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**Bala and the Bible:  
Thomas Charles, Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones<sup>1</sup>**

E. Wyn James

Who is the most famous Welshwoman in the world? If you were to ask that question of passers-by shopping in Cardiff, the Welsh capital, the answer would most likely be Shirley Bassey, or Catherine Zeta Jones perhaps. That reply would be as good an indicator as any of the seismic changes which have occurred in Welsh culture over the past hundred years or so, because at the end of the Victorian Era “the most famous Welshwoman in the world” was one of the names given to the late eighteenth-century hymn-writer, Ann Griffiths. One might well agree that Ann was indeed the undisputed holder of that title in late Victorian times were it not for one other candidate, a woman often referred to by the Victorians and Edwardians as “the little Welsh girl without a Bible.” That girl was Mary Jones, whose walk to Bala in 1800 to buy a Bible has by today been retold in about forty languages, and who can perhaps still be justifiably regarded as the most famous Welshwoman in the world, as least in the realms of international popular Christian culture.

Both women were relatively unknown until the 1860s, in the case of Ann Griffiths, and the 1880s, in the case of Mary Jones.<sup>2</sup> However, by the end of the nineteenth century both had become national icons, taking their place beside two other Welsh “women” who came into prominence during that same period, namely “the Virtuous Maid” and the “Angel on the Hearth.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it would not be far amiss to call Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones the two most prominent female “saints” of the Liberal, Nonconformist Wales

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which came into being in the second half of the nineteenth century. Our purpose here, however, is not to discuss those romantic Victorian and Edwardian images, but rather to consider Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones in their own period and context, and especially as they relate to their great mentor, Thomas Charles of Bala.

#### **Ann and Mary: comparisons and contrasts**

It is interesting to compare and contrast their lives. Both were born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century – Ann at the beginning of 1776 and Mary at the end of 1784. There was, then, an age gap of only about nine years between them. This is in stark contrast to their age at death. Mary's life stretched far into the nineteenth century. She died a blind widow in December 1864, having just reached her eightieth birthday. Ann Griffiths, on the other hand, was a recently-married young woman when she died aged 29 in August 1805, following the birth of her only child.

Both women lived in rural north Wales, and in communities which were almost monoglot Welsh-speaking – Mary in the parish of Llanfihangel-y-Pennant, fairly close to the sea, in the north-western county of Merioneth; Ann in the parish of Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa, fairly near the English border, in the north-eastern county of Montgomery.<sup>4</sup> The counties of Merioneth and Montgomery were the main centres of the woollen industry in Wales from the middle of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, and wool played a prominent role in the lives of both Ann and Mary. Mary was the daughter of weavers, and she and her husband, Thomas Jones, were themselves weavers all their

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married life. Similarly, the handling of wool was one of the main activities in Ann's daily life. Around the time of her death, there was a loom, five spinning wheels and about eighty sheep on the family farm, Dolwar Fach.<sup>5</sup>

This throws into focus one major difference between Ann and Mary. Mary had a very poor upbringing, raised by her widowed mother in a small cottage. She was poor as a child and remained poor to the grave. Ann on the other hand was reasonably well-off. She was a farmer's daughter. Although not rich, her father was in a fairly easy financial position and played a prominent role in local parish life; and when Ann married, she married into a quite wealthy family. Her husband, Thomas Griffiths, brought with him to Dolwar Fach, on his marriage to Ann, six silver spoons. Until then, the kitchenware at Dolwar had been of pewter and wood, with no silverware. From Elizabethan times onward a family's status depended on having at least six silver spoons, and it is indicative that when the time came for Thomas Griffiths to leave Dolwar Fach, following Ann's death, he took the six spoons with him.<sup>6</sup>

### **Thomas and Sally Charles**

Despite the difference in their social status, Ann and Mary moved in the same social circles by virtue of the fact that they were both Calvinistic Methodists. The great spiritual awakening we refer to as the Methodist (or Evangelical) Revival began in south Wales in the 1730s. Its development in north Wales was initially fairly slow. Indeed it was not until the 1780s that the Methodist movement began to gather strength in earnest in north Wales, especially after an evangelical Anglican clergyman from south Wales, Thomas

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Charles (1755–1814), moved to the town of Bala, in central north Wales, and joined the Methodists there.

“The Lord’s gift to the North,” is how the pioneer Methodist leader and prince amongst preachers, Daniel Rowland,<sup>7</sup> described Thomas Charles in 1785 – and not to north Wales alone by any means, when one considers his significant contribution to the progress of Christianity throughout Wales and beyond. But one should also note the exceptional contribution made by his wife to Thomas Charles’s achievements, for if there were ever an example of a wife playing a key role in her husband’s success, Sarah Charles – or Sally Charles as she is more frequently known – was that person.

Sarah Charles (1753–1814) – Sarah Jones before her marriage – came from Bala. She worked in the family shop in that town. She was beautiful, intelligent, very godly and had a fairly well-lined purse. The great Methodist hymn-writer from south Wales, William Williams of Pantycelyn,<sup>8</sup> was exceptionally fond of her, and it is said that he would have liked her as a daughter-in-law. However, that was not to be. Thomas Charles fell head over heels in love with her at first sight. Their courtship was rather hesitant at first, from her side at least, since she rather suspected Thomas Charles of having his eye on her money. However, Charles proved an ardent and persistent lover, and after a long pursuit, he eventually married her.<sup>9</sup>

Sally Jones was determined to remain in Bala, and Thomas Charles had no choice but to move there when they married in 1783. Sally, then, was directly responsible for Thomas Charles settling in Bala; and she and her shop were also responsible for supporting him there, and providing the means by which he was able to apply himself to his pioneer work among the Methodists of

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north Wales. (It is worth noting in passing that the most prominent Calvinistic Methodist leader of the next generation in north Wales, John Elias of Anglesey, was also dependent on his wife's shop for his material support; similarly, his close colleague, William Roberts of Amlwch was dependent on his wife's shop, as was Abraham Jones, the Methodist preacher of Llanfyllin, who was supported in his work by the income from the shop of his wife, Jane, the eldest sister of Ann Griffiths. Welsh Calvinistic Methodism owes a great debt to shopkeeper wives!)

### **Thomas Charles: educator**

One of Thomas Charles's most important contributions was his educational work. On moving north, Thomas Charles had been forcibly struck by the spiritual darkness that surrounded him in north Wales. In order to try and dispel that darkness, he decided to organise day schools on the pattern of the circulating schools of Griffith Jones of Llanddowror – Charles, it should be remembered, was a native of the Llanddowror area in southern Carmarthenshire. Griffith Jones' circulating schools had begun in the 1730s and had proved a remarkable educational and religious experiment which had succeeded in making the Welsh one of the most literate peoples in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

Griffith Jones' schools had never been as strong in north Wales as they had been in the South, and by the time Charles moved to Bala they had all but disappeared. After his removal to Bala, Thomas Charles began employing schoolmasters, arranging for them to circulate from one neighbourhood to another, staying in each place for a few months at a time in order to teach people to read

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the Bible and to instruct them in the basic tenets of the Christian faith. These peripatetic teachers proved to be exceptionally effective missionaries, and their influence was to prove far-reaching. In contrast to Griffith Jones, Thomas Charles, in addition to organising circulating schools, also set up Sunday schools as a channel for local people to continue the educational work after the schoolmaster had moved to his next location. These circulating schools and Sunday schools proved exceptionally successful, and through them a large sector of the population of Wales became literate.

### **Bala and revival**

In tandem with Thomas Charles' educational campaigns, north Wales experienced in the same period a series of powerful spiritual awakenings. One prominent authority on the history of Welsh revivals has claimed that the years between 1785 and 1815 were, in his opinion, the most successful period ever for religion in Wales.<sup>11</sup>

There is no better example of the striking spiritual change wrought in that period than Bala itself. When the pioneer Methodist evangelist, Howel Harris, visited the town during an evangelistic preaching tour in 1741, he was almost killed by a mob of fierce persecutors.<sup>12</sup> Although he was accustomed to confrontation, Harris was so frightened by the ferocity of the assault on him at Bala that he was unable to face going anywhere near that town for many years to come. However, a half century later, in 1791, the town of Bala was in the grips of an extremely powerful religious awakening. Thomas Charles says of one Sunday night in October 1791:

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Towards the close of the evening service, the Spirit of God seemed to work in a very powerful manner on the minds of great numbers present, who never appeared before to seek the Lord's face... About nine or ten o'clock at night, there was nothing to be heard from one end of the town to the other, but the cries and groans of people in distress of soul.<sup>13</sup>

Many in north Wales embraced this fervent evangelical Christianity in the years from about 1785 onward and a good number of them joined the Calvinistic Methodists. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, north Wales had become a stronghold of Methodism, and Bala had become a veritable Jerusalem for the Methodists of north Wales. This was partly due to its geographically central location for the Methodists of the North; but above all, it was the presence of Thomas Charles in the town which made it the hub of the Methodist movement in north Wales.<sup>14</sup>

A key factor in its prominence was the communion services held by Thomas Charles at Bala on the last Sunday of every month. Although the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists had, to almost all intents and purposes, become a separate denomination as the eighteenth century progressed, they did not formally secede from the Anglican Church until they began ordaining their own ministers in 1811. Prior to that only priests ordained by the Anglican Church – the Established Church in Wales at that time – were allowed to administer the sacraments among the Welsh Methodists; and for about twenty years, from 1784 to 1803, Thomas Charles was the only ordained priest ministering regularly among the Methodists of north Wales. It is not surprising, then, that Methodists from far



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and wide regularly attended the monthly communion services at Bala, not to mention the great preaching festival linked to the Methodist Association meetings held at Bala every summer.

### **Thirst for Bibles**

As a result of Thomas Charles' schools and the powerful spiritual awakenings which interfaced with them, a substantial sector of the population of Wales could not only read the Bible, but also and more importantly, earnestly desired to read it. This in turn created an enormous challenge for Thomas Charles, namely how to satisfy the increasing demand for Bibles. It was the efforts of Charles and others to ensure a regular supply of cheap Welsh Bibles for the common people which led to the establishment of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804. In a letter in March 1804 to Joseph Tarn, another of the founders of the Bible Society – a letter preserved in the Bible Society's archives in Cambridge University Library – Thomas Charles gives some idea of the thirst for Bibles that characterised Wales at that time:

The Sunday Schools have occasioned more calls for Bibles within these five years in our poor country, than perhaps ever was known before among our poor people... The possession of a Bible produces a feeling among them which the possession of no one thing in the world besides could produce... I have seen some of them overcome with joy & burst into tears of thankfulness on their obtaining possession of a Bible as their own property & for their free use. Young females in service have walked thirty miles to me with only the bare hopes of obtaining a Bible each; & returned with more joy & thanksgiving than if they had ob-

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tained great spoils. We who have half a doz. Bibles by us, & are in circumstances to obtain as many more, know but little of the value those put upon one, who before were hardly permitted to look into a Bible once a week.

It is not surprising that there was such a demand for Bibles amongst the converts of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. The Bible was central to their lives. For them, the Bible was the inspired and infallible word of God and the final authority in all things pertaining to their faith and life.

In 1792, when he was eighteen years of age, John Elias ventured to the Methodist Association meetings in Bala with a large group of young people who walked there from the Llŷn Peninsula in western Caernarfonshire. The following extract from his description of the journey to Bala clearly demonstrates the importance of the Bible in the lives of these young Methodists:

We started on the journey, talking about the Bible and sermons. Occasionally we sang psalms and hymns, and sometimes we rested, and one or two would engage in prayer. Then we would proceed again on our journey, singing on the way. Very few words were uttered by any one among us all the way, except respecting the Bible, sermons, and religious subjects.<sup>15</sup>

### **Rooted in Scripture**

The Bible was central to Thomas Charles' life and work. Producing Bibles, winning readers to the Bible, expounding and applying the Bible's message – that was the very essence of his work. To quote the late Professor R. Tudur Jones:

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When we turn to Thomas Charles's public work, it becomes immediately obvious that his various projects all centre on the Bible. He belonged to a generation of religious leaders who shared the same ideals, and between them they were responsible for weaving the Bible in a new way into the pattern of the life and culture of the common people of Wales... He was intent on building in Wales a civilization rooted in Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

After the Bible itself, and Thomas Charles's famous catechism, *Hyfforddwr yn Egwyddorion y Grefydd Gristionogol* ("Instructor in the Principles of the Christian Religion"), which went to more than eighty editions in the nineteenth century, possibly the most influential book in nineteenth-century Wales was another work by Thomas Charles, his substantial *Geiriadur Ysgrythyrol* ("Scriptural Dictionary"). It was written in order to help people better understand the Bible and its teachings; and it is worth quoting (in translation) the opening sentences of his introduction to that dictionary in order to demonstrate the high esteem in which Charles held the Bible:

The Holy Scriptures are a treasure house of all profitable and essential knowledge... Since they have all been given by the inspiration of God, they must partake of his perfection, and benefit it. Because of the perfection of his knowledge, he cannot err; and because of the integrity of his nature, he will not deceive us in any matter; therefore, the knowledge given to us in the Scriptures is lofty, certain and complete. There is nothing which pertains to our condition and our blessedness in another world; nor anything which pertains to our circumstances and our duties in this world, that God, in his holy word, has not given us full in-

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struction, how to behave in all things, in all situations, and towards everyone. The great plan of salvation, through a Mediator, shines clearly and fully in it, before a world of sinners.<sup>17</sup>

With their leader holding the Scriptures in such high regard, it is no surprise to see the Bible being afforded a central place in the lives of that generation of Welsh Methodists which grew up under Thomas Charles' influence. Among them were Mary Jones and Ann Griffiths, since both not only witnessed the great evangelical revolution that swept north Wales during their youth, but were also carried along by the spirit of that revolution and into its epicentre.

### **Ann and Mary: pilgrims on the Bala way**

Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones became Methodists in different ways. Mary Jones' parents were among the pioneer Methodists in her area. From birth, then, she was part of that religious community. She came to personal faith as a child of eight years, and was accepted as a member of the local Methodist *seiat* (or "society meeting") at that early age.<sup>18</sup> About two years later, in 1795, Mary witnessed a period of significant persecution of the Methodists of her area by a prominent local landowner. Ann Griffiths would most certainly have sided with the persecutors had she been living there at the time. Like most Welsh people of the period Ann was a faithful Anglican. She would tirade against all types of Nonconformist religion, and would refer with derision to those going to the Methodist Association meetings at Bala, "Look at the pilgrims going to Mecca." But in 1796, at about twenty years of age, Ann came under deep conviction of sin, and would soon join the despised

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Methodist *seiat* in her locality. Thereafter, she also would head regularly for Bala, to the monthly communion services and the annual Methodist Association meetings.

It was common at that time for Methodist maidservants to include in their agreement of employment a clause which allowed them to attend the Bala Association meetings every summer. In return for that privilege they would take a reduction of five shillings a year in their wages. It seems that such an arrangement obtained in the case of Ruth Evans, who became maidservant at Dolwar Fach in 1801, since there is mention of Ann offering Ruth five shillings on one occasion so that she could go to Bala instead of Ruth. However, by all accounts, Ruth preferred to go to the Association meetings than accept the money!

Although Ann appears to have failed in her attempt to attend the Association meetings on that occasion, in general she seems to have succeeded in reaching Bala fairly regularly. In his memoir of Ann Griffiths, published in 1865, Morris Davies includes a number of anecdotes relating to a group of Methodists from her area, and Ann prominent among them, who would cross over the mountains to attend meetings at Bala. Returning home on Sunday evenings, says one of her fellow-travellers, "our work along the way was to listen to Ann Thomas reciting the sermons. I never saw anyone like her for remembering."<sup>19</sup>

The experience of going to Bala on Communion Sunday and to the Association meetings was not unknown to Mary Jones either. In old age, she would enjoy reminiscing of how in her youth she would walk all Saturday night in order to reach Bala in time for communion on Sunday morning, of the group prayer meetings on the way, and of the powerful preaching and rejoicing she wit-

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nessed in the open-air meetings on the Green in Bala.<sup>20</sup>

#### **Members of the same community**

It is quite probable that Ann and Mary, for a few years at the beginning of the nineteenth century, actually attended the same meetings at Bala, and knew one another – from a distance, at least, across the crowds. In other words, they both belonged to the same religious community, a community which centred on Bala and on Thomas Charles. Indeed, all the elements which characterised the Calvinistic Methodism of north Wales at the end of the eighteenth century were at work in both their lives. Their spiritual experiences were essentially the same, as were their beliefs. As regards religious practise, they both spoke the same language, followed the same customs, and attended the same type of meetings. They heard the same preachers, read the same books, sang the same hymns. Both knew Thomas Charles personally, and although Ann had not, like Mary, been a pupil in one of Charles's circulating schools, both were deeply indebted to Thomas Charles's educational efforts. For example, the chief spiritual mentor in both cases were teachers in Charles's circulating schools: William Hugh of Llanfihangel-y-Pennant in the case of Mary Jones, and John Hughes of Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa (later of Pontrobert) in that of Ann Griffiths.

One is very aware that, by placing Ann and Mary side by side in this manner, one is in danger of giving the impression that they were on a par. That is not the case. Both had strong mental faculties, and both had extremely good memories, but Ann was the genius. She was the born leader. Although a stanza reputed to be the

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work of Mary Jones has survived in oral tradition, Ann Griffiths had the richer cultural background and the poetic gifts. And while Mary Jones certainly had a vital spiritual experience and a good grasp of the truths of Christianity, the more profound spiritual experience and the more penetrating insights into those truths belonged to Ann Griffiths.

Yet both were faithful and gifted disciples of Thomas Charles and the Methodist movement to which they belonged. That is nowhere to be seen more clearly than in their strong emphasis on the Bible; and in what follows we will look at the life of each woman in turn, concentrating particularly on the predominant role the Bible played in their lives.

#### **Ann Griffiths**

Ann Griffiths was born in 1776, the youngest but one of the five children of John and Jane Thomas of Dolwar Fach farm in the parish of Llanfihangel-yng-Ngwynfa, Montgomeryshire.<sup>21</sup> Her two sisters had left home by the time their mother died in 1794, leaving Ann at 17 years of age the mistress of the house; and she would remain mistress of Dolwar until her own early death in 1805.

Ann received a religious upbringing. Her father was more zealous than was the norm among Anglicans. He attended services regularly at his parish church and held family devotions at home every morning and evening. According to tradition a remarkable old dog at Dolwar would follow its master to Llanfihangel Parish Church every Sunday morning, lying quietly under the pew until the service was over; and a sign of Ann's father's regularity at the morning service is that the dog would attend every Sunday morning

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through force of habit, even if no member of the Dolwar family were present!

Yet despite the family being, by all accounts, sincere and conscientious Anglicans, almost each of them in turn came to the conviction that they did not possess true experiential faith: four of the five children experienced conversion as adults, and their father also followed the same spiritual path before his death. They all joined the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, and Dolwar Fach became a preaching station for the Methodists for some years.

Although they would no doubt have described their religion before turning to the Methodists as being “superficial,” and although they would have received as much pleasure, to say the least, in joining in the dancing and the evening entertainment and the Sunday afternoon sports as they did in the Sunday morning services in the parish church, their regular attendance at Church services and their custom of holding daily devotions on the hearth meant that the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer were part of their staple diet. They were also raised in the sound of the traditional Welsh Christmas carols – known as *plygain* carols<sup>22</sup> – which were full of biblical allusions and are often described as sermons in song; and it is possible to see hints of the influence of the Book of Common Prayer and the *plygain* carols on Ann’s work, the fruit of her Anglican upbringing.

#### **Biblical immersion**

As has already been emphasised, in joining the Methodists, Ann was joining a people for whom being immersed in the Bible was a matter of great importance. They read the Bible regularly; they studied it ardently, every part of it; they meditated upon it and



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learned substantial portions by heart. The Bible penetrated the very marrow of their being, controlling their mind and actions and colouring their language, both oral and written.

The following description by a woman who was well acquainted with the Dolwar family, clearly demonstrates the central place Ann afforded the Bible in her life following her conversion:

There would be a very pleasant appearance to the family at Dolwar while spinning, with the old man [Ann's father] carding wool, and singing carols and hymns. At other times, a solemn silence would reign among them. Ann would spin with her Bible open in front of her in a convenient place, so she could snatch up a verse while carrying on with her task, without losing time. I saw her at the spinning wheel in deep meditation, paying heed to hardly anything around her, and the tears flowing down her cheeks many times.<sup>23</sup>

Why the central role afforded to Scripture in Ann's life? The simple answer, as has already been suggested, is because she was convinced that the Bible was the Word of God and the only sure and sufficient guide for her life.

### **Biblical experience**

One of the most notable aspects of Ann Griffiths's life is the deep spiritual experiences which characterised it, experiences which resulted in her rolling on the floor on occasions and going into a deep trance-like meditation at other times. She herself states in a letter to one of her Methodist friends, Elizabeth Evans, that she would sometimes become so absorbed in spiritual matters that

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she would completely fail “to stand in the way of my duty with regard to temporal things.” In such a state, she says, “the Lord sometimes reveals through a glass, darkly, as much of his glory as my weak faculties can bear.”<sup>24</sup> It was deep spiritual experiences such as these that led Thomas Charles to declare during a visit to Dolwar Fach that he was of the opinion that Ann “was very likely to meet with one of three things – either that she would meet severe trials; or that her life was almost at an end; or else that she would backslide.”<sup>25</sup>

Ann termed such periods of spiritual absorption “visitations.” A real danger facing anyone receiving such profound spiritual “visitations” as these is to be ruled by those feelings and experiences. Not so in Ann’s case. There is in her life and work a remarkable balance between the subjective and the objective, between clarity of mind and intensity of experience. She fears “imagnations” (as she calls them) above all else and welcomes the authority of the Bible – an objective and final authority outside of herself – to control those imaginations. “I am constrained to be grateful for the Word in its invincible authority,” she says in a letter to her mentor, John Hughes, Pontrobert, in 1802.<sup>26</sup>

It is important to emphasise that the Bible did not play a merely negative role in Ann’s life and spiritual experience. It is true that the Bible prevented her from believing certain things, that it forbade her from acting in certain ways, and kept a reign on her spiritual experiences in certain directions. But the Bible also played a positive role in such matters. As regards spiritual experiences, for example, the Bible was a means of creating and deepening her experiences, as well as directing and controlling them. In her letters, almost every other sentence contains a reference to some

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Scriptural verse or other which had been impressing itself on her mind, enlightening her, comforting or chastening her. Indeed, one of her great fears was that she would fail “to find her condition in the Word.” The Bible, then, was the interpreter and nurturer of her spiritual experience. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to claim that it was not her own subjective fancies, but rather biblical revelation, which fashioned the nature of her experience of the Godhead.

### **Biblical language**

In her hymns and letters, Ann Griffiths expresses her beliefs and experience in biblical terms. Although one can hear a hint of her Montgomeryshire Welsh dialect at times in her work, that is not the language Ann uses in composing her hymns and letters, but rather a more formal Welsh which we may term “the language of the *seiat*” or “the language of the pulpit” – similar in register to the language used by her great Methodist forerunner, William Williams of Pantycelyn, in his hymns and prose, and based to a large degree on the language of the Bible. The Bible was also the ultimate source of her imagery, although much of that imagery was in widespread circulation both in the speech of her fellow Methodists at Pontrobert and indeed throughout Wales, being part of what one Welsh literary critic has called the “common currency of the hymn’s literary style.”<sup>27</sup> Ann, then, utilised in her compositions both the linguistic and the literary conventions of the religious community to which she belonged – conventions that were Wales-wide and Bible-centred.

Welsh hymn-writers of the eighteenth-century evangelical

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awakenings breathe the atmosphere of the Bible. Their work abounds in words and imagery which emanate from Scripture. Likewise Ann. In general, she uses the same biblical imagery as the other hymn-writers and draws heaviest on the same sections of the Bible as they do – in particular, the prophecy of Isaiah, the Song of Solomon and the Psalms in the Old Testament, and the epistle to the Hebrews, the book of Revelation and the Gospels in the New Testament. Yet Ann's use of the Bible is more intense and more exclusive than that of the others. For example, William Williams of Pantycelyn remains, to some degree at least, a nature poet of this world in his hymns; not so Ann Griffiths. In her work, *every* plant is a heavenly one, and *every* mountain is in the Middle East. In general, also, Ann Griffiths's hymns are a tighter weaving of scriptural allusions than those of the other hymn-writers. The scriptural references and allusions are, in the main, more condensed and complex than in the work of the others. One literary critic has graphically described the process Ann uses in her hymns as that of making a *collage* of biblical pictures, "bringing together various experiences and names-for-experiences into a new, wondrous unity."<sup>28</sup>

Ann Griffiths's copious scriptural references underline the breadth of her knowledge of the Bible and her great debt to it as a source of ideas and imagery; but those extensive biblical references have led to the accusation that she does little more in her work than string together biblical texts. This does her a great disservice, since Ann clearly selects her biblical references with much skill and deftness, and at her best she succeeds in creating out of them stanzas which are "rounded, finished and majestic compositions."<sup>29</sup> These biblical references enrich her work greatly, both on

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a literary and a spiritual level. As Professor R. M. (Bobi) Jones has emphasised, they perform a role similar to Classical references in other types of poetry.<sup>30</sup>

Unfortunately, the abysmal ignorance of the Bible which characterises contemporary Welsh life and culture results in the loss to the contemporary reader of much of the wealth of meaning in Ann's work. It also leads to much misunderstanding and misinterpretation of her work. For example, it has been fashionable to discuss the "erotic element" in the work of Ann Griffiths, and to quote in that context a line from the end of perhaps her greatest hymn, "*Cusanu'r Mab i dragwyddoldeb*" ("Kissing the Son for eternity"), without realising that Ann Griffiths had Psalm 2:12 in mind – "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry" – and that the kiss in question is one of homage to a king.

One further aspect of her use of the Bible should be emphasised, namely that she views the Bible, not as a collection of independent books, but as a single composition, with one divine Author and one basic message running through the whole. One result of this is that she draws, in her work, on almost every book of the Bible, those of the Old Testament as well as the New, and interweaves references to them comprehensively. Another point that should be noted is that she is thoroughly Christocentric in her interpretation of the Bible. Christ is the key to the whole; to Him everything refers, sometimes clearly, at other times in parables and types. Ann Griffiths would certainly have agreed wholeheartedly with William Williams of Pantycelyn when he wrote in his epic poem, *Golwg ar Deyrnas Crist* ("A Prospect of the Kingdom of Christ"): "My Jesus is the marrow of the Bible, there is not a chapter which does not speak, indirectly or directly, of a crucified

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Lamb.”<sup>31</sup>

### Mary Jones

In turning to Mary Jones the first point that needs to be underlined is the prominent place afforded to the Bible throughout her long life. As has already been noted, Mary was born in December 1784, the daughter of poor weavers, Jacob and Mary Jones, who lived in a cottage called Tyn-y-ddôl in the parish of Llanfihangel-y-Pennant at the foot of one of the highest mountains in Wales, Cadair Idris. To the best of our knowledge, she was their only child. Her father died in March 1789 when Mary was just over four years of age, and she and her mother faced much hardship in the years which followed. These were years which saw a significant increase in poverty in rural Wales in general as a result of the incessant warring between Britain and France following the French Revolution, together with other economic factors.

Mary received a Methodist upbringing, very different from that of the majority of her contemporaries, which would have been characterised by superstition and levity. This did not mean, of course, that her upbringing was dull and tedious and lacking in joy. As one prominent critic of the literature of eighteenth-century Welsh Methodism has emphasised on more than one occasion: “Methodism organised different types of enjoyment for its adherents.”<sup>32</sup> It is worth quoting here part of a letter sent by Thomas Charles to Sally Jones on 1 March 1780, which emphasises the nature of the Christian’s enjoyment in this life:

There can be no happiness but in y<sup>e</sup> enjoyment of y<sup>e</sup> inex-

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haustible and overflowing source of all goodness and perfection. As we lost our happiness by separating ourselves from God, so y<sup>e</sup> only way of regaining it is, by returning to him again; for he has promised *to meet us in Christ and there (and no where else)* to be *forever* reconciled to us. But notwithstanding, *Creatures, not* 'as they are subject to vanity', but *as Creatures of God* can, and *do* contribute *much* to our happiness *by his* (observe) *blessing*. God has diffused *himself* thro' all his creatures, and when we enjoy him *in* his creatures, then they answer to us the end for which they were created. So that the love of God and of his creatures not only are consistent, but inseparably connected together.<sup>33</sup>

It has already been noted that Mary came to personal faith at eight years of age, and was received into membership of the local Methodist *seiat* at that time, sometime in 1793. It was unusual in that period for children to become members of the *seiat* at such an early age, but since Mary attended other religious meetings of an evening with her widowed mother, in order to carry the lamp for her, she was also allowed to accompany her mother to the *seiat* meetings. Early in life, then, she became very familiar with the content and message of the Bible – much more familiar than most children in her area at that time.

When Mary Jones was about ten years of age, one of Thomas Charles' circulating schoolmasters, a man called John Ellis, came to keep day-school at Abergynolwyn, some two miles from Mary's home; and before long a Sunday school was also established there. By all accounts, one of the most punctual and regular attendees at both these schools (to the extent that her circumstances allowed) was Mary Jones. She earnestly sought scriptural knowledge, and it is obvious from the surviving evidence that she was a capable pu-

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pil, with a very good memory – indeed, in old age she could still recite faultlessly large portions of Thomas Charles’s catechism, the *Hyfforddwr* (“Instructor”). Her biographer, Robert Oliver Rees, says of her: “She distinguished herself especially in the Sunday school by treasuring in her memory, and reciting aloud in public, entire chapters of the Word of God, and in her ‘good understanding’ of it.”<sup>34</sup>

### **To Bala for a Bible**

Apart from the copy of the Bible in the parish church, the only Bible in the vicinity at that time, it would seem, was the one at Penybrynau Mawr, a farmhouse about two miles from Mary’s home.<sup>35</sup> The Bible was kept on a table in the small parlour, and Mary was given permission by the farmer’s wife to go and read it, on condition that she removed her clogs before venturing in. It is said that Mary would walk there every week, whatever the weather, over a period of some six years in all, to read the Bible and commit portions to memory.

However, her great desire was to obtain a Bible of her own. The story of her walk to Bala, barefoot for most of the way, in order to purchase a Bible from Thomas Charles, is well-known in Christian circles world-wide. That was in 1800, when she was 15 years old. It would have been a round journey of about fifty miles. However, the heroic effort on her part was not so much in walking to Bala as in the sacrifice and perseverance involved in saving to buy a Bible. Walking that sort of distance to Bala was not at all unusual among Methodists of the period, and walking barefoot was quite normal among the common people at that time; but for someone as poor



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as Mary Jones, saving enough money to buy a Bible was a great sacrifice. Bibles were very expensive in those days, and she would have had to have scrimped and saved every penny for years before succeeding to accumulate the little over seventeen shillings she would have needed to buy a Bible – a huge sum for a poor girl like Mary.

A few years ago a stanza was published which had been preserved in oral tradition over several generations in the Llanfihangel-y-Pennant area. It is said to have been composed by Mary Jones herself, and although I am far from convinced of this, it is intriguing that the first person listed in the chain of people who had a hand in its preservation in oral tradition was someone from Penybryniau Mawr, the farm to which Mary is said to have gone regularly to read the Bible. Here is the stanza in English translation:

Yes, at last I have a Bible,  
Homeward now I needs must go;  
Every soul in Llanfihangel  
I will teach its truths to know;  
In its dear treasured pages  
Love of God for man I see;  
What a joy in my own Bible  
To read of His great love for me.<sup>36</sup>

### **Mary Jones and the Bible Society**

It is said that Mary Jones's visit to Thomas Charles in 1800 to purchase a Bible made such an impression upon him that he had no peace of mind until he had found a way to ensure a regular supply of cheap Bibles for the common people of Wales. Furthermore, according to tradition, Charles's telling of the story of Mary's visit

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to him had such an electrifying effect on the members of committee of the Religious Tract Society at their meeting in London at the end of 1802, that they began to seek in earnest the possibility of establishing a society to publish and distribute Bibles, not only for Wales, but also for the whole world.

It was this which led to the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, a matter of great joy for Thomas Charles, Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones. As Thomas Charles said in a letter in July 1810:

I was continually applied to for Bibles, & much distressed I was (more than I can express) to be forever obliged to say, I could not relieve them. The institution of the British & Foreign B[ible] S[ociety] will be to me, & thousand others cause of unspeakable comfort & joy as long as I live. The beneficial effects already produced in our poor country, of the abundant supply of Bibles by the means of it, are incalculable.<sup>37</sup>

Some have questioned the role played by Mary Jones in the history of the formation of the Bible Society. The most vociferous among these was probably the colourful bibliophile, Bob Owen of Croesor. "It is a great shame," he once said, referring to a monument erected in the ruins of Mary Jones's cottage in Llanfihangel-y-Pennant, "that the meagre pennies of the quarrymen, miners and farmers were spent raising a monument to one who had nothing to do with the founding of the Bible Society."<sup>38</sup>

It is true that there is no contemporary evidence that Thomas Charles told the story of Mary Jones's walk to Bala at the committee meeting in London at the end of 1802; and one should certainly not over-emphasise Mary Jones's part in these matters.

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Thomas Charles would certainly have known of many other examples of the great thirsting after the Bible that characterised so many of the common people of Wales in his day. And yet, from a fairly early period, there is regular mention that one girl had made a particular impression on Thomas Charles; and all the evidence suggests that Mary Jones was that girl, and that a special relationship developed between her and Thomas Charles following her visit to Bala to purchase a Bible.

For example, when special meetings began to be held for Thomas Charles's Sunday schools, where the pupils from a number of schools would come together to be publicly examined, Mary Jones would attend such meetings in her area as faithfully as she possibly could; and she would by all accounts excel in them. In a manuscript in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth, Robert Griffith, Bryn-crug (a minister who knew Mary well towards the end of her life), said that her answers "would descend in showers like balls of fire," with great effect on the gathered crowd. Robert Griffith adds that Thomas Charles would be certain to ask every time he came to a meeting of schools in the vicinity of her home, "Where is the weaver [i.e. Mary Jones] today, I wonder?" Robert Griffith also tells how Mary would often meet Thomas Charles at Methodist Association meetings and converse with him on such occasions.

### **Bees and Bibles**

Mary Jones had a long life. It was a poor and a grim one in many ways. She married in 1813. At least six children were born to her and her husband, but most of them died young. Only one child seems to have survived her, and he had by then emigrated to the

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~~United States.~~ Around 1820, Mary and her husband, Thomas, moved a few miles nearer the coast, to the village of Bryn-crug near Tywyn, and it was there that she spent the remainder of her days, dying in 1864, an aged and blind widow.

Yet despite all her hardships and troubles, and although she suffered much from depression in later years, her Christian faith held to the end, and she was noted for her faithfulness to the Calvinistic Methodist cause in Bryn-crug. Despite her poverty, she contributed regularly to the work of the Bible Society, and donated half a sovereign to the special collection made in 1854 to send a million New Testaments to China, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

Part of Mary Jones' income came from keeping bees. It is not impossible that Thomas Charles was a help to her in that respect also! His scriptural dictionary is a treasure-trove of information on all manner of subjects, including bees and honey. Keeping bees was a common practise at that time. There were six beehives at Dolwar Fach, for example; and it is quite possible that they (together with Psalm 118:12) were in Ann Griffiths's mind when she composed the words:

Weary is my life, by foemen  
Thick beset in savage throng,  
For like bees they come about me,  
Harass me the whole day long . . .<sup>39</sup>

But the imagery of bees as enemies is not appropriate in Mary Jones's case. Here again (in translation) are the words of Robert Griffith, Bryn-crug:

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She [i.e. Mary Jones] had only a small garden of land, and that was very full of fruit, and a myriad of bees, and she would be like a princess on a fine summer's day, in their midst, and she could pick them up in her hands like corn, or oatmeal, without any one of them using its sting to oppose her.

She kept the income from selling the honey for her own livelihood, but she divided the income from the beeswax – which could be a considerable sum – between the Bible Society and her denomination's Missionary Society; and she attributed the fact that the bees did not sting her, and that they were so productive, and that their produce was of such high quality, to the fact that they knew that Mary dedicated a substantial portion of that produce to the work of their Creator.

The section of the *Trysorfa* ("Treasury"), her denominational magazine, to which Mary Jones would always turn first was the "Missionary Chronicle." The same missionary interest is evident in Ann Griffiths. She has a hymn on the theme of the success of overseas mission, and it is worth remembering that John Davies, one of Thomas Charles' circulating school teachers, and a member of the same Methodist *seiat* as Ann, sailed as a missionary to Tahiti in 1800.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Charles could well have been the source of the interest of both Ann and Mary in the mission field. He laid great emphasis on overseas missionary work. He says, for example, in the letter to Joseph Tarn in March 1804, which has already been quoted:

These noblest institutions, the Missionary [Society, i.e. the London Missionary Society, formed in 1795, of which Charles was a director], the Sunday School, together with

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the Bible Society added now to the other two, complete the means for the dispersion of divine knowledge far & near.

In her old age, Mary Jones would enjoy telling the tale of her walk to Bala to obtain a Bible. She made good use of the Bible she received from Thomas Charles. She read it from cover to cover four times during her lifetime. She memorised substantial sections of it, which proved of great benefit and comfort to her after she lost her sight. And when she died, the Bible she had bought in Bala over sixty years previously was on the table by her side.

\* \* \*

One of the best-known stanzas in popular Welsh hymnody is "*Dyma Feibl annwyl Iesu*" ("This is Jesu's dear Bible"). Its authorship is given as 'anonymous'. As the Welsh poet, Menna Elfyn, has reminded us in one of her poems, where she plays on the prefix "an-" and the name "Ann," "anonymous" can often mean that a work was composed by a woman. Although not certain, the likelihood in this particular case is that the stanza was actually composed by a man. His name was Richard Davies, a native of Tywyn in Meirioneth, who was born in 1793 and served as a Calvinistic Methodist elder in Tywyn until his death aged 33. The stanza first appeared in print, to the best of our knowledge, in a collection of hymns published by one Thomas Owen in Llanfyllin, a market town in Montgomeryshire, in 1820.

The reason for mentioning this is that the stanza binds Ann Griffiths and Mary Jones together in more ways than one. Richard Davies, like both Ann and Mary, was a Calvinistic Methodist.

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Tywyn, where he lived, is but a stone's throw from Mary Jones's home, and she would certainly have known him. Llanfyllin, the place the stanza was first published, is only a stone's throw from Ann Griffiths's home. Ann Griffiths and Richard Davies both died young; indeed, Ann was in her grave before Richard composed his stanza. However, had she lived, it would not be difficult to imagine her and Mary Jones singing together that simple but comprehensive stanza with fervour on the Green in Bala during a Methodist Association meeting. Here, then, to close is that stanza in translation:

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This is Jesu's dear Bible,  
Precious gift of God's right hand;  
There we find the rule for living  
And the path to Canaan's land;  
There we read our ruin's story,  
Eden's sad and sorry loss;  
There we find the way to glory  
Through my Jesus and His cross.<sup>41</sup>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>This article is a revised version of a Welsh-language article published under the title "Ann Griffiths, Mary Jones a Mecca'r Methodistiaid" in *Llên Cymru*, 21 (1998), a journal published by the University of Wales Press.

<sup>2</sup>"Ann Griffiths" was Ann's married name; her maiden name was "Ann Thomas," although she would have been commonly known as "Nansi Thomas." "Mary Jones" was both Mary's maiden name and her married name, although she would have been known generally as "Mari Jacob" – Jacob being her father's first name.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Sian Rhiannon Williams, "The True 'Cymraes': Images of Women in Women's Nineteenth-Century Welsh Periodicals" in Angel John (ed.), *Our Mothers' Land: Chapters in Welsh Women's History*,