

The Sin of Onan:- “NOT about contraception!”

Written by K B Napier

Wednesday, 05 October 2016 21:11

Some think the ‘sin of Onan’ was masturbation. Not so! Some think it was to do with contraception. Not so! His sin was to defy God’s command. The result was his death. The account of this ‘Levirate marriage’ is in Genesis 38:4-10 and is called *yibbum*.

Onan/’Ownan (‘strong’) was the second son of Judah. His elder brother, Er, married Tamar, but the couple did not have children. Er was wicked, so God put him to death. Because the marriage was childless, according to Hebrew requirements, Judah commanded his son, Onan, to “raise up seed to (his) brother”.

He dutifully married Tamar and they had sexual activity. But, against Judah’s command, he did not fulfil his obligation to make Tamar pregnant. Instead of allowing his seed to go into Tamar, he “spilled it on the ground”, because he did not want to sire a child in his brother’s name.

Judah had given the command because it was *God’s* command. When God saw that Onan defied Him, He put him to death, leaving Judah with the youngest son, Shelah. So, neither Er nor Onan were in the line of the Messiah. Judah did not ask Shelah to marry Tamar instead.

The purpose of this Hebrew code of marriage is also found in other nations that have strong clan connections. It keeps the nation strong and focused on real bonds, avoiding birth of children from outside the nation. It finds its form in Deuteronomy 25:5,6, which adds that a brother’s name is thus retained and not “blotted out of Israel”.

The significance of the command was that the first child to be born as a result of *yibbum* was counted to be the legitimate heir to the dead brother’s estate and line. It is quite possible that Onan resented this peculiarity of inheritance and wanted his own child, or even himself, to inherit. Another significant fact is that as the deceased brother was Er, the first-born to Judah, any child born first when Onan did what was necessary would receive a double inheritance, thus reducing Onan’s inheritance greatly, even though he was now the husband of Tamar.

However, under ancient Hebrew law, Onan could have elected to refuse the marriage by undergoing a ceremony called *halizah*, which symbolically rejected the marriage of a brother to his dead brother’s wife. In this ceremony, the widow would remove a shoe from her

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brother-in-law, in the presence of tribal/town elders. This simple act meant the widow could marry whomever she wished. If this simple ceremony was not undertaken, then whoever married the widow would be called an adulterer. (There is more to this ceremony). It seems there was a gradual slide away from yibbum in favour of halizah, but I am unsure whether or not Onan was under the law of halizah at that time.

The way Rome has twisted this sin to be contraception is nonsense, because it is not in accord with the actual scriptural evidence. Of course, it is in Rome's interest to stop contraception, because each child born to a Catholic couple is counted to be Catholic! Thus, Rome 'backdated' its meaning to apply to Onan, as an excuse to ban contraception. But, this is a deliberate abuse of the text.

The real point of all this is that Onan defied his father's (and God's) demand for him to continue his dead brother's lineage, by marrying, and giving a child to Tamar. Thus, the 'sin of Onan' was the sin of defiance against God's command.

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