

Exegetical Brief: The Whole-Hearted Man

John C. Jeske

The Hebrew word **כִּמְלֵךְ**, together with a number of derivatives, plays a significant role in the Old Testament. Some unfortunate translations in our English versions have, however, obscured that role. By so doing they have complicated the English Bible reader's job of understanding what the sacred writer meant to say.

The fundamental meaning of **כִּמְלֵךְ** is "to be complete." The related noun **כִּמְלֵךְ** means "completeness"; the adjectives **כִּמְלֵךְ** and **כִּמְלֵךְ** mean "complete." Speech which is **כִּמְלֵךְ** (Amos 5:10) is "complete," entirely in accordance with the truth.

Noah is described as **כִּמְלֵךְ** (Genesis 6:9). By using this adjective to describe Noah, what is Moses telling us about the man? That he was "blameless" (NIV), or "perfect" (KJV)? The unhappy incident of Noah's drunkenness affirms that he was neither blameless nor perfect. There was, however, a completeness, an all-around quality to Noah's faith. Living, as he did, in an ungodly world, his faith was not confined to his heart, but showed itself also in his life, which was devoted to God. Genesis 6:9 says nothing about any moral perfection of Noah.

In Genesis 17:1 God called Abram to be **כִּמְלֵךְ**. NIV translates: "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless" (KJV: "be thou perfect"). Both translations obscure God's meaning. The opening verse of Genesis 17 sets the stage for a divine announcement Abram had been waiting to hear for a quarter of a century (17:21). God prefaced his startlingly good news by giving himself a new and unusual name: "I am *El Shaddai*," God Almighty, a God who can even suspend the laws of nature (in this instance, the laws governing human reproduction). God continued: "Now, Abram, I want you to live before me as **כִּמְלֵךְ**. I want you to live wholeheartedly and consistently in the confidence that I can do what I have promised as *El Shaddai*, the God who can even compel nature to obey his will." Again, the issue is not Abram's moral perfection.

The verb **כִּמְלֵךְ** and its derivatives are used most frequently of Job (e.g. 1:1). Again, NIV's "blameless" and KJV's "perfect" are misleading. Job knew he was neither blameless nor perfect. He admitted as much in 7:21 ("Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?"). Both context and etymology suggest that Job was "wholehearted." His faith in the Redeemer and his consequent life of sanctification made him a "well-rounded" child of God. "Wholehearted" or "devout" seem preferable translations.

In 2 Samuel 22:24 David says: "I have been **כִּמְלֵךְ** before God." Is he claiming to have lived a "blameless" life, as the NIV suggests? Or is he claiming to have been devoted to God, living in his covenant, returning to it in repentance and faith after falling into sin?

If the NIV's translation of Psalm 119:1 is correct ("Blessed are they whose ways are blameless"), there's precious little comfort there for sinners. But what blessedness comes to the person who surrenders all that there is to him—heart and life—to the Savior who has redeemed him.

It may be of interest to note in passing that the Septuagint commonly translates **כִּמְלֵךְ** as *τέλειος*, a term used a half dozen times in the New Testament to describe one who has attained God's purpose (*τέλος*) for him. In KJV's translation of that NT vocable one can note a phenomenon parallel to the one noted earlier in the OT references. The *ἀνήρ τέλειος* (Ephesians 4:13) is not "a perfect man" (KJV), but a "mature" person (NIV), in contrast to "infants...blown here and there by every wave of teaching."