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THE NEW TESTAMENT IN BASIC ENGLISH

THE policy of many reviewers of *The New Testament in Basic English** (Cambridge University Press, 8s. 6d. net) has been to take the pen in one hand and the Authorized Version in the other and to proceed immediately in an attempt to show how the Basic English translation differs from, is less adequate, less beautiful or in some other way less satisfactory than the translation of 1610. This, it seems to me, is exactly contrary to the hope of the producer of Basic English, Mr. C. K. Ogden, the Orthological Institute, Professor S. H. Hooke's committee, and the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, all of whom have expressly pointed out that the Basic English version is intended in no sense to take the place of the Authorized Version or to come into competition with it. An exhaustive comparative study of the two versions might possibly, but by no means necessarily, show that the Basic English version lacks the flexibility, the beautiful rhythms and the great rhetorical force of the version with which most of us are perhaps, it seems to me, too familiar. The rediscovery of the Bible as literature, as opposed to a cloakroom of theological pegs, comes to any writer and lover of English as a shock of delight. Almost forty years ago it was declared by the Biblical scholar, Professor R. G. Moulton, that we had "done almost everything that is possible with these writings. We have overlaid them, clause by clause, with exhaustive commentaries; we have translated them, revised the translation, and quarrelled over the revisions; we have discussed authenticity and inspiration, and suggested textual history with the aid of coloured type; we have mechanically divided the whole into chapters and verses, and sought texts to memorize and quote. There is yet one thing left to do with the Bible—*simply to read it.*" By tradition and association, in fact, the version of 1610 has become regarded by millions of people not only as sacred and inviolate in subject and matter but in

the very arrangement and order of its words. Hence, it seems to me, the immediate tendency of reviewers to reach for it and, I think mistakenly, use it as a standard issued by a sort of sacred weights-and-measures office for all time.

By H. E. BATES

For this reason I have not, in trying to assess *The New Testament in Basic English*, made a single reference to the Authorized Version except to make a check on the date and authorship of the four gospels. What is the effect of the direct approach?—the approach which will, after all, be made by thousands of readers to whom English is an adopted tongue? First, what is Basic English? As conceived by Mr. Ogden it has a vocabulary limited to 850 words. For the purposes of the New Testament translation fifty special Biblical words have been added, together with 100 words "listed as giving most help in the reading of English verse," thus bringing the number up to 1,000. In other words, this is everyday English. It is English shorn of literary pomposity, pretence, clichés, mannerisms, catch-phrases, Latinization. Yet it is English that remains also astonishingly flexible; that remains nervous, delicate and yet muscular; a language which, if correctly used, gives the impression of having a far greater word content and variation than it actually has. Thus there is nothing new in Basic English; nor is it a scheme to popularize baby-talk. It is a revaluation of the language which, though it may not be deliberately conceived as revolutionary, may be seen as part of the revolution of severe simplification accomplished in English prose of the last two decades by certain modern writers, notably Hemingway. There are times, in fact, when this Basic English version of the Testament reads extraordinarily like the Gospel in Hemingway's translation, though for me it most often recalls, especially in the

* Available in three styles. Demy 8vo, 8/6 net. Pocket edition, cloth 3/0 net, leather cloth, 3/6 net.

narration passages of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the touch of Defoe:

"And when the fourteenth day came, while we were going here and there in the Adriatic sea, about the middle of the night the sailors had an idea that they were getting near land; and they let down the lead, and saw that the sea was a hundred and twenty feet deep; and after a little time they did it again and it was ninety feet."

It is possible that the Authorized Version is stronger in rhythm, more coloured and more holy in tone, but it could hardly have a more natural narrative force. Its meaning is unmistakably clear. The effect on a reader unhampered by the disturbing memories of a book whose every word has been presented as if clothed in holy velvet must inevitably be one of a clear, factual, credible account. The reaction of such a reader will not be whether this writing is better or worse than another version of the same affair, in which almost every word is a familiar quotation, but whether this story of sea-faring men having difficulties in the Adriatic sea is a credible business written by a man who knows a ship from a hay-stack. And the answer must, I think, be in favour of Basic English. Language may be so sanctified by association (the smell of pine pews, of old foxed paper, of monastic dampness, the hush of dim religious light) as to become almost entirely meaningless. As has been very well pointed out, "the Elizabethan prose of the Authorized Version sometimes conceals, by its very familiarity, the plain meaning of the text." What familiarity has failed to destroy has too often been finished off by the memory of a sort of holy discomfort.

To a reader unhampered by the memory of uneasy associations or brought up by a method known as "reading a portion of Scripture" the Basic English version of the New Testament cannot fail, I think, to be a credible and persuasive document. Is anything more needed? Is credibility enough? Ought not the language also to be beautiful and, while conveying the plain sense, moving? These questions are a legitimate test, and Basic English, it seems to me, satisfies them:

"But in those days, after that time of truth, the sun will be made dark and the moon will not give her light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers which are in heaven will be moved. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory." (Mark.)

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were gone: and there was no more sea. And I saw the holy town, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, like a bride made beautiful for her husband." (Revelation.)

These passages, selected at random, seem to me to be capable of surviving any test which the most fanatical Authorized Version purist cares to apply. They justify the claims, quoted by the publishers, that "to read the new translation is like reading the Bible for the first time," and that Basic English offers "a valuable corrective to careless and ambiguous use of words and a check in those devices of rhetoric which hide the plain sense of what is being said." In short, the only objection to Basic English is prejudice. Once that is broken down, Basic English becomes a salutary educational force whose effect on the general use of written English may be, and I hope will be, as great as that of the Authorized Version for the last three hundred years. Meanwhile the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, who have shown highly commendable enterprise in this business, should set about an edition for schools, without verses, as soon as possible. The Old Testament, together with the Apocryphal Books will, I hope, follow.

RAPID REVIEW

THE UNITY OF INDIA, by Jawaharlal Nehru (*Lindsay Drummond*, 10s. 6d. net).

This collection of articles, speeches, and essays by the Indian Congress leader now in prison, date from 1935, when he finished his autobiography, to his eloquent statement at his recent trial in 1940. Nehru writes well. His sincerity is glaringly obvious. His survey of Congress Politics is a useful introduction to the real situation in India, and anyone who wishes to take an unbiased view of the whole problem which is likely to become urgent at any moment should make it their business to read this book.

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IN the collection of accumulated prefaces, criticisms, and to be worthy nostalgic papers and kind of books Reid has the papers and which will the bookish Andrew L. the 'Eighties Irish and James, and quiet and shroud and discriminate describe people Reid's virtue very new likes his sultry near to the intelligent pleasure of Where I interesting essays I have cut off from of two generations are known We may not have the precepts. But half-known, who were survive and to read: the fascination. I occasional re though I have him, but Rhoads Gould, W. D. Garnett—who