

The Book of Job

Session 19: Job 31:1, Covenant with His Eyes

Author: Dr. John Walton

Source: Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Job, Covenant, Eyes, Betulah, Etbonen, Lust, Harem, Status, Marriage, Hebrew

Abstract

In this session, Dr. John Walton provides a detailed linguistic analysis of Job 31:1, challenging the common translation that associates the verse with sexual lust or chastity. By analyzing the Hebrew verb *etbonen* (inquiring or seeking) and the cultural definition of *betulah* (a marriageable woman under her father's protection), Walton argues that the verse is actually about the acquisition of a harem. Ultimately, he demonstrates that Job's covenant with his eyes represents a rejection of amassing multiple wives to gain social status and prestige, aligning with his broader vow against the obsessive pursuit of power and wealth.

Outline

I. Introduction to Job 31:1

- A. Context of the Verse
 - 1. Positioned within Job's solemn Oath of Innocence in chapter 31.
 - 2. Traditional translation (NIV): "I made a covenant with my eyes, not to look lustfully at a young woman."
- B. Method of Analysis
 - 1. Walton utilizes his commentary, the NIV Application Commentary on the Book of Job, to explore specific Hebrew terms.
 - 2. A close linguistic and contextual reading is required to verify if the traditional focus on sexual ethics is correct.

II. Linguistic Analysis of Covenant and Eyes

- A. Covenant Language
 - 1. The Hebrew terminology used for making a covenant in this verse is standard biblical language.

- o 2. The concept treats Job's eyes as "vassals" that are being brought under strict control.

III. Deconstructing the Forbidden Activity: Etbonen

- A. Semantic Range of bin
 - o 1. The verb etbonen is the Hithpael form of the root bin.
 - o 2. Occurs 22 times in the Old Testament (8 times in Job), typically meaning to examine an object closely or carefully.
- B. The Importance of Prepositions in Hebrew
 - o 1. In Job 31:1, etbonen is followed by the preposition 'al'.
 - o 2. Only one other Old Testament passage shares this exact combination: Psalm 37:10.
 - o 3. In Psalm 37:10, the phrase refers to "seeking out" or "inquiring after" the wicked, carrying no sexual nuance.
 - o 4. The traditional translation of "lustful" is derived purely from context rather than the actual semantic usage of the word.

IV. Redefining the Object of the Gaze: Betulah

- A. The Social Status of a Betulah
 - o 1. Commonly translated as "virgin," but the Hebrew classification system focuses on social protection rather than sexual history.
 - o 2. A betulah is defined as a marriageable woman still under the authority and protection of her father.
 - o 3. If Job's vow were about sexual ethics or lust, it would naturally restrict him from gazing at any woman, not just a betulah.
- B. Marriage and Polygamy Context
 - o 1. In ancient Israelite society, polygamy was socially accepted.
 - o 2. Inquiring after a betulah was the standard process for arranging a marriage or amassing a harem.

V. The True Focus: Harem, Status, and Power

- A. The Rejection of amassing a Harem
 - o 1. Job already has a wife, so this vow is not an expression of asceticism or physical chastity.
 - o 2. In the ancient Near East, acquiring a large harem of multiple wives and concubines was a major status symbol of wealth and power.
 - o 3. Job's covenant with his eyes is a vow to avoid searching for or pursuing additional wives to inflate his social prestige.
- B. Alignment with Chapter 31 Themes

- o 1. This vow directly mirrors Job's statements in verses 24-25, where he disavows the pursuit of excessive wealth.
- o 2. It represents a commitment to avoid consolidating, abusing, or obsessively pursuing social power and status, rather than a narrow statement on sexual ethics.

VI. Conclusion

- A. Value of Close Reading
 - o 1. Close examination of Hebrew linguistics reveals a very different theological message than modern translations suggest.
 - o 2. Prepares the reader to transition to Elihu's upcoming discourses.