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## ON JESUS LEARNING OBEDIENCE: HEBREWS 5:8

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*In the interdisciplinary study which follows, Fr. William Most provides an interesting and convincing interpretation of Holy Scripture's statement that Jesus "learned obedience", despite the fact that he was perfectly obedient to the Father from the first. This study is important not only for its exegetical merit, but also for the insight it gives into the nature of that unity of body and soul which we call man. In reading carefully, one can learn much about the problems besetting his own spiritual growth. Finally, the article shows forth the best in modern religious scholarship—a judicious use of both sacred and secular learning, an openness to new developments, and conclusions consistent with the demands of faith and reason alike.*



AN IMPORTANT SEEMING CONFLICT APPEARS IN THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS.

On the one hand, in 5:8, we read that Jesus “learned obedience from the things he suffered.” On the other hand, the same Epistle (10:--10) dramatizes the very first moment of his human existence: “Coming into the world, he says: Sacrifice and oblation you did not desire, but you have fitted a body to me. .. then I said: Behold I come—it is written at the head of the book about me—to do your will, O God. ... by this ‘will’ we were sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” Clearly this is a dramatization,<sup>1</sup> but it is equally clear what the author means to teach. Always, in fact, from the very start of his life, Jesus made obedience his life’s theme. He was determined to obey, and he did obey, even to death on the cross. Hence his obedience is presented as perfect, complete, from the beginning, embracing even the supreme sacrifice. But how could he be so completely obedient and yet learn obedience? The problem is further complicated by the fact that the same Epistle repeatedly speaks of his being perfected (5:9, 2:10, 7:28) as though he had been imperfect. Yet 4:15 asserts that he was “tried in all things according to a likeness [to us, yet was] without sin.” If he was without sin in all temptations, he was never disobedient, never really imperfect (we shall see later the relation of obedience to perfection).

In an effort to resolve this apparent conflict, we will first review what the commentators have said about his being perfected and about learning obedience, and then consider some evidence from experimental psychology.

### THE PERFECTING OF JESUS

Some take the words “being perfected” and similar expressions in a solely cultic way. Thus Michel points out that the word perfect often is meant in a priestly-sacral sense, and calls our attention to Luke 13:32: “on the third day I am made perfect.”<sup>2</sup>

Others see a sense that is cultic, but not solely so. Thus Westcott says: “The installation of this priest was a type of that which Christ attained to absolutely.”<sup>23</sup> However, he also adds that through obedience he was brought “to the full moral perfection of his humanity.”<sup>24</sup> Later he explains, “The Lord’s manhood was (negatively) sinless and (positively) perfect, that is, perfect relatively at every stage; and therefore He truly advanced by ‘learning’ ....”<sup>25</sup> M. Bourke follows Westcott on both points.<sup>6</sup>

The most extreme view is that of Vanhoye who says, “. . . the authors [who exclude moral perfecting] let themselves be guided by a priori ideas which fit poorly with the affirmations of the epistle. It nowhere says that Jesus had all moral perfection since his birth.”<sup>27</sup> Further:<sup>8</sup>

It is concerned rather with a concrete perfection, adapted to each stage of his life .... Before suffering, he did not have the moral perfection that acceptance of suffering gives .... The humanity of Christ ... had, then, a need to be ‘made perfect’, by a profound transformation .... Really a complete recasting.<sup>9</sup> Hence the necessity of death.

Less radical are the views that the experience caused Jesus to know experimentally what suffering is, making him better qualified to fulfill his priestly office (Nicolau,<sup>10</sup> Turrado<sup>11</sup>). At least similar are the ideas of Kuss,<sup>12</sup> Montefiore,<sup>13</sup> Bruce,<sup>14</sup> and Spicq. The latter seems to explicitly reject the notion of being made morally perfect.<sup>15</sup>

Hard to classify is the view of Buchanan that in a religious context, being made perfect means being made fully qualified.<sup>16</sup> He adds that verses 5:8-9 associate Jesus with the suffering servant, that is with “generations of Jews [who] suffered to perform enough merits to balance the books, so that the rest of Israel might return to the promised land.”<sup>17</sup>

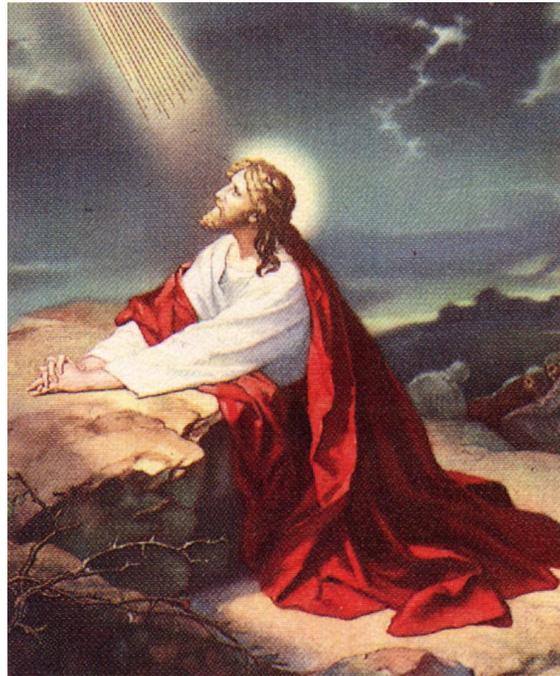
To summarize, some take perfected in a purely cultic sense, but most commentators wish to add to such a view that Jesus was made fully qualified to be a mediator

by his experience of misery. Some would say there was a relative moral growth: he was relatively perfect at each stage, not absolutely perfect. Finally, Vanhoye thinks he was positively morally imperfect to such an extent that he needed a complete recasting, so complete that only the dissolution of death could effect it.

## LEARNING OBEDIENCE

When we turn to the problem of Hebrews 5:8 itself, we find that some simply seem not to notice the difficulty. Michel speaks of a hellenistic play on words,<sup>18</sup> recalling the *pathei mathos* of Aeschylus.<sup>19</sup> Montefiore says that he did not learn obedience “as one who had not known it before. Rather, he took his obedience ‘up to death’ . . . to the point beyond which it could be taken no further.”<sup>20</sup> But he does not clarify further. He could mean much the same as those who hold that Jesus gained experimental knowledge of the cost of obedience, even though he had had obedience before. Thus Robinson: “Jesus learned obedience ... in appreciating from practical experience what its full meaning was.”<sup>21</sup> Turrado<sup>22</sup> and Nicolau<sup>23</sup> speak similarly. Cody suggests he learned obedience

“humanly in his accepted suffering ....”<sup>24</sup> Spicq asserts that Jesus, “perfect since his conception ... could not make any progress in obedience, but he had to deploy that virtue in all circumstances even to heroism.” By this he gained an “enriching psychological experience and practical knowledge, an appreciation of suffering that was indispensable for having compassion as a priest on that of his brothers ....”<sup>25</sup> Hering seems to have a similar view: “he learned to have pity on those like him ....”<sup>26</sup>



Westcott wrote: “Sufferings . . . may be said to teach obedience as they confirm it and call

it out actively ... the learning of obedience does not imply the conquest of disobedience as actual.”<sup>27</sup> He means, as we saw above, that Jesus was sinless and perfect relatively at every stage, and so He could truly advance by learning.<sup>28</sup> M. Bourke cites and approves of Westcott,<sup>29</sup> and repeats the comparison to Greek literature,<sup>30</sup> which we saw in the view of Michel. Vanhoye applies the same ideas

here as for Jesus' perfecting-that Jesus was so thoroughly morally imperfect that he needed the complete recasting that only death could give.<sup>31</sup>

What are we to think of these views? First, we must exclude any real imperfection of a moral nature from Jesus, in spite of Vanhoye. Vanhoye charges it is apriorism to suggest that Jesus was always morally perfect and asserts there is no mention of such a thing in Hebrews. Yet, there really is a double teaching of moral perfection in Jesus found in Hebrews, and that from the beginning. For 10:5-7 insists that from the first instant of his conception his life was one of obedience. Now when we reflect that full obedience means full alignment of a person's will with that of God, and add that our will is the only free element in us-it then becomes obvious that full obedience is full perfection.<sup>32</sup> This is confirmed by the teaching of 4:15 that he was "without sin". Hence, we fear that Vanhoye himself is guilty of apriorism.

Second, we can easily go along with those who say that Jesus gained experimental knowledge of obedience by his sufferings, even though as divine he was supremely capable of pity and compassion even before that knowledge entered through the experimental channel. It was precisely this compassion which led him to empty himself and become obedient unto death, even to death on the cross.



#### A CONTRIBUTION FROM EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY

I think, however, that something more can and should be added. To supply that addition, an interdisciplinary approach is necessary, an approach which employs not only the resources of exegesis, but also those of another field, experimental psychology.

An early worker in modern psychology, William James, in collaboration with Cal Lange, proposed in 1884 a theory which could have been suggested by many Scriptural expressions about bowels being moved. In his *Principles of Psychology*, James wrote: "My theory ... is that bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as

they occur is the emotion."<sup>33</sup>

This theory that emotions can be precisely identified with the visceral modifications has of course been challenged. W.B. Cannon in 1929 observed that total separation of the viscera from the central nervous system does not alter emotional behavior, that the same visceral changes occur in very different emotional states, that the viscera in themselves are relatively insensitive structures, and their changes are too slow to be a source of emotional feeling, and finally, that artificial induction of visceral changes typical of strong emotions does not produce those emotions.<sup>34</sup>

An advance was made with the work of Daniel Funkenstein, published in 1955. He found that certain emotions tended to be associated with specific changes in biochemistry rather than with mere physiological visceral modifications. Briefly summarized, his findings were "that anger directed outward was associated with secretion of nor adrenalin, while depression and anxiety were associated with secretion of adrenalin."<sup>35</sup> He found further that injecting these substances into a subject would make him specially prone to the very emotions in which a large amount of these substances is secreted when the emotions occur in normal circumstances outside the laboratory.

The research of Stanley Schachter and J. Singer showed, however, that biochemical factors are not the sole generators of emotions. They determined that mere physiological arousal by the injection of epinephrene would not generate an emotion or at least not a specific emotion. Cognitive factors had to be added. After injection, it was relatively easy to induce various emotional states in the subject by cognitive manipulations: "Given a state of physiological arousal for which an individual has no immediate explanation, he will label this state and describe his feelings in terms of the cognitions available to him."<sup>36</sup>

An important further step forward resulted from the work of Ferris Pitts. He found that infusion of lactate for twenty minutes into a patient with anxiety neurosis reliably produced an anxiety attack beginning within a minute or two after the infusion was started, decreasing rapidly after the infusion, and often followed by exhaustion and heightened anxiety symptoms for one to three days.<sup>37</sup> However we need to note that those results were produced in patients who already had an anxiety neuro-

sis. Pitts tried the same infusions with persons who did not have that neurosis. He found that nonpatient controls exhibited decidedly fewer and less severe symptoms in response to lactate.<sup>38</sup> He concluded that a high concentration of lactate ion will produce some anxiety symptoms in almost anyone, regularly producing anxiety attacks in patients, but not in controls. He discovered further that it was possible to cancel out the effects of the lactate to a large extent by another means: “. . . calcium ion largely prevents the symptoms in both patients and controls.”<sup>39</sup>

The special significance of the research of Pitts is this: not only did he find that emotional states can be induced by biochemical means in some persons, but he discovered that there is another very important factor involved in producing the results, namely, the standing, long-term condition of the subject. For not all patients reacted the same way to the • lactate infusions. Some, who were prone in advance to anxiety, were greatly disturbed, with results lasting for days after the infusion; others, on the contrary, who were not anxiety patients but controls, experienced little or no effect from the lactate. We gather this important result: it is not solely the transient modification of biochemistry, nor solely the cognitive conditions (which are important, as shown by Schachter and Singer) but also a certain hard-to-define abiding condition within the patient that is required for the induction of anxiety attack. What could be the nature of that condition? Pitts did not speculate, but we can see a plausible explanation from a keen observation of another researcher.

Thomas Verner Moore contributed greatly to establishing the view that disturbances, ranging all the way from mild anxiety up to an including full-blown psychoses, at least often have a biochemical basis. In the last book published before his death a few years ago, he described a remarkable case he encountered in his practice of psychiatry in Washington, D.C. A manic-depressive patient came to Moore for treatment. The patient at this particular visit was descending into one of the deep black phases of his psychosis. He complained to Moore that he was losing his faith. Moore however decided otherwise: “Throughout all his depressions there remains a steady blind faith that is unaffected. It is the resonance of faith that disappears . . .”<sup>40</sup>

Moore’s insight is fascinating. He believed that we human beings are composed of body and soul, matter and spirit, bound so closely together that the two together

form one person. Precisely as a result of this interconnection, it follows that if a condition occurs on either of the two sides of the dichotomy, for normality there should be a corresponding condition, which he calls a “resonance” on the other side. In the patient in question, faith was, of course, on the side of the spirit. Yet for normal function, that faith needed a somatic resonance. The biochemistry of his psychosis impeded the somatic resonance to faith. Hence, although faith was not expelled, yet it could not function normally. As a result, it seemed to the patient that he was losing his faith, even though, as Moore commented, faith was always there. When the patient emerged from the black depressive swing, there was no need to induce him to believe again: he had never stopped.

Moore did not make clear whether or not he considered the somatic resonance to be a transient or an abiding factor, or both. In view of the researches of Pitts, as well as the conditions of the case described by Moore, it would seem plausible to suppose that the resonance was not purely transient, i.e., there was a standing, long-term biochemical (or other) condition within the patient. There would be, of course, a long series of oscillations within a manic-depressive, involving ever-shifting patterns of resonance. At the same time there would also be a more abiding sort of resonance, lasting as long as his psychosis persisted.

To sum up, in a manic-depressive subject, there would be a double set of somatic resonant conditions, one transient, in an oscillating pattern according to the swings of his psychosis, the other long-term or abiding.

The psychological theorizing suggested and presupposed by Moore’s work would suggest that for every condition on the side of the spirit, there ought to be, for full, normal and smooth function, a corresponding condition on the side of the body. Precisely in what that condition would consist is less clear. In some cases, at least, it could be in part a biochemical state.

This leads us to see that there should be a somatic resonance to obedience. Obedience, being an acceptance on the part of the will, is, of course, on the spiritual side. But for smooth function it needs a resonance on the side of the body. In souls that are still imperfect in their attachment to the will of God, not only would the somatic resonance need to develop as the soul advanced toward perfection, but the attachment of the will itself to the will

of God would grow too. The normal pattern of growth in souls fits our theory of resonance. Spiritual directors have long noted that if one were to make a graph of the spiritual growth of a good person striving for perfection, it would be a series of rather flat plateaus, with short, rather rapid rises in between them. We can see why such a graph is strictly normal: physical living things do follow such a pattern of growth.<sup>41</sup>

As we implied in speaking of the graph, the rises that come between plateaus are not usually very high. However, there are conditions in which an especially large rise can take place: it can occur when the individual is under very severe stress. He may collapse under such stress, and take a loss, so that the graph goes down. But if, in time of extreme difficulty, he reacts in the optimum way, he will make a very large gain in a short time. The reason is that the very severity of the difficulty he must surmount puts his somatic resonance into what might be compared to a state of flux. That fluidity makes possible large rises on the graph. In other words, in time of great trial, if a soul responds well, there will be large growth; if not, a large fall.

Hans Selye, a noted psychological authority on stress, wrote: "Stress ... gives an excellent chance to develop potential talents, no matter where they may be slumbering in the mind or body. In fact, it is only in the heat of stress that individuality can be perfectly moulded."<sup>42</sup>

We spoke above of souls in which both the virtue of obedience and its somatic resonance need to grow. In Jesus, there never was a lack of perfection in the adherence to the will of God, that is obedience as far as his spiritual will was concerned. Hebrews 10:5-7 and 4:15 make that quite clear, as we have seen. But there was room for the development of facility in his somatic resonance. Of course, he did accept in advance the will of the Father. But it is one thing for the will to accept the will of God in advance; it is another to carry it out amidst

extreme pain and stress. Precisely at the time when the difficulty is actually present, the somatic resonance is put under severe strain.

I do not mean to imply, of course, that the author of Hebrews thought of modern psychological theory or knew such terms as have been employed here. But the basic concept involved could be known in a general way by any keen observer. We can see that ready possibility by comparing the cases of two persons. The first of these would be one who had never been really ill to any considerable extent. Now, at a rather advanced age, he must endure long illness and suffering. He may have always been very devoted to the will of God. Yet now, when the difficulty comes in great intensity, it will not be easy for him to adjust, to physically acquiesce, to settle down, as it were, in the pain. The other person, similarly dedicated to the will of God, has already had many such experiences of suffering in his lifetime. Obviously, the second will find each new experience not precisely easy, but yet, will be able to take it in stride, as it were: his resonance is already adjusted.

## CONCLUSION

So it may well have been in the case of Jesus. On the side of his will, obedience was always complete. But his somatic resonance to acquiesce in extreme suffering could and did grow. The fact that growth was needed did not mean any imperfection: it is perfectly normal for a normal human nature to shrink from great pain. After the experience of going through a great deal of it, it does not become easy, but the body does learn to take it in stride. Jesus could and did learn this side of obedience. In this, in addition to the cultic sense, in addition to the acquisition of experimental knowledge, we may say he was perfected-not in his will and intellect-but in his somatic resonance, with the result that his human sensitivity was made perfectly fitted to have compassion on those who suffer.



## NOTES

- 1 Cf. Heb. 13:22.
- 2 O. Michel, *Der Brief an die hebraeer* (Meyer 13; 12th ed; Goettingen, 1966) p.145.
- 3 B.F. Westcott, *Epistle to the Hebrews* (Macmillan, London, 1909) p.64.
- 4 Ibid., p.49. Emphasis added.
- 5 Ibid., p.130. Emphasis added.
- 6 M. Bourke in *Jerome Biblical Commentary* (JBC), pp.385-86.
- 7 A. Vanhoye, *Situation du Christ: epître aux Hebreux*, 1 et 2 (LD 58, Cerf, Paris, 1969) p.322.
- 8 Ibid., p.323.
- 9 “II s’agit d’une refonte complete. D’ou la necessite de la mort.”
- 10 M. Nicolau, *Carta a los Hebreos* (La Sagrada Escritura, BAC, Madrid, 1962) p.65.
- 11 L. Turrado, *Epistola a los Hebreos* (Biblia Comentada, BAC, Madrid, 1965) p.750.
- 12 O. Kuss, *Der Brief an die Hebraeer* (RNT 8/ 1, 2d ed., Regensburg, 1966) p.74: “Die Vollendung traegt doppelte Frucht: sie macht Jesus zum Heilbringer fuer alle ... und sie bringt ihm ... die endgueltige Einsetzung in seine ewige Hohenpriesterwuerde.”
- 13 H. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (BNTC; London, 1964) p.61: “Perfection of human character ... consists in a perfect ... response to each of life’s changing circumstances. Since death marks the end of life, a person whose life has been marked throughout by obedience and who ends it with a perfectly unified response may be described as having been made perfect at his death.”
- 14 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, 1964) p. 105: “. . . the essence of the perfection which our author has in mind consists in the fact that by His suffering and death Christ (a) ‘became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation’ and (b) was ‘named of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.’”
- 15 C. Spicq, *L’Epître aux Hebreux* (E Bib; Paris, 1953) II, p.117: “. . . parfait des sa conception . . . .
- 16 G. W. Buchanan, *To The Hebrews* (AB 36, Garden City, 1972) p.31.
- 17 Ibid., p.98.
- 18 Michel, p. 224.
- 19 “By suffering [comes] learning.” Cf. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 177; Herodotus, *Histories*, I, 207.
- 20 Montefiore, p. 99.
- 21 T. H. Robinson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (MNTC; NY, 1933,1963) p.62.
- 22 Turrado, p. 750.
- 23 Micolau, p. 65.
- 24 A. Cody, in NCC p. 1227.
- 25 Spicq, p.117.
- 26 J. Hering, *L’Epître aux Hebreux* (CNT 12; Neuchatel, 1954) p.54
- 27 Westcott, p.130-1.
- 28 Ibid.(see note 5 and page 7).
- 29 Bourke, JBC pp.385-86.
- 30 Ibid., p. 390.
- 31 Vanhoye, pp. 322-23 (see notes 8 & 9 and p. 7).
- 32 Cf., St. Teresa of Avila, *Interior Castle*, II, 1, 8: “. . . it is quite certain that in this [conforming one’s will with that of God] consists all the greatest perfection that can be obtained in the spiritual way.” See also A. Royo Marin, *Teologia de la Perfeccidu Cristiana* (wd ed. BAC, Madrid, 1955) pp. 719-27; A. Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life* (tr. H. Branderis, Dexclee, Tournai, 1930) pp.503-06, 242 (esp. 242 §497); J. De Guibert, *The Theology of the Spiritual Life* (tr. P. Barrett, Sheed & Ward, N.Y., 1953) pp.96-101.
- 33 Wm. James, *Principles of Psychology* (Holt, N.Y., 1890) II, p.449.
- 34 W. B. Cannon, *Bodily Changes in Pain, Hunger, Fear and Rage* (2d ed., Appleton, N.Y. 1929).
- 35 D. Funkenstein, *The Physiology of Fear and Anger in Scientific American* May, 1955, p.5.
- 36 S. Schachter and J. Singer, *Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State* in *Psychological Review* 69 (1962) p.398.

37 Ferris N. Pitts, *The Biochemistry of Anxiety in Scientific American* 220 (Feb. 1969) p. 75.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 T.V. Moore, *Heroic Sanctity and Insanity* (Grune & Stratton, N.Y., 1959) p. 102.

41 A similar graph is found in the development of athletes in all sports, e.g., see J. E. Counsilman, *The Science of Swimming* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, 1968) pp. 191-92.

42 Hans Selye, *The Stress of Life* (New York, 1956) p. 277. Cf. also Counsilman p. 337 on need of “agony” and “pain” to produce peak results in swimmers. I.P. Pavlov found that dogs subjected to extreme stress would pass into three phases, the equivalent, the paradoxical, and the ultra-paradoxical, in which old behavior Patterns were erased and a great susceptibility to new patterns resulted. W. Sargant, in *Battle for the Mind* (Penguin, Baltimore, 1957) shows that the same is true of humans: cf. esp. pp. 1-20, in particular p. 19. Compare also II Cor. 12:9.

