

Understanding Italicized Words in the King James Version

What Are the Italicized Words in the KJV?

Many readers notice that certain words in the King James Version are printed in *italics*. Some have heard that these words were added by the translators and wonder if that means they should not be in the Bible.

The answer is no.

The italicized words were generally added by the translators to help the English sentence make sense. They were not trying to hide anything. In fact, the italics were a way of being honest with the reader.

Why Were Words Added?

Hebrew and Greek grammar works differently than English.

Sometimes the original language can express an idea very briefly, but a literal English translation would sound awkward or incomplete. In such cases, translators supplied words that were understood in the original language but needed to be stated in English.

For example, Greek might literally say:

“To him glory forever.”

English readers would naturally expect:

“To him **be** glory forever.”

The word “**be**” may not appear as a separate word in the Greek text, but the idea is clearly implied. To make the sentence understandable, the translators supplied the word.

Why Italicize Them?

The KJV translators used italics to tell the reader:

“These words are not directly represented by a single Hebrew or Greek word but have been supplied to make the English translation clear.”

This was actually a very transparent practice.

Many modern translations also supply words when necessary, but most do not mark them with italics.

Examples

Sometimes Hebrew leaves the verb “is” understood rather than stated.

For example:

“The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

(Psalm 23:1)

In some passages, words such as “is,” “are,” or “be” may appear in italics because they are implied in the original language rather than explicitly written.

Another example is Hebrews 11:6:

“But without faith it is impossible to please him...”

In many KJV editions, the word “**him**” is italicized because it is supplied from the context.

Were the Italicized Words Wrong?

No.

In most cases, the italicized words are not changing the meaning of Scripture. They are helping communicate the meaning in understandable English.

If all the italicized words were removed, many passages would sound broken, awkward, or difficult to understand. The translators were not adding new doctrines. They were making the original meaning readable in English.

A Common Misunderstanding

Some people teach:

“You should ignore all the italicized words.”

That is not a good approach.

Usually, those words are necessary for proper English grammar and clear communication. Removing them often makes a verse harder to understand rather than more accurate.

The Translators Understood This

The King James translators recognized that:

- Word-for-word translation is not always possible.
- Languages do not match perfectly.
- Clarity sometimes requires supplied words.
- Good translation seeks to communicate meaning accurately.

Even the most literal modern translations must do the same thing.

An Interesting Historical Fact

The practice of using italics for supplied words did not begin with the King James Version.

The Geneva Bible, published before the KJV, also used italics to indicate words supplied by the translators. The KJV simply continued an existing translation practice.

One Caution

Sometimes an italicized word can slightly influence interpretation because translators must decide what is implied by the context.

For that reason, comparing translations and studying the surrounding context can be helpful.

However, in the vast majority of cases, the italicized words are harmless grammatical helps that make the English clearer.

Simple Summary

The italicized words in the KJV:

- Were added by the translators for clarity.
- Usually are not directly represented by a single Hebrew or Greek word.
- Help English grammar make sense.
- Were marked in italics to be transparent with readers.

Rather than being an attempt to change Scripture, the italics are actually evidence of the translators' honesty. They wanted readers to know where they had supplied words to help communicate the meaning of God's Word in clear and understandable English.