

# JOB 31: A PERSONAL INTEGRITY AS AN ETHICAL EPITOME

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**Abstract:** Job 31 is one of the passages of the Old Testament that has aroused the interest of researchers both from a linguistic and theological point of view, as well as from an ethical perspective. Being part of the last soliloquy (chapters 29-31), this chapter represents the petition submitted by Job to God (Job 31:35) in order to receive a response to his tragic and perplexing situation. If in the book's prologue the description of Job is summed up in the words: *There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil* (Job 1:8), in his last answer, Job, without knowing anything about heavenly dialogue, exemplifies in detail God's description before the heavenly council. Job 31 is an ethical epitome both as system of moral values described in the text, and as a moral example offered by a person.

**Keywords:** *Job, wisdom literature, moral values, motivation, integrity, ethics, ethical epitome*

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## **Introduction**

Job's book is an open window to the understanding of the great controversy stake between good and evil. Thus, even in the beginning of the book, Satan comes before God claiming, indirectly, as being representative of our world, but God has someone among men as His representative on earth. Job is presented in the first verse of the book as being "blameless and upright", and also that "he feared God and shunned evil." This succinct, but comprehensive description of Job's character is the same that God Himself presented before Satan (1:8; 2:3). Satan claims that Job's

righteousness is due to preferential God's favor to him. Thus, pointing to Job, in fact Satan accused God. This perspective is somehow expressed through the words of Job's friends in the poetry section. Accusing Job, they followed the same tendency of Satan's accusations.

In the last answer which Job gives to his accusers (the chapters 29-31), he presents himself especially, what he had and what he was. It is exactly what the prologue of the book tells us about him (1: 1-2). The high level of Job's social, moral and spiritual statute from prologue is presented by himself in a vivid picture of the chapter 29. But notwithstanding of this excellence of life, his situation became a tragical one. And this is pointed in chapter 30, following exactly the same line as in the prologue: first, it was prosperity, and in the next moment, tragedy. Finally, in chapter 31, Job seems to present his moral character to his friends, but first of all, this is a soliloquy which is presented to be heard by God (31:35).

Beyond the oaths and self-imprecations, the reader could easily discover the moral values of the individual who presents his behavior in the light of his motives and his inner attitudes. Edwin Good, for the first time in the history of interpreting this chapter, supports the idea that Job 31 contains "an ethical system,"<sup>1</sup> and Mays notes that in addition to external actions, this chapter presents "inner attitudes and principles of ethical thinking."<sup>2</sup> Roehrs and Franzmann see in Chapter 31 a proof of consciousness through "complete self-research,"<sup>3</sup> and Clifford considers Job to declare his own virtue, presenting himself to the court as a "hero without equal in terms of motivation or manner."<sup>4</sup> Also, Smith asserts that the sins listed in this chapter do not constitute "monstrous crimes, but minimal deviations from the highest standards of ethics and piety."<sup>5</sup> Although some commentators see the actions and the attitudes about which Job declares that he did not manifest them, as representing precisely those facts and thoughts that culture has supported throughout

1 Edwin M. Good, *Job 31 in Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job*, Roy B. Zuck (ed), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 335.

2 J. L. Mays, *Harper's Bible commentary* (Job 31:1, electronic edition). (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1996).

3 W. H. Roehrs and M. H. Franzmann, *Concordia self-study commentary*, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, Vol. 1, 1998) 327-328.

4 Richard J. Clifford, *The Wisdom Literature. Interpreting Biblical Texts*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 86.

5 J. E. Smith, *The wisdom literature and Psalms*, (Job 31:1-40, electronic edition), (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing) 1996.

history,<sup>6</sup> however, “the ethical content of Job’s confession, with the emphasis placed on motivation (cf. 1, 2, 24, 25, 33, 34) and the inner attitude (v. 1, 7, 9, 26, 27, 29, 30), is unique and without any parallel until the Sermon on the Mount of Jesus (Matt. 5-7).”<sup>7</sup> Reyburn<sup>8</sup> sees chapter 31 as an end to Job’s arguments, from the perspective of “a series of oaths of innocence,” by which he defends his own integrity. And for Davis,<sup>9</sup> it is “Job’s peroration” that points to “the most comprehensive expression of his original understanding of integrity.” From Gray’s point of view,<sup>10</sup> the chapter presents an exemplary Job in terms of justice, hospitality and trust in God. Also, according to Knowles,<sup>11</sup> it is “an amazing statement about the moral values manifested by Job in personal life, in public and social life, as well as in matters of a sexual nature.” From this general perspective, our research question is: Could the integrity code in Job 31 be considered an ethical epitome? By epitome we mean either a person who is a perfect example in a particular field, or a summary of a written document.

First of all, I will pursue a general view of the text, accustoming better to the passage, trying to sketch an outline, and also, a chiasmic structure of Job 31. Then I will point to the tension between oaths and moral values of chapter 31. Finally, I will observe the integrity value in the general context of the book.

#### ACCUSTOMING TO THE TEXT

Chapter 31 begins with the expression of the covenant that Job established with himself, regarding the moral purity. Then there are some questions to God, following the same tone of his precedent hazy issues of an unfinished “why?”. Beginning with verse 5, until the end of the chapter, there is a series of oaths, that alike sheds light and dark, hope and distress. Thus, the oaths interfere with the self-imprecations. There

6 Edwin M. Good, Job 31 în *Sitting with Job: Selected Studies on the Book of Job*, Roy B. Zuck (ed), (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), 339.

7 E. D. Radmacher, Allen, R. B. and House, H. W., *The Nelson study Bible: New King James Version* (Job 31:1, electronic edition), (Nashville, TN: Nelson Publishers, 1997).

8 William D. Reyburn, *A Handbook on The Book of Job*, United Bible Societies, NY, 1992, 558.

9 Ellen F. Davis, Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith, în Stephen L. Cook, Corrine L. Patton și James W. Watts (eds.), *The Whirlwind. Essays on Job, Hermeneutics and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 2001, 103.

10 Mark Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, T&T Clark International, New York: NY, 2006, p. 237.

11 A. Knowles, *The Bible guide*, Augsburg books, Minneapolis, MN, 2001, 227.

are sixteen oaths which are introduced by the “if” conjunction (*im*), and then for every oath there is one or more self-imprecations. In the end of every section of the chapter, Job shows what kind of result would have had a wrong conduct, if he had lived accordingly to the acts presented in every oath. Beyond the oaths and self-imprecations there is a moral - spiritual mirror of Job. Thus, in his self-investigation, Job is a man having pure thoughts (31:1), honesty (31:5), he is led by firm principles, and not sinful passions (31:7), loyal to his family (31:9), benevolent to the needy ones (31:16-21), true worshiper (31:24-27), compassionate, or gentle (31:29-32), ready to confess his sins or mistakes (31:33-34), and fair in his affairs (31:38-40).

Also, we can observe that there are five sections of this chapter. It begins with the inner morality (31:1-12). The second one is about the extern conduct, which is characterized through the attitude regarding to the neighbor (31:13-23). Then, it is about worship (31:24-28). The fourth one is again about the relation with the neighbor (31:29-34) and finally, we find a last request before God, sustaining his righteousness. Keeping all these in our mind we may indicate an outline of the chapter.

### *Job 31- an outline*

#### **I. The inner moral state: Job and himself (31:1-12)**

- A. The covenant ban contracted between Job and himself (31:1)
- B. Perplexity regarding to the source of his suffering (31:2-4)
- C. First oath: falsehood (31:5)
- D. First self-imprecation: God is invited to judge him (31:6)
- E. The second oath: right guidance (31:7)
- F. The second self-imprecation: emptiness of the life (31:8)
- G. The third oath: fidelity to family (31:9)
- H. The third self-imprecation: losing the wife and the riches (31:10)
- I. The divine sentence: all is lost (31:1-12)

#### **II. The external moral state: Job and the others (31:13-23)**

- A. The fourth oath: mistreatment to the servitors (31:13)
- B. In God’s court: equality (31:14-15)
- C. The fifth until the eight oath: compassion to the needy (31:16- 21)
- D. The fourth self-imprecation: disintegration (31:22)
- E. The motifs of the acts: based on who God is (31:23)

**III. The spiritual state: worship (31:24-28)**

- A. The ninth until eleventh oath: false worship, idolatry (31:24-27)
- B. The divine sentence: disloyalty to God (31:28)

**IV. The external moral state: Job and the others (31:29-34)**

- A. The twelfth oath: attitude in thought and words (31:29,30)
- B. The thirteenth oath: attitude in acts (31:31,32)
- C. The fourteenth oath: attitude to sins, mistakes (31:33,34)

**V. Job's defense signed: Job before God and others (31:35-40)**

- A. The defense is signed: waiting for God's answer (31:35-37)
- B. The fifteenth oath: the earth judgement (31:38)
- C. The sixteenth oath: honesty (31:39)
- D. The fifth self-imprecation: Adam's curse (31:40)

This outline helps us to see a certain order in Job's defending. He appeals to God's court for justice in terms of his own innocence. Thus, we could observe that he begins with the internal life, basing his pleading on the fact that behind his acts there are pure motifs and thoughts. The next step is characterized by the depiction of his relation with the neighbor, in the very center of the chapter being expressed his attitude in worship to God. In the fourth section there are other dimensions of his conduct to men, and finally, he insists on waiting for God's answer, ending his pleading with the request that if he is guilty, then God should curse his soil like in Adam's case.

*The chiasmatic structure of Job 31*

The precedent outline of Job 31 may suggest a certain similitude among the main sections, which could be rendered in form of a chiasmatic structure. This will help us to understand better the issues of the text, focusing on Job's moral-spiritual conduct. Also, its center and its climax could represent the essence of his pleading before God. Thus, its schedule is the next one:

- A. Job and his inner life: integrity (31:1-12)
- B. Job in relation with the others: compassion (31:13-23)
- C. Job in relation with God: true worship, only God is my God (31: 24-28)
- B'. Job in relation with the others: compassion (31:29-34)
- A'. Job and his environment: integrity (31:35-40)

This perspective clearly shows us Job's final decision, state and conception, just before God's glory was to reveal in the chapters 38-41. In this chapter, both the inner moral-spiritual state, and the external one are openly presented by the man who is without answer to his dismal experience. Motifs and actions, feelings and words, attitudes and thoughts are investigated by the man who truly was God's representative on earth, just before the Almighty (31:35) was ready to pronounce His sentence: Job "has spoken right," and he is "My servant" (42:7).

#### JOB 31: OATHS AND VALUES?

Crenshaw points to Job 31 as being "the highly informative passage that is the most problematic in the wisdom literary corpus."<sup>12</sup> The same author has compared it, regarding the defense of Job's ethical, with a moral code nearly to the one, which is found in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>13</sup> So, Job 31 is something like a mixture between lightness and darkness. Maybe the darkness is due to Job's language related to the multitude of the oaths, but also to his mysterious and unsolved drama.

#### *Job 31 and its oaths*

How should we see the oaths and self-imprecations? Is Job wrong in these aspects? We could answer these questions from two perspectives. Firstly, the procedure was well known in the ancient jurisprudence.<sup>14</sup> Biblically speaking, a crime could be disowned by calling down a curse on oneself if one committed it.<sup>15</sup> It looks like the *lex talionis* (Exod 22), or other biblical examples (Num. 5:11-31; 1 Sam. 12:3; 1 Kgs. 8:31-32; Ps. 7:3-5). In the ancient Israel there was a custom or law that required anyone who claimed to be innocent, when he was accused of a crime, to go to the sanctuary and take the oath of innocence. Also, because of disobedience, Israel was to receive the curses predicted by God's word (Deut. 28).

The second perspective is given by some similarities with the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* and the *Code of Hammurabi* from

<sup>12</sup> James L. Crenshaw, *Old Testament Wisdom*, (London: John Knox Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Francis I. Andersen, *Job, An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1976), 238.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

Mesopotamia.<sup>16</sup> Both Andersen and Crenshaw have solved the issue sustaining that Job's words are directed to God's court and not Job or other human being have to apply the justice, but God is the One who "weighs his heart."<sup>17</sup>

Personally, I see that the issue has to be placed in the context of Job's whole drama. Thus, in the beginning, in the dialogue between God and Satan, the evil one says that Job will curse God, but here Job doesn't curse either God or himself. He says that only "if...", then the curse may fall upon him. We could see, in this chapter, that the self-imprecations are versus Job's self-investigation. The purity of his thoughts, motifs, actions, and words is the evidence of someone who knows himself well. Job not only declares his innocence, but he also presents his inner thoughts and attitudes, which are more difficult to be detected, reflecting upon his high standards toward unseen sins.

I also think that Job answers through these oaths to his friends, who think that his tragical situation is because of his sins. He considers that if he did something wrong, then there are other more fitted God's penalties for his sinful actions.

Thus, it seems to me as an appropriate view, which is according to the general direction of Job's thinking. He does not know why it happened to him, but he sees himself as unguilty, and thus, if God should punish him for his iniquities then there are other more suitable penalties than those which his friends prescribed to him (Job 5:2-5; 8:12-22; 15:20-23; 20:4-16 etc.).

#### *Moral values in Job 31*

After I have tried to offer a perspective on Job's oaths and imprecations, I will sketch what chapter 31 tells us about moral values. The biblical wisdom is defined, according to Crenshaw,<sup>18</sup> as practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world, based on experience. Job 31 even if not exclusively so, represents wisdom ethics.<sup>19</sup> In this context, the negative declarations of Job 31 could be positively expressed from humanistic point of view that *virtue is its own reward*. But from the biblical perspective, Job

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16 M. H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, translation, and notes*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 227.

17 Crenshaw, 7, and Andersen, 238.

18 Crenshaw, 9

19 *Ibid.*, 15.

31 is one of the strongest witnesses that “the fear of the Lord is wisdom” (Job 28:28), and Job is the evidence of how this wisdom has acted upon his character. So, Job 31 is a description of how “the fear of the Lord” is expressed in the daily life. Concretely, taking the outline and the chiasmic structure into account, we try to point out the main moral values, which could emerge from the passage:

- a) Total loyalty to God (31:24-28);
- b) Life led by principle, not by lust (31:1- 4);
- c) Honesty, first in the heart and then in action (31:5,6);
- d) Consistency on the purity way (31:7,8);
- e) Fidelity to the family vow, both in thoughts, and in acts (31:9-12);
- f) Social justice (31:13-15);
- g) Compassion to the needy ones (31:16-22);
- h) Love to the enemies manifested through thoughts and words (31:29-30);
- i) Love to the neighbor manifested through generosity, and hospitality (31:31-34);
- j) Honesty in affairs and to the environment (31:38-40).

According to these values, Job 31 is more than a description about the moral values of a man, it is par excellence about a human model of integrity. The foundation of the true integrity is totally based on the loyalty to God.

There is an order of the steps toward the true integrity. Firstly, the personal level: integrity or purity manifested through clean desires, thoughts, motifs, attitudes, feelings, and acts. Secondly, the ingredients of the first step are related to the relationship with the neighbors: family members, the needy ones, the enemies, and the strangers. Thirdly, the behavior of a man of integrity is a blessing for the earth and its inhabitants.

### *Job 31 between Sinai and the Mount of Blessings*

Being included “within sapiential ethics,”<sup>20</sup> and known as “Job’s code of ethics,”<sup>21</sup> Job 31 is found as an accomplishment of two biblical ethics codes.<sup>22</sup> Anyhow, before we pursue the connection among them, we have

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20 Crenshaw, 9

21 Crenshaw, 7

22 Ibid.



to emphasize that Job's code springs from his own experience, as a personal assimilation of these principles.

The theologians have presented the fact that there is a correlation between Job 31 and the Decalogue.<sup>23</sup> But also, as we have seen, according to Crenshaw, there is a link between Job 31 and the sermon on the Mount of Blessings. Therefore, we try to point out the links between Job 31, the Decalogue, and Jesus' sermon from Matthew 5-7, showing the major themes and supporting them with the biblical references:

- a) God has to be God: He has to be the first One, and the creatures have to worship to Him only: Job 31:24-28 and Exod 20:2-11; Matt. 6:33;
- b) Firm principles against the sensuality temptation, both in terms of thinking and of acts: Job 3:1,9 and Exod. 20:14; Matt. 5:27-32;
- c) Not a life led by lust (sensual or material things): Job 31:7-9,24,25 and Exod 20:17; Matt. 5:27-32; 6:19-24;
- d) Honesty, Sincerity in words and acts: Job 31:5,30,33,39 and Exod 20:15,16; Matt. 5:33-37.
- e) Love to the neighbor, no matter if he is someone from your house, a stranger, or an enemy: Job 31:13-21,29-32 and Exod 20:12,13; Matt. 5:21-26,38-48.

Viewing these striking parallels between Job 31 and the two ethics codes, we can say that Job is the character that weaves in his conduct the letter of the moral code with love of God, He who is the Spring of these moral principles. So, the ethical model proposed by Job 31 is sprung from God and consists of total loyalty to Him. Therefore, the biblical ethics doesn't consist of an abstract system of axioms, but it is transformational, strengthening the one who assimilates and applies it to his life.

*Job's integrity in the context of the entire book*

Job 31 represents Job's own answer to the question: Who is he from moral point of view? In the prologue of the book, God's description about Job is that he is unique on earth (Job 1:8;2: 3). Thus, according to Job 1:8; 2:3, he is a) God's servant; (עבדִי); b) a blameless (תם) man; c) an upright (ישר) man; d) one who fears God (אלהים ירא); and e) one who shuns evil (מרע)

<sup>23</sup> M. Oeming, "Hiob 31 und der Dekalog", in *The Book of Job* (W.A.M. Beuken, ed., Leuven University Press, 1994), 362-368.

טו). In spite of the awful first drama (Job 1:13-19), Job still holds fast to his integrity (בתמתו מהזיק), and this is God's very conclusion. After Job's second trial, in which he is afflicted by Satan with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the crown of his head (Job 2:7), although God is silent, the conclusion is pronounced by Job's wife in the same terms, even if she does it from different reasons: you still hold fast to your integrity (Job 2:9).

In the poetic sections, the general trend of speeches is given by Job's friends accusations, on the one hand, and his own defending, on the other hand. The virtues from the prologue are disputed by Job's fellows one by one. Thus, according to Eliphaz, if Job had been blameless (תם), he wouldn't have been punished by God (Job 8:20). Also, he considers that those who are upright (רשׁי) cannot ever be destroyed (Job 4:7), and he contests Job's fear of God (ארי מיהלא), mocking it (Job 4:6). Job defends himself along his speeches, sustaining his blamelessness (Job 9:21), uprightness (Job 23:7), departing from evil and his fear to God (Job 28:28). All these characteristics confirm God's concretely description about Job's moral character: he holds fast to his integrity (קייזחמ ותמתב). In this context, Job decided (Job 27:5) to defend his integrity (המת), and he will do it in chapter 31, asking God's evaluation upon it (Job 31:6).

Although he does not know the source of his distress, Job presents to his accusers both his behavior and the intentions and motivations behind his actions. Job's motifs, thoughts, words, and acts are emerged from the conscience that God is the Almighty One who knows all and only He can judge justly and solve his mysterious tragedy (31:4,6,35). Thus, Job's integrity, as it is expressed in the prologue, is met along the speeches sections, and it is explained and developed in chapter 31. So, Job 31 reveals not only a moral code, but a character that has imbibed those moral principles from the text. This is a detailed summary that completes the integrity picture started in the prologue. We can say that Job 31 is an ethical epitome both as system of moral values described in the text, and as moral example offered by a person.

## Conclusions

In chapter 31, both the inner moral-spiritual state, and the external one, are openly presented by the man who is without answer to his

dismal experience. Motifs and actions, feelings and words, attitudes and thoughts are investigated by the man who truly was God's representative on earth, just before the Almighty One (31:35) was ready to pronounce His sentence: Job "has spoken right," and he is "My servant" (42:7).

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