

Why is that writing slanted?

THE USE OF *Italic* TYPE IN THE BIBLE

By D. E. Anderson

If you pick up a copy of Answers in Genesis (UK)'s October-December 2004 'Prayer News' leaflet, at the end of the first paragraph you will find the sentence 'To be united, his disciples must *obey* Jesus as the Holy Spirit guides them into *all truth*'. No doubt, you will notice the words in slanted type—indeed, they're in slanted type so that you'll notice them. That style of type is called *italic* (which I've put in italic type, because I want you to notice the word!). In many instances italic type is used because the author wants to emphasise something; he makes the word look different so that it will catch your eye.

If you pick up a copy of the Bible and turn to Genesis 1.4, you will find some more words in italic type: 'And God saw the light, that *it was* good'. If you go by the examples in most books and maga-

zines, you would think that God wants us to notice in particular the words 'it was' since they are in italic type, and no doubt there are those who have spent many hours studying to figure out what the theological significance of those two words is. However, it's because those two words lack theological significance that they're in italics!

Most people reading this article will have English as their first language, but many will have studied—or may currently be learning—a second language. If you're one of those, you will know how hard it can be to translate from one language to another. A thought that in one language might be clear by using a single word, in another language might require two or more words. If a Spanish speaker said *vivo*, other Spanish speakers would understand by that one word what he meant. If he has to translate that into English, however, it would take two

words—‘I live’—for the English person to understand all that the Spanish speaker meant.

The same thing is seen in translating the Greek and Hebrew of the Bible: sometimes one English word isn’t enough to convey what a single Hebrew or Greek word might mean. And there is an added problem in these Biblical languages: often, forms of the verb ‘to be’ (for example, ‘am,’ ‘are,’ ‘is,’ ‘were,’ ‘was’) are omitted. In English if I were to say ‘I sitting,’ you would probably think that I didn’t know the language very well. (Indeed, leaving out forms of ‘to be’ is common for those learning to speak English.) In English, we have to include a form of this verb, in this instance, ‘am’—‘I am sitting.’ Without it, the sentence sounds wrong, and can be hard to understand.

When translating everyday speech or magazine articles or letters from one language to another, the translator will, of course, want to be as accurate as possible. He will work hard to ensure that the person reading his translation will fully understand what the original document or speech has. If he is translating something very important, such as the Queen’s Speech or a document written by the President of the USA, he will be especially careful not to add to or take away from the original, since any change could have worldwide consequences.

If accurate translation is important in the Queen or President’s message, how much more important it is in God’s message to mankind! An error in translating the President’s message could lead to war and death; an error in translating God’s message could result in eternal death.

For centuries, those translating the Word of God from the Greek and Hebrew texts have recognised the great responsibility they have in producing accurate versions of the Bible, in which nothing can be added or omitted. They knew that it would be no easy task: these Greek and Hebrew scholars knew that they could not always translate one word with another single word. They also knew that there would be occasions in which a different word might be used instead of the ones that they chose. Therefore, these translators decided that, when a word or words had to be added so that the English reader could understand what the Greek and Hebrew words meant, they would add those words in italic type.

Going back to Genesis 1.4, we see the words ‘it was’ in italic type. The Hebrew, if translated word for word, says ‘And God saw the light, that good.’ Perhaps we could read that and figure it out; perhaps not. To be certain that it would be understood and in proper English, the translators added ‘it was’ in italics, so that we would be sure to know that when God saw the light ‘that *it was* good’.

So, when you read your Bible, note the words in italics. You will begin to see some of the struggles that the translators faced in producing the Scriptures in our languages. When you have finished reading, thank God for His grace in raising up people to undertake this great work so that we would have the Scriptures in our own languages, and pray for those who are currently translating His Word. ■