

that it is given in chronological order of writing, and it requires quite an effort of thought to remember that the gospels were written after Paul's letters, and that these letters themselves are given not in chronological order but simply in decreasing order of length. Dr Rhymer has cut up the Bible and pasted it together again in what he considers to be chronological order of writing. He recognises of course that total rigidity in this must be avoided, or the result would be so disjointed as to be wholly unreadable. He recognises also that not everyone will agree with his judgements about dates, and so the volume is inevitably the product of compromise, in two ways; no one would hold this against him, for no one to whom this project has ever seemed attractive can be blind to the problems involved.

This way of printing the Bible has undoubted advantages, and brings out forcefully some important historical and theological facts. To start bluntly with the call of Abraham brings out how the story started, and emphasises the importance of the nomadic beginnings. Similarly, in the New Testament to begin with the little confessions of faith and early hymns, which are normally found embedded in Paul's letters, does give the feel of the earliest Christian communities. The

ends of the two Testaments are also instructive: it is informative and exciting to have the apocalyptic prophets printed just before the New Testament begins, and also useful to be given the little historical novelettes like Ruth and Esther as a sort of appendix (especially with the frank statement in the introduction that they are in some sense fictitious). It is useful also to find the Johannine writings at the end of the New Testament, for it helps to appreciate their developed and prophetic qualities. But there are undoubted disadvantages, too, in this way of printing the Bible. Unhistorical though the first eleven chapters of Genesis are, it was certainly an inspired decision to put them at the beginning of the Bible, for without these great lapidary statements of man's relationship to God and of his sinfulness and hope of redemption there can seem to be a trivialisation of the whole story. However, my basic criticism of *The Bible in Order* is that, in spite of the generous tables of contents, it is so hard to find one's way about it that it is extremely difficult to use. This is why I fear that what looks at first glance like a useful teaching aid may be found in practice to be an expensive white elephant.

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**THE SAYINGS OF THE DESERT FATHERS: The Alphabetical Collection**, translated by Benedicta Ward. *A. R. Mowbray*, London, 1975. 228 + xviii pp. £7.50 hardback, £4.50 paper.

**THE WISDOM OF THE DESERT FATHERS (The Anonymous Series)**, translated by Sister Benedicta Ward. *SLG Press*, Oxford, 1975. 66 + xix pp. 90p.

In the deserts around us lie a number of notable ecclesiastical ruins, and shortly there will probably be more before the bulldozer tidies them up. Explain to the curious the thoughts of those who constructed and lived in some of these places let him who may. Never since Constantine can the entire scenery of organised Christian life have seemed more likely to be rolled up between the acts.

Yet there have always been a few for whom these things hardly existed, like the priest of Scetis who went to see the Archbishop of Alexandria and, on his return, was unable to answer the question: What is going on in the city? (*Alphabetical Collection* under Isidore the Priest no. 8, *Anonymous Series*, p. 7). These people about

whom in one way so little is known, and yet in other ways perhaps all they would have thought worth knowing is known, have a strange power of surviving all the changes. Christians in almost every century, but particularly in those of profound transformations, have come across them anew and been reminded of things of which they needed a living reminder. There is nothing archaic, for instance, about the story of the repentant anchorite who prepared his lamp on Easter Eve and prayed until he found it alight, as anyone can discover who reads it with the eyes of the heart (*Anonymous Series*, pp. 11-13). It will be likely to persuade them of the truth of the saying of a rare bishop who found a place in the *Alphabetical Series* that 'the acquisi-

tion of Christian books is necessary for those who can use them. The mere sight of these books renders us less inclined to sin, and incites us to believe more firmly in righteousness' (*Epiphanius* no. 8). In her introduction to the smaller of these two series, where she has omitted some of the sayings available in the *Alphabetical Collection*, Sister Benedicta interprets the sense of *presence* to which the bishop here alludes by saying that 'the essence of the spirituality of the desert is that it was not taught but caught'. In thus insisting on our need to move about in a context, she has also done us the great service of giving us, under the title *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, the *Alphabetical Collection* in its entirety in a translation that it is a quiet pleasure to read. It is not just the great and familiar names that impress us. Under Mark, disciple of Abba Sylvanus, for example, we have five sayings that in themselves constitute a lovely little biography.

It is one of the ironies in the varied transmission of these accounts of men who might otherwise have been forgotten that even in this edition, prepared with much scholarly care, there are a few misprints. And what has happened to the 'maps used as end-papers' referred to in the introduction? Authors, like disciples, obviously have to be kept in their place, and no minor defects should deter anyone from acquiring these two collections. To be *seen* they have to be owned. When the reviewer notices that he once upon a time acquired his bound copy of the familiar Helen Waddell selections for the equivalent of the modern 35p, the smaller series in paper can seem dear, though it is a bargain today. And even the hardback of the *Alphabetical Collection* costs less than a good dinner in most of the capitals of Europe, and is likely to be a good deal more permanently sustaining.

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