Just What Was the Sin of Onan
by Donald L. Goddard

Much has been written and said about the sin of Onan, but because the account that we find in Genesis 38 contains reference to sex, much of what has been said is simply wrong and/or distorted. If you asked most people of most religions that make reference to the Bible, if they even recognize the name Onan at all, they will probably say that the sin of Onan was masturbation. It would be hard to be farther from the truth. If we look into the Bible we will find that the account of Onan says nothing about masturbation, but it surely says much about disobedience, fraud and greed.

As a starting point it would be best to go to the Bible and read the account in Genesis 38:

2 And Judah saw there a daughter of a certain Canaanite, whose name was Shuah; and he took her, and went in unto her.
3 And she conceived, and bare a son; and he called his name Er.
4 And she conceived again, and bare a son; and she called his name Onan.
5 And she yet again conceived, and bare a son; and called his name Shelah: and he was at Chezib, when she bare him.
6 And Judah took a wife for Er his firstborn, whose name was Tamar.
7 And Er, Judah’s firstborn, was wicked in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD slew him.
8 And Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother’s wife, and marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother.
9 And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; and it came to pass, when he went in unto his brother’s wife, that he spilled it on the ground, lest that he should give seed to his brother.
10 And the thing which he did displeased the LORD: wherefore he slew him also.

The remainder of the chapter recounts how Judah failed to fulfill his promise to Tamar and how she eventually tricked him into fathering her twin sons.

Just to show how far this story has been twisted by some religions of the world, I was told by a man who had been given a religious upbringing in one sect known for its strictness that this story showed that “It is better to leave your seed in the belly of a whore than to spill it on a stone”, or that masturbation is a worse sin than fornicating with a whore.

To shed some light on this above account consider the following:
1st. Judah had 3 sons Er, Onan, and Shelah
2nd The firstborn son of Judah was Er and Onan was second in line.
3rd Judah was exercising something known as the “levirate law” when he ordered Onan to marry Er’s widow. Note that the levirate law has nothing to do with Levi or the tribe of Levi, A dictionary’ will show that this term comes from the Latin word “levir” which means “husband’s brother”. Sources such as The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary’ and Gill’s Notes indicate that the levirate law was a practice common to the cultures of that time and place.

The levirate law is explained in the book of Deuteronomy in chapter 25 :
5 If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger: her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her.

The key issue here being that the firstborn was to inherit a double portion of his father’s estate. The family responsibilities of the firstborn which were related to that double portion are not mentioned here, but the key point is that the firstborn’s portion was to be double.

Since Judah had 3 sons, his estate would have been divided into 4 portions on his death and Er would have received 50% and Onan and Shelah 25% each. With Er dead, Onan was the firstborn and there were only 2 sons. Therefore there would be 3 portions and Onan would receive 2 of them or 67% of his father’s estate, a 42% increase in inheritance not to mention status, etc. That this matter was on Onan’s mind is shown by Genesis 38 verses 8 and 9:
8…. marry her, and raise up seed to thy brother.
9 And Onan knew that the seed should not be his; …

Obviously the child would have been his in the sense that he fathered it, so the significant sense in which the child would not be his appears to be what can

2 The Interpreter’s One Volume Commentary of the Bible, © 1971, Abingdon Press
3 The New John Gill’s, Exposition of the Entire Bible. All Rights Reserved, Larry Pierce,Winterbourne,Ontario

This law appears to have still been in use at the time of Christ as attested by Matthew 22:24 (and the parallel scripture Luke 20:28):
Mt 22:24 Saying, Master, Moses said, If a man die, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother.

But there is another law that comes into play in this story. That law pertains to the inheritance of the firstborn. The pertinent portion of that law may be found in Deuteronomy 21:17 where a man who has taken a second wife that he favors more than his first wife is enjoined from failing to give his firstborn the inheritance that is due.

De 21:17 But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.

The "levir" which means "husband’s brother" comes from the Latin word "levir" and the term is generally used to refer to the brother of a deceased husband who marries the widow to perform the duties of the deceased husband. The levirate law was a practice common to the cultures of that time and place, and it was understood that the child produced by their marriage would be the firstborn son of the deceased husband, thus ensuring the continuation of the family line and the inheritance of the family estate.

It is important to note that the levirate law was intended to protect the rights of the firstborn son, who was entitled to a double portion of the family estate. The law was designed to ensure that the firstborn son would inherit a portion of the estate that was twice as large as the portion that would be received by one of the other sons.

The levirate law was a practice common to the cultures of that time and place, and it was understood that the child produced by their marriage would be the firstborn son of the deceased husband, thus ensuring the continuation of the family line and the inheritance of the family estate.

The remainder of the chapter recounts how Judah failed to fulfill his promise to Tamar and how she eventually tricked him into fathering her twin sons.
be seen from Deuteronomy 25:6 above. The child would inherit in the name of Er and would receive the double portion!

Well, if Onan did not care for the arrangement or for Tamar, could he just have refused to marry her? The answer appears to be yes. If we look at the codification of this levirate law as found in Deuteronomy 25 right after stating the requirement of the law, the escape clause is given starting in Deuteronomy 25:7

7 And if the man like not to take his brother's wife, then let his brother's wife go up to the gate unto the elders, and say, My husband's brother refuseth to raise up unto his brother a name in Israel, he will not perform the duty of my husband's brother.

8 Then the elders of his city shall call him, and speak unto him: and if he stand to it, and say, I like not to take her;

9 Then shall his brother's wife come unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot, and spit in his face, and shall answer and say, So shall it be done unto that man that will not build up his brother's house.

10 And his name shall be called in Israel, The house of him that hath his shoe loosed.

As can be seen, not fulfilling the requirement of the levirate law was possible but it carried with it a great deal of stigma and loss of prestige. The manner in which this was practiced may be familiar to those who remember the passages from the story of Ruth; Ruth 4:5-10

5 Then said Boaz, What day thou buyst the field of the hand of Naomi, thou must buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance.

6 And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to my self; for I cannot redeem it.

7 Now this was the manner in former time in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning changing, for to confirm all things; a man plucked off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbour: and this was a testimony in Israel.

8 Therefore the kinsman said unto Boaz, Buy it for thee. So he drew off his shoe.

9 And Boaz said unto the elders, and unto all the people, Ye are witnesses this day, that I have bought all that was Elimelech's, and all that was Chilion's and Mahlon's, of the hand of Naomi.

10 Moreover Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of Mahlon, have I purchased to be my wife, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance, that the name of the dead be not cut off from among his brethren, and from the gate of his place: ye are witnesses this day.

So when Onan was faced with his dilemma, what was Onan’s response? He fraudulently went along with the idea of raising up seed to his brother by having sexual relations with his brother’s widow, but he spilled his seed. He was going to pretend to obey his father, and fulfill the levirate law, defraud Tamar, by pretending to be her “husband” which would prevent her from marrying another and deny her a chance to have children, and he would far more than double his inheritance. All the while, he would keep his prestige intact.

As to the matter of Onan’s sin being all about the act of spilling his seed rather than his motivations in all this, one need only look into Leviticus 15:16-18. As with all matter of bodily fluids and maintaining a clean living environment the matter of spilled semen is dealt with, particularly Lev 15:17:

17 And every garment, and every skin, whereon is the seed of copulation, shall be washed with water, and be unclean until the even.

Spilled semen is merely something that is to be properly cleaned up, not a matter for the death penalty! Today we would observe that any bodily fluids can potentially carry contagious diseases and we regard them as something to be properly cleaned up.

So is the sin of Onan all about sex? No it is primarily about disobedience, greed, fraud and hypocrisy!