

The Sin Of Onan

Genesis 38:1-5 [NIV] *“At that time, Judah left his brothers and went down to stay with a man of Adullam named Hirah. There Judah met the daughter of a Canaanite man named Shua. He married her and lay with her; she became pregnant and gave birth to a son, who was named Er. She conceived again and gave birth to a son and named him Onan. She gave birth to still another son and named him Shelah. It was at Kezib that she gave birth to him.”*

Shua gave Judah three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah.

Genesis 38:6-7 [NIV] *“Judah got a wife for Er, his firstborn, and her name was Tamar. But Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the LORD’s sight; so the LORD put him to death.”*

Er married a woman named Tamar but Er was a wicked man, we are not told exactly what he did but the Hebrew word used means good for nothing, to spoil or break to pieces, moral depravity and corruption.

Showing God’s justice in taking Er’s life to stop him influencing others.

Genesis 38:8 [NIV] *“Then Judah said to Onan, ‘Lie with your brother’s wife and fulfil your duty to her as a brother-in-law to produce offspring for your brother.’”*

Why was Onan told to do this?

Deuteronomy 25:5-10 [NIV] *“If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel. However, if a man does not want to marry his brother’s wife, she shall go to the elders at the town gate and say, ‘My husband’s brother refuses to carry on his brother’s name in Israel. He will not fulfil the duty of a brother-in-law to me.’ Then the elders of his town shall summon him and talk to him. If he persists in saying, ‘I do not want to marry her,’ his brother’s widow shall go up to him in the presence of the elders, take off one of his sandals, spit in his face and say, ‘This is what is done to the man who will not build up his brother’s family line.’ That man’s line shall be known in Israel as The Family of the Unsandalled.”*

This was a statute to ensure that the name and inheritance that is linked to the family name.

This law was called the levirate law, meaning “*husband’s brother.*”

Any children of this marriage were counted as children of the first husband who died.

Onan took his brother’s wife, but refused to have a child by her, because any child he had by Er’s wife would have primary inheritance as children of the firstborn male in the family of Judah.

Onan was breaking the law and expressing greed and selfishness, this is why God took Onan’s life, to put an end to this flow of wickedness within the family, but it was deep-rooted.

These verses do not pass any judgement on birth control as such.

The motive behind this action and the attitude towards the law was the sin.

Genesis 38:11 [NIV] *“Judah then said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, ‘Live as a widow in your father’s house until my son Shelah grows up.’ For he thought, ‘He may die too, just like his brothers.’ So Tamar went to live in her father’s house.”*

This was the continuation of the same law, but the youngest son was **not** yet old enough to conform.

Judah's fear that this young son would also die as his elder brothers, could well be because of the wicked influence of his Canaanite wife Shua.

Judah's lack of integrity resulted in family strife and deception.

Genesis 38:12-18 [NIV] *“After a long time Judah's wife, the daughter of Shua, died. When Judah had recovered from his grief, he went up to Timnah, to the men who were shearing his sheep, and his friend Hirah the Adullamite went with him. When Tamar was told, ‘Your father-in-law is on his way to Timnah to shear his sheep,’ she took off her widow's clothes, covered herself with a veil to disguise herself, and then sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah. For she saw that, though Shelah had now grown up, she had not been given to him as his wife. When Judah saw her, he thought she was a prostitute, for she had covered her face. Not realising that she was his daughter-in-law, he went over to her by the roadside and said, ‘Come now, let me sleep with you.’ ‘And what will you give me to sleep with you?’ she asked. ‘I'll send you a young goat from my flock,’ he said. ‘Will you give me something as a pledge until you send it?’ she asked. He said, ‘What pledge should I give you?’ ‘Your seal and its cord, and the staff in your hand,’ she answered. So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she became pregnant by him.”*

The trail of broken laws and sin continues.

Judah did not at first perceive the fraud, but discovered it after a long course of time.

When Shelah had grown up, finding herself deceived, Tamar turned her thoughts to revenge. Her plan was base, and unworthy of a modest woman, and by a blind error of mind she hurried into another sin, not less detestable than adultery, incestuous intercourse.

Genesis 38:19-26 [NIV] *“After she left, she took off her veil and put on her widow's clothes again. Meanwhile Judah sent the young goat by his friend the Adullamite in order to get his pledge back from the woman, but he did not find her. He asked the men who lived there, ‘Where is the shrine-prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?’ ‘There hasn't been any shrine-prostitute here,’ they said. So he went back to Judah and said, ‘I didn't find her. Besides, the men who lived there said, “There hasn't been any shrine-prostitute here.”’ Then Judah said, ‘Let her keep what she has, or we will become a laughing-stock. After all, I did send her this young goat, but you didn't find her.’ About three months later Judah was told, ‘Your daughter-in-law Tamar is guilty of prostitution, and as a result she is now pregnant.’ Judah said, ‘Bring her out and have her burned to death!’ As she was being brought out, she sent a message to her father-in-law. ‘I am pregnant by the man who owns these,’ she said. And she added, ‘See if you recognise whose seal and cord and staff these are.’ Judah recognised them and said, ‘She is more righteous than I, since I wouldn't give her to my son Shelah.’ And he did not sleep with her again.”*

Tamar waited till she should be demanded for capital punishment, for then she would have stronger grounds for exploitation.

The book of Ruth shows that this law of levirate extended farther than the husband's brother, [**Ruth 4:1-11**].

As we have seen, the real sin in Judah's family was a trail of broken laws, starting by his marriage to a woman from a pagan tribe through his sons and his daughter-in-law.

These sins are the reason for the wrath of God, the spilling of Onan's spilt semen was **not** the sin, but the wicked minds and actions of all the family including the daughter-in-law, Tamar.