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Now You See 'Em, Now You Don't: Perfect People in the OT (Chapter Two of God and Human Wholeness)

Kent L. Yinger

Chapter 2

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Perfect People in the OT

No matter how great and important we think ourselves to be, we are still animals, fallible creatures fated to fall short of ever having it "all together."[1]

Recent debates over perfection, or better, Judaism and perfect law-keeping, took off with the publication of E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[2] As mentioned in the introduction, for Luther and most of the Protestant theological traditions in his wake, one of the chief problems with salvation[3] according to the OT law was that no one had kept, or could keep, its commandments sufficiently to be considered righteous. Nearly all were agreed this was because the law required flawless or perfect obedience to all its commands. Since all are sinners, such a demand for perfect obedience returns a guilty verdict upon every single human being. The reformational reading of texts like Gal 3:10 or Rom 3:20 made Paul a further Jewish witness to this position. However, Sanders argued that this was a complete misreading of Jewish soteriology. For the most part, Jews did not think Torah required of them a perfect,

1. Hyde, *Perfection*, 2.

2. Earlier, usually overlooked, voices stating the same were: Moore, *Judaism*, 1:494–95 ("no suggestion of sinless perfection"; "God was too good, too reasonable, to demand a perfection of which he had created man incapable."); and earlier, Montefiore, *Judaism and St. Paul*, esp. 33–37.

3. Since terms like "salvation" and "save" are mainstays in the Bible and in theology, we will employ them. However, readers should be aware that OT texts usually mean something a bit different than modern church folk might think. Rather than "going to heaven," "living forever," or the like, OT texts usually intend "deliverance of a people or an individual from a threatening situation." Light, "Salvation," 1153.

unerring obedience. "Human perfection was not considered realistically achievable by the Rabbis, nor was it required."[4] In fact, as Stendahl had proposed earlier, Paul had no great problem at all with keeping the law adequately. "As to righteousness under the law," he thought he was "blameless" (Phil 3:6b).[5]

Thus, one important element of our agenda is clear: Did Jewish tradition (Torah itself and Jewish thinkers up to and around the time of the New Testament) teach that one had to keep Torah's commands flawlessly in order to be considered righteous? We will first investigate what the Jewish Scripture has to say, followed by analysis of Jewish writings up to the Common Era and finishing with a brief look at rabbinic thought.

However, there is an even more important issue to be probed in Jewish tradition; one that is usually short-circuited by the focus on perfect law-keeping. If Jews did not think their God was looking for perfection, what was he looking for? With what sort of person would he be satisfied? What was his aim for the people of Israel and for the humanity he had created? And how does Torah fit into all this? If not fixated on perfect obedience, what was its vision for Israel and for human persons?

In turning to the Old Testament on the subject of perfection, readers are in for two big surprises. First, there are quite a host of perfect people in the King James OT. And second, all these perfect people disappear depending on what English translation one reads.

Perfect People in the First Testament

English-speaking Bible-readers raised on the belief in the sinfulness of all human beings and convinced of the truism that "nobody's perfect," may be surprised to find quite a few perfect people in the Old Testament.

> Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. (Gen 6:9, KJV)

> Asa's heart was perfect with the LORD all his days. (1 Kgs 15:14, KJV)

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4. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 137. Sanders acknowledged isolated texts with such perfect obedience expectations (e.g., 4 Ezra), but argued that these are exceptions to the widespread pattern of non-perfectionistic covenantal nomism. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 409, 414–18. For those not familiar with this terminology, "nomism" (from Greek *nomos* [law]), as Sanders uses it, refers to life governed by law, and "covenantal" to the divine-human relationship initiated by God's grace.

5. Stendahl, "Apostle Paul," 78–96.

> There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. (Job 1:1, KJV; cf. also 1:8; 2:3)

And these were not just the few exceptional individuals; ancient Israel was full of such perfect people.

> All these men of war [over 200,000!], that could keep rank, came with a perfect heart to Hebron, to make David king over all Israel: and all the rest also of Israel were of one heart to make David king. (1 Chr 12:38, KJV)

In fact, *all* those devoted to the God of Israel were considered perfect.

> That they may shoot in secret at the perfect [i.e., all the pious in Israel]. (Ps 64:4, KJV)

> For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. (Prov 2:21, KJV)

So, if "nobody's perfect" and everyone's a lost sinner, what are we to make of so many perfect people in the OT?

The Disappearance of All Those Perfect People

A first step is simply to read a different Bible. The King James translation of the OT uses various forms of the English word "perfect" (perfection, perfectly, etc.) sixty-eight times.[6] If we switch to the New Revised Standard Version, this drops to twenty; or in the New International Version, to twenty-one.[7] Even the New King James translation has eliminated nearly half, with thirty-eight remaining.[8]

There are, in fact, in the newer translations *no longer any perfect people*! Readers of these translations will still find that sacrificial animals must be perfect (Lev 22:21), the law of the Lord is still perfect (Ps 19:7), and, of course, the God of Israel remains perfect in his ways (2 Sam 22:31; Ps 18:30). However, Noah, Job, and many others have ceased to be perfect.

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6. Only somewhat less (fifty-two) in the Roman Catholic Douay-Rheims version.

7. The 2011 revision of the NIV dropped an additional two of these, totaling now nineteen.

8. Counts in other translations include the NET (eighteen), ESV (nineteen), NJPS (twenty), NAB (twenty-three), NASB (twenty-four), and the NLT (thirty-three).

Instead, Noah is now "blameless" (Gen 6:9, NRSV and most other ETs). Job is likewise "blameless" (Job 1:1, NRSV) or "pure" (NET). Asa's heart is no longer described as perfect (1 Kgs 15:14), but is now "true" (NRSV), "wholly devoted" (NASB), "fully committed" (NIV), or "loyal" (NKJV). Similarly, devoted and faithful Israelites are no longer perfect (Prov 2:21) but "innocent" (NRSV), "honest" (NAB), "blameless" (NASB, NIV), or people "with integrity" (NET, NLT).

The careful reader will realize this hardly resolves the issue. True, the OT no longer teaches that humans can be perfect, but now it asserts they can be "pure," "blameless," "innocent," "fully committed," "wholly devoted," "true," etc. Although the English term "perfect" is no longer used, what remains doesn't sound all that different, and these descriptions still don't make them sound like sinners. To get to the bottom of this, we will have to dig more deeply into the meaning of the two main Hebrew roots in these texts.

t-m-m and Cognates[9]

The primary word-group used in the OT to speak of this wholeness, intactness, perfection of human beings in their relationship with God are the various forms of the stem *t-m-m* and their cognates.[10] These words in their various forms occur over two hundred times in the Hebrew text. They all indicate that a thing, person, or action is complete, entire, whole. *It fulfills its purpose and is intact, sound or mature.* This is easily seen in texts referring to non-personal objects. Thus, the sun stands still for "a whole [*tamim*, i.e., entire, complete] day" (Josh 10:13). Moses writes all the words of Torah "to the very end ['*ad tummam*]" (Deut 31:24), i.e., until they were completed. The Lord instructs Israel to wait a specified period of time, "you shall count off seven weeks; they shall be complete [*tamim*]" (Lev 23:15), i.e., finished.

The word-group is used about fifty times for sacrificial animals, which must be "without blemish [*tamim*]" (Exod 12:5). That is, they must

9. A brief but helpful overview of Hebrew terms lying behind this perfection tradition in the OT is, Turner, *Vision Which Transforms*, 41–45. More detailed treatment will be found in the standard Hebrew lexica as well as in Kedar-Kopfstein, "*Tamam, etc.*," 15:699–711; Olivier, "*Tamam*," 4:306–8; Shults, "Shalem and Thamim"; Dickson, "Idea of Perfection"; and Edlund, *Das Auge der Einfalt*, 27–50.

10. Included here are the adjectives *tamim* and *tam*, along with the nouns *tom* and *tummah*, as well as the verb *tamam*.

be whole or sound, not defective or disfigured in any of the specified ways forbidden in Torah (Lev 22:20–25).[11]

This same semantic range of that which is complete, whole, whole-hearted, genuine, and mature, but not necessarily morally or otherwise perfect, holds true when the OT speaks of persons and their behavior.

> Noah was a righteous man, *tamim* in his generation; Noah walked with God. (Gen 6:9)

This is a description of Noah's general lifestyle and behavior, his "walk," which marked him out as a righteous person rather than a wicked one, as one whose life as a whole was in line with his talk. He was a blameless or genuine human being rather than being a hypocrite or blameworthy person; one whose aim was to adhere to God rather than to turn from him. Rather than suggesting Noah never sinned, this verse describes him as a person who is what God wants him to be, a complete and whole God-aimed human being, warts and all.[12] God was satisfied.

The same explanation applies to the description of Job:

> There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was *tam* and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil. (Job 1:1)

And it applies equally to all the godly who are wise and upright:

> For the upright will abide in the land, and the innocent[13] [*temi-mim*] will remain in it. (Prov 2:21)

> Happy are those whose way is blameless [*tamim*], who walk in the law of the LORD. (Ps 119:1)

11. This is parallel to the language of blemish or disfigurement (Hebrew *mum*). Most important is that the animals be complete and not disfigured, that they "conform to the class to which they belong." Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 51–53, quotation 53.

12. Carol Kaminski's recent treatment of Noah's "finding favor" with God focuses on divine agency (God showed unmerited favor to Noah) rather than on Noah's behavior or character. She is particularly opposed to "the view that Noah *deserves* the favour he finds or that God is in some sense *obligated* to show him favour." Kaminski, *Was Noah Good?*, 110, original emphasis. Her point is well-taken that God's favor is always *unconditioned* (i.e., given without pre-conditions). However, she overlooks that such divine favor is not *unconditional* (i.e., given with no expectation/obligation of return); see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*. Thus, to say Noah was "righteous," "found favor," and *tamim*, means he walks in the ways expected of one who has been shown such divine favor. Her study would be strengthened by giving greater attention to the language of "Noah walked with God" (only p. 195 and n. 95 as far as I can see) and his "blamelessness" (no treatment).

13. NIV: the blameless; ESV, NLT: those with integrity.

Thus, to say that someone is *tamim* marks them as upright, genuine, and complete in behavior, but does not imply they are perfect. This completeness involves the fear of the Lord, shunning evil and ordering one's behavior according to God's Torah (instruction, law). It "means to belong to him wholeheartedly, without practicing idolatry, sorcery, and other abominations (cf. [Deut] 18:9–12)."[14] Such a person avoids "great transgression" (Ps 19:13), rejection of God and his covenant, and can be described near-synonymously as "righteous [*tsaddiq*]" or "upright [*yashar*]." One who enters into Yahweh's presence must "walk *tamim* (with integrity, genuineness)" and "do *tsedeq*" (Ps 15:2). It is hard to improve on Deut 10:12–13 as a summary of this OT expectation: "So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being."

Notice, although this integrity referred typically to one's observable behavior (one's "way") it was certainly not limited to a mere external conformity. Such wholeness demanded that one's very heart, one's most essential inner being, thoughts, desires, and motivations, also be *tamim*, that is, whole and complete, conforming to the divine aim for humanity, where inner and outer reality combine in genuine integrity. Rabbi Harold Kushner gets it right when he summarizes:

> [I]f we want to know what God expects of us . . . my candidate for the most important single word in the Bible occurs in Genesis 17:1, when God says to Abraham, "Walk before Me and be *tamim*." What does that word mean?
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> [M]ore recent translations . . . have backed away from the notion of God demanding that Abraham . . . be perfect and without flaw. . . . Contemporary scholars take the word *tamim* to mean something like "whole-hearted." My own study of the verse leads me to conclude that what God wants from Abraham . . . is not perfection but integrity. God wants Abraham to strive to be true to the core of who he is, even if he strays from that core occasionally.[15]

Moving on now to the second most frequent Hebrew term for our study,[16] we read,

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14. Schnackenburg, *Christian Existence*, 1:162.

15. Kushner, *How Good Do We Have to Be?*, 169–70.

16. In addition to the two main Hebrew word-groups, forms of the stem *k-l-l* are

And may you be wholehearted [or wholly devoted, NAB] (*lēb shalem*) with the LORD our God, to walk in His ways and keep His commandments, even as now. (1 Kgs 8:61, NJPS)

sh-l-m

Much like *tamim*, the adjective *shalem* denotes "totality, wholeness" as when a stone is *shalem* ("unhewn," Deut 27:6), or a people's guilt is not *shalem* ("full" or "complete," Gen 15:6; 25:15).[17] Often in the OT it occurs in combination with "heart" denoting that one's inmost being is undivided or totally devoted. Thus, Hezekiah reminds the Lord that he has walked before him "with a whole [*shalem*] heart" (Isa 38:3) [KJV: perfect heart; NIV: with wholehearted devotion], and the Chronicler comments that Asa's heart was true (NRSV), blameless (NASB), undivided (NAB), perfect (KJV) his entire life (2 Chr 15:17). As with *tamim*, it would be misleading to think of these as having a perfect heart, i.e., with no shadow, error, or evil thoughts. The point is that they are true and wholehearted in their devotion to Yahweh, as opposed to being half-hearted or hypocritical. This is clear in the account of King Asa just mentioned (1 Kgs 15:9–24; par. 2 Chr 14:1—16:14). After stressing his similarity to King David (15:11) and his positive deeds such as removing idols from the land (15:12–13), a negative trait, a particularly evil deed for a king, is mentioned: "the high places were not taken away" (15:14a). Yet, even with this imperfection, this wicked behavior, the narrator continues: "Nevertheless the heart of Asa was true to the LORD all his days" (15:14b).[18]

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occasionally found behind texts translated with perfect in the KJV (e.g., Isa 47:9), but these add little to our study.

17. On this term, see Illman, "ŠLM," 15:97–105; and Nel, "Sh-L-M," 4:130–35. See esp. Eisenbeis, *Die Wurzel* שלם *im Alten Testament*, 339–41, although his treatment of the formula in Chronicles unnecessarily imports a legalistic assumption (347–48).

18. The flip side of this coin is seen in the narrative of King Amaziah, who is explicitly stated *not* to have a whole heart (2 Chr 25:2b; see 2 Kgs 14:1–22). Although he performed in many ways well as a king ("did what was right," 2 Chr 25:2a), his reign was full of "incongruity and disparity: because the king did not act 'with a blameless heart' (v. 2), his actions were incongruous with his role as king of God's people, and there was often disparity between the king's intentions and his achievements." Graham, "Aspects of the Structure," 85. Thus, the opposite of a whole heart is lasting hypocrisy.

Righteousness and Related Terms

Since we have spoken of righteousness in connection with this wholeness, perhaps a brief word on the meaning of this and other central covenantal terms is in order. While the human heart and behavior are the focus of the *tamim* and *shalem* word-groups, a closely related set of terms focuses on the covenantal relationship itself. Premier among these is "righteous/righteousness," Hebrew *tsaddiq, tsedaqah*.[19]

Out of chaos the God of the Bible created order . . . an order that was to result in goodness, life, and blessing for the creation. This went awry early on with the rebellion of the first couple, and the story seemed to be heading for a bad end until the appearance of Noah, "a righteous [*tsaddiq*] man, blameless [*tamim*] in his generation" who seemingly alone among all humans then living "walked with God" (Gen 6:9; cf. 7:1). At this first occurrence of the word in the canon, righteousness refers to a life in accord with the order God had originally desired, and it belongs to God's covenant or agreement with Noah (6:18). Largely overlapping with this, *tamim* marks Noah as a substantially mature or complete, though certainly not perfect, specimen of what God had intended for human life; and both are summed up in terms of Noah's relationship to this creator God: "Noah walked with God."

The next occurrence of righteousness comes in the account of Abram. As far as we can tell, Abram's family took part in the polytheistic milieu of the Chaldeans, but Yahweh's call and promise sets him on a path that will eventually lead to the establishment of the people of Israel. Although Abram apparently knows little about this God, he follows him to Canaan and trusts his promise of a large family and inheritance. This loyal trust and obedient adherence is "reckoned . . . to him as righteousness [*tsedaqah*]" (Gen 15:6). That is, Abram is considered to be in line with the order of the world and human life which this God desires. This, too, is part of the covenant God makes with Abraham (Gen 15:18). As such, he is also called to the human wholeness [*tamim*] that forms part of that order (Gen 17:1). Again, we see how closely related and largely overlapping these two concepts are.

Finally, we reach the heart of the OT story of God's establishing the desired order for his creation, but now centered on one people, Israel. They are the *tsaddiqim* (Ps 1:5) to whom alone among the nations on

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19. The academic literature on this central topic is immense, but seems to have settled somewhat for our purposes. See Scullion, "Righteousness (OT)," 5:724–36.

earth has been revealed God's guidance (Torah/Law), whose detailed ordinances "are true and righteous altogether" (Ps 19:9). Now righteousness reaches its fullest, covenantal, and Torah-centered meaning. To be one of the righteous is to live in accord with the way of life detailed in Torah, conforming not necessarily perfectly, of course, but authentically, substantially, from the heart.

And it is this covenantally ordered *tsaddiq* lifestyle, along with closely related terms like "uprightness" (*yashar*) and "fidelity" (*'emunah*), which repeatedly overlap with *tamim* and *shalem*.[20]

> As for you, if you will walk before me, as David your father walked, with integrity [*tam*] of heart and uprightness [*yashar*], doing according to all that I have commanded you, and keeping my statutes and my ordinances. (1 Kgs 9:4)

> Judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness [*tsaddiq*] and according to the integrity [*tam*] that is in me. (Ps 7:8)

> Mark the blameless [*tam*], and behold the upright [*yashar*], for there is posterity for the peaceable [*shalom*]. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off. The salvation of the righteous [*tsaddiqim*] is from the LORD; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. (Ps 37:37–39)

> The righteousness [*tsidqath*] of the blameless [*tamim*] keeps their ways straight, but the wicked fall by their own wickedness. The righteousness [*tsidqath*] of the upright [*yesharim*] saves them, but the treacherous are taken captive by their schemes. (Prov 11:5–6)

Thus, it turns out that *tamim*, the term for human wholeness, along with other key covenantal terms such as *tsedeq*, *yashar*, etc., is a central descriptor for what God wants of those who are in covenant with him. This is what God has always been after . . . what will satisfy him as far as his human creation is concerned. Old Testament luminaries such as Noah, Abraham, Job, and David are marked as examples of this genuine wholeness. They are not, however, the exceptions, but the guides for how every whole-hearted covenant member is to walk. It is not rule-keeping, and certainly not flawless performance, but being a whole, upright, God-fearing and God-loving human being that is at the center of OT piety.[21]

20. "In particular, the word '*saddiq*' appears to be almost synonymous with the word '*tamim*.'" Hartin, *Spirituality of Perfection*, 25.

21. See esp. Edlund, *Das Auge der Einfalt*, 32–35, for this point.

N. T. Wright has put this nicely in his recent *The Day the Revolution Began*. What I call the incorrect perfection view he terms the "works contract," described as follows:

> God told his human creatures to keep a moral code; their continuing life in the Garden of Eden depended on their keeping that code perfectly. Failure would incur the punishment of death. This was then repeated in the case of Israel with a sharpened-up moral code, Mosaic law.[22]

He contrasts this with a view centering on vocation:

> What the Bible offers is not a 'works contract,' but a covenant of *vocation*. The vocation in question is that of being a genuine human being, with genuinely human tasks to perform as part of the Creator's purpose for his world. The main task of this vocation is 'image-bearing,' reflecting the Creator's wise stewardship into the world and reflecting the praises of all creation back to its maker.[23]

What Wright calls the vocation of "being a genuine human being" is precisely what we are arguing *tamim* refers to in Scripture.

Summary

The puzzle of the OT's vanishing perfect people has been solved. Their presence was the result of a particular English translation, the venerable King James Bible. Their disappearance occurred as modern English translators found more appropriate English terms for the Hebrew words and concepts. Noah, Job, Abraham, and the many others were no longer perfect but whole, blameless, intact. They were *tamim*—genuine exemplars of God's intent for his human creatures. Flawed and imperfect, yet oriented from the heart to this God and his ways.

A Note on OT Translations

We have laid at the doorstep of the KJV some of the blame, at least in the anglophone world, for our thinking that the OT requires flawlessly perfect obedience. When we look later at Matt 5:48 ("be perfect"), we

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22. Wright, *Day the Revolution Began*, 75.
23. Wright, *Day the Revolution Began*, 76.

will suggest that the KJV translators may, in fact, have been intending something more akin to "complete" than "perfect."[24] Nevertheless, readers can see from Table 1 that most modern English OT translations have by-and-large abandoned the word "perfect" in relation to human persons.[25] However, are their alternatives any better?

Table 1: Disappearance of "Perfect" People in the English OT Tradition

OT Figure	KJV	NKJV	NRSV	NIV	ESV	NAS	NJPS	NET	NLT
Noah (Gen 6:9)	perfect	perfect	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless
Call to Abraham to "be perfect" (Gen 17:1)	be perfect	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	live a blameless life
Call to Israel to "be perfect" (Deut 18:13)	be perfect[26]	be blameless	remain completely loyal	be blameless	be blameless	be blameless	be whole-hearted	be blameless	be blameless
Asa (1 Kgs 15:14)	perfect	loyal	true	fully committed	wholly true	wholly devoted	whole-hearted	whole-heartedly devoted	completely faithful
200,000 Israelite warriors (1 Chr 12:38)	perfect heart	loyal heart	full intent	fully determined	full intent	perfect heart	whole heart	by accla-mation	single purpose
Job (Job 1:1)	perfect[27]	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	blameless	pure	blameless

Clearly, with only a very few exceptions, English OT translators consider "perfect" a less-than-ideal translation in reference to persons.[28]

24. See ch. 6 below.

25. Of course, in reference to God, English "perfect" is still widespread. Interestingly, the OT appears not to actually refer to God's own person as *tam*, but only to his ways, his actions. "This God—his way is perfect (*tamim*)" (Ps 18:30). One could possibly translate the Hebrew "God is perfect in his way," as reference to God himself as perfect. The OT does refer *indirectly* to God as *tam*: see the name *Yotam* ("Yahweh is perfect," Judg 9:5; 2 Kgs 15:32); so Sabourin, "Why Is God Called 'Perfect,'" 266–68. Nevertheless, the fact remains that such language, "God is perfect," is unusual in the OT. By the first century, however, Jews have begun to use *tam* for God himself. See below on Philo and Matt 5:48b, "as your Father in heaven is *teleios*."

26 The CEB continues the KJV "perfect" tradition.

27 The HCSB continues somewhat the KJV tradition: "a man of perfect integrity."

28. As noted before, they do still refer to an animal for sacrifice as "perfect" (Lev 22:21).

The chief alternative is "blameless." The intent of this change is difficult to discern. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as, "Giving no cause for blame; undeserving of reproach; faultless, guiltless." This could, on the one hand, imply little difference from sinless perfection; i.e., can be charged with no single deviation. But one suspects that this idea of laying blame or reproach on someone refers more to their overall reputation. That is, such a person may have flaws and commit sins, but cannot be charged with serious blame before God or society. They are not deserving of major reproach. Their reputation remains whole. Whatever the precise intent of these translators, however, neither is "blameless" a perfect rendering of *tamim, shalem,* etc.

Other alternatives such as "loyal," "true," "pure," "fully committed," "wholehearted," and "completely faithful" seek to get at other aspects of this rich covenantal description of the person who walks as desired by God. Terms such as "whole," "complete," "intact," and "integrity" could be added, but the fact is, apart from the rich biblical-covenantal story, no single English word conveys the depth of the call to be *tamim.*