

has since been written by Père Bruno (*Etudes Carmelitaines* 1960), pursues the same theme in accordance with our own traditions in her article *Solitude Chrétienne*.

'The Desert is the place of the highest Wisdom, the Wisdom of Love. Here, everything is supremely simple, pardon falls like a drop of dew from heaven; for the true solitary, even when he is suffering persecution for justice's sake, has mercy, just as he comforts those who weep. How could it be otherwise if he lives by the love of God alone, poor in spirit, clean of heart, gentle and unviolent?'

## Reviews

THE CONSCIENCE OF ISRAEL Pre-Exilic Prophets and Prophecy, by Bruce Vawter, C.M.; Sheed and Ward; 22s. 6d.

The Hebrew prophets stand on one of the many islands of ignorance round which the broad stream of classical literary education has pursued, since the Renaissance, its complacent way. It is a safe enough guess that only a tiny minority of Catholics have read the prophetic books of the Bible, and a matter of common experience that, in the teaching of 'religious doctrine', the apologetic utility of prophecy has been insisted on to the exclusion of more intrinsic values.

Fr Vawter's book has many merits, but foremost among them is his evident determination to understand the prophets rather than to use them. His method is historical, his approach sympathetic and intelligent: the result, a piece of readable scholarship giving warmth as well as light. By encouraging us to see the prophets 'against the backdrop of the history in which they lived', Fr Vawter does more than rescue their human personalities from stained-glass immobility. He succeeds in communicating to us moderns, separated from the prophets by so many barriers of space, time and culture, the message which is more important than the men: the message embodied in a literature which is part of our birth-right. God's word, indeed, but man's too; a kingdom of the mind where we can and ought to be at home.

The book falls into three sections. The second and third parts discuss Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah (eighth century) and Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah (seventh century). In the first part, Fr Vawter examines the fact of Hebrew prophecy, set against comparable phenomena of the contemporary

Near East; with admirable clarity he states the principles he intends to apply in the rest of the work. For example: 'We have not yet taken in their (the prophet's) words until we have reset them—to the extent that this is possible for us—in the concrete historical moment that provoked them into being. When their words remain obscure for us, as often as not this means that we have been unable to recreate this historical moment'. The principle ought to be a truism among educated Catholics; yet the notion that the prophets were mere stenographers taking divine dictation is, in fact, an unconscionably long time a-dying.

This book will help us to avoid falsifying the prophetic message by reading into it meanings that were never there. While maintaining our right to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the New, Fr Vawter rebukes those who would read the prophets 'with an obsessing conviction that they had no function other than to make predictions of the Messiah'. Patient inquiry, historical and linguistic, into what the prophets meant, cannot derogate from either the inspired quality of their message or the fulfilment of it in Christ. 'If our comprehension of the meaning of prophecy is broader than the prophets', it is nevertheless the comprehension of a meaning that was first theirs. If it was never theirs, we have no business thinking of it as prophecy. We must begin, therefore, with what the prophets themselves understood. The first and most necessary commentary on the New Testament is the Old Testament, but an Old Testament critically and honestly interpreted'.

Those who have read *A Path Through Genesis* will not need telling that Fr Vawter does not shirk difficulties. Problems are presented squarely. The solutions offered are firmly followed through. Texts, well selected, are given in the author's own translation. Biblical names are used with 'the spelling customarily found in . . . our general literature': forms which, the Foreword reminds us, are not Protestant so much as standard English. I have already said that Fr Vawter's style is eminently readable: the acceptance of an occasional Americanism is a small price to pay for the scholarship and humanity, to say nothing of the spirituality, which have gone to the making of this book.

DAVID GOTHARD, C.R.L.

SPIRITUAL CONFERENCES, by John Tauler, O.P., translated and edited by Eric Colledge and Sr Mary Jane, O.P.; B. Herder; 34s.

By the time Tauler had begun to preach, 'Maitre Eckhart avail fait bien des écarts', and more than one innocent Béguine had perished in the fire. Tauler was, with Suso, probably a pupil of Eckhart, and he was on good terms with many of the 'Friends of God'. But the *studium generale* at Cologne in 1325 no doubt had its complement of conventional masters, for Tauler's sermons (the authentic ones at least), half of which are translated in the present volume, have a sober, traditional framework. The higher flights of *Wesensmystik* and *Braut-*