

Exegetical Brief: Genesis 38:8-10 – Is the Sin of Onan Applicable to Birth Control in General?

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There is no question that Onan practiced birth control and that he incurred the anger of the LORD. The question is whether the sin of Onan should be equated with birth control in general and whether the practice of contraception should therefore generally be regarded as something displeasing to the LORD.

The duty that was placed on Onan by his father Judah is stated in verse eight:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאוֹנָן בֹּא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶחָיו
וַיְבִיחַ אֵתָהּ וַיְהַקֵּם יָרֵעַ לְאֶחָיו:

8 Then Judah said to Onan, “Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfill your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.”

Judah was committing his son to a levirate relation to Tamar, the childless widow of Onan’s elder brother Er. Judah’s basic command and purpose are clear. The use of the verb **יָבַח** is limited to this verse and Deuteronomy 25:5-9 and clearly refers to the establishment of a relationship between a widow and her deceased husband’s brother for the primary purpose of producing offspring for the dead brother.

There are some intriguing questions that surface with this parental command. One has to do with the origin of what has become known as the “levirate law” (so named from the Latin word for husband’s brother). This event preceded the covenant code articulated in Deuteronomy 25 by about 400 years and indicates that the later Mosaic stipulations reflected a pre-existing practice whose source is not revealed in Scripture. All that we can say is that the Lord may have given this precept in oral form or through a non-canonical written source prior to inspiring Moses to record it in Deuteronomy. So this is a case reminiscent of Noah’s recognition of what constituted “clean” and “unclean” animals (Gn 7:2ff.) long before these categories were defined in writing for God’s people (Lv 11, Dt 14). Despite our uncertainty regarding the source of the practice commanded, there is no doubt that it was understood by Onan and intended to bind his conscience. His disregard for this parental injunction was considered rebellion against the Lord.

The question has also been asked whether the mandated sexual relationship for the purpose of procreation constituted the establishment of a marriage bond. While any argument based purely on these verses must be drawn largely from silence, the vocabulary used in Dt. 25 seems to speak of a marriage rather than simply a siring procedure. Since the gender-neutral word “seed” (יָרֵעַ) is used here, it has also been asked if a daughter as well as a son would suffice to preserve the dead brother’s name and family line. Actually, the same question can be asked about the term “firstborn” (בְּכוֹר) used in Dt. 25:6. The emphasis on the child being the firstborn is clear while its gender requirement is less clear. The eventual clarifications given in connection with Zelophehad’s daughters (Nu 27, 36) made this a moot question.

In verse nine the response of Onan to his father’s command and the motive for his behavior are revealed in a straightforward manner.

וַיֵּדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יִהְיֶה הַיָּרֵעַ וַיִּהְיֶה אִם־בָּא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֶחָיו
וַיִּשְׁחַת אֶרְצָהּ לְבִלְתִּי נָתֹן־יָרֵעַ לְאֶחָיו:

9 But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so whenever he lay with his brother’s wife, he spilled his semen on the ground to keep from producing offspring for his brother.

The explicitly revealed rationale for Onan's actions is his understanding that the "seed" that would result from his union with Tamar would not belong to him but would belong to his brother. This point is actually stated twice in this one verse, first negatively by saying the child would not be his (לֹא לּוֹ יְהִיָּה הַנֶּזְרַע) and then positively by clarifying that the procreating would be giving seed to his brother (נָתַן-נֶזְרַע לְאָחִיו). This is the clearly defined plan that was not acceptable to Onan.

The manner chosen by Onan to keep from fulfilling his duty has been labeled *coitus interruptus* and here consists of sexual intercourse deliberately interrupted by withdrawal of the penis from the vagina prior to ejaculation. In doing this Onan "ruined" or "destroyed earthward" (שָׁחַת אֶרֶץ), that is, he allowed his semen to spill on the ground and be ruined or wasted. The frequent modern identification of "Onanism" with masturbation is therefore inaccurate if the reference is to Onan's original conduct, despite the "wasting" of semen in both cases.

This behavior, furthermore, was not an isolated incident. The use of אָז with the perfect carries the idea of frequent past occurrences, here indicating Onan repeatedly "went in to his brother's wife" (אָז-בָּא אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ). Reflecting this same understanding, the LXX rendered this phrase with ὅταν εἰσήρχετο πρὸς τὴν γυναιῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ. This point is brought out well by the NIV's translation, "whenever he lay with his brother's wife." Onan did not openly disobey his father's command, but repeatedly pretended to obey. Whether or not he fooled Judah we cannot say. We do know he did not deceive the Lord.

וַיֵּרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיָּמַת גַּם-אֵתוֹ:

10 What he did was wicked in the LORD's sight; so he put him to death also.

The insertion of "also" (גַּם) is understood by some to mean more than that Onan copied his older brother Er in fatal wickedness, but that he duplicated the same kind of wickedness. The thought would be that both brothers misused Tamar and the marriage bed and both paid the same price for their deeds. This idea, however, is not clearly stated in the biblical text. The precise nature of Er's evil is not revealed (Gn 38:7).

The severity of the punishment has led many to ask what was involved in "what he [Onan] did" (אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה) that was so wicked to merit the death penalty. Was it simply a matter of his unwillingness to produce progeny on behalf of his brother, or was more involved? The penalty later linked to a failure to fulfill the levirate duty is limited to public shame (Dt 25:8-10; see Ruth 4:7-8). Through the centuries interpreters have suggested a number of plausible opinions in this matter. Here are prominent examples:

- Onan's disobedience of a clear parental command was a demonstration of contempt for his father and the Lord whom the father represented. As later reflected in explicit stipulations (e.g., Ex 21:15,17, Lv 20:19, Dt 27:16), this was a most serious matter.
- Onan's deceptive manner of frustrating the purpose of the levirate relationship compounded his guilt. His conduct was especially reprehensible since it was hypocritical, a flagrant disobedience with a repeated appearance of obedience.
- Onan's low regard for progeny reflected a low regard for the patriarchal messianic promise as well. To intentionally hinder the possible production of the "woman's seed" (Gn 3:15) exposed the man's rejection of The Promise. (Luther even expressed the opinion that Tamar's later intercourse with Judah was "prompted by faith" and the hope to "receive from Judah the promised Redeemer.")
- Onan's motive was greed and the materialistic hope to inherit in brother's estate. This assumes that the later Mosaic inheritance laws (Nu 27:8-11) reflected practices that were already prevalent among the patriarchs.
- Onan's conduct was a demonstration of selfish sensuality at the expense of marital duty, for he desired the pleasures of sexual activity but despised spousal as well as parental responsibilities normally connected with it. (The Midrash, keying off Tamar's name, theorized Tamar was especially

beautiful and “stately as a palm tree,” and that Onan wanted selfishly to preserve her beauty by keeping her from difficulties related to motherhood. Luther declared it “a most disgraceful crime to produce semen and excite the woman, and to frustrate her at that very moment.”)

- Onan’s action was a rejection of the primary natural and legitimate purpose of marriage, namely, the procreation of children. Anyone who deliberately frustrates this primary goal of marriage commits a sin that is in itself shameful and intrinsically worthy of divine judgment.

The majority of interpreters settle on a combination of such moral offenses to explain how Onan’s conduct warranted his punishment. We should state clearly that we are not called on to “justify the ways of God to man” and demonstrate that the punishment was appropriate for the crime committed. This was ultimately God’s decision and reflected his perfect justice. Still, for self-examination purposes, there is some value in considering the explanations offered in this list. Our purpose now is to focus specifically on the last one listed, the one that sees Onan’s sin as that of practicing contraception regardless of possible motivations that lay behind it. Those who advocate this position usually base their conclusion on two major arguments, one exegetical and one theological.

Exegetically, opponents of the practice of contraception point to the statement that “what he did” (אֲשַׁר עָשָׂה), not what he possibly intended, was wicked in the Lord’s eyes. Their point is that the only thing the text describes Onan doing is ruining his semen and avoiding conception. To separate motive and relevant circumstances from “what he did,” however, is not exegetically tenable. The general phrase אֲשַׁר עָשָׂה occurs 191 times in the Old Testament and sometimes assumes a link between the action itself and the motive or circumstance related to it. The same words are used to denote what Ham did in seeing and announcing his father’s nakedness (Gn 9:24), what David did in marrying Bathsheba (2 Sam 11:27), and what Eliashib did in providing lodging for Tobiah (Neh 13:7). The actions themselves, seeing and talking about a naked parent, taking a wife, or showing hospitality to someone, are not morally deficient in themselves, but motives and attendant circumstances in these examples made the actions displeasing to the Lord. And since the motive behind Onan’s actions as well as the deceptive manner of practicing contraception are revealed in the immediate context (verse 9), it is not inappropriate to take this into consideration in defining “what Onan did.”

Theologically, those who equate the sin of Onan with contraception in general see the procreation of children as the primary if not the only legitimate purpose of marital intercourse. While motives might vary, therefore, the activity itself would remain unacceptable. On the basis on passages like Gn 1:28, 9:1, Ps 127 and 128, we concur that propagation is very much a part of God’s normal purposes for marriage and that children are distinct blessings from God. We would also maintain, however, that passages like Gn 2:18, 24, Ec 9:9, Sol 4:1-7, 5:10-16, 1 Co 7:1-6, and 1 Pe 3:7 also speak to this issue. Companionship, sexual satisfaction, and mutual helpfulness are also purposes in marriage and are legitimate ends in themselves aside from the production of children. Also, we observe that this event concerning Onan is properly viewed as descriptive rather than prescriptive, and to make it normative for marital life in general is inappropriate. One searches in vain for a biblical stipulation forbidding birth control as such. Despite the many sexual regulations in the later Mosaic code, for example, nothing is said on the subject, not even about the practice of what is likely the oldest form of preventing conception, namely withdrawal.

Does this mean, then, that the account of Onan has nothing to say to us about the practice of contraception? Actually, we believe it has a great deal to say to us despite the fact that it is not an indictment of contraception as such. Here the truth stated in Pr 16:2, 21:2, and 1 Co 4:4-5 is dramatically demonstrated, namely, that motive cannot be separated from activity and motives are weighed by the Lord. With the widespread use of birth control, the issue of motive can too easily be forgotten. The practice of contraception remains unacceptable when it stems from greed, selfishness, unbridled sensuality, loveless self-gratification, or a despising of God’s gift of children. In short, birth control in itself is not sinful, but becomes sinful when used for sinful purposes.