

THE SIN OF ONAN: IS IT RELEVANT TO CONTRACEPTION?

By John F. Kippley

In early 2006 a teacher of natural family planning had an unfortunate exchange with a well-known American priest. She was upset because this priest who defends the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* criticized her use of the Onan account (Genesis 38: 6-10) to uphold the anti-contraception teaching of the Catholic Church, and she asked for my comment. In my subsequent contact with this priest, he noted first that neither Pope John Paul II nor the Catechism of the Catholic Church use the Onan text to explain or defend this teaching. His second reason is that “a large majority of priests would see a theological argument with the Onan account as almost a mark of ignorance of how to interpret Sacred Scripture. They would reject such an argument almost out of hand. Even if these priests are wrong, the argument would be ineffectual and defeat the purpose of the argument.” He might have added that most of these priests use the *New American Bible* that footnotes Gen 38: 9-10 as not applying to the birth control issue.

This was a familiar line of thinking. In 1968 when I was writing *Covenant, Christ and Contraception* (Alba House, 1970), I was aware of the tendency to interpret the Onan account in a way that saw his sin *only* as a violation of the ancient near eastern custom of the Levirate. I thus visited the library of the St. Paul Seminary the week after Thanksgiving and searched the periodical indexes for articles that would explain the shift from the anti-contraception interpretation to the Levirate-only interpretation. I found none, so I phoned one of the seminary priests who taught Scripture and asked him for the references that I couldn't find. His response: “We just don't DO things that way anymore.” In short, there were no new discoveries relating to the text; the revised interpretation was simply part of the pro-contraception atmosphere that permeated theological studies at the time, an interpretation of expedience.

(Within a few days, I also visited with Bishop James P. Shannon. When he asked me what I was doing, I told him I was writing a book to defend and explain *Humanae Vitae*. A slight smile crossed his face, but I didn't have the presence of mind to ask him why he smiled. Just a few days previously, on November 23, he had written a letter resigning from the episcopacy because he did not believe the teaching of that encyclical. A few weeks later he married a thrice-divorced woman. He died August 28, 2003, apparently reconciled with the Church but with no apologies or retractions.)

Apparently the theological milieu of the 1960s is still with us, and the questions remain: Is the Onan account relevant to Catholic teaching on birth control? Do those who use it in this way subject themselves to embarrassment and perhaps ridicule for being theologically ignorant? I went on another search, first using the old-fashioned way at another seminary library, then using the modern way that uses internet databases and search engines.

My library search yielded a Levirate-only note in the 1968 revised edition of the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, of which the general editors were Roland E. Murphy, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Raymond E. Brown. In their 1990 edition, the words were changed but the Levirate-only interpretation remained. While I recognize that these men are renowned in biblical scholarship, my personal experience with Fr. Brown leads me not to accept his opinions as authoritative. Back in the summer of 1966, about the time when he would have been working on this commentary, I was privileged to attend a week-long evening course on modern biblical research conducted by Father Brown. One evening he was discussing the human knowledge of Jesus. He did not commit himself to any particular position, but it was clear that he was leaning heavily to the proposition that Jesus did not have humanly expressible knowledge of his divinity until after his resurrection. Fr. Brown would take written questions, so at the break of this two or three hour session, I wrote this question: "If Jesus did not have humanly expressible knowledge of his divinity until after his resurrection, how do you explain the words of the institution of the Eucharist?" He read the question to the class of about 300 adult students and replied, "I have never thought about that." That said volumes. Here was a Sulpician priest who was presumably celebrating Mass each day and saying the words of institution, and yet he had never thought about what those words said about the self-consciousness of Jesus. That's utterly amazing. It told me that there can be a vast difference between biblical scholarship and understanding the meaning of the text. Biblical scholarship acquaints the scholar with what everyone else is saying about the subject. That it may have nothing to do with actually understanding the text is illustrated by this experience. I remain grateful to Father Brown for having the humility to say what he did; it was an eye-opener for me.

My web-based search found no articles by Catholic theologians arguing for a Levirate-only interpretation of the Onan account. On the other hand I found a number of website references to articles upholding the anti-contraception interpretation. The most frequent references were to articles written by Fr. Brian Harrison, OS, S.T.D., who teaches

theology at the Pontifical Catholic University in Ponce, Puerto Rico, and he unambiguously affirms that the sin for which Onan received the death penalty was his practice of withdrawal and spilling his seed.¹ Professor William May of the John Paul II Institute in Washington recently affirmed the anti-contraception interpretation in an article where he referred to the textual analysis by Fr. Manuel Miguens that I will quote later on.²

When I explained the results of my research to the priest who counseled against using the Onan account, he said he would check with a friend who was a scripture scholar. A few weeks later, he replied that his scholar friend had noted that the sin for which Onan was slain by God was not his violation of the Levirate because the punishment for that is described in detail in Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, an embarrassment but far from the death penalty. He then went on as follows. “Onan died for an unnatural act. But, here is the rub: my friend confirmed that no one knows what the unnatural act was: it could be almost anything from spilling the seed on the ground to some kind of homosexual activity. No one knows and that is why it is not used.” I replied that by such an application of textual agnosticism, we might say that we just don’t know why Judas hung himself; it could have been despairing remorse for being a traitor, or it could have been an overwhelming migraine headache, or it could have been an unhappy homosexual liaison; we just don’t know. One agnosticism is just as absurd as the other.

Such textual agnosticism is an improvement over the self-assured but erroneous Levirate-only interpretation, but it highlights the prejudice against using the Onan account to uphold traditional Christian teaching against unnatural forms of birth control. Perhaps another examination of the text and the controversy can help to reduce that prejudice. First, what do the text and the context tell us? Second, when someone defends and explains Catholic teaching against contraception, does a failure to refer to the Onan account signify a repudiation of that text as helpful?

A. Let us look first at the text and context. The 38th chapter of Genesis interrupts the story of Joseph who, in chapter 37, had just been sold into slavery in Egypt and whose story is continued in chapter 39. In chapter 38 we learn about one of Joseph’s brothers, Judah, who married a Canaanite woman who bore him three sons, Er, Onan, and Shelah. As the years passed, Judah gave Er as husband to Tamar. “But Er, Judah’s first-born was wicked in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD slew him.” The text does not say what form of wickedness was fatal for Er.

With his first son dead, Judah then complied with the ancient near-eastern custom called the law of the Levirate that called for the brother-in-law of a childless widow to perform the marriage act with the widow and to raise up children who would be considered to be his brother's, thus keeping alive that family line. In the culture that existed at the beginning of biblical history, he could have his own wife to carry on his own line. Here is the text in the RSV/CE translation:

Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." But Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so when he went in to his brother's wife he spilled the semen on the ground, lest he should give offspring to his brother. And what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he slew him also. Then Judah said to Tamar, his daughter-in-law, "Remain a widow in your father's house, till Shelah my son grows up"—for he feared that he would die, like his brothers. So Tamar went and dwelt in her father's house.

The text continues with the story of how a veiled Tamar played the role of the harlot with Judah, who loaned her his signet until he could provide payment, and thereby conceived twin boys, one of whom continued the line from Abraham to Joseph in the genealogy of Matthew's gospel. Then, as the pregnant Tamar was about to be burned by the order of Judah, she produced the signet and revealed that Judah was the father of the boys. He acknowledges the signet, spares Tamar, and confesses, "She is more righteous than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah" (38:26).

What is the meaning of the text? How should it be interpreted? The first rule of biblical interpretation is that a text must be considered in itself. In the case at hand, the key sentence is, "What he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD, and he slew him also." Second, the text must be interpreted in the immediate context of the entire account, namely, all of chapter 38. Third, it must also be seen in the wider context of other biblical condemnations for violations of the law of the Levirate. Fourth, the text needs to be interpreted in the context of related teaching. Fifth, but not least, the text must be seen in the context of the Church's traditional teaching over the centuries, lest a person think that the Holy Spirit became operative only today in his guidance of the Church.³

1. Biblical scholar Manuel Miguens has pointed out that a close examination of the text shows that God condemned Onan for the specific action he performed, not for his anti-Levirate intentions. He notes that the translation “he spilled his seed on the ground” fails to do full justice to the Hebrew expression. The Hebrew verb *shichet* never means “to spill” or “waste.” Rather, it means to act perversely. The text also makes it clear that his perverse action was related toward the ground, not against his brother. “His perversion or corruption consists in his action itself, not precisely in the result and goal of his act . . . In a strict interpretation the text says that what was evil in the sight of the Lord was what Onan actually did (*asher asah*); the emphasis in this sentence of verse 10 does not fall on what he intended to achieve, but on what he did.”⁴

2. In the context of the entire chapter, Genesis 38, it is clear that Onan is only one of three persons who violated the Levirate. We have seen above that Judah admitted his fault in violating the Levirate, and Shelah also was guilty because he should have assumed the Levirate duty when Judah failed in his responsibility. When three people are guilty of the same crime but only one of them receives the death penalty from God, common sense requires that we ask what that one did that the others did not do. The answer is obvious in this case: only Onan engaged in the contraceptive behavior of withdrawal; only Onan went through the motions of the covenantal act of intercourse but then defrauded its purpose and meaning.

3. The traditional anti-contraception interpretation is reinforced by the wider context of the Bible. The law of the Levirate and the punishment for its violators are spelled out in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. An aggrieved widow could bring the offending brother-in-law before the elders; if he still refused to do his duty, she could “pull the sandal off his foot, and spit in his face, and she shall answer and say, ‘So shall it be done to the man who does not build up his brother’s house.’ And the name of his house shall be called in Israel, The house of him who had his sandal pulled off” (9-10). Embarrassing, but hardly the death penalty. Note also that Deuteronomy has no qualms about the death penalty for sexual sins: chapter 22: 22-25 prescribes death for adultery and rape.

4. The text must be interpreted in the context of the rest of the Bible’s teaching about love, marriage, and sexuality. It can be stated without fear of contradiction that the teaching against unnatural forms of birth control is in perfect harmony with the biblical teaching against sexual immorality including sodomy, fornication, and adultery. On the other hand, it is admitted by pro-contraception dissenters that the acceptance of marital

contraception entails the logical acceptance of every form of sexual behavior between consenting adults. Or, at the least, dissenters can find no natural law basis for proscribing such behaviors, only pragmatic grounds such as health or immediate social consequences.⁵ The “logic” of contraception cannot say a firm NO to anything that is mutually agreeable. As secular humanist Walter Lippmann wrote in 1929, “the central confusion has been that the reformers have tried to fix their sexual ideals in accordance with the logic of birth control instead of the logic of human nature.”⁶

5. The way in which the Church has understood the Scriptures throughout the centuries is the most important part of interpretation, and there is no question that the anti-contraception interpretation of Genesis 38 has been *the* interpretation over the centuries. St. Augustine wrote: “Intercourse even with one’s legitimate wife is unlawful and wicked where the conception of the offspring is prevented. Onan, the son of Judah, did this and the LORD killed him for it.” Pope Pius XI quoted Augustine in this way in *Casti Connubii*, the 1930 encyclical in which he reaffirmed the Christian Tradition shortly after the bishops of the Church of England accepted marital contraception.

In summary, the text itself offers no support for a Levirate-only interpretation, and there has been an almost universal tradition that the sin for which Onan received the death penalty from God was his sin of contraceptive behavior.

B. Does the “argument from absence” count against using the Onan account to uphold Catholic teaching against marital contraception? That is, if one or more Popes wrote about the birth control issue but did not refer to the Onan account, does that indicate that he or they thought it was imprudent or theologically incorrect to quote Scripture in this way? The short answer is “No.” Logic tells us that we can’t prove a negative. By extension, no one can prove that non-use of a text means that the non-user thought it was erroneous or imprudent to use that text.

In addition, while Pope Paul VI did not directly quote the Onan account or Augustine, he did so indirectly when he referred to *Casti Connubii* at the end of section 11 of *Humanae Vitae*. In this case, he may have avoided direct reference because of the theological milieu of the day in which any use of “proof texts” for almost any subject met with a negative reaction. I wish he had quoted both Genesis 1: 28, “...be fruitful and multiply...” and Genesis 38: 9-10 quoted above. Ordinary Christians want to know what God has said in the Bible about these important aspects of family life. The words of

Sacred Scripture are more powerful than our philosophical and theological reasoning. The fact that Paul VI didn't quote them says nothing at all about the value of both texts to the discussion of birth control, natural family planning, and contraceptive behaviors.

What about Pope John Paul II? The priest whom I mentioned at the start of this article noted that his opposition was based on the fact that "John Paul II never used the Onan account and that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not use it anywhere. The omission of the Onan account from these fundamental documents of the Church indicates to me that there is some dispute about what it means. Of course, this is the common opinion of Scripture scholars—even those who are more traditional in their approach."

As stated above, a negative doesn't prove anything. That leaves us with speculation. In my opinion, the reason that neither John Paul II nor the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* referred to the Onan account is that both are making positive statements rather than showing examples of sins, and reference to the sin of Onan simply didn't fit well. The Pope carried on an extensive argument in a positive manner about the significance of the marriage act. He wrote and talked about the nuptial meaning of the body, the marriage act as a renewal of the marriage covenant, and the need for the attitude of self-gift. Reference to the sin of Onan would have been a distraction. He would have had to explain the law of the Levirate, the concept of carrying on the family line that was part of the near eastern culture in the time of the patriarchs, and how the violation was described in Deuteronomy, etc. That explanation would have raised further questions about polygamy and whether the brother doing his Levirate duty could have another wife to carry on his own line. All of that is material for apologetics and theology texts, but it was not necessary in the sort of teaching documents he wrote to exhort spouses to fulfill their obligations as Christian married couples and to help them experience the joy that comes only from discipleship. An alternative speculation would be that both Paul VI and John Paul II were told by their advisors that the preponderance of modern biblical exegetes favored a Levirate-only interpretation of the Onan account and that its use might be questioned. To avoid an additional problem, they avoided using the text. All of this is speculation.

In short, we simply do not know why these Popes did not do something. Our ignorance will be relieved only if they journalized their thoughts and such writing is some day made public. What we *do* have is a text that the author was inspired by the Holy Spirit to write and to interject into the story of Joseph. The sacred author could have told us that Onan

was slain by God without giving any behavioral reasons, as he did with the death of Er. Or he could have had them both die suddenly without describing God as the active agent, as in the story of the seven husbands of Sarah (Tobit 7:11). What the sacred author actually did was to relate that Onan was slain by God for his behavior that was both contrary to the Levirate tradition and was deliberately contraceptive. In the light of Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, respect for the context as well as for the literal meaning of the text shows that Onan's contraceptive behavior was his capital offense. The text reveals God's extreme displeasure with contraception, and it thus illustrates why there cannot be any widespread renewal within the Church without a rebirth of chaste marriage that rejects contraceptive behaviors and embraces children as gifts from the Lord.

The absence of the sin of Onan from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is similarly explained. It is much briefer in its treatment of marriage and sexuality than the documents it quotes, and its quotations are selective. The *Catechism* (n. 2370) quotes from *Familiaris Consortio* in teaching that contraceptive behaviors are dishonest, but it strangely omits the direct quotation from *Humanae Vitae* in which Paul VI teaches that contraceptive behaviors are "intrinsically dishonest" (last sentence of n. 14). The omission means nothing. For another example of failing to use a striking personal sin to make a point, consider the *Catechism's* treatment of fraud. In section 2409, it describes the sin and gives four scriptural references. Yet it entirely omits any reference to the most spectacular biblical punishment for the sin of fraud—the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira in *Acts* 5: 1-11. So what are we to make of this lack of reference to the account in *Acts* 5? Exactly nothing. The *Catechism* is a catechism, not an apologetics text, and the same is true of the absence of reference to the Onan account.

In summary, the Onan account is an important part of the Christian Tradition against contraceptive behaviors. Claims that Onan was slain by God simply for his violation of the law of the Levirate are not sustained by the text itself and are further disproved by the text of Deuteronomy 25: 5-10. The anti-contraception interpretation of the text was reflected by St. Augustine and confirmed by Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*. Its absence in the documents of John Paul II and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* simply reflects the efforts of those documents to transmit Catholic teaching about love and marriage in a positive way.

While I was writing this article, I was able to discuss it with Father Dwight Campbell, a regular contributor to this journal. He noted that his pastoral experience shows that

people want to know what God has told us in the Bible about love and sexuality. The first commandment of the Bible, “Be fruitful and multiply” (RSV/CE), is positive and powerful in its call to generosity in the service of life. Fr. Campbell uses the NAB translation, “Be fertile and multiply” and points out that “using contraception or getting sterilized renders one infertile—while NFP leaves fertility intact.” The story of Onan is negative, and it teaches in a powerful way “how seriously God regards violations of his order regarding marital relations.” We ought not to censor the word of God. We need to share his word with his people. To which I say, Amen.

¹ Brian Harrison, OS, PhD, “Onan’s Real Sin,” *This Rock* (8:4) April 1997; “The Sin of Onan Revisited,” *Living Tradition* (67), November, 1996.

² William E. May, PhD, “Curran’s attack on John Paul II rebutted,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (CVI: 6) March 2006, 8-16.

³ Much of this analysis is abbreviated from Chapter 17 of the author’s *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*, Ignatius Press, 2005.

⁴ Manuel Miguens, “Biblical Thoughts on Human Sexuality,” *Human Sexuality in Our Time*, ed. George A. Kelly, St. Paul Editions, 1979, 112-15.

⁵ Michael F. Valente, *Sex: the Radical View of a Catholic Theologian*, Bruce, 1970. “Likewise, there is no difference between using the condom and *coitus interruptus* or any of the other so-called sins prohibited under the [traditional natural law] doctrine, such as masturbation, homosexuality, and bestiality,” p. 126.

⁶ Walter Lippmann, *A Preface to Morals*, Macmillan, 1929; reprinted 1982 and 1999, Transaction Publishers, 306.

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