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The Academic Re-discovery of Apocalyptic Ideas in the Seventeenth Century

(concluded)

JOSEPH MEDE

JOSEPH MEDE is the third figure to be considered in this study of the academic re-discovery of the literalist apocalypse in the early 17th century. Born in 1586, Mede went to Christ's College, Cambridge at the age of sixteen, and remained there as a fellow of the college until his death in 1638.¹ Mede's learning was not confined to theology: logic and philosophy, mathematics and the natural sciences, history and philology, astrology and Egyptology all came within his encyclopaedic range. Devoid of ambition, the studies in which he immersed himself gained him an international fame he had not consciously sought.² Mede was no rigid ecclesiastical partisan, and the breadth of his Anglican churchmanship included opposition to Puritan liturgical austerity and schemes of Presbyterian polity, the acceptance of the notion of the Papacy as the Anti-Christ, the curious admission that Rome nevertheless taught the fundamentals of the Christian faith, and finally sympathy for Dury's dreams of Church unity.

Mede's reputation as a theologian particularly derived from his contribution to biblical apocalyptic studies, which he revolutionised. The fact of this achievement and the nature of his millenary exegesis formed an essential element of the background to the rise of popular millenary feeling in England in the mid-17th century.

Mede's enunciation of a novel method of interpreting the Johannine Apocalypse led him to conclusions about its meaning no less startling; this was his dual achievement. His method of interpretation was contained in his *Clavis Apocalyptica* (1627), which was not a commentary but a key or method of arrangement, in which Mede demonstrated that the order of the apocalyptic prophecies could be determined from internal evidence, without previous reference to the external evidence of historical events.³ Mede held that the latter could be applied to the Apocalypse only according to the sequence of prophecies contained therein, instead of the hitherto usual method of arranging the prophecies according to their most likely coincidence with historical events. Contemporaries and later commentators alike recognised Mede's

achievement as the founder of modern apocalyptic studies.⁴ For our purposes this "technical" theological achievement was important for three reasons: it established Mede's reputation in this field and created a ready public for his further apocalyptic works; it set forth a method which others, including the less learned and discriminating, could apply for themselves; and Mede's own application of his method led to his re-assertion of the literal interpretation of the millennium.

The latter was mainly promulgated in his *Commentary on the Revelation* (1632), which sets out his scheme of Church history and its culmination in the establishment of the Kingdom of the Saints on earth, but his other works also discussed it.

Mede regarded the visions in the Apocalypse as a prophetic record of the destiny of the Church, most of which had already been fulfilled. For him the Papal power and Catholic Church were the continuation of that Roman Anti-Christ first manifest in imperial Rome, which oppressed the true Church but would be overthrown for ever with the personal reign of Christ and the Saints. From his reading of Scripture and observation of the troubled political world of the 1620s and 1630s, Mede concluded he was witnessing that final age of the fulfilment of those cataclysmic pre-millennial events foretold in those Apocalyptic visions as yet unaccounted for. These events he believed would occur within less than a century. The current generation was seeing the outpouring of the Fourth Vial upon the Sun, which he interpreted as the separation and deliverance of the German Empire from the House of Austria, by a semi-messianic conqueror who would lead the attack against the Romish Anti-Christ. Mede saw Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden in this role: "And behold . . . there is now at length come from the North God's revenger of wrongs, to succour afflicted and distressed Germany; a godly King, happy, and which way soever he cometh, a conqueror, whose prosperous progress is more speedy than the flight of an eagle. Is this not he whom the Lord of Hosts hath destined to execute the work of this Phial?"⁵ Gustavus' death in 1632 showed he was not the expected deliverer, but Mede's general contention was not altogether falsified, since he had only prophesied a reduction of Rome's power at this stage, its complete downfall being subsequent upon the defeat of the Turks and the return of the Jews to the Holy Land. Biblical chronology, especially the Book of Daniel, informed Mede these events would be completed and the Millennium set up by a certain year between 1625 and 1716;⁶ reverence for the subject forbad any closer calculations!

Mede was very cautious about pronouncing upon the nature of this imminent millenary state,⁷ for he was fully aware that the

doctrine of a personal reign of Christ and the Saints on earth a thousand years was a highly unorthodox one. Conscious of the difficulty of the subject and its dangerous associations, Mede concluded that a detailed description of the millennial state was impossible; yet the broad truth of a literal millennium he found himself forced to uphold—for four reasons. The application of his exegetical method to the relevant Scriptures permitted no other conclusion; the notion was confirmed by other Scriptures; it was orthodox doctrine in the immediately post-Apostolic Church; Christ and Peter had never denied the millenary understanding of the Judgement Day common in their time.⁸ These two latter considerations were especially attractive to all Puritan radical elements wishing to return to the beliefs and practices of the early Church. Apart from outlining the destruction to come upon the enemies of the Church, and declaring that the millennial Kingdom would be a time of renewal and restoration in the earth,⁹ Mede gave no details of the future. Yet he certainly created widespread interest, enthusiasm and controversy among his wide circle of correspondents, and, later, his reading public. Among the latter were not to be lacking those who would supply the details of the millennial state, and do so in terms of political and social radicalism.

The range of Mede's contacts was wide and his correspondence voluminous. Those with whom he maintained contact between 1628 and 1638, and who displayed interest in apocalyptic exegesis, included Archbishop Ussher; Dr. William Twisse, chaplain to the Queen of Bohemia and later curate of Newbury; Samuel Hartlib and John Dury; the Calvinist theologian Dr. William Ames; Sir William Boswell, the resident English ambassador at the Hague; Thomas Hayne, and many others in England and in continental Protestant circles. Among these men circulated not only Mede's writings and unpublished manuscripts, but also a wide variety of apocalyptic exegesis from diverse sources. Ussher praised Mede's original contribution in this field, and Twisse in 1629 declared that Mede was being used of God to revive the notion of the earthly millennium of the Saints "in a more seasonable time, when Anti-Christ's kingdom should draw near to an end," while in 1642 Twisse re-affirmed that Mede was the one person most responsible for the contemporary advances in apocalyptic understanding.¹⁰ Undoubtedly Mede gave a great stimulus to apocalyptic studies, and for many re-established the validity of a millenary exegesis.

Joseph Mede's influence certainly did not cease at his death in 1638; indeed, not until after then did any of his works appear in English. The years 1641-43 saw the publication of his major works, and several further editions appeared in subsequent years.

The Apostasy of the Latter Times (1641) dealt with the degeneration of Romanism and contained some of Mede's chronological predictions about the advent of the millennium; it was highly commended by that moderate Presbyterian, Stephen Marshall.¹¹ *A Paraphrase and Exposition of the Prophecy of St. Peter, concerning the day of Christ's Second Coming*, (1642) and *Daniel's Weeks* (1643) were two of Mede's other works of prophetic exegesis that appeared for the general public, but the most important were the English translations, by Richard More, of *Clavis Apocalyptica* and *Commentary on the Revelation* (both 1643). More came of one of the leading county families in Shropshire, and most prominent for its support of the Parliamentary cause in a predominantly Royalist county in the Civil War. At his death in 1643 More was M.P. for Bishop's Castle. Having read various interpretations of the Johannine Apocalypse More found Mede's most satisfactory, translating it into English for his own convenience and finally publishing it at the suggestion of his friends. It is illuminating that the House of Commons Committee for Printing and Publishing delegated a Rev. Arthur Jackson to read these translations, in case their millenary exegesis might be potentially socially dangerous. Jackson reported that although Mede's millenary notions were unusual, "the printing of it will not be perillous," but would afford spiritual blessing to many.

The parliamentary organs of censorship had decided Mede's millenarism would not be socially dangerous, and in terms of explicit and direct influence, they were almost certainly correct. Mede, Twisse and their associates in this field of biblical studies had always stressed that the millennial kingdom should never be regarded as one of carnal delights, a heresy which could be used to justify moral anarchism and social upheaval, which neither Mede nor any of his group had the slightest intention of encouraging or countenancing. Mede said to a friend: "beware of gross and carnal conceits of an Epicurean happiness misbeseeming the Spiritual purity of Saints,"¹² and he granted that the chiliasm of the early Church, though substantially correct, had been "deformed with many erroneous misconceits and idle, yet some not tolerable, fancies."¹³ It was generally acknowledged by supporters and critics alike of the millenary position, not only that it was contrary to orthodox theology as understood for many centuries, but that also that it was the kind of doctrine which had been used in the past, and could be employed again unless great care were exercised, for revolutionary and anarchic purposes. Hence Mede's moderation when advancing the millenary idea even as a form of interpretation, the extreme caution of Mede and his associates about applying it in detailed terms, and their limitation

of the latter to such issues as the outcome of the Thirty Years' War, the conversion of the Jews, and missionary work among the Red Indians. Of itself, the prophetic exegesis of Mede neither preached nor directly inspired that social radicalism with which all contemporary commentators agreed millenarism could so easily be associated.

The extent to which Mede's works had an indirect influence in this connection can only be guessed at: radical preachers may have read him, and other holders of Fifth-Monarchist ideas than Thomas Goodwin,¹⁴ the leading Congregationalist, may have had their thoughts turned to millenary exegesis by Mede, and not acknowledged the fact in their writings—if they wrote at all. It is very likely that Mede's works were very widely read after his death—Hayne ranked him along with Brightman and Alsted, Archer and Knollys, as being among the leading and most influential exponents of the millenary position.¹⁵

Joseph Mede of Cambridge completed the academic re-discovery of apocalyptic ideas that had begun in Elizabeth I's reign with the thought of Thomas Brightman and been taken a stage further in the writings of Alsted. Mede's use of a novel method of exegesis of the Apocalypse led him to re-discover the notion of the literal millennium of the Saints on earth. This became more and more an academically acceptable and socially respectable concept. Mede's biblical chronology made him regard his own 17th century as the final age of the world, an analysis seemingly borne out by the turbulent politics of England and Europe alike. In the 1630s Mede's ideas aroused considerable interest among his associates and correspondents. In the 1640s their wider availability in English for the general public undoubtedly contributed to the rising atmosphere of millenary feeling in England.

CONCLUSION

The academic re-discovery of apocalyptic ideas was an important aspect of the religious mentality and intellectual atmosphere of the mid-17th century years in which the Baptists first emerged as a distinctive element among the organised religious forces in England. Too great a preoccupation with notions of a literal millenary paradise was feared as socially subversive by the ruling classes of the time, and the spread of millenary ideas was embarrassing to the Baptists of the 1640s because they were, quite wrongly, regarded as responsible for their dissemination. *The Short History of the Anabaptists of High and Low Germany* (1642) was typical of much literature which used the activities of the 16th century Anabaptists of Munster to condemn the 17th century English Baptists as dangerous millenary heretics and social revolu-

tionaries. Although in the 1640s and 1650s a number of Baptists were attracted by millenary notions once they had become generally prevalent, (see my article "The Shattered Baptists," *Baptist Times*, May 28th, 1959), a study of the emergence of these ideas reveals that it was not in the first instance a product of the sectarian movements. The Baptists, like the other Independents of the time, were influenced by an apocalyptic atmosphere created—or at least re-discovered—by academics.

NOTES

¹ For Mede's life, see: *Dictionary of National Biography*; B. Brook: *Lives of the Puritans* (1813), Vol. ii, pp. 429-34; D. Neal: *History of the Puritans* (1822), Vol. ii, pp. 310f.; J. Hunt: *Religious Thought in England* (1870), Vol. I, pp. 167f.; J. Worthington: *Works of Joseph Mede* (1672 ed.), p. i-xlv; Rev. A. Jenour: *Rationale Apocalypticum* (1852), p. 320, note.

² Among those who praised his achievements were Pastor Paul Testard in France, Ludovic de Dieu and Dr. Antony Walaeus of Leyden, and Archbishop Ussher in Ireland.

³ Jenour, *supra*, pp. 401-8.

⁴ e.g., Worthington: *Works*, General Preface; note on Mede in Darling, *Cyclopaedia Bibliographica*.

⁵ *Commentary on the Revelation*, II, p. 117.

⁶ *The Apostasy of the Latter Times*, pp. 658-62.

⁷ *Commentary on the Revelation*, II, pp. 121f.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121-2, 134-5.

⁹ *A Paraphrase and Exposition of the Prophecy of St. Peter* (1653 ed.), pp. 26-7.

¹⁰ See Twisse's Preface to More's translation of *Clavis Apocalyptica*.

¹¹ See Preface.

¹² Worthington: *Works*, III, pp. 603-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, V, p. 923.

¹⁴ Goodwin acknowledged Mede as the source for some of his millenary ideas in his *The Great Interest of States and Kingdoms* (1646), pp. 23, 37. For Mede's acceptance of the Fifth Monarchist scheme of history, see *The Apostasy of the Latter Times*, pp. 654-5.

¹⁵ Thomas Hayne, *Christ's Kingdom on Earth* (1645), pp. 47, 54, 77, 80.

BRIAN G. COOPER

We imagine that readers will know that 1961 sees the bicentenary of William Carey's birth. Will members please note that the Annual Meeting of the Historical Society is to be held on Monday, May 1st, in the Institute Hall of the Westminster Chapel with tea at 4.30 p.m. and business at 5.0 p.m. We shall hear an address by the Rev. Brynmor F. Price, M.A., B.D. on "Carey and Serampore—Then and Now." Mr. Price speaks from 10 years experience of Serampore and we are sure he will have much of great interest to say. Members are permitted to bring friends to tea and the meeting.