



KEYS

to the Gospel Tradition

A Wisdom Curriculum —Lesson Four

TELEIOS

Yeshua said,

*Become
perfect
just
as
your
Father
in
Heaven
is
perfect.*

Matthew 5:48

PERFECTION

Many, perhaps, are familiar with the words coming from the mouth of Yeshua (Jesus): “Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Interesting words, but what do they mean?

In conventional thought (reinforced by the standard translations—and this one from the King James Version of the Bible), they have the ring of a moral injunction. Yeshua seems to be saying, “Stop being imperfect. Get your act together and turn yourself into a perfect being.” It’s a noble sentiment perhaps, but we realize that it is entirely unrealistic. After all, we say (and rightly), “I’m only human. I am not perfect.”

So, was Yeshua merely “blowing smoke” so that now we live with another example of religious “magical thinking,” or was he speaking about something entirely different that, in the end, is spiritually critical for us?

For anyone who takes the words of Yeshua seriously, they must be true in some fundamental way. The truth, however, is obscured by most of the standard English translations of the Bible.

COMPLETION IS NOT PERFECTION

No one can claim (or should claim, perhaps) that he or she is without flaw. So if flawlessness or moral perfection is not what Yeshua means in this teaching, then something else is. But what is it?

It appears from other instances in his life and teaching that when he says these words Yeshua has something else in mind other than moral perfection. The actual term used for perfection in the original language is *teleios* (from another Greek word we may know already, *telos* or destiny). *Teleios* has very much to do with reaching or completing some destiny. A better translation of the word would be completion (or becoming complete).

Used in that way, the intent of Yeshua's words would be inclined much more in this direction: "*Become complete (or, reach completion) as your heavenly Father (your divine Source) is complete.*"

We often think of a child as a perfect little person, but because he or she has not reached maturity, we understand that the child is not yet complete.

A piece of fruit growing on a tree is another example. A peach may or may not be flawless (without external blemishes on its skin), but if it is ripe, then we might say that it has reached perfection—or perfect ripeness. When it is ripe and ready to eat, we call it delicious. Again, it is usually a beautiful color, and it is plump and juicy because it has reached its *telios* (or destiny), but the fact may be that it has a blemish or two where a branch has scraped it, or a small mark where a bird has pecked it. Technically, it is not perfect, but it is still absolutely complete. This, I think, illustrates the relationship between these two very different ideas.

The goal is to reach completion (full maturity or ripeness). Nothing less will do. For a creature who has the potential for amazing growth, to stay in a state of arrested development is simply tragic. God is a complete being in whom nothing is missing. Like God, Yeshua understands that we too are meant to reflect this completion.

Completed beings having reached the destiny for which they were designed. The question is, then, what is a complete human being?

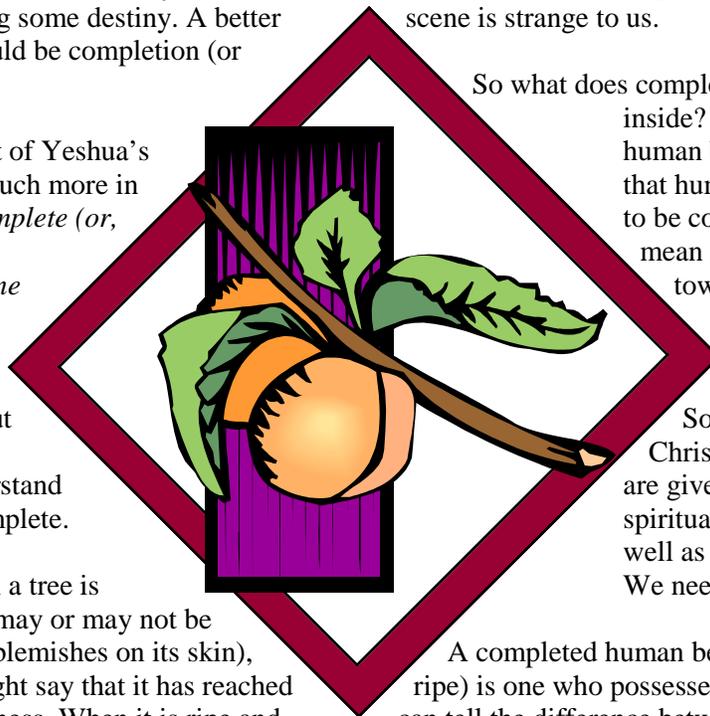
Earlier we explored the transitional nature of a human being, and the possibility of transformation. We are not yet as we shall be, but we are in the process of spiritual evolution. In the Christian tradition we are said to have been given a revelatory glimpse of a fully transformed being on the Mount of Transfiguration. Clearly, when seen from an external point of view, the traditional scene is strange to us.

So what does completion look like from the inside? What would a fully formed human being be like? What would that human have to have internally to be complete? What does this mean practically as we move toward such a destiny?

There are many good answers to these questions. Some of them are found in the Christian Scriptures and others are given expression throughout the spiritual tradition of Christianity as well as in other spiritual traditions. We need to be aware of these.

A completed human being (a human who is fully ripe) is one who possesses certain inner qualities. You can tell the difference between a ripe piece of fruit and an unripe piece by its taste. What has changed about the fruit is not only its exterior color, but its inner sugar content. In a ripe piece of fruit the sugar content is higher, and other essential flavors have developed as well.

What are these qualities, and what is the full "flavor" of a human being? In the writings of the Apostle Paul, he mentions the qualities of faith, hope and love (I Cor. 13). At another place he speaks of the "fruits of the spirit" (love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance, found in Gal. 5:22). Finally in the Ephesian letter, goodness, righteousness and truth become the highlighted qualities (5:9).



Each list, though different, includes those particular qualities that make a person a more complete being—that is, filled with a kind of “taste” that you can actually recognize in another person.

There is another interesting concept found in the early Christian Scriptures that has to do with the word fullness (*pleroma*). When something is said to be completely full—a glass, for example—it has no lack. The word fullness has, then, to do with nothing lacking. In the writings of both John and Paul this word is used to indicate divine Reality itself which is said to be so full that it lacks nothing. This same idea is also applied to human beings who are said to be “full”—there is no lack in them (John 1:16, Ephesians 1:23; 3:19).

These various teachings become, then, the foundation for later understandings of wisdom which build upon them. Within the sapiential tradition, for example, three

critical qualities are placed at the heart of human completion. These are described as wisdom, virtue, and freedom—each of which are dimensions of those divine qualities that must come to be embodied. It is taught that the middle term, virtue, includes all the designations in the various lists that were specified in the early sacred writings. The three terms, then, are broad categories containing many aspects and dimensions of human completion mentioned in early Christian writings and in those of later centuries.

We see, therefore, that human completion is both an ideal and a practical reality built into the very fabric of a human person. In the midst of ordinary life (here in space and time) we are to embrace these aspects of divine life that are made available to us.

THE PARADOX OF EMPTINESS AND FULLNESS

As we have seen, human completion is described as a form of fullness. This term, however, is only one side of a great paradox. In sapiential teaching, fullness is complemented with emptiness. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Yeshua speaks twice about this second side of the paradox:

Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled full (Matt. 5:3, 6).

Poverty is a form of lack or a kind of emptiness. Hunger and thirst are the same. When one is hungry or thirsty there is an emptiness that needs to be filled. In sacred teaching, fullness and emptiness are placed together to form an inner balance that is a complementarity of opposites.

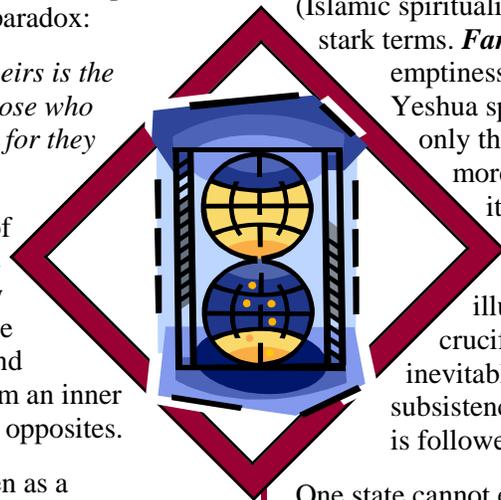
In that light, emptiness might be seen as a precondition for fullness. You do not fill a wine glass with a fine wine if it already has some other liquid in it. If you are already full of fast food, you will not be ready to enjoy a truly gourmet dinner.

Poverty of spirit (spiritual hunger and thirst), then, as an inner state is a precondition for a new form of fullness. In some sense a wisdom seeker is asked to

stay in both states at once—perpetually hungry or empty, and always being filled full. It is a paradox.

This same teaching is highly developed in the spirituality of other traditions, particularly in Sufism (Islamic spirituality) where emptiness is described in stark terms. *Fana'* in Arabic is said to be a form of emptiness called annihilation or “ego-loss.” Yeshua speaks of the same when he says that only the person who loses their “life” (or more accurately, *psyche* or ego) can find it. The principles are the same, and in the Christian tradition, at least, the prime metaphor for such a death is illustrated in the graphic image of the crucifixion. In Sufism, *fana'* leads inevitably to *baqa'* (which is fullness or subsistence in God). In Christianity crucifixion is followed by resurrection as its precondition.

One state cannot exist without the other. One can certainly understand this rationally in a serial way. The first state precedes the other and is replaced by the second state. The paradox of Christian spirituality is that these two states exist in simultaneity. This is a great mystery and requires that we move beyond a simple understanding into a dynamic experience of it.





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Telephone, TX 75488
Phone: 903 664-3011
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Wisdom Curriculum
2011

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HUMAN GREATNESS

*Know to what extent the Creator
has honored you above all the rest of the creation.*

*The sky is not an image of God,
nor is the moon,
nor the sun,*

*nor the beauty of the stars,
nor anything of what can be seen in creation.*

*You alone have been made in the image of the Reality
that transcends all understanding
—the likeness of the imperishable beauty,
the imprint of true divinity,
the recipient of beatitude,
the seal of the true light.*

When you turn to him you become that which he is himself....

*There is nothing so great among beings
that it can be compared with your greatness.*

*God is able to measure the whole heaven with his span.
The earth and the sea are enclosed in the hollow of his hand.*

*And although he is so great
and holds all creation in the palm of his hand,
you are able to hold him,*

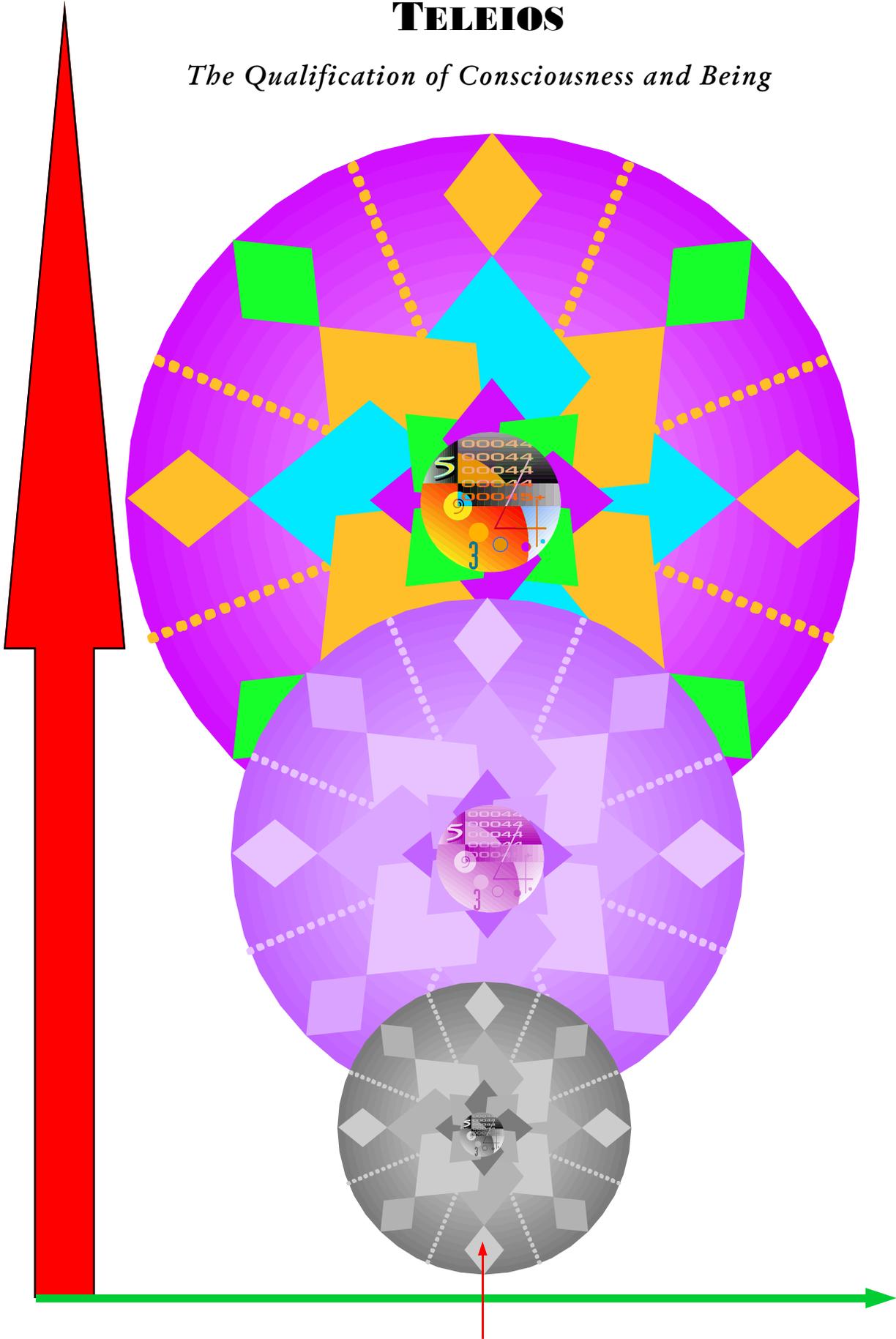
*he dwells in you
and moves within you without constraint,
for he has said,*

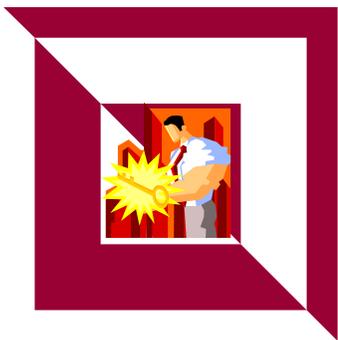
*'I will live and move among them'
(II Cor. 6:16).*

*Gregory of Nyssa,
Second Homily on the Song of Songs (PG 44, 765)*

TELEIOS

The Qualification of Consciousness and Being





KEYS to the Gospel Tradition

A Study Guide — Lesson Four

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. If you are an adult reading this, then you are considered mature. You have reached a certain level of maturity or completion. Describe your experience of that. Do you feel complete? What is still missing?
2. Objects have qualities. For example, we know a crystal goblet is of higher quality than a plastic throw-away drinking glass. If the same is true for humans, what qualities do you value in a human most? How would you describe someone full of qualities?
3. *Fanna'* and *baqa'a* are two Arabic words used in Sufism to describe the paradox of emptiness and fullness. How would you explain this paradox to someone? Have you ever experienced both conditions in yourself existing at the same time?

READINGS FOR INSIGHT

Here is a basic principle: What you worship you become, what you admire you become, what you strive for, you become. If what you worship or admire, or strive for are the idols of our consumerist marketplace, or the tawdry, flashy, and neurotic lives of our leaders, film stars, and football players, then the truth is you will be cut off from your sacred origins and from all the powers and potentialities that are yours by sacred design and destiny. You see, we need these powers, and we need the vision that comes to us from our sacred origin if we are to survive the diminishment of this age.

—Andrew Harvey, *The Way of Passion*, 166



*You see, if you knew yourself for even one moment,
if you could just glimpse the beauty of your original face,
maybe then you wouldn't slumber so deeply
in this house of clay.*

*Why not move into the abode of spirit—the house of joy,
and shine there in every crevice!*

*For you are the secret Treasure-bearer,
and always have been.*

Did you not know that? Did you not know?

—from Rumi

PRAXIS AND MEDITATION

1 If, as one of the readings above suggests, we become what we worship, then our personal focus determines the outcome of our maturation and completion. *Teliosis* is the ripening of a human being, and your ripening takes place here where the forces and elements around you determine what qualities are built into your being. In a period of reflection determine what has been the focus of your attention (your “worship”). How is that determining what you are becoming? Can you imagine another focus? As a form of praxis find an icon that embodies certain qualities in its image. Meditate on that icon, opening yourself to the qualities that it holds for you. Journal your experience.

2 Carefully examine the diagram. How do you understand what it is telling you? What is happening in it that illustrates this teaching? How would you explain it for another person?

3 In many sacred traditions, the embodiment of higher-order qualities in a human being is considered to be a kind of refinement, a subtlety that cannot be measured but can be detected and imbues that individual with finer and higher virtues reflecting the divine. This is called the qualification of a human being—more and more quality is being added. What have you detected in yourself or in those around you that manifest these subtle qualities?

4 In the Abrahamic traditions, prophets are Light-Bringers, and said to be saturated with divine qualities. Their mission on earth is to display and catalyze the reception of higher-order qualities in others. The Prophet Muhammad, for example, is said to have spoken these words: *Every prophet is a shepherd once, for God would not bestow the divine mantle on one unschooled in hardship. A long while I was a shepherd that I might gather calmness and fortitude.* This extraordinary saying speaks about how qualities are learned. What is the relationship between “schooling in hardship” and the learning of these virtues? How has hardship taught you? Meditate on how one approaches hardship on a daily basis to learn these qualities. What is that praxis?