

The Book of Job

Session 19: Job 31.1, Covenant with His Eyes

By John Walton

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 19, Job chapter 31:1, Covenant with His Eyes.

Introduction [00:25-1:19]

We're all set to do Elihu's discourse. But before we get into that, I want to tackle one specific verse in Job's Oath of Innocence. I'm referring to chapter 31:1. The NIV translates, "I made a covenant with my eyes, not to look lustfully at a young woman." It's an interesting verse to start off his series. And I want to look at it carefully to make sure that we understand what it says. For most of this segment, I'm going to actually be reading from my commentary. This is the NIV Application Commentary on the Book of Job. I've mentioned it before. It goes into a little more detail than the book I did with Tremper Longman called How to Read Job. So, I want to talk about the specifics of understanding the Hebrew of this passage.

Covenant [1:19-148]

The verse opens with a reference to a covenant, and it's pretty much standard terminology there. The word for making a covenant and the word for covenant are pretty much what you'd find any place else in the biblical text. So, a covenant is often an agreement made with a vassal, and all of this suggests that Job's eyes are being treated as vassals being brought under control. That would be the thrust of the covenant language.

***Ethonen*, not Lust but "seeking" or "inquiring" [1:48-3:41]**

Since this verse seems to be an obvious statement about sexual ethics, we have to consider the details carefully. The verb in the second line describing the forbidden activity is *etbonen*. It's a hithpael form of the root *bin*, which occurs 22 times in the Old Testament and eight times in the Book of Job. Most of these instances describe close or careful examination of an object. In only one occurrence, Psalm 37.10 is the verb

followed by this particular preposition *'al*. That's important in Hebrew; a verb used with different prepositions may take on different meanings depending on the preposition.

So, we look very carefully at this one occurrence where this same preposition is used after this verb form. There it refers to seeking out, but not finding in that case, the wicked; neither this instance nor any other occurrence of the hithpael form carries any sexual nuance. That ought to be a warning to us about bringing that in.

The NIV has arrived at its translation by context, not by other usages of the word. It interprets the gaze as lustful because its object is a virgin. The Hebrew word is a *betulah*. But this interpretation does not satisfactorily explain why the prohibition, to Job's eyes, is limited to a *betulah*. If sexual ethics is really the issue, it would be more natural for this covenant to extend to any woman, whatever her status.

***Betulah*: Virgin and/or woman under the protection of her father [3:41-5:20]**

A *betulah*, again, "virgin" is a common translation, but it's really not the woman's sexual condition or status that is communicated by the word *betulah*. It refers to a woman who remains under the protection of her father. In most cases, of course, this means she has not had a sexual experience or a sexual encounter. So, she is a virgin. But there are one or two occurrences in the Old Testament where someone who clearly has had a sexual encounter is still a *betulah*.

So we have to be careful and how we classify terminology. Terms are not necessarily going to fall into the same categories as they do in English classification systems. So, the Israelites were much more interested in classifying a woman according to whose protection she's under, whether she has a husband or not, whether she has borne a child or not, that's their classification system, not whether she has had a sexual encounter or not, which is our categorization system.

So, this is a *betulah* that Job is not going to be looking at. If a girl remains under her father's protection, that means she's a viable candidate for marriage, and society at

this time was comfortably polygamous. So, the idea that Job would be considering a woman for marriage is what's being expressed here.

***Mah* what? [5:20-5:46]**

So, to reach a better understanding of this verb, we have to start fresh. Job has made a covenant regarding his eyes. That much is clear. The second part of the verse begins with a common interrogative particle *mah*, which in Hebrew means "what," although Job's usage of this particle is consistent throughout the book. Most translations choose not to render it in this particular case.

Psalm 37:10's Contribution [5:46-7:51]

Typically, in Job, this particle introduces a rhetorical question, which seems likely here as well. Psalm 37.10, the verse we've already mentioned, uses this verb and preposition, and employs the same verb as this verse to direct to the reader to look all around for the location of the wicked. Within its context, this directive suggests that if one inquires diligently after the status of the wicked, the search will yield nothing. If we apply this observation to Job's statement, the sense would be as follows: Since I've made a covenant with regard to my eyes, what interest would I have in inquiring after a *betulah*? That is, investigating or inquiring about her availability for marriage. Inquiring after a *betulah* is not the same thing as inquiring after a prostitute. If the text truly was speaking against lust, we would expect the verb *hamad* to be used. That would be a more likely choice. Furthermore, a *betulah* generally does indicate a virgin, but virginity is more circumstantial than truly representative of the word's core meaning. More to the point, the *betulah* is a marriageable girl still within the household of her father and under his protection. One would inquire after a *betulah* in order to arrange a marriage. Such an inquiry could potentially be motivated by lust; we think of Samson in Judges 14:2, but that's only one of several alternatives and cannot be automatically inferred. In point of fact, any arranged marriage begins with inquiring after a *betulah*.

Harem and Status Are the Point Not Lust [7:51-9:25]

In light of this discussion, Job's covenant regarding his eyes cannot be interpreted as a commitment to asceticism because he already has a wife. The logical alternative is that the statement concerns the acquisition of a harem. That's what you do when you inquire after a wife, a *betulah*. A large harem was an indicator of power and status in the ancient world. Job has turned away from the idea of amassing multiple wives and concubines, and he characterizes this decision as a covenant regarding his eyes in order to underscore the point that he's not even on the prowl. This vow mirrors his statement in chapter 31, verses 24 and 25, that he is not absorbed in the pursuit of wealth. Job has undertaken neither a vow of poverty nor a vow of chastity but rather avoids the obsessive pursuit of prestige.

This interpretation takes account of each word choice the author has made and therefore presents the most likely interpretation. Accordingly, the verse has nothing to do with sexual ethics, as important as they may be. Instead, it accords with Job's many pronouncements that he has not attempted to consolidate or abuse power, tempting actions for a person in his position.

Importance of a Close Reading of the Hebrew Text [9:25-9:57]

So, we find that the verse reads a little differently than we might have thought. This is what can be the result when we engage in close reading of the Hebrew text and then try to see what we find in light of the logical flow of the argument. It can give us a different perspective. Now we're ready to move on to Elihu.

This is Dr. John Walton and his teaching on the Book of Job. This is session 19, Job 31:1, Covenant with His Eyes. [9:57]