

A Yeoman of England

BY REV. FRANK BAKER



PEACEFUL HARBOUR—A view of the Anchorage at Tenby, in Pembrokeshire.

The Week's Book Causerie

"Utopia or Nemesis"

THIS is an age in which right thinking about the State and its claims is no mere academic exercise but a matter of life and death. It is not surprising, therefore, that books on the subject continue to pour from the printing presses of many countries. Some writers, such as Lewis Mumford and the late Karl Mannheim, study the State from a sociological angle; others, such as H. J. Laski and R. M. MacIver, are more concerned with political theory; while others, notably John MacMurray and Arnold Toynbee, are interested in the philosophy of history which underlies the rise and fall of States.

What is needed so greatly is a Christian critique of the State. It must assess the findings of others in the many fields of inquiry into State theory and practice. It must show a thorough knowledge of the work of Christian political thinkers both past and present, and it must set forth its own clear judgment, well and wisely arrived at, and persuasively set forth. All these conditions are fulfilled in a book by the Rev. Geraint Vaughan Jones, "Democracy and Civilisation" (Hutchinson, 21s.).

If the work be set alongside D. R. Davies' *Theology and the Atomic Age* (Lattimer House, Ltd., 5s.), its style and method can be more properly determined. Mr. D. R. Davies is the best known English popular exponent of Reinhold Niebuhr's philosophical theology. In his *Beyond Tragedy* and in his *Gifford Lectures, Nature and Destiny of Man*, Professor Niebuhr set world affairs against a sombre eschatological background. In Mr. D. R. Davies's recent writings his emphasis on eschatology has deepened and now the pupil outruns the master. In this latest little book he not only indulges in a rugged kick at any form of utopianism, but goes back to what seems a liberal interpretation of the

apocalyptic element in the Bible. Recently the concern with present judgment has outweighed the emphasis on the future judgment. But Mr. D. R. Davies would have us concentrate on the "Last Judgment and Return of the Lord Jesus Christ." It is no wonder that second adventists have begun to quote him with approval.

He will not as yet commit himself to the certainty of our Lord's imminent coming, but he describes the contemporary situation as an almost exact fulfilment of the warnings of Jesus as recorded by St. Mark (chapter xiii.). Because "this may be the onset of the Last Judgment," Mr. Davies asserts

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that "the Church will do more for civilisation, even in this world, by primary fidelity to her Gospel than by any amount of social activities directly pursued in the interests of civilisation." He dares to cap the argument by saying that concentration on the word of God as it is found in the Gospel will do more to win our generation away from its obsession with power than direct action on a secular level.

Now these words have only to be set down for their cold despair to become apparent. Not all the vigour of Mr. Davies's mind nor the richness of his pen can obscure the fact that his message cuts the nerve of all social endeavour and bids us wait for the *deus ex machina* as the solution of all our troubles. It is no new solution. From the black days of the second century there have not been wanting godly Christians of many types who despaired of earth and refused to be concerned with its concerns. Instead they looked (as Mr. Davies bids us to do) for the second coming and the Last Judgment.

The author would complain bitterly of the crankish notions of the motley company in which he now finds himself, but that is where this book has brought him. "Prior concentration on the Gospel" is a pious grouping of words which means in practice for many a religious funk-hole from a world situation in which they ought to be playing their own proper part.

It is part of the great merit of Mr. Geraint Vaughan Jones's book that he has read so widely and so deeply as D. R. Davies whose great modern writers who deal with the heaven and hell in the human soul. Against background of wide acquaintance with Catholic and Reformation literature he treats with discrimination and real insight the thought of Berdyaev, Barth, Bruner, Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. The one omission of consequence is that of Kierkegaard. But Mr. Vaughan Jones suffers from no

ill consequences of over-indulgence in an unbalanced diet. He is also widely read in the great liberal thinkers such as Ortega y Gasset, Unamuno, and Salvador de Madariaga. He is aware of neo-Thomism and the new emphasis on Christian humanism.

In consequence he does justice both to the liberal and apocalyptic elements in the Christian tradition. He is as much concerned as D. R. Davies to stress the sovereignty of God and our own dependence upon Him who is the Alpha and Omega, the author and finisher of our faith, by whom alone the Kingdom is fully consummated. But he refuses to believe that since the initiative remains with God the end must be catastrophic rather than anastrophic. He is moved by St. John's teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit and to him the violent intervention would neither seem necessary nor his method nor in consonance with His character. What Mr. Vaughan Jones does affirm is the telos and not the tisis of history. God will fulfil Himself in His own way, but within this space-time order we are called to co-operate with Him in His purposes.

There is no skirting of unpleasant facts and factors. Mr. Vaughan Jones uses the word demonism as seriously as does Paul Tillich. He knows the sickness of modern society and the forces that threaten its disintegration. But he refuses to believe that collapse into a frightened barbarism is inevitable, and he sees the function of the Christian Faith to be a preservative against corruption. The Church is the agent of the Faith and by its stress on certain fundamental truths can provide a bulwark alike against a rigid State tyranny and an irresponsible individualism.

Mr. Geraint Vaughan Jones has no doubt that the meaning of history lies in the attempt to realise a Commonwealth of value through an awareness of the Kingdom of God in our midst. He argues persuasively that the material conditions for that lie in a liberal social democracy in which freedom and responsibility are equally stressed. But men are at different stages of development and there remains the "tragedy and tribulation of the world" which is far distant, but even now with a great leap of faith we can work on the temporal but live on the eternal plane. It is

Charles Wesley asks

"My hands are but engaged below
My heart is still with Thee."
This is a fine book written out of great learning and deep faith. It is a most stimulating tract for the times providing at once a stern warning against human confidence and a corrective against human despair. I read the book eagerly, not willing to miss a sentence, because here I found a welcome combination of teacher and prophet, discerning the signs of the times and setting forth the counsel of God.

THE literary shrine of Britain's famous dead, the Dictionary of National Biography, immortalises not only those born in mansion and in manse but also those who were born in cottage and low-ceilinged farmstead—"the yeomen of England." Of the latter was Joseph Benson, a scholar-evangelist to whom Methodism owes a great debt as one of those who worthily took over the reins of leadership from John Wesley.

Joseph Benson was born on January 25, 1748, at Melmerby in Cumbria, though the D.N.B. mistakenly gives the year of his birth as 1749. Melmerby was a tiny and isolated village under the shadow of Cross Fell, dignified by the remains of an old Roman road and a thirteenth century church. At his birth Benson's former parents had been married sixteen years, and he was the only one of their three sons to survive them. Small wonder that many hopes were placed on young Joseph, who was intended by his father to become a clergyman, for which he seemed particularly fitted by his thoughtful, studious nature. To that end his simple grounding at a village school was followed by the tutelage of a neighbouring Presbyterian minister named Dean. He soon became a sound classical scholar, and also browsed greedily in the Dean's library, which flooded with theological milk and honey compared with his own home, which was equipped with little except a family Bible and a volume of pious sermons, and the ubiquitous *Whole Duty of Man*. With borrowed books he filled in his evenings at home, crouched in a remote (and cold) corner of the large farm-kitchen, almost oblivious to the sounds of industry and merriment around him. He took his share of the farm-work, however, and retained vivid memories of marching with long poles for sheep buried on the snow-covered hills.

The young student was precocious in soul as well as in mind. As a child of six or seven, he would often meditate upon hell and heaven, kneeling down in fields and asking God to help him escape the one and gain the other. After due preparation he was confirmed, and strove to arduous his spiritual education by taking notes of all the sermons he heard at church. Warmth and depth was given to his religious experience when at length he realised that salvation came by faith alone. This was through the influence of his Methodist cousin, Joshua Watson, who took him upstairs, made him kneel down, and said, "Now, Joseph, you must pray." Introduced to Wesley's preachers, and also to some of Wesley's preachers, at seventeen he was a voluntarily converted Methodist. He had already been schooled in prayer for about a year, but his new friends persuaded him to throw himself on John Wesley's care. After adventuring in the study of Wesley, March 11, 1766, found them both at Kingswood School, with Benson appointed classics master. He was eighteen years old!

THOUGH young in years, however, Joseph Benson was old in knowledge. Like Wesley, he believed in "redeeming the time," in which his farmhouse training certainly helped. Among his resolutions for conduct as a youthful master at Kingswood School were: "To rise at four o'clock in the morning, and to go to bed at nine at night. Never to trifle away time in vain conversation, useless visits, or studying anything which would not be to my advantage." To the end of his days it was the same. Fifty years later Joseph Entwistle remarked that the light in Benson's study in City Road, London, would always be on at 5 a.m. and would usually remain on until 11 p.m. While he was at Kingswood, Benson's application to study was such that Wesley reversed his usual procedure with Methodist preachers by telling him not to read too much. In the second of his sixty-odd letters to Benson, Wesley wrote: "Beware you be not swallowed up in books; an ounce of love is worth a pound of knowledge."

Not that there was really any fear of scholarship diverting Wesley from what he regarded as his primary task. A year earlier he had approached his duties as schoolmaster with the prayer that he might not only train up the boys "in useful learning," but "impress a sense of the things of God upon their minds." Yet his countryman's slowness and hesitancy of speech made him at first reluctant to accept the additional spiritual challenge presented by the Kingswood colliers. Soon, however, he was preaching to them regularly, and when in 1770 he became headmaster of the new school at Huntingdon's College at Trevecha, he continued to preach. Already he had himself been entered as a student at St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford, with a view to a degree and episcopal ordination. His Methodist preaching, however, was construed as a technical breach of ecclesiastical procedure, and he was refused his testimonials or Orders, upon which he quitted Oxford, although a little later he was offered the title to a living. Here again, however, his Methodist preaching, and the bishop refused to ordain him. This settled the issue, and in 1771 Benson was received on trial as an itinerant preacher by the Methodist Conference. He retained no bitterness for the Anglican Church, however, but was one of the foremost leaders of the

Methodist "High Church Party," which strove to prevent a separation from the Established Church. Two of his own sons became clergymen, the youngest Samuel probably holding with his father the record for consecutive years of ministerial service, their ministries covering the years 1771-1861.

BENSON'S ministry opened at LONDON, and then extended throughout the country, though concentrated mainly in the Midlands and the north, including Edinburgh, of which circuit he was made the superintendent when he was twenty-eight at Sunderland (which in those days of huge circuits was part of the Newcastle Circuit) he managed to persuade a large number of Methodist smelters to abandon their evil ways. At Hull, where he superintended the erection of the George Yard Chapel, necessitated by his greatly-enlarged congregation, his ministry was extended to the then unprecedented length of three years. His junior colleague said of him—although Benson had only just turned forty—that "he was the greatest and greatest preacher in England; and he was as good and as useful as he was great." Benson was what was known in a paid ministerial appointment as a "free" preacher, in that he was free during his hour-long sermons, but he commanded the attention of his hearers throughout by the clarity of his thought, his simple and sometimes colloquial style, and above all by his passionate sincerity, which made his closing applications both memorable and fruitful. His unpretentious country appearance sometimes disappointed occasional hearers into thinking that a second-rate supply had been sent instead of the famous preacher whom they had come to hear, but soon they were under the spell of the messenger and his message.

When Joseph Benson returned to LONDON, Methodism in 1800 the quarterly meeting there petitioned that he should be kept beyond the maximum three years' ministry; but the rule could not be broken, even for Benson. A happy compromise was found, however. In 1801 he was appointed Connexional Editor, and in that capacity remained in London for the remainder of his life. It was an eminently suitable appointment, leaving full scope for his preaching gifts, yet affording greater opportunity for his scholarship. During his term as Editor he founded and enlarged the *Methodist Magazine*, with which he had been concerned since before his birth, having suggested doctrinal articles for it when it was still a dream in John Wesley's mind. He also prepared collected editions of the works of the two Methodist leaders with whom it is most easy to compare him, John Wesley and John Fletcher, having also written what was for eighty years the standard biography of Fletcher. For the last decade of his life he was engaged by request of the Conference on his last monumental work, a commentary on the whole Bible—now forgotten.

EVERYTHING Benson wrote and said and did was marked by the deep earnestness which characterised him as a child. From the year of his conversion until his death he religiously kept a journal full of pious musings and aspirations. This, like his letters, and like the biographies from which his reputation has sprung, is rather too heavy and moralising for modern taste. Even his love-making had been a very solemn business, the more so because Sarah Thompson's mother objected to the young man on the grounds of the difference in their ages (at their marriage on January 28, 1780, he was 32, she 22), and because of the "notion of poverty" of the Methodist preacher, and also because Benson, besides looking melancholy, appeared to be consumptive. Although his ascetic nature and drawn features lent colour to this assumption, in actual fact he out-lived his wife. She died in 1810, aged 52. He in 1821, aged 73; both are buried in the graveyard of Wesley's Chapel, London. The trustees paid noble tribute to his worth by offering to open Wesley's own grave to receive his remains, but his children felt that he should be laid to rest with his wife.

The Methodist Conference honoured Joseph Benson by twice electing him as their President, in 1798 and 1810, and twice as Secretary, in 1805 and 1809. The greatest tribute of all, however, was the unflinching love of thousands of ordinary Methodist people who through his ministry had been brought closely into the presence of their Master. His Anglican clergy would sometimes tiptoe into Wesley's Chapel while Benson was preaching, to learn the secret of his great power over his congregations. That secret was a simple one, summed up in his own words to a Methodist clergyman in 1779: "The preaching that does most good is that which makes the freest, simplest offers of divine grace, and breathes most love to the miserable children of men." Such were his own sermons, simple and sincere expositions of the central truth of the gospel of redemption. To all the flowery praise of the official obituaries and costly memorials he himself would undoubtedly have preferred the words of the simple brass tablet affixed to his coffin: "Jesu Christi Ecclesiarum"—a Preacher of Jesus Christ.

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