

Dr. John Walton, Job, Session 19, 6-min. Video Overview

BiblicalLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to the explainer. All right, today we're cracking open a really fascinating linguistic cold case. We're looking at a passage of ancient texts that pretty much everyone in the modern world thinks they perfectly understand, but a closer look reveals we might actually have it entirely backward.

We're diving right into the brilliant linguistic investigation by Dr. John Walton regarding what has got to be one of the most famously misunderstood verses in the entire book of Job. It's literally a translation detective story, and it's going to completely shift your paradigm. So let's start with section one, the setup and the accepted translation.

Now, if you've ever heard a discussion on modern sexual ethics, controlling your gaze, or just avoiding temptation in general, you have probably heard this exact quote. It's Job chapter 31, verse one. The traditional New International Version translates it super clearly.

I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a young woman. For decades, this has been universally viewed as the ultimate definitive ancient standard on personal sexual purity. I mean, Job is seemingly making a pact with himself to literally bounce his eyes away from an attractive young woman.

Sounds incredibly straightforward, right? But wait a second. I really want you to think about the logic behind that traditional translation. Does this verse actually have anything to do with lust at all? Think about it.

If Job's ultimate goal was making this blanket rule about sexual ethics and lustful gazing, why on earth would he limit this strict rule solely to young unmarried women? Like, if avoiding lust is the actual goal here, wouldn't it be way more natural for this covenant to extend to any woman, regardless of her age or marital status? This specificity right here—that's our first major red flag, that something else is entirely going on under the surface. Which brings us to section two, investigating the Hebrew. This is our first clue.

Okay, so the actual verb used in the text to describe this forbidden eye activity is *itbonen*. It's a very specific grammatical form, a *hithpaal* form if we're being technical, of the Hebrew root word *bin*. And what's super fascinating here is that this word absolutely does not mean lusting.

Not at all. It actually means seeking or inquiring. It describes a very close, careful, and deliberate examination of an object.

You see, it's an investigative word. It's not an inherently sexual one. Let's look at the hard data for a second.

The root word *bin* occurs 22 times in the Old Testament and eight times right here in the Book of Job alone. But, you know, ancient Hebrew is a language of incredible precision. A verb used with different prepositions can completely change its entire meaning.

And this exact verb form, paired with this specific preposition, only happens one other time in the entire ancient text. That's in Psalm 37, verse 10, where it means to diligently seek out or look all around for the wicked. And guess what? Out of all these occurrences across the text, there is absolutely zero sexual nuance.

Like, literally none. Dr. Walton points out that modern English translators didn't actually choose the word lustfully based on the linguistic usage of the Hebrew word. They honestly just guessed based on what they assumed the context was.

And honestly, this brilliantly illustrates a classic translator's dilemma. Because think about it. If the original author truly wanted to write a verse about lust, ancient Hebrew actually had a perfectly good, widely used word for exactly that.

The verb *hamad* specifically means to lust or to covet. But the author purposefully chose not to use it here. They specifically went out of their way to choose a word about investigative seeking.

Let's move on to section three, redefining the virgin and our second big clue. So the English text translates the object of Job's gaze as a young woman or a virgin. The actual Hebrew word used here is *betulah*.

Now, while a *betulah* is often a virgin circumstantially, Dr. Walton's research shows something really interesting. The core meaning of the word actually has absolutely nothing to do with her biological or sexual status. A *betulah* simply refers to a marriageable woman who still remains safely under the household protection of her father.

Basically, we've got a massive culture clash on our hands here. Our modern Western system is kind of completely obsessed with categorizing people by their sexual experience, you know, whether someone is a virgin or not. But the ancient Israelite system categorized women entirely differently.

They looked at whose protection they were under. Were they under the protection of a father or a husband? A *betulah* literally just meant a girl still living under her father's roof. We've basically been taking our modern obsessions and projecting them backward onto this ancient framework.

And you know, that brings us to our final linguistic clue in the text. It's this tiny little interrogative particle called *ma*. It simply means what? Now, in a lot of English translations, it gets entirely skipped over just to make the sentence sound a bit smoother to our modern ears.

But in the book of Job, this little word is consistently used to introduce a rhetorical question. So if we actually put the original grammar back in where it belongs, Job isn't just making some flat statement. He's asking a rhetorical question.

He's saying, since I made a covenant with my eyes, what interest would I have in inquiring after a *betulah*? All right, section four, the reveal, the pursuit of power. Remember how we said inquiring after a woman who is under her father's protection had a very specific

meaning in the ancient world? Well, it was actually the formal first step in seeking to arrange a marriage. You have to keep in mind, Job's society was comfortably polygamous.

So if a wealthy, powerful man started inquiring about the availability of a local father's daughter, he wasn't just creeping on her. He was putting out formal feelers to acquire a new wife. And this brilliantly illustrates what we might call the ancient power and harem pipeline.

It goes like this. Step one, you diligently inquire after a *betulah*. Step two, you arrange the marriage.

Step three, you expand your harem. And step four, you massively increase your power and status. You see, in the ancient Near East, acquiring multiple wives and concubines wasn't just about romance.

It was the ultimate indicator of your wealth, your prestige, and your political dominance. Expanding your household literally meant expanding your empire. Now, we also really have to remember the broader context of Job's life here.

Job is already a married man. He hasn't suddenly packed up his bags to move to a mountaintop and take some monk's vow of asceticism. He isn't suddenly swearing off women in a vow of absolute chastity.

That just doesn't fit the picture at all. Instead, when we read the text correctly, this opening verse perfectly matches the rest of Job chapter 31. Just a few verses later, in verses 24 and 25, Job forcefully swears that he is not absorbed in the endless pursuit of wealth, and he's not putting his trust in gold.

He's actually spending the entire chapter defending his innocence against the temptation to abuse or consolidate worldly power. So here is our massive summary takeaway. Job didn't take a vow of chastity.

By making a covenant with his eyes not to inquire after a *betula*, Job was actually taking a vow against the obsessive pursuit of prestige. He's basically saying, I am so content and so absolutely unwilling to abuse my massive wealth to build a giant status-boosting harem that I won't even let my eyes look around for a new bride. I am not even on the prowl.

This completely changes our entire understanding of the verse. It goes from being a rule about sexual ethics to being a really profound statement on the ethics of power. Which leaves us with a pretty massive question to ponder today.

Dr. Walton's close reading of the Hebrew proves that by ignoring cultural context and grammatical precision, we completely inverted the meaning of a very famous text. So if we misread Job 31.1 this deeply, literally forcing our modern sexual categorizations onto an ancient text about power and prestige, what other ancient texts are we filtering through our modern lens? Like what else do we think we perfectly understand that actually requires a much, much closer look? Definitely something to think about. Keep your eyes open, guys.

Thanks so much for joining me for this explainer, and keep seeking the truth behind the text.