

## Chapter 2 — The Holy Scriptures

### Q16. Are the Holy Scriptures perfect or imperfect?

A. Perfect. “The law of the LORD is perfect” (Ps. 19:7).

What does the word “imperfect” mean in our question? Then the Bible would be defective or incomplete, or have flaws and faults. What would then be a problem? Then we do not know what is true in Scripture and what is not. We would not know how we should live. But what is the answer of our catechism? Thankfully that the Scriptures are perfect. Let us have a closer look at the Bible text that is mentioned.

In the answer, the Bible text speaks about the “law of the LORD” when it wants to prove the perfection of the Bible. What is the “law” in that verse? Maybe you answer, “Of course, the Ten Commandments.” That is certainly part of it. You say, “Does it speak about the ceremonial laws?” So, the laws in of the temple worship? Yes, that is also meant. But the law here is more. In the original, we have the word “Torah.” What do you think it speaks of? Yes, in the first place, the five books of Moses. But it also points to the rest of the Old Testament. “Torah” means law, instruction, or a prophetic teaching. We use words like this at times in the same way. If you ask someone’s hand, what do you do? Do you ask only for the person’s hand? No. The hand in that case points to the whole person. You ask the other party to marry you. The same is the case with the word “law” in our text. At times, it only speaks of the Ten Commandments or another law. But at other times, it refers to the whole Bible.

Let us now think whether the Bible is perfect or imperfect. What does our answer say? Indeed, “perfect.” Let us first give an example of something that we call perfect. Maybe in the future you will buy a car that is perfect. It has all what you need. It satisfies all your requirements. But is that car really perfect? No, it can have many improvements. Is that what we mean when we say that the Bible is perfect? No. The dictionary gives three different senses for the word “perfect.” They are,

- 1. It satisfies all the requirements.
- 2. It is entirely without fault.
- 3. It is a faithful reproduction of the original.

Which of the three is meant in our answer? Yes, the second and third. The Bible is complete, intact, and trustworthy. If we read it, we can trust it. But how is it possible that the Bible is perfect? Because God Himself is perfect. God is free from error or imperfection. Think about a perfect engineer that has to write a manual. If he does his work faithfully in writing, the manual is perfect too. Otherwise, he is not a perfect engineer. What does it mean to us that the Bible is perfect? That we may not add things to it or leave things out. That would destroy the perfection of the Bible.

What about translations? Are Bible translations perfect or imperfect? They are imperfect. This translating work is done by humans. This is even true for the most faithful translations. And of course, we desire to have a translation that is as faithful as possible. What is then needed to have a faithful translation? The translator needs to be a true child of God. He has to be governed and ruled by the LORD. He wants to seek God’s honor.

But why are translations not perfect? For two reasons. First, the translator can use a wrong word in translating. He can think that the original word has a certain meaning, but he might be wrong. Second, the original word can have multiple meanings. For the translation, you can only use one word, not a whole description of the original word. This means that the other meanings are lost in the translation. Let's say that you have to translate "bank" into Spanish. Which word would you use? The word "bank" can point to different things: a financial bank or the bank of a river. So, depending on the context, you translate it one way or the other. The same is true in the original languages of the Bible. Words can have multiple meanings. For example the Hebrew word "chesed" can mean, "faithfulness, loyalty, and loving-kindness." But you can only translate it with one word. It can even be that the author meant the word to have all those meanings. But in translating, you lose two of them. Do you see that translations, therefore, are imperfect, no matter how faithful you translate? But what about the original documents? Are we missing things or do we have errors in it?

**Q17. Has any part of the Holy Scriptures been lost or falsified?<sup>1</sup>**

A. No, they are as entire and pure as they ever were (Matt. 5:18).

In thinking about the original documents, the question speaks of "any part." It is about the smallest part of the Bible. The question is, therefore, about each book, chapter, and verse. We have our Bibles, but are any parts missing? Are there things "lost"? Then we do no longer have these parts. Let's give an example of losing something. You travel to another destination. You take two large suitcases and one small one with you. But on the way, you lose the smaller one. Years later, you receive a call from the airline that they found your small suitcase. Is that what happened with the Bible? Are parts lost or might be found later? But what if we find new 'gospels'? For example, a document about the life of Jesus when He was between 2 and 12 years old. Should we add it to our Bible? Something like that has happened. Some years ago, they found the Gospel of Judas. The headlines of the newspaper said, "The lost gospel is revealed...It was hidden for 1700 years." In 2006, they published this 'gospel.' Also, National Geographic spend time on it in one of their broadcasts. Some theologians said that this was an important discovery. What was the content of this document? It revealed some conversations between Jesus and Judas. Two things are interesting. First, the picture of Judas is much different. He is no longer a betrayer but Jesus' favorite disciple. Jesus even worked with Judas to plan His own death. Second, Judas did not kill himself. He was the first martyr. The other eleven disciples stoned him to death. What should we think of this 'gospel'? The answer is simple. It does not contain the same message as the rest of Scripture. It contradicts the inspired Word of God. We have to reject it. This document is not God's Word. What do we then have to do if we find new 'parts of the Bible? We can acknowledge that they can be useful and even historically correct. But we have to say that they are not inspired. They will never be or become God's Word. We can add to this the following. God has preserved His Word in such a way that His Word was available to the churches throughout the centuries. So, we can say that nothing of the Word of God has been lost.

The next question is then, are there maybe parts of the Bible that have been "falsified"? What is that? That certain things are changed in order to deceive the readers. In other words, the question is, do we have a different Bible than the original? Have people made intentional mistakes during the

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, "Q. Is no part of the Holy Scriptures lost or falsified?"

copy process? The answer is no. Let us think about an example of falsifying. Let's say that you have a credit card. The company keeps your history as a record. Now, you have had some troubles in the past. You ask this company to remove some data so that it makes you look better. That is what we call to falsify. When we speak about the Bible, why would people want to falsify it? There are good reasons for it. Some people do not like that the Bible shows that Jesus is God. Others desire to make God's people look better. So, the question is, is our Bible falsified? The answer is no. We have the same Bible as the original writers. This means that the Bible is faithfully copied. How do we know? For this, we should know more about the copy process of the Hebrew Bible. The copyists needed to fulfill some requirements in their copy process. What are they? Columns had to be between 48 and 60 lines. They would count the letters, words and paragraphs, and write down these things down. They would note the middle letter of a page and of the whole Old Testament. They would record the number of letters and words in each column. After the copy was finished, a review would take place within one month. No error was permitted. Do you see how faithful they copied the Scriptures? A proof of this we have with the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls were found in 1947. Scholars compared them with the Hebrew manuscripts of our Bible. They were almost identical. But what about the New Testament? There are more than 5000 copies available of the Greek Manuscripts. It is true that there are some differences between those copies. But we can say that most differences are insignificant. For example, some words would miss the last "n." This is the case for the manuscripts of our King James Bible. But we have to tell you that there are indeed falsified manuscripts circulating. They are called the Critical Text. Some would say that the changes in these manuscripts are 'accidental.' But interestingly, many of those changes often make Jesus look more human. For example, in a number of cases the word Christ is left out when it speaks about "Jesus Christ." Let us show you another example in Timothy,

- The King James Version says, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: *God* was manifest in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). This verse shows that Jesus as God became human.
- The English Standard Version says, "Great indeed...is the mystery of godliness: *He* was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16). This leaves out that Jesus was God.

Even though such falsified manuscripts are circulating, we can say that our Bible is not falsified. Why is that? Because God took care of it. He has even promised to do so. We read in one of the Psalms, "The words of the Lord are pure words...Thou shalt keep them, O Lord, *Thou shalt preserve* them from this generation *for ever*" (Ps. 12:6-7). So, we can say that we have a faithful and complete Bible.

### **Q18. May human traditions be added to the Holy Scriptures?<sup>2</sup>**

A. No, the Holy Scriptures alone are sufficient. "In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9).

Let us think about "human traditions." What are some examples of traditions? For example, some say that biking on Sunday is not allowed while others have no problem with that. Some say that we can only wear certain colors with our clothing, but others would not agree on those colors. We have a certain order of worship in the church. This can differ from other churches. What is an example of a

<sup>2</sup> Literally, "Q. Are human traditions necessary besides the Holy Scriptures? A. By no means; the Holy Scriptures alone are sufficient."

non-Biblical tradition? How do we celebrate our birthday? Some prepare a special breakfast the person that turned another year. In our catechism it speaks also about traditions. It looks mainly to the Roman Catholic Church. They have added a number of traditions to the Bible. What are some of them? The sign of the cross, the worship of Mary, praying in Latin, or fasting on Fridays. Are all such traditions wrong? Not at all, if they do not go against Scripture. We too can have good traditions. The order of worship gives structure in the church. The same is true for the place we like to sit in church. Another helpful tradition is chapters and verses in our Bibles. They are not in the original but added by theologians. Chapters were added around AD 1240 and verses in AD 1445. So, not every tradition is wrong. They can even be helpful.

But the catechism asks if those traditions are to be added to the Bible. That means, do such traditions have the same authority? What do you think? The Roman Catholic Church says that they are binding. You must keep them. If you do not, you place yourself outside the church. This means you can no longer be saved. But before we look down on Roman Catholics, let us think about ourselves. Are there some of such traditions in our circles? If others do not keep them, we think that a person has no salvation? Yes, we do. But the Bible proves that some traditions do not need to be kept. Think about Jesus. He did not keep the Sabbath according to the rules of the Pharisees. This gave friction between Jesus and the Pharisees. What is the answer? Do we need to add such traditions to the Bible?

Our answer says, the “Holy Scriptures alone are sufficient.” No, this does not mean that traditions cannot be helpful. They can. Think about many catechism books and other teaching tools. Think of confessions like the Three Forms of Unity or the Westminster Standards. These documents are needed. They express the doctrine of the Bible. But we have to say that the Bible alone is sufficient for salvation. Rather, if we add anything to it, one’s salvation is in danger. God said, “If any man shall *add* unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book” (Rev. 22:18). What is the problem with the Roman Catholic traditions? They are placed above the Bible. It means that the church has more authority than the Bible. They would say, you can not understand the Bible without the priest or pope. But is that true? No. If that is true, then another issue arise. The pope can change traditions. He can declare new things with God’s authority. In what way is that problematic? In history, popes have contradicted each other. How could their statements be true? How can they be spoken with God’s authority? That cannot be true. Therefore, our answer is that traditions are useful, but they are under the authority of the Bible.