northampton, wrote 'that he was careless in some part of his Life there'. As Mason frequently remarked in sermons, '*here stands one that has been as great a Sinner as any of you till it pleased God to open his Eyes*'. For Mason, God's gracious dealing with his own soul in a personal and individual manner would far outweigh any role that the Church might play in his salvation. His literary treatment of his personal relationship with his Saviour would constitute his main attraction for contemporary Dissenters and later Evangelicals. Gray also remarked that Mason

'. . . would be sometimes starting of Questions, in reference to the usages of the Church of England (which seem'd to discover some dissatisfaction) and with greater earnestness, than points discours'd only for dispute sake are ordinarily manag'd.'<sup>9</sup>

Already, Mason seems to have been expressing some sympathy for Dissent.

Nevertheless, after taking his B.A. degree in 1665, Mason was ordained deacon by Joseph Henshaw, bishop of Peterborough, on 22 September 1667.<sup>10</sup> He served his title at Upper Isham, Northamptonshire, where Francis Sawyer,<sup>11</sup> who had been the Cromwellian minister at Sibbertoft, was rector. Sawyer had resigned the vicarage of Sibbertoft in 1660 in favour of the pre-Civil War incumbent and ended his life as rector of Kettering. As a conformist, he seems unlikely to have strongly influenced Mason in favour of Dissent, but he was certainly not a High Churchman. At the end of the academic year in 1668, Mason received his M.A. degree, and was ordained priest on 20 September.

On 21 October 1668, Mason was presented to the vicarage of Stantonbury by the Puritan Sir John Wittewronge.<sup>12</sup> At the Restoration, Sir John had reluctantly conformed to the Church of England,



FIGURE 1 Stantonbury Church from the north-east. Reproduced from the Victoria County History, Buckinghamshire Vol. IV, p. 465, by permission of the General Editor.

although he continued to move in circles that hovered on an uncertain boundary between the Church and Dissent.<sup>13</sup> He built a large new house at Stantonbury for his son John Wittewronge, Esq., and his daughter-in-law Clare Alston, where Mason lived virtually as their chaplain.<sup>14</sup> In July 1669, Mason responded to Archbishop Gilbert Sheldon's questionnaire, designed to gather information for the renewal of the Conventicle Act of 1664 which had lapsed in May 1668. Mason certified that 'there are noe conventicles or unlawfull assemblies held within the Parish of Staunton or Stoughtonbury',<sup>15</sup> but the conversation and family prayers in the Wittewronge household may have been at variance with the spirit of the re-established Church of England. Sir John Wittewronge's will, made in 1688, left £100 for his youngest son James to distribute among worthy and impoverished Non-conformist ministers or their widows.<sup>16</sup>

Mason's first published work was a funeral sermon for Clare Wittewronge, who died in October

1669 when he had been with the family for only a year.<sup>17</sup> The sermon, *The Waters of Marah Sweetened*, follows the Puritan pattern of text, doctrine, and use and contains a strongly Calvinistic message of comfort for the elect as they face the loss of a loved one and their own eventual death. It was published by John Macock in 1671, simultaneously with a sermon preached in 1670 at the funeral of Clare's mother, Mrs. Mary Alston, by Adam Littleton, rector of Chelsea.<sup>18</sup> Clare's grieving father, Joseph Alston, probably paid for both sermons to be published, so Mason first appeared in print in company with the learned lexicographer, who was also a royal chaplain. Littleton's sermon, however, is godly enough to please any Puritan and perhaps reflects Joseph Alston's taste in preaching. Joseph Alston, who was later created a baronet, was a cousin of Sir Thomas Alston, Bart., of Odell Castle in Bedfordshire.<sup>19</sup> Like the Wittewronges, Sir Thomas and his wife Lady Elizabeth were well-known for their grudging conformity to the Church

of England. Lady Elizabeth insisted that her tenants and servants attend Odell parish church, but she made sure that they heard godly preaching there. Sir Thomas kept a succession of Presbyterian domestic chaplains.<sup>20</sup> The Alstons were related to the Puritan families of Crewe, Pickering, Bray, Conway, and Harley.<sup>21</sup> Sir Thomas Alston's younger brother Sir Edward held the manor of Strixton<sup>22</sup> while Mason was a schoolboy there and may have recommended him to Joseph Alston, his daughter Clare, and her father-in-law Sir John Wittewronge as a prospective vicar of Stantonbury.

In January 1675, Mason was presented to the rectory of Water Stratford by the dowager Viscountess Baltinglass, who was related to the Alstons and the Wittewronges by marriage. Lady Baltinglass was a Temple of Stowe, the daughter of Sir Peter Temple, Bart.; she had inherited the advowson of Water Stratford from her mother, Anne Throckmorton of Paulerspury, Northamptonshire.<sup>23</sup> Sir Thomas Alston's widowed mother Frances had married Sir John Temple, Knt., of Stantonbury, a cousin of Sir Peter.<sup>24</sup> Sir John's son, another Sir Peter Temple, had sold the manor of Stantonbury to Sir John Wittewronge in 1653, eight years before the marriage of John Wittewronge, Esq., and Clare Alston.<sup>25</sup> In the early part of his career, then, under the patronage of the Wittewronges and with the support of the Alstons, John Mason takes his place on the barely conforming fringe of the re-established Church of England, among Puritan families who continued to support Dissenting ministers.

#### JOHN MASON'S WRITINGS

##### 'How shall I sing that majesty':

##### Mason's hymns

After the funeral sermon for Clare Wittewronge, Mason's next published work, in 1683, was a collection of poems entitled *Spiritual Songs: or Songs of Praise to Almighty God, upon Several Occasions*, which he intended to be sung as hymns. The best known hymn from this collection is 'How shall I sing that majesty which angels do admire?',<sup>26</sup> yet few who have sung three or four carefully selected verses have realized that it was written as a twelve-verse hymn of varying quality. As most recently printed in *Common Praise*<sup>27</sup>, 'How shall I sing that majesty' consists of the first four verses of Mason's text except that the second halves of the second and third verses

have been transposed. Professor J. R. Watson of Durham University has recently followed Julian<sup>28</sup> in seeing this hymn as evidence of Mason's Christian Platonist mysticism, but it seems to the writer that it may also reflect Mason's Calvinist sense of God's sovereignty and majesty. Mason's Calvinism is seen clearly in verse seven, a poetic statement of the doctrines of predestination and damnation:

'Who would not fear thy Searching Eye,  
Witness to all that's true?  
Dark Hell and deep Hypocrisie  
Lye plain before its view.  
Motions and Thoughts before they grow  
Thy Knowledge doth espy,  
What unborn Ages are to do,  
Is done before thine Eye.'

While modern congregations from a variety of traditions are happy to sing the earlier verses, verse seven would be unacceptable to those with an Arminian tradition, believing that salvation is available to all who freely turn to Christ.

Mason's poetry is devout, with the occasional striking line, but of modest literary merit; it is similar to the pious but undistinguished verse written by many seventeenth-century divines, both Anglican and Dissenting. Mason's work shows, perhaps, some influence from the Puritans George Wither and Francis Quarles,<sup>29</sup> and he draws unashamedly on both the High Churchman George Herbert and the Puritan Richard Baxter.<sup>30</sup> His influence was primarily on Dissenters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially through the hymns of Isaac Watts, author of 'When I survey the wondrous Cross', 'O God, our help in ages past', and many other perennial favourites. During the summer of 1694, Watts completed his ministerial training at the Newington Green Dissenting Academy and returned to his father's house, where he spent more than two years before finding work as a private tutor. He passed that time reading widely in church history and biblical commentaries as well as in various collections of hymns, including those of Mason. Those two years were also a period of great creativity for Watts, as he began to write his own hymns.<sup>31</sup> In March 1700, Watts's brother Enoch commented unfavourably on Mason's rendering of the Psalms which they had sung together during worship at the Independent meeting at Southampton between 1694 and 1696,

**Spiritual Songs :**  
O R,  
**Songs of Praise**  
T O  
**Almighty God,**  
Upon Several OCCASIONS.  
Together with the  
**SONG of SONGS,**  
Which is  
**S O L O M O N S :**  
First Turn'd, then Paraphrased in *English*  
Verse : With an Addition of a Sacred POEM  
on *Dives* and *Lazarus*.  
To which is Added,  
**Penitential Cries.**

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The Eighth Edition Corrected.

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London : Printed for Tho. Parkhurst, at the Bible and Three  
Crowns, at the Lower End of *Cheshide*, near *Stretton*-  
*Chapel*, 1704.

FIGURE 2 Frontispiece from *Spiritual Songs* by John Mason, 8th edition (1704). Permission to reproduce this granted on behalf of the Trustees of Dr William's Library. Photograph by Digby James.



saying that 'Mason now reduces this kind of writing . . . to a sort of yawning indifference'.<sup>32</sup> Watts's reaction to this comment is unknown, but he certainly borrowed widely from Mason. Watts rescued many of Mason's best ideas, which are often spoiled for congregational singing by quaintness or downright oddness. As the Congregational historian Harry Escott says, 'Mason's patterns of hymn structure were considerably improved upon the anvil of Watts's more logical mind'.<sup>33</sup> 'Come, let us join our cheerful songs with angels round the throne'<sup>34</sup> is a good example of Watts's use of Mason; it contains borrowings from three of Mason's 'Songs of Praise' but is much more singable than any of them.

The third edition of Mason's *Spiritual Songs* of 1691, shows another link with Dissent. It contains a new section of thirty-six *Penitential Cries*; the first six are by Mason and the remainder by Thomas Shepherd,<sup>35</sup> who may have been Mason's cousin. In the year of the publication of the *Penitential Cries*, Shepherd was curate of the parish of Haversham, but he had earlier been vicar of St. Neot's, Huntingdonshire (Cambridgeshire today), where he had preached the gospel with conspicuous success and been constantly at odds with the bishop of Lincoln, Thomas Barlow. Part of the trouble arose because Shepherd used a severely modified form of the Book of Common Prayer and refused to read the whole of the liturgy in order to leave more time for preaching. Shepherd was happy amongst the 'Haversham Christians', whom he described as 'an Holy, Warm, Lively, Spiritual, People, who breath'd the Heavenly Life at an uncommon Rate'. Ministering in the parish, he found that 'Ceremonies shaled off of their own Accord', but, when he was ordered by a diocesan court to take out a new preaching licence in 1693, he decided that the further step into Nonconformity was necessary. In 1694, the year of Mason's death, Thomas Shepherd was called as pastor of Castle Hill meeting in Northampton, where he remained for less than two years. From 1700 until his death in 1739, he was minister of the Independent meeting at Bocking, just outside Braintree in Essex, where he built up a thriving congregation and published a number of sermons. Escott thinks that it was largely through Shepherd's influence that Mason's hymns became known to Dissenters.<sup>36</sup>

While space will not permit us to trace in detail

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Songs of Praise to Almighty God, upon  
several Occasions.

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I. *A General Song of Praise to Almighty God.*

( 1. )

**H**OW shall I Sing that Majesty  
Which Angels do admire?  
Let Duft in Duft and Silence lye,  
Sing, Sing, ye Heavenly Quire.  
Thousands of Thousands stand around  
Thy Throne, O God, most High;  
Ten Thousand times Ten Thousand sound  
Thy Praise; but who am I?

( 2. )

Thy Brightness unto them appears  
Whilst I thy Footsteps trace;  
A Sound of God comes to my Ears;  
But they behold thy Face.  
They Sing because thou art their Sun;  
Lord, send a Beam on me;  
For where Heaven is but once begun,  
There Hallelujahs be.

Λ 3

( 3. )

FIGURE 3 First page of 'A general Song of Praise to Almighty God' today known as 'How shall I sing that majesty' from *Spiritual Songs* by John Mason, 8th edition (1704). Permission to reproduce this granted on behalf of the Trustees of Dr William's Library. Photograph by Digby James.

Mason's literary influence on later Evangelical hymn writers, we can look briefly at the continuing popularity of his hymns during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *A Collection of Divine Hymns upon Several Occasions*, published in 1694, is thought to be 'one of the earliest Hymnbooks used in public worship by the Independents'.<sup>37</sup> It is a compilation drawn from the work of six authors, including Richard Baxter, and eight of the forty-five hymns printed are Mason's. In 1707, the Presbyterian minister Samuel Bury published a

*Collection of Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs* for use in families. Of the 144 hymns printed, twenty-five are from Mason's *Spiritual Songs* and sixteen from *Penitential Cries*. The collection must have sold well, because two more editions had been printed by 1713.<sup>38</sup> Also in 1707, three Anglicans, Richard Roach, Mr. Hoffman, and Mr. Bridges, planned to publish a new edition of Mason's hymns; they may have been responsible for the tenth edition of 1708. Roach and his friends were associated with the millenarian Philadelphian society and acknowledged the divine inspiration of the French Prophets, a millenarian sect which migrated to England in 1706.<sup>39</sup> About 1720 when Thomas Pierson was a child of seven, he was given a copy of Mason's hymns by his grandfather Joseph Margetts, vicar of Kempston in Bedfordshire. Pierson memorized many of the hymns and loved to recite them for his family. He later became a member of the Moravian Brethren in Bedford; as an old man, he still found 'much sweetness in meditating on them'.<sup>40</sup> Joseph Hart, a Dissenting Evangelical who ministered to a congregation in Jewin Street, London, between 1760 and 1768, borrowed liberally from Mason in his *Hymns Composed on Various Subjects*. None of his hymns remains in use today, but they were still in print as late as 1857.<sup>41</sup>

Charles Wesley also borrowed from Mason. Mason's 'Now from the altar of our hearts let incense flames arise'<sup>42</sup> is occasionally sung today, but phrases from this hymn are better known in Wesley's 'O thou who camest from above'.<sup>43</sup> The third and fourth lines of Wesley's first verse ('kindle a flame of sacred love/on the mean altar of my heart') are based on Mason's opening couplet, and Wesley's third and fourth verses echo Mason's 'Till I shall praise Thee as I would, /Accept my Hearts desire' of verse three and 'Then shall I praise for all my Time, /When Time shall be no more' of verse four. The third verse of Wesley's 'Hark, the herald angels sing' is largely taken from Mason's 'A Song of Praise for Christ'.<sup>44</sup> John Newton, an Anglican Evangelical friend of Dissenters, also used Mason as a source; 'How sweet the name of Jesus sounds' draws on Mason's 'A Song of Praise for Christ', using words which Mason had borrowed from George Herbert's 'Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life'.<sup>45</sup> Thomas Shepherd seems to have had more influence on William Cowper than did Mason; Shepherd's peni-

tential tone is noticeably similar to Cowper's melancholy approach to God.<sup>46</sup> In 1828, the Scottish Moravian literary critic and poet James Montgomery included Mason in the third edition of his *The Christian Poet*. By then, Mason's popularity was waning; Montgomery comments 'That such writings should once have been exceedingly popular (as the multitude of editions proves) and now nearly forgotten, is little creditable to the admirers of sacred literature in this country'.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, a long article in 1881 in *The Sunday at Home*, published by the Religious Tract Society whose committee included an equal number of Anglican and Dissenting Evangelicals, still finds devotional value in Mason's quaint verses.<sup>48</sup> The Church of England adopted hymn-singing much later than the Dissenting denominations, and the writer has found only one instance of a High Church Anglican admiring Mason's verse. John Keble's 'A living stream, as crystal clear', printed in *The Salisbury Hymnbook* which arranges material according to the liturgical year of the Book of Common Prayer, is based on Mason's 'A Song of Praise for Joy in the Holy Ghost'.<sup>49</sup> The ecclesiologist and hymn writer of the Oxford Movement, John Mason Neale, Mason's great-great-great-great grandson, does not seem to have reused any of his ancestor's verses.

#### A little catechism for little children

Mason published his *Little Catechism, with Little Verses, and Little Sayings, for Little Children* in 1692;<sup>50</sup> presumably it reflects his teaching of his own six children and the other children at Water Stratford. Although it is roughly the same length as the Catechism in the Book of Common Prayer, Mason's *Little Catechism* bears a closer resemblance to the much longer Westminster Shorter Catechism, prepared by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in 1647 and approved by the Long Parliament in 1648.<sup>51</sup> A number of verbal borrowings suggest that Mason wrote with the Shorter Catechism before him. In the Prayer Book Catechism, the child is seen as the recipient of God's grace, through the sacraments and prayer, and his membership of the Church and his place in its corporate life are assumed. By contrast, Mason's *Little Catechism* presents in miniature the Shorter Catechism's Calvinist doctrines of the total depravity of mankind, a penal substitutionary understanding of limited atonement, and justifica-

tion of the individual believer by faith and the imputed righteousness of Christ. Only Jesus Christ, who died on the cross bearing 'the Curse of God that was due to Sinners', can save the child from perdition. However, 'all the World' are not saved by Christ, only those who 'Believe on him'. 'Multitudes are called and invited', but their lack of humility keeps them from coming to Christ. Mason is concerned with the penitent child's personal relationship with Christ as Saviour, who will give him grace and peace, comfort and provide for him, take his part, and bring him to heaven. It is small wonder that when John Newton catechized the children of both Church and Dissenting families in Olney, he used Mason's *Little Catechism*, rather than the Prayer Book Catechism, to avoid giving offence to the Dissenters.<sup>52</sup>

#### Mason's holy wisdom: select remains

Mason's *Select Remains*, a collection of sayings and letters, was published for the first time in 1736 by his grandson John Mason III,<sup>53</sup> then minister of a Presbyterian congregation at Dorking in Surrey. Space will not permit an examination the Calvinist theology of this little volume here, but we can gain insights into Mason's relationships with Dissenters from the editor's preface and several of the letters. The preface quotes from a letter from John Hammet, Mason's successor-but-one as vicar of Stantonbury, regarding Mason's attitude towards Nonconformity:

'... 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. And as he had a great charity for others, so he was most highly esteem'd by the most sober Churchmen and Dissenters. Mr. Baxter said, *He was the Glory of the Church of England.*'<sup>54</sup>

This quotation seems to indicate that Richard Baxter knew Mason, at least by reputation, but the writer has found no evidence for the friendship between the two men which several writers on Mason have assumed.<sup>55</sup> Mason might have met Baxter while visiting his friend Richard Mayo at Great Kimble; we shall see more of him in the next section.

Hammet recalls that Mason read the liturgy of

the Book of Common Prayer 'with Affection, and said, he enjoy'd much Communion with God while reading it'.<sup>56</sup> Henry Maurice, however, tells a slightly different story. While Maurice records that Mason said the collects in the Prayer Book 'were very good', he also remembers that Mason

'... was once discoursing with a very sober Person of the difference betwixt a Form of Prayers, and no Form, when he thus exprest himself. *Both are very liable to be abus'd. No Form was apt to make Men Vain-glorious, but a Form was apt to make them careless.*'

According to Maurice, Mason's 'Prayers were always vehement, and an awful silence, betwixt every Petition, doubl'd their length, with a sort of divine breathings.' He says that Mason 'made use of some' of the 'Prayers of the Church' in public, but, when at home with his family, he preferred 'to extemporize'. Seeking to explain how his friend became deluded at the end of his life about the imminence of Christ's second coming, Maurice partially blames Mason's 'coldness to the *Church Prayers*'.<sup>57</sup> Another scrap of evidence concerning Mason's attitude to the Book of Common Prayer comes from a letter to Elizabeth Glover, who may have been Mason's cousin and who remained one of his committed disciples at Water Stratford after his death.<sup>58</sup> When she expressed doubts about ceremonial in worship, he counselled her that

'The ceremonies are no part of God's worship, for then they must be matter of necessity, which we hold them not to be—but matters of decency and order, as the apostle saith, *Let all things be done decently, and in order.*'<sup>59</sup>

Isaac Watts, who had been in the habit of distributing the first edition of Mason's *Select Remains* 'in Families, among private Christians', contributed a recommendation to the second edition of 1741, and this was printed in all twenty subsequent editions, the last of which appeared in 1830. Watts thinks that the sayings 'are very proper to attend Christians of the middle rank of Life, either in the Parlour or the Kitchen, in the Shop or the Work-House', and even considers that 'a serious Christian of the highest Rank can hardly read many of these Sayings, without an inward Relish and Taste of the Truth of them.' The letters 'show the Reader, that the Writer's



Heart was always in Heaven' and will teach him 'to bring religion into his Converse with his Friends, whether by writing or by speaking'.<sup>60</sup>

Three of the letters are addressed to John Mead, and Mason sends greetings to his two brothers William and Samuel.<sup>61</sup> The Meads were a family of Dissenters who were originally from Soulbury but later moved to Mursley and then Aylesbury. The Independent divine Matthew Mead and his brother William, a leading Quaker, were the most famous members of the family. Their nephews John (Mason's correspondent) and William Mead were executors of the will of another uncle, Henry Phillips of London, and, in that capacity, William was responsible for building the new grammar school in Aylesbury in 1718. He died unmarried and childless in 1724 and left a number of charitable bequests. Three of the recipients of his generosity were adult children of 'the Reverend and Pious John Mason sometime Rector of Water Stratford'. John and William Mason each received £100, and their sister Mary 'Evince' (Evans?) received £60.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, the recipients of most of the other letters are not named; if they were, they would probably add to our knowledge of Mason's friendships, or even family relationships, with Dissenters.

#### JOHN MASON'S MILLENARIAN LEGACY

##### Dissenting influences on Mason's millenarianism

In 1690, Mason began to preach that the second coming of Christ was imminent. According to Henry Maurice, Mason preached a sermon entitled *The Midnight Cry* in several places with great zeal, and it was received with much applause. Followers from an area of ten miles around Water Stratford flocked to the village.<sup>63</sup> *The Midnight Cry* was first published during the autumn of 1690, and a fifth edition had been printed by early 1694.<sup>64</sup> Thus it also reached a wider, literate audience, although the published version may not have attracted any disciples to Water Stratford. *The Midnight Cry* was written up by 'R. M.' from notes and published with Mason's authority but without his editing of the text. 'R. M.' was probably Richard Mayo, vicar of Great Kimble, Buckinghamshire, from 1686 to 1707. While Mayo was an Anglican incumbent like Mason, his father, also Richard, was a distin-

guished Presbyterian divine, and his brother Daniel a Presbyterian minister.<sup>65</sup> Mayo had been presented to the vicarage of Great Kimble by Richard Hampden, the son of the 'Patriot' John Hampden who had opposed Charles I's levy of ship money and been killed fighting for Parliament at Chalgrove Field in 1643. Hampden was a strong Presbyterian who befriended a number of ejected ministers, including Richard Baxter.<sup>66</sup> He had earlier presented James Wrexham to the vicarage of Great Kimble. Wrexham, who had been vicar from 1678 to 1682, became Mason's great friend and mentor in millenarianism while serving as assistant to the curate at Haverham from 1682 until his death in 1684.<sup>67</sup> Mason's millenarianism, then, was encouraged by two barely conforming Anglican clergymen who were supported by a Presbyterian patron.

While space will not permit a thorough examination of Mason's millenarian theology, a brief look at his beliefs is necessary to establish whether he was influenced theologically by Dissent and to examine the reactions of later Dissenters and Anglican Evangelicals to his millenarianism. Since the Reformation, most Protestants had held that the sinful world had entered its 'end times' and that the final judgement and the establishment of the kingdom of God were near.<sup>68</sup> *The Midnight Cry* asserts that the second coming of Christ to judge the world will occur literally and is imminent, opinions which Mason shared with virtually all contemporary theological schools of thought. Before modern biblical criticism, the literal second coming was seen as a necessary completion to the story of man's salvation by Christ.<sup>69</sup> Henry Maurice tells us that Mason and Wrexham had together studied John Henry Alsted's *Thesaurus Chronologiae*, which predicts that the second advent will take place in 1694,<sup>70</sup> but *The Midnight Cry* refrains from mentioning any date and is free from Alsted's mathematical computations. When Mason preached about the second coming, however, he must have mentioned the date 1694, since the crowd of disciples began to gather at Water Stratford late in 1693.<sup>71</sup> The Presbyterian millenarian Elias Pledger wrote a long letter to Mason in January 1694, asking for more details of 'a desolating judgment that is to fall on y<sup>s</sup> city of London & parts adjacent', about which two ministers, Mr. Cole and Mr. Melhor, had told him that Mason was preaching,<sup>72</sup> so there must have been more predictions circu-

lating orally than are contained in *The Midnight Cry*. However, in fixing a date for the second coming, Mason was still not allying himself with Dissenters against Anglicans. While a number of writers, both Anglicans and Dissenters, indulged in this kind of speculation, others, again both Anglicans and Dissenters, urged restraint and waited for God to accomplish his purposes in his own time.<sup>73</sup>

*The Midnight Cry* also refrains from overt millenarianism, the doctrine, based on Revelation, chapter 20, that Christ will literally reign with his saints on earth 1,000 years before the final judgement. Our evidence for Mason's millenarianism comes from Maurice's *Impartial Account* and other contemporary writings.<sup>74</sup> As a literal millenarian, Mason belongs to a smaller group of seventeenth-century theologians; most held the traditional belief that the 1,000 years represented a past period of church history or were to be interpreted spiritually as a time when Christianity would flourish. Opponents of the literal interpretation noted the difficulties of Christ's absence from heaven for 1,000 years, the strangeness of a society composed partly of elect mortals and partly of the souls of saints descended from heaven, and the need for Christ to come a third time to effect the final judgement.<sup>75</sup> Even Mason's millenarianism, however, does not definitely mark him as a sympathizer with Dissent. In 1690, Richard Baxter, who opposed millenarianism, wrote that 'the chief Writers for the *Millennium* are Conformists, (and men of greatest Learning and Piety among them)'. He specifically includes Mason and Mayo amongst those conformists, although he also says that 'very many of the Antinomian, and Separating Opinion' share their errors.<sup>76</sup> We may tentatively conclude here that Mason's millenarianism does not necessarily show that he was theologically influenced by contemporary Dissent, despite the undoubted millenarianism of many Puritans earlier in the century.

#### Dissenting and evangelical reactions to Mason's millenarianism

The writer has discovered five fragments of evidence for reactions to Mason's millenarianism by later Dissenters and Anglican Evangelicals. First, two early eighteenth-century writers compared Mason's errors to those of the millenarian sect known as the 'French Prophets', which had migrated to England in 1706. The rector

of Bury St. Edmonds, Francis Hutchinson, was, of course, an Anglican, but his historical studies had been directed by his uncle Francis Tallents, an ejected minister. Hutchinson later became bishop of Down and Connor, where he was well-known for his good relationships with both Presbyterians and Roman Catholics. His *A Short View of the Pretended Spirit of Prophecy* of 1708 contains a short but damning account of the events at Water Stratford in 1694; it ends with a recommendation of Maurice's *Impartial Account*.<sup>77</sup> The ejected minister John Humfrey wrote *An Account of the French Prophets, and their Pretended Inspirations* in the same year. Like Hutchinson, Humfrey was a man of broad sympathies; he had received Presbyterian ordination in 1649, supported the restoration of the Stuart monarchy, and ministered to a gathered church in London after his ejection from the vicarage of Frome Selwood in Somersetshire. He has less to say than Hutchinson about Mason but remarks that 'a Good Man, a Holy Man, (as Mr. Mason of late, ) who is Sincere, and hates all Imposture or Hypocrisie, may be deluded, and others thereby Misguided and Abused, there is no Question.'<sup>78</sup>

The second piece of evidence is a book entitled *Multum in Parvo*, written by an anonymous Dissenter and published in 1732. The writer establishes his Nonconformity by denouncing a paid ministry, especially bishops, 'Overseers of the flock', and patrons. He wholeheartedly supports a literal interpretation of the millennium; he lives in hope of 'Christ reigning on Earth' and is angry with those who denounce preachers of the kingdom, 'calling them Enthusiasts, and Visionaries'.<sup>79</sup> Despite there being no direct reference to Mason or Water Stratford in the main text of *Multum in Parvo*, two hymns are printed as suitable to be sung by congregations praying for Christ's coming in judgement. Both are based on hymns written by Mason and sung by his disciples at Water Stratford. The first is printed without any title or attribution, but it includes parts of two hymns which were printed with *The Midnight Cry*.<sup>80</sup> The second is identified as 'Some VERSES of Mr. MASON'S'; it closely resembles another Water Stratford hymn which was printed in slightly differing versions in two pamphlets of May and November 1694.<sup>81</sup> The striking thing about both hymns as printed in *Multum in Parvo* is that they have clearly not been copied out of the earlier

printed sources. The verses have been rearranged and slightly modified in a way which seems to indicate a living tradition. The author of *Multum in Parvo* appears to have written down hymns which remained in congregational use, although he gives no clues as to where the congregation which sang them was gathered or how its members were connected with Mason's disciples at Water Stratford.

A third reaction to Mason's millenarianism is found in John Mason III's 1736 preface to his grandfather's *Select Remains*, in which he says that

'It must be acknowledged indeed, that towards the Close of Mr. Mason's Life, this fair and beautiful Scene [of his grandfather's piety] was much discoloured. His fervid Zeal, and warm Affections for the Honour of Christ (attended with the Decays of Nature) betrayed him into some Excesses in the Millenarian [*sic*] Scheme, which no judicious Christian can approve . . .

But over this unhappy Scene, Religion and Duty oblige me to throw a charitable Veil . . .'

John Mason III then turns to the writings of the second-century theologian Irenaeus of Lyon, who wrote that 'with respect to obscure Prophecies, *It is much the safer Way to wait for the Accomplishment of them, than to give ourselves to Guessings and Conjectures.*'<sup>82</sup> Irenaeus had, in fact, held a literal interpretation of the millennium, anticipating the physical return of Christ to reign with his saints on earth for a thousand years before the final judgement.<sup>83</sup> John Mason III does not tell us whether he is in full agreement with Irenaeus about the nature of the millennium, nor does he comment further on precisely how his grandfather was deluded, but it may be that the only errors of which he accused him were that he had mistaken a dream for a true vision of Christ and fixed a date for the commencement of the millennium. The grandson is embarrassed by his grandfather's excesses, but he still finds it hard to understand why his father, John Mason II, a Dissenting minister at Daventry in Northamptonshire, Dunmow in Essex, and Spaldwick in Huntingdonshire, never published his father's papers. John Mason II was a youth of seventeen<sup>84</sup> when his father died, and we can guess that the memory of those frantic days at Water Stratford must have been painful.

Our fourth piece of evidence occurs amongst

Anglican Evangelicals: Henry Gauntlett, vicar of Olney from 1815 to 1833, and Edward Cooke, rector of Haversham from 1802 to 1824.<sup>85</sup> Gauntlett had experienced an Evangelical conversion as a young man in 1788.<sup>86</sup> Although he had then been somewhat inclined to millenarianism, he later concluded that the belief that Christ will literally reign on earth with his saints for a thousand years is mistaken. In his *Exposition of the Book of Revelation* of 1821, he argued that the millennium must be understood spiritually. After the publication of the first edition of this work, a clergyman writing under the name 'Basilicus' responded with an impassioned plea for a literal understanding of the millennium. Gauntlett added an appendix to the second edition of his book refuting Basilicus. His daughter Catherine summarized this appendix neatly, writing that Gauntlett believed that millenarianism

' . . . cannot be true, because it supersedes the numerous predictions respecting the spiritual reign of Christ, contradicts the declarations of scripture, which assert that Christ will come the second time to judge the world; stands in direct opposition to the doctrine of the church of England; and is encumbered with impossible consequences.'<sup>87</sup>

Gauntlett intended to write a popular pamphlet refuting millenarianism and showing the great error of John Mason and his followers at Water Stratford, but he never accomplished his plan. His friend Cooke, however, reprinted a limited edition of Maurice's *Impartial Account*, together with the contemporary derisory pamphlet *A Letter from a Gentleman*, in 1823. Thirty copies were privately distributed to the editor's friends, who presumably shared Cooke and Gauntlett's disapproval of Mason.<sup>88</sup> Gauntlett would also have liked to republish the three pages on Mason in Browne Willis's *History and Antiquities of Buckingham*. Catherine Gauntlett included them as an appendix to her two-volume edition of her father's sermons. Among his papers, she also found a note warmly recommending Mason's *Select Remains*; Gauntlett follows John Mason III in finding great value in his sayings and letters but disagreeing with his millenarianism.<sup>89</sup>

In 1835, the highly eccentric Unitarian minister James Hews Bransby,<sup>90</sup> published *A Brief Account*

of the Remarkable Fanaticism Prevailing in Water-Stratford in Buckinghamshire, in the Year 1694. Drawing heavily on Maurice's *Impartial Account* and John Dunton's *Some Remarkable Passages in the Life and Death of Mr. John Mason*, Bransby is as thoroughly opposed to Mason's millenarianism as Gauntlett and Cooke. Mentioning the similarities between Mason's followers and the French Prophets, Bransby agrees with the judgements of Hutchinson and Humfrey. He then goes on to compare John Mason to the charismatic millenarian Edward Irving, who had died in December 1834.<sup>91</sup> Irving was one of the founders of the Catholic Apostolic Church and had claimed prophetic gifts for himself and encouraged them in his followers; he predicted that Christ would come a second time and inaugurate the millennium in 1868.<sup>92</sup> Bransby comments that 'Thus Christianity fails to accomplish its sublimest purposes, and is exposed to the cavils and scoffs of the unbeliever.' For Bransby, the millennium will come when

'. . . all Christians shall unite upon the foundation of an holy life and the joint profession of the few, plain, fundamental truths; when they shall make real goodness the object of their affection towards each other, and all difference of opinion the objects of their mutual forbearance.'<sup>93</sup>

This plea for universal tolerance with the minimum of doctrinal agreement contrasts sharply with Mason's condemnation of all who did not believe in the truth of his vision.

#### JOHN MASON'S DESCENDANTS

A pattern similar to Mason's web of friendships and influences is evident in the religious affiliations of his descendents. His third son William became a clergyman of the Church of England, serving as vicar of Mentmore-with-Ledburn in Buckinghamshire and as rector of Bonsall in Derbyshire,<sup>94</sup> but, as we have seen, his eldest son John became a Dissenting minister. We have also noticed Mason's grandson, John Mason III, who became moderately famous as the author of theological treatises and sermons. Following his ministry to a Presbyterian congregation at Dorking, he was pastor to a united congregation of Presbyterians and Independents at Cheshunt in Hertfordshire, where he prepared young men for the ministry. His favourite niece,

Sarah Peyto, the daughter of Henry Peyto, Independent minister of Great Coggeshall, Essex, married Peter Good, Independent minister at Epping, also in Essex. Their son John Mason Good, a physician and writer of plays, literary translations, poems, essays, and medical treatises, became a Unitarian towards the end of his life.<sup>95</sup> His daughter Susannah married an Anglican clergyman, Cornelius Neale, and became the mother of John Mason Neale,<sup>96</sup> the hymn writer and ecclesiologist of the Oxford Movement. An enthusiast for the catholic revival within the Church of England, John Mason Neale was the complete antithesis of his great-great-great-great grandfather theologically, but resembled him closely in his religious fervour, his linguistic skill, his delicate health, and his resistance to Anglican apathy. John Mason's descendants, then, reflect his own predilection for Dissent but finally return, after six generations, to the Church of England where he found his own rather uncomfortable home.

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86. Henry Gauntlett, *Sermons* (1835), p. x.
87. *Ibid.*, pp. xvii–xx, cxx–cxxi; Henry Gauntlett, *An Exposition of the Book of Revelation*, 2nd ed. (1821), pp. 355–404, 480–6.
88. Gauntlett, *Sermons*, pp. cxxi–cxxii; H. Maurice, *An Impartial Account, of Mr. John Mason, of Water-Stratford, and his Sentiments*, Newport-Pagnel (1823), Cooke's signature is on the flyleaf of the British Library copy.
89. Gauntlett, *Sermons*, pp. cxxii–cxxiii, 353–6; Browne Willis, *The History and Antiquities of Buckingham* (1755), pp. 343–5.

90. DNB, s.v. Bransby, James Hews.
91. James Hews Bransby, *A Brief Account of the Remarkable Fanaticism Prevailing in Water-Stratford, in Buckinghamshire, in the Year 1694*, Carnarvon (1835), pp. 6, 16.
92. Columba Graham Flegg, 'Gathered Under Apostles' (Oxford, 1992), pp. 329–330.
93. Bransby, pp. 7, 21–22.
94. DNB, s.v. Mason, John (1646?–1694); Myres, p. 19.
95. DNB, s.v. Good, John Mason; Olinthus Gregory, *Memoirs of John Mason Good* (1828), pp. 3–5.
96. DNB, s.v. Neale, John Mason; Geoffrey Rowell, *The Vision Glorious* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 98–115.

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