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David Peterson

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The justification for a full-scale study of the concept of perfection in the so-called 'Epistle to the Hebrews'¹ could simply be given in the words of Otto Michel: 'understanding Christian perfection is important, indeed central, for an interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews'.² The centrality of the concept to the writer's theology has been clearly recognised by those commentators who have provided extended notes on the subject and by the various authors of journal articles who have attempted to investigate the idea more closely. Three times in Hebrews the perfecting of Christ is mentioned (2: 10; 5: 9; 7: 28). On four occasions we are told that the Old Covenant ritual was unable to perfect the worshippers (7: 11, 19; 9: 9; 10: 1). On three specific occasions we are told that Christ alone is the source of perfection for believers (10: 14; 11: 40; 12: 23), though the use of related terminology elsewhere in the argument proclaims the same truth. Additionally, the writer urges his readers to 'maturity' (5: 11 – 6: 1) and points them to Christ as the 'perfecter' of faith (12: 2). An interpretation of these themes and their inter-relationship is clearly important for a proper understanding of Hebrews.

However, the multiplicity of opinions as to the background and purpose of this document is reflected in the variety of interpretations that have been offered to explain the concept of perfection it sets forward. The 'elastic adaptability'³ of τέλειος and its derivatives in Biblical and extra-Biblical usage encourages interpreters of Hebrews to suggest the relevance of some associations and to reject others, according to their presuppositions about the religious context in which the document was written. This diversity of opinion suggests the need for a detailed exegesis of the relevant passages in Hebrews, in order to assess the validity of the various interpretations.

To set the discussion in its proper context, a selected history of interpretation will now be given. Having thus highlighted the various methodological and exegetical issues that others have raised, I will be in a position to specify certain questions, which subsequent chapters will seek

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to answer. The contributions summarised below are not necessarily given in chronological order and I have restricted myself to a representative group of twentieth-century scholars. Later chapters will show how others have followed and adapted the sort of arguments they present.

(a) J. Kögel⁴

It is often assumed by readers of the New Testament that any reference to perfection is to be understood in terms of a *moral* perfection. As a reaction to such interpretations of Hebrews in a number of nineteenth-century writings, Julius Kögel sought to establish what may be called the 'formal' interpretation. From his analysis of the use of *τελειοῦν* in classical Greek sources, Kögel came to the conclusion that this verb, which is used nine times in Hebrews, is 'a general term, without distinct content' (p. 39). It is a 'purely formal expression', and only the object of the verb and the context can indicate the particular sense in which it is being used on each occasion. Whereas *τελεῖν* puts the stress on 'the end as against the beginning or the middle', *τελειοῦν*, derived as it is from *τέλειος*, involves a more qualitative sense of 'wholeness', in contrast with what is fragmentary.

Turning to the LXX, Kögel observed that *τέλειος* is appropriately used there to render *šālēm*, *tāmīm* and *tām*, since these terms indicate 'wholeness' of personality, rather than 'sinlessness' (pp. 49f). Although he acknowledges an ethical colouring in the use of the verb at Sir. 31: 10, he does not consider that LXX usage of the verb goes beyond that of classical sources in any significant respect. In the NT, the verb is said to be used with much the same sense as *τελεῖν*, meaning 'to complete, finish', at Luke 2: 43; John 4: 34; 5: 36; 17: 4 and Acts 20: 24. However, in passages like 1 John 2: 5; 4: 12; 4: 17–18 and James 2: 22 it is to be understood more specifically in terms of bringing something to its pinnacle or to perfection. A final group of references in the NT shows the verb used *absolutely*, with respect to persons, and includes Luke 13: 32; Phil. 3: 12 and the usage of Hebrews. In none of these contexts is the concept of perfection a moral one.

Kögel takes Hebrews 9: 11, with its reference to 'the greater and more perfect tent', as the starting point for his exposition of the concept of perfection in Hebrews. As part of the writer's ongoing contrast between essence and sign, original and copy, heavenly and earthly, eternal and temporal, *τέλειος* belongs to the first category in each case and is equivalent to *ἀληθινός* (cf. 8: 2; 9: 24). The verb in 11: 40 and 12: 23 cannot mean moral perfection in the context but refers to the attaining of the goal of their earthly pilgrimage by believers, namely 'entrance into the

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heavenly inheritance' (pp. 55f). Through the work of Christ, believers are perfected 'as those who are taken into the eternal rest (4: 1ff) and have attained the *δόξα* determined for them from the beginning, that is, fellowship with the Father'. Working backwards through Hebrews, Kögel notes from 10: 14 that this perfecting is finally and objectively achieved by the sacrifice of Christ (*τετελείωκεν*), but that it must be subjectively appropriated by individuals in different generations (*τοὺς ἀγιαζομένους*). From 9: 9; 10: 1; 7: 11, 19 he argues that association with terminology such as *ἀγιάζειν* and *λατρεύειν* shows that 'in no way does an ethical idea combine with this word but only a religious one, whereby the action of man is not in view but exclusively the relationship with God' (p. 58).

Applying the principle that *τελειοῦν* is only given distinct content from its object in each particular context, Kögel argues from 2: 10 that Jesus' person as such is not perfected, but only his quality as 'pioneer of their salvation' (p. 61). Indeed, as a military leader is prepared for his task, Christ needed perfecting only in the external sense of being brought to 'glory and honour', not with respect to his 'inner being' (p. 62). The participle *τελειωθεῖς* in 5: 9 relates to Christ in his capacity as 'source of eternal salvation' and further describes his vocational perfecting. Although the contrast between 'men having weakness' and 'a Son perfected for ever' in 7: 28 could be taken to imply that *τετελειωμένον* was being used in a moral sense, he argues that the perfecting of Jesus as Son simply refers to the perfecting of his *Mittlerqualität* (pp. 63f).⁵ This occurred through his humiliation and death, in connection with his installation to the high-priestly office.

If the perfecting of Christ was accomplished through his temptations, suffering and consequent learning of obedience, this was not in any sense to prove Christ but rather to enable him to *understand* the situation of the recipients of salvation and thus become 'a merciful and faithful high priest'.⁶ The writer does not think in terms of the eternal Son of God proving his unfathomable love in temptation and suffering but rather of Jesus the man being thus prepared for his heavenly office, 'Son though he was' (p. 65). The 'learning' of 5: 8 means 'becoming acquainted with', though this is not simply 'an operation on the intellect but on the will'. It is clear from 2: 5–18 that Christ is perfected as 'pioneer' in order to bring about the perfecting of the 'many sons', whom he calls 'brothers'. In the final analysis, then, Kögel relates the perfecting of Christ to his exaltation or glorification, by which he opens the gate to God's glory for his people and thus perfects them.

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(b) O. Michel⁷

Although Michel's great commentary on Hebrews contains significant discussion of the concept of perfection at various points, his most comprehensive exposition of the theme is found in a journal article, published in 1935. Acknowledging much of value in Kögel's survey of the evidence, Michel argues, nevertheless, that *the LXX is the proper basis on which to interpret the NT evidence*. Kögel's dependence on classical Greek parallels led him to one-sided and incorrect conclusions. Michel fundamentally wishes to argue that 'the Biblical concepts always carry with them a concrete reference, and that they mostly stand in contrast to Greek abstraction and Hellenistic formalism' (p. 335). Hebrews has taken over the connection between *δίκαιος* and *τέλειος* that is frequently found in the LXX and late Judaism, and does not use the terminology in a formal or neutral sense (p. 336).

In the OT and Rabbinic interpretations of the OT,⁸ perfection is the situation of the person who 'acknowledges God's command and renders obedience' (p. 337). It is not simply a moral quality alongside others, but one that describes a person's whole position before God (Deut. 18: 13 LXX). For NT exegesis, the comparison between *τέλειοι* and *μαθητάνοντες* (1 Chr. 25: 8 LXX) is said to be particularly instructive (cf. Hebrews 5: 11ff; 1 Cor. 2: 6; Phil. 3: 15). Although there is a formal usage of *τελειούν* in the LXX, there is also a 'religious' usage (eg., 2 Sam. 22: 26; Sir. 31: 10; Wis. 4: 13), related to the use of the adjective and conveying the sense of perfection in relation to God. The religious use of the adjective and verb does not exclude cultic and moral content, but 'it is a mistake to note exclusively the cultic and moral content of the concept' (p. 340). The LXX 'goes beyond the classical Greek linguistic usage and prepares both for the religious and the formal assertions of the NT'.

Having surveyed the use of the terminology elsewhere in the NT, Michel turns specifically to Hebrews. He notes that 'Christ was Son and became high priest; the way from sonship to his high priesthood was his perfection (2: 10; 5: 9; 7: 28). Christ did not give up his sonship; on the contrary, perfection consisted precisely in this, that sonship remained proven' (p. 348). The real emphasis of Hebrews is on God's consecration of the Son as high priest through suffering (2: 10) and confirmation of his cross through ascension (5: 9). 'Sinlessness and obedience are the expressions of inner perfection, the signs of proven sonship; cross and exaltation are the events by which the outer, vocational perfection is reached' (p. 349). Yet, 'it is impossible to distinguish the inner, personal perfection from the outer, vocational. Hebrews has woven both lines into a unity.' As learning

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is the way to perfection in 1 Chr. 25: 8 (LXX), so for Christ 'sinlessness and obedience were not self-evident but had to be learned and struggled for'. The OT teaching on perfection is clearly in the background when Hebrews speaks of Jesus' offering himself freely, completely untarnished by sin (4: 15; 9: 14).

With regard to the perfecting of believers in Hebrews, Michel compares the perspective of Paul in Phil. 3: 12–15. Believers may be *τέλειοι* on earth, 'through the Spirit of God, through regeneration, through striving for the goal', but not 'perfected' (*τετελειωμένοι*). Christians only reach perfection with the Parousia of Christ (pp. 350f).⁹ Michel notes the connection between purification, sanctification and perfection in Hebrews: the one action of God in Christ makes pure, sanctifies and perfects. Yet each of these terms has its own specific value in the argument. Furthermore, although each term is eschatologically considered by the writer, having its *τέλος* in eternity and beyond time, 'only perfection is *emphatically* eschatological' (p. 352). The purification of the conscience brings about the 'new heart' of Jer. 31: 31–4. The 'true heart' and the 'good conscience' are '*the fruit of forgiveness, the concrete content of Christian perfection and the first-fruit of the future world*' (p. 353). With Kögel, Michel concludes from the use of *τέλειος* in 9: 11 that the writer's linguistic usage identifies the heavenly and the perfect. In the final analysis, our writer's teaching about the perfection of believers supposes 'a becoming, a striving, a development, which draws nearer to the goal; and yet God reserves to himself the true perfection and gives it only to the citizens of the future city (12: 23)' (p. 355).

(c) E. Käsemann¹⁰

Observing the use of similar terminology in the Mandaean literature, quotations from Irenaeus about the teaching of the Valentinian Gnostics, the *Odes of Solomon* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Käsemann concludes that perfection in Hebrews is synonymous with 'glorification' or 'entrance into the heavenly sphere' (pp. 85f). He approves of Kögel's opposition to the moral interpretation but argues that, in the exegesis of the relevant texts in Hebrews, Kögel shows a subtle shift from the neutral or formal interpretation to an identification of perfection with glorification. Michel's contention is thus proved to be correct: there is no Hellenistic formalism in the usage of the terminology in Hebrews. However, Käsemann cannot follow Michel's suggestion that the LXX is the proper basis on which to interpret the NT evidence. In the light of his overall understanding of Hebrews, in terms of the Gnostic myth of the 'redeemed Redeemer', he

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reaches conclusions that are superficially similar to Kögel's. Perfection is equivalent to glorification, though in Käsemann's presentation there is a metaphysical emphasis not found in Kögel's approach.

Christ is said to have been perfected inasmuch as he has experienced 'a restored, qualitative transformation of his being, in which the sphere of humiliation is left behind. The one who is perfected is he who is transferred back into heaven, as he originates from heaven' (p. 86). The obedience of Jesus is 'an attribute of his earthly being, not moral proving but recognition of the plan of salvation and a sign of humiliation, which puts him on the same footing with the earthly church'. Käsemann's dependence on the Gnostic myth of the heavenly man thus brings him to conclude that obedience and perfecting are two *contrasting stages* in the journey of Christ, from heaven to earth and back to heaven again. The perfecting of believers is said to be clearly associated with transfer to the heavenly assembly in 11: 40 and 12: 23 and is easily understood in similar terms at 7: 11 and 7: 19. However, 9: 9; 10: 1 and 10: 14 connect the perfecting of believers with the concepts of purification and sanctification accomplished by Christ in his sacrifice (pp. 88f). Only Christ is 'perfecter' (12: 1), but believers are perfected by their attachment to him (10: 14) and as such may be called τέλειοι (5: 14).¹¹

Believers are perfected already only inasmuch as they are 'those who are being sanctified' (10: 14): 'through consecration one becomes a member of the heavenly sphere, while still on earth' (p. 88). Such consecration to God is effected by the sacrifice of Christ, but 'a final and comprehensive perfecting is still outstanding, precisely with a view to which one is consecrated'.

The relationship between Christ's testing through suffering and his perfecting is taken up again at a later stage in Käsemann's work (pp. 142ff). He insists that it is misleading to portray Christ's perfecting as the result of a process of moral development on earth. Following K. Bornhäuser,¹² he argues that Jesus is portrayed in Hebrews as suffering not general human temptations but the 'proto-type' of specifically Christian temptations. These are not essentially moral dangers but 'the temptation to fall away from the eschatological hope'. In learning obedience through suffering, Christ 'realized the prerequisite' for perfection, 'not in the sense of a process of moral development' but in 'the absolute decision between hope and falling away' (p. 143).

(d) Th. Häring¹³

A totally different line of interpretation is initiated by Theodor Häring, which may conveniently be called the 'cultic' approach. The Christian

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hope is presented in Hebrews in cultic terms. Man is enabled to 'draw near to God' because of the high-priestly work of Christ. The parallelism between *τελειοῦν*, *καθαρίζω* and *ἀγιάζειν* in the argument of Hebrews 9 and 10 shows that these are all the effects of the one sacrifice of Christ. More than both the other terms, *τελειοῦν* is said to be a formal concept, the particular meaning of which must be sought from the context. In this case, the context points to the meaning 'to consecrate' (*weihe*n).

Häring acknowledges that classical Greek sources, Philo and the papyri offer no real support for such a cultic rendering of this verb.¹⁴ Here the appropriate word for consecration is *τελεῖν*. However, he proposes that the former is used as an equivalent for the latter in the LXX rendering of the expression *millē*' (*yād*), 'to fill (the hand)', i.e., 'to consecrate for the cult' (e.g., Exod. 29: 9, 29). 'The material significance of the Hebrew concept was still not extinguished from the translators' consciousness' when they chose *πληροῦν* to render the same Hebrew expression elsewhere (e.g., Exod. 32: 29; Jdg. 17: 5, 12). However, this is said to have entirely receded from view when they chose *τελειοῦν*. To suggest that these two Greek verbs were used synonymously, with the meaning 'to fill', shows little feeling for the Greek language, in Häring's view (p. 267).¹⁵

He then proceeds to argue that the cultic understanding of perfection best fits the context on each occasion.¹⁶ Calvin is cited in support of this line of exegesis, though Calvin himself did not base his conclusions on a supposed cultic use of the verb in the LXX. Häring takes particular issue with those commentators who try to identify perfection with the concept of glorification (pp. 268ff). Although this is a possible interpretation of the verb in 2: 10 in view of the preceding verses (verses 5–9), the following section (verses 11–18) shows that the consecration of Christ to his priesthood was in the writer's mind. This is indicated even more clearly by the context when the perfecting of Christ is mentioned again (5: 9; 7: 28). Although glorification is possibly what is meant by the perfecting of believers at 11: 40 and 12: 23, the writer's preceding use of the verb in association with the concepts of cleansing, sanctification and drawing near to God suggests that the cultic sense is to be understood throughout.

The conclusion is thus reached that *τελειοῦν* in Hebrews may be consistently interpreted as a synonym for *τελεῖν*, particularly as the latter is used in the Mystery religions. However, our writer's usage is derived from a particular usage in the LXX and stresses that Christianity offers 'the true consecration', as opposed to all other means of consecration to God pursued by mankind (p. 275).

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(e) E. Riggenbach¹⁷

Eduard Riggenbach's commentary on Hebrews, first published in 1913, contains a detailed analysis of the relevant texts, but no attempt to systematise the evidence relating to the concept of perfection. In a journal article responding to the arguments of Häring, he expresses himself more fully on the subject. A general review of the literature leads Riggenbach to the conclusion that 'an assured linguistic use of *τελειοῦν* and *τελειώσις* in the sense of consecration to the Mysteries does not exist' (p. 190).¹⁸ The Hebrew expression *mille*' (*yād*), 'to fill (the hand)', refers quite literally to the initial presentation of sacrificial offerings, by which action priests were installed to office. The LXX rendering *πληροῦν τὰς χεῖρας* expresses more conspicuously the concrete meaning of the Hebrew expression than *τελειοῦν τὰς χεῖρας*. However, even the latter keeps the literal sense in view, and *τελειοῦν* is used to indicate more specifically the 'spiritual significance' of the action: 'consecration with respect to the hands', that is, for the activity of a priest (p. 186).¹⁹ The use of *τελειώσις* for *millû'-îm* (e.g., Exod. 29: 22, 26) is said to confirm this interpretation.

In the final analysis, Riggenbach is prepared to acknowledge 'an influence of the language of the Mysteries on the use of *τελειοῦν* in the manner of expression of the Pentateuch, but not in that of Hebrews' (p. 194). The perfect passive participle at Hebrews 7: 28 certainly recalls the use of Lev. 4: 5; 21: 10 (LXX). However, to interpret the verb in Hebrews in the sense of 'consecrated' would present a strange antithesis: Christ's consecration is for ever, whereas that of OT priests was somehow limited by sin (pp. 190f). In fact, 7: 11ff shows that the characteristic difference between the high priesthood of Christ and that of the OT is that 'it does not rest upon a legal arrangement, but on personal character' and has to do with *Christ's testing, death and heavenly exaltation*. We are not in the least prepared for a cultic application of the verb when it is first used (2: 10), and the following passage does not force a cultic interpretation upon us, as Häring proposes, since no hint has been given in the argument thus far that Christ needed to be consecrated himself to become 'the consecrator' (2: 11).

With reference to the perfecting of believers, Riggenbach notes that *τελειοῦν* in the LXX nowhere has the general sense of consecration that Häring wants to give it ('to place in a proper position in relation to God'). Our writer could certainly have effected such a new application of the verb, but this is unlikely because he denies absolutely that OT institutions could bring perfection (7: 11, 19; 10: 1). There was a measure of cleansing and sanctification possible under the Old Covenant (9: 10, 13f) and, if

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τελειοῦν was being used as a cultic term by our writer, a similar sort of a *fortiori* argument could be expected. Riggenbach concludes that there is no linguistic basis for interpreting the latter in terms of 'the true consecration'.

The terminology is said to be found frequently in Hebrews because of the situation of the original recipients. They were in danger of forfeiting their relationship with Christ because they were placing a higher value on the institutions of their Jewish background. The writer aims to show that everything that Judaism strove for, but did not attain, comes to fulfilment in Christ. Their perfection in Christ is only made possible because he himself was 'morally proved in suffering and brought to the goal of his vocation' (p. 195). Thus perfected, he is able to 'lead upward to perfection those who walk in fellowship with him'. The concept in Hebrews includes *a religious reference sometimes, an ethical one on occasions and sometimes a reference to the perfecting of man's state or condition*. The theme is central to the writer's purpose: 'readers only gain afresh the enthusiasm to declare themselves confidently for Christ when they become convinced that they achieved perfection in every respect in him and in him alone' (p. 195).²⁰

(f) M. Dibelius²¹

In contrast to Riggenbach, Martin Dibelius contends that all attempts to read Hebrews as a message to a specific congregation in a specific situation impair the proper theological understanding of the document. Passages such as 10: 32–4 describe no single situation but 'typical experiences of a younger church' (p. 161), used by the writer to expound the theme of the Christian's 'better and more lasting possession' (10: 34). The exhortations are addressed to *the whole church*, 'whose final, eschatological distress is still pending' (p. 162). The writer treats his readers as immature (5: 11 – 6: 12) to 'admonish them to the utmost attentiveness'. He has no real knowledge of their situation and no real expectation of a renunciation of faith on their part.

The writer's purpose is a theological one: he sets out to portray Christian salvation in the form of 'a sublime *mystery-cult*, linking earth and heaven. Christ, the true high priest, opens the way through his death into the eternal sanctuary in heaven. He receives himself the initiation for this cult and makes Christians qualified to follow him, the Forerunner (6: 20), and become consecrated themselves in this cult' (p. 163). However, Jesus has accomplished his work in the framework of history – this cult is based on no myth – and all believers can 'draw near' to God in the heavenly sanctuary, as 12: 22 shows.

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In two respects Hebrews is said to have withdrawn from what the early Christian kerygma held as historical tradition and has approximated its picture of Christ to that of the Gnostic Anthropos Myth (p. 164). The resurrection is played down in preference to the concept of Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, and there is a close parallelism between statements about Christ and statements about believers. An ethico-religious understanding of the concept of perfection is foreign to the NT, importing modern 'humanistic' ideas into the text. Only when it is observed that the goal of Christ and Christians is entrance into the heavenly sanctuary can it be seen that our writer means by *τελειώσεις* 'the consecration that will bring perfection (*die vollendende Weihe*)', and by *τελειοῦν* 'the conferring of this consecration' (p. 166).²²

Dibelius clearly builds on the arguments of Häring and opposes those of Riggensbach. It cannot be proved that the terminology was used with reference to consecration in the Mysteries. However, the use of the verb in the LXX for the expression 'to fill the hands' adds something to the plain meaning of the Hebrew original. It appears as a technical term, which is 'familiar to the LXX translator and his readers, according to which *τελειοῦν* means "to consecrate", that is in the special sense "to perfect", so that the person concerned is qualified for priestly service' (p. 166). Since the consecration involves filling the hands with offerings, it is 'consecration with respect to the hands'. Dibelius goes on to argue the possibility of reading the verb in a cultic sense uniformly throughout Hebrews.²³

The priesthood and ritual of the Old Covenant could not bestow 'the requisite cultic qualities' (pp. 167f). However, what the OT cult had previously denied is now affirmed for Christians (10: 14), namely 'the consecration that will bring perfection'. OT believers had to wait for Christians before experiencing this (11: 40). Those who have 'already received that consecration and have entered the heavenly sanctuary' are pictured in 12: 23.

The perfecting of Christ refers to 'the action which immediately precedes his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary', namely the consecration that is effected through his sacrifice (p. 170). This is shown by the sequence in 5: 7–10, where Christ's learning obedience through the things he suffered is a preliminary to his perfecting, not a part of it. God's intention to bestow this consecration on him through suffering is indicated in 2: 10, and 7: 28 asserts that his consecration is in no way transitory, since his sacrifice is effective 'for ever'. The 'last act' in our writer's presentation of the work of Christ is his entrance into the heavenly sanctuary for eternal ministry and the bold introduction of believers into that sanctuary.²⁴