

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 19
“Covenant with his eyes” (Job 31:1)
Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Study Guide, 4) Briefing Document, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Walton, Job, Session 19, “Covenant with his eyes” (Job 31:1), Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This excerpt from Dr. John Walton's lecture analyzes Job 31:1, challenging the common interpretation of Job's "covenant with his eyes" as a vow of chastity. Walton argues that the Hebrew text's specific word choices indicate Job's commitment is not about avoiding lust but about rejecting the pursuit of multiple wives, a symbol of power and status in that culture. He emphasizes careful examination of the Hebrew, demonstrating how different translations can significantly alter the meaning. His interpretation aligns Job's action with his broader rejection of wealth accumulation, illustrating Job's avoidance of power-seeking behavior. This detailed linguistic analysis ultimately offers a revised understanding of the verse's context and message.

2. 12 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Walton's, Job, Session 19 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Old Testament → Psalms & Wisdom → Job → Walton).



**Walton_Job_Session
19.mp3**

3. Briefing Document

Okay, here's a detailed briefing document based on the provided excerpt from John Walton's lecture on Job 31:1:

Briefing Document: John Walton on Job 31:1 - "Covenant with His Eyes"

Source: Excerpts from "Walton_Job_Session19.pdf"

Main Theme: This session focuses on a detailed analysis of Job 31:1, specifically challenging the common interpretation that the verse is about avoiding lustful gazes. Walton argues that a careful reading of the Hebrew reveals the verse is actually about Job's rejection of the pursuit of status and power through the acquisition of a harem.

Key Ideas and Facts:

1. **Context:** Walton emphasizes the importance of analyzing specific Hebrew words and their nuances, rather than relying solely on contextual interpretations. He uses his own commentary on Job as a primary reference point, highlighting a desire to move beyond more general interpretations.
 - *"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. ... It goes into a little more detail than the book I did with Tremper Longman called How to Read Job."*
1. **Covenant Language:** The verse begins with the concept of a "covenant" which, in biblical terms, often describes agreements made with vassals. This leads Walton to argue that Job is treating his eyes as vassals brought under control.
 - *"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."*
1. **Re-examining the verb *etbonen*:** The Hebrew verb *etbonen*, often translated as "look lustfully," is re-evaluated. Walton points out that *etbonen* appears 22 times in the Old Testament (8 times in Job), and generally refers to "close or careful examination." The verb doesn't carry any inherent sexual nuance. The one other occurrence of this verb form with the specific preposition used in Job 31:1 ('al), in Psalm 37:10, refers to "seeking out" but not finding.

- *"The verb in the second line describing the forbidden activity is etbonen. It's a hithpael form of the root bin... Most of these instances describe close or careful examination of an object...neither this instance nor any other occurrence of the hithpael form carries any sexual nuance."*
 - *"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."*
1. **Re-evaluating *betulah* (Virgin):** The Hebrew word *betulah*, commonly translated as "virgin," is argued not to be primarily about sexual status. Instead, it refers to a woman under the protection of her father, and therefore a candidate for marriage.
 - *"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...So, the Israelites were much more interested in classifying a woman according to whose protection she's under..."*
 - *"If a girl remains under her father's protection, that means she's a viable candidate for marriage..."*
 1. **Interrogative Particle *mah*:** Walton explains that the particle *mah* means "what" in Hebrew. In Job, *mah* is often used in rhetorical questions. He argues that Job is posing a rhetorical question, "What interest would I have in inquiring after a *betulah*?", reinforcing that he is not seeking marriage, not necessarily that he's repressing lustful thoughts.
 - *"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. ... Typically, in Job, this particle introduces a rhetorical question..."*
 - *"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."*
 1. **Focus on Status, Not Lust:** Instead of being about sexual ethics, the verse is interpreted as Job's rejection of the practice of building a harem to gain prestige.

The desire to amass multiple wives was a common way of indicating power and status in the ancient world, but Job has turned away from it.

- *"The logical alternative is that the statement concerns the acquisition of a harem. ...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."*
 - *"Job has undertaken neither a vow of poverty nor a vow of chastity but rather avoids the obsessive pursuit of prestige."*
1. **Importance of Close Reading:** Walton concludes by emphasizing the importance of closely examining the Hebrew text. He argues that a careful word study can lead to a very different understanding of the passage than one based on general impressions or contextual readings.
 - *"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."*

Key Takeaway:

Job 31:1 is not about suppressing lustful thoughts, but rather about rejecting the societal norm of accumulating wealth and status through polygamy. Job is using the language of a "covenant with his eyes" to underscore his detachment from the pursuit of worldly power and prestige. The focus of the verse is on status and power dynamics, not sexual ethics as traditionally understood. This interpretation hinges on nuanced reading of the original Hebrew text.

4. Job Study Guide: Session 19, “Covenant with his eyes” (Job 31:1)

Job 31:1: A Covenant with His Eyes - Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 sentences.

1. What is the traditional interpretation of Job 31:1, and how does Walton challenge this interpretation?
2. What does the Hebrew word "etbonen" typically mean, and how does that inform Walton's reading of Job 31:1?
3. Explain why Walton argues that the Hebrew word "betulah" does not primarily mean "virgin."
4. What does Walton suggest is the true intention behind Job's covenant regarding his eyes?
5. How does the use of the interrogative particle “mah” in Job 31:1 help Walton establish his reading of this verse?
6. How does Psalm 37:10 contribute to Walton’s understanding of the meaning of the Hebrew term “etbonen” in Job 31:1?
7. According to Walton, what are the typical motivations behind inquiring after a *betulah* in the ancient world?
8. How does Walton connect Job's statement in 31:1 to Job's statements about wealth in verses 24-25?
9. What does Walton suggest is the real focus of Job’s oath of innocence?
10. What is the importance of engaging in close reading of the Hebrew text, according to Walton?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The traditional interpretation of Job 31:1 is that Job is making a vow not to lust after young women. Walton challenges this, arguing that the verse is not about sexual ethics but rather a commitment not to pursue power and status through amassing a harem.

2. The Hebrew word "etbonen" typically means "to examine closely," "to seek," or "to inquire." Walton uses this to argue that Job is talking about investigating women for marriage, not lusting after them.
3. Walton argues that "betulah" primarily refers to a woman under the protection of her father, and not necessarily a woman who has never had a sexual encounter, although in most cases those two characteristics were likely to coincide. He suggests that Israelite classifications focused on a woman's social status rather than her sexual experience.
4. Walton suggests that Job's covenant regarding his eyes is not about abstaining from sexual desire but rather a vow not to seek after a large harem as a means of gaining prestige. He is choosing to reject the pursuit of additional wives and concubines.
5. The particle "mah" introduces a rhetorical question, suggesting that since Job has made a covenant regarding his eyes, he would have no interest in seeking a *betulah* for marriage, implying his decision was already set.
6. Psalm 37:10 uses "etbonen" with a similar preposition to suggest looking diligently for something, finding nothing. It helps Walton establish the meaning of "etbonen" as investigating or searching.
7. According to Walton, the typical motivation for inquiring after a *betulah* was to arrange a marriage. It could be motivated by lust, but this was not the only or main motive and could not be automatically inferred.
8. Walton connects Job's rejection of the pursuit of a harem in 31:1 to his earlier claims of not pursuing wealth in verses 24-25, showing he was not seeking material power or status. Both statements express his lack of obsession with power and prestige.
9. Walton suggests that the real focus of Job's oath of innocence is not about being sexually pure or materially poor, but rather a declaration that he has not sought to consolidate or abuse power.
10. According to Walton, engaging in a close reading of the Hebrew text allows us to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding of the text, which may be different than a more conventional or intuitive reading.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Answer each question in a well-organized essay with a clear thesis and supporting evidence from the source.

1. Analyze how Walton's interpretation of Job 31:1 challenges traditional readings of the text, specifically focusing on the use of "etbonen," and "betulah."
2. Discuss the significance of the "covenant with his eyes" within the larger context of Job's protestations of innocence in Job 31, considering why Job would choose the image of his eyes in such a way.
3. Compare and contrast Walton's reading of Job 31:1 with a more traditional Christian interpretation, focusing on how different understandings of the historical context affect interpretations of the text.
4. Explain the importance of examining the Hebrew text and the use of prepositions in order to better understand a verse like Job 31:1, considering how a failure to do so could result in an inaccurate reading of the text.
5. Discuss the cultural significance of polygamy in the ancient Near East and how this impacts the interpretation of Job's statement as interpreted by Walton, considering how Job is using his personal behavior as evidence of his innocence.

Glossary of Key Terms

Betulah: A Hebrew term often translated as "virgin," but more accurately refers to a young woman under the protection of her father and eligible for marriage. The word is defined by her social status not her sexual history.

Covenant: A formal agreement, often between a superior and a vassal, in this case used to describe Job's commitment to control his desires, or, as Walton suggests, to forgo any ambition to acquire multiple wives.

Etbonen: A Hebrew verb meaning "to examine closely," "to seek," or "to inquire." Walton argues that it indicates Job's examination of women for potential marriage, not a lustful gaze.

Harem: A collection of wives and concubines. A large harem was often a symbol of power and status in the ancient world.

Hithpael: A Hebrew verb form that often indicates reflexive or intensive action. The hithpael form of the word *bin* (to understand) is the word *etbonen*.

Mah: An interrogative particle in Hebrew meaning "what." In Job, it often introduces a rhetorical question.

Polygamy: The practice or custom of having more than one wife or husband at the same time. The Israelite context in the period of Job permitted polygamy.

Rhetorical Question: A question asked for effect rather than to elicit an answer. In Job's case, the rhetorical question is a device to emphasize the point that he is not pursuing a harem.

Vassal: A person or state subordinate to another, often by a covenant. Walton uses this image to explain the implications of Job's "covenant with his eyes."

5. FAQs on Walton, Job, Session 19, “Covenant with his eyes” (Job 31:1), Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions about Job 31:1

- **What is the common interpretation of Job 31:1, and what does it say about Job's covenant with his eyes?**
- The common interpretation of Job 31:1, often translated as "I have made a covenant with my eyes; why then should I look upon a virgin?", typically frames the verse as a commitment against lustful looking. It's seen as Job establishing a boundary to avoid sexual temptation, particularly towards young women. However, this interpretation is challenged by a deeper look at the Hebrew text.
- **What is the significance of the Hebrew word *etbonen* in Job 31:1?**
- The Hebrew word *etbonen*, often translated as "look," is a hithpael form of the root *bin*, which generally indicates careful or close examination. It appears 22 times in the Old Testament and eight times in Job. In most cases, it suggests seeking or inquiring. Contextually, when followed by the preposition '*al*' as it is in this verse, it is used in Psalm 37:10 to mean seeking out, not necessarily lustful gazing. This challenges the common interpretation that *etbonen* specifically refers to lustful looking in Job 31:1.
- **Why does the interpretation of "lustful gaze" not fit the Hebrew?**

The interpretation of a "lustful gaze" is primarily derived from the context, and the object of the gaze being a virgin (*betulah*). However, the Hebrew term *etbonen* does not inherently carry sexual connotations. More importantly, if the concern were about lust in general, the text would likely be more general. Also, if sexual ethics was the specific concern, Job's covenant would likely extend to any woman, regardless of their status. Instead it is limited to a *betulah*.

- **What does the Hebrew word *betulah* mean, and why is it important to understand it correctly?**
- The Hebrew word *betulah* is often translated as "virgin," but that doesn't fully capture its meaning. It actually refers to a woman who is under the protection of her father. While this status typically implies she is a virgin, the core meaning isn't about her sexual experience. Instead, the word denotes her status as a marriageable woman, still under her father's protection and authority.

Understanding this is crucial because Job's statement is about avoiding the pursuit of marriage prospects, not necessarily just about avoiding lust.

- **What does the particle *mah* contribute to the meaning of Job 31:1?**
- The Hebrew particle *mah*, meaning "what," often introduces a rhetorical question in the Book of Job. In the context of Job 31:1, it suggests Job is rhetorically questioning why he would even bother "inquiring after" a *betulah*, since he has made a covenant about his eyes. The sense is, having made a covenant about what his eyes seek, he would not look for or investigate a *betulah* for marriage.
- **How does the interpretation of Job 31:1 relate to the idea of amassing a harem?**
- Job 31:1 is better interpreted as a covenant against the pursuit of accumulating a harem. In the ancient world, a large harem symbolized wealth and status. Job's commitment regarding his eyes can be seen as a decision not to seek multiple wives and concubines, which is something that is done by "inquiring after a *betulah*". It's not so much about sexual ethics as it is about abstaining from the obsessive pursuit of power and prestige through a large harem, much like his disavowal of a focus on amassing wealth.
- **Is Job 31:1 about sexual ethics or something else?**
- While sexual ethics are an important aspect of life, Job 31:1 is not primarily focused on this. A close reading of the Hebrew text shows that Job is making a statement about his commitment to avoiding the pursuit of status and prestige. Specifically, he is avoiding the use of marriage, and the associated seeking out of *betulah* for that purpose, as a means to power.
- **What is the importance of close reading of the Hebrew text?**
- Close reading of the Hebrew text, paying attention to each word choice and grammatical nuance, can reveal interpretations that significantly differ from common understandings. In the case of Job 31:1, it shows that the verse is not about avoiding lustful looking but rather about Job's commitment to avoiding the pursuit of power and prestige through the acquisition of a large harem. This underscores the importance of examining the original languages to gain more accurate and deeper interpretations of biblical texts.