



---

## **Exegetical Study of Genesis 38: 8-10 and the Question of Contraception**

*Edward OyetundeAdeloye*

PhD Candidate, Adeleke University, Ede, Nigeria

[tunnyadeloy76@gmail.com](mailto:tunnyadeloy76@gmail.com)

Orchid: [0000-0002-9375-3460](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9375-3460)

---

### **ABSTRACT**

Genesis 38: 8-10 remains the major text that is used by many in the ecclesiastical circle to discuss the issue bothering on contraception. In fact, a section of the Christian denomination has read the text through a contraceptive lens and using it to prohibit any form of artificial contraception, arguing that Yahweh killed Onan for practicing coitus interruptus. This paper is burdened with the task of doing an exegetical study on Genesis 38:8-10 in order to discover whether or not the text should be read through a contraceptive lens. This paper adopts as its method historical-grammatical method to discover the contextual meaning of some purposively selected keywords from the text. The paper argues that Onan was killed for violating the levirate marriage agreement and not for practicing coitus interruptus. Hence, Genesis 38: 8-10 should not be used as a proof-text to prohibit any form of contraception.

Keywords: Widow, Levirate Marriage, Contraception, Coitus Interruptus, Exegesis

---

### **1. Introduction**

Today, the question of contraception is not a strange phenomenon in many homes and perhaps in all social gatherings at large. In the ecclesiastical circle it is often marked by two ideological positions: the Conservative view and the Liberal view. While the Conservatives hold the position that all forms of artificial contraception are morally and spiritually wrong, the Liberals on the other hand argues that nothing is morally or spiritually wrong with it provided such methods are not abortifacient in nature (Ongesa and Mwangela, 2019:54-60). It should be understood that before 1930, all Christian denominations were doctrinally against the use of artificial contraception, seeing it as being associated with promiscuity and adultery. However, the Anglican Bishops' Conference of 1930 held in Lambeth marked a turning point in the way the Church viewed contraception. At this conference, the Anglican Bishops gave a public approval for contraception in marriage provided it is done according to the Christian principle (Racoczy, 2016:2). Today, it appears that the Roman Catholic Church is the only Denomination still upholding this historic teaching even when other Churches are changing from this traditional position (Ongesa and Mwangela, 2019). The Roman Catholic teaching position on artificial contraception believes that the nature or the purpose of sex in marriage is for bonding and procreation hence, artificial contraception works against the procreative nature of the sexual embrace, which is conception. If the procreative act is therefore split from the bonding act, it means the purpose of sex within the marriage bound has been defeated (Alar, 2021). Many scholarly works have been done to support and challenge this position. Scholars like Kalo Broussard (2021), Martin Rhonheimer (1989:20-57), Kelvin O'Reilly(2019:221-236), and Toni Saad (2021) have argued in support of the Roman Catholic position that God orders sexual powers towards procreative and unitive purposes, and that the two purposes should not be split. Conversely, the likes of Matt Perman(2006), William LeiMaire (2016:2065-2069), and Cosmas Ongesa et al (2019) do not see anything morally wrong with artificial contraception, with the argument that both natural and artificial methods of contraception work for the same end, which is pregnancy prevention, and call on the Vatican to revisit its position. While there are no Biblical passages which explicitly or implicitly make reference to contraception especially as it is in modern reproductive health, Genesis 38: 8-10 remains the major Biblical passage that is always referred to whenever the question of contraception is discussed. The proponents of anti-artificial contraception always argue that Yahweh killed Onan for practicing coitus interruptus, which in modern reproductive health is referred to as "artificial contraception."

Whether Onan's coitus interruptus is "natural" or "artificial" is not the major concern of this paper. The crux of this paper is to examine through an exegetical study of the text whether that act should be seen as a contraceptive act as it is in the modern contraception. Should this text be used to condemn artificial contraception as it is being advanced by the Conservatives? This paper adopts a historical-grammatical

method as a platform to understand the authorial intent of the text.

## 2. Exegetical Analysis of Some Keywords in Genesis 38: 8-10

An exegetical study of some words in Genesis 38 is necessary for proper understanding of the text as well as situating the narrative in its proper context. The entire paper rests on the presupposition that Tamar's predicament within her levirate marriage is not unconnected with Onan's violation of the levirate law through a practice of coitus interruptus, which in reproductive health is called contraception. Consequently, an exegetical examination that will be carried out under this section will focus majorly on some key words in verses 8-10. After the death of Er, Judah commanded his second child to marry Tamar, the deceased widow and provide offspring for the late brother. Rather than fulfilling this obligation, Onan refused to make Tamar pregnant. This attracted Yahweh's anger and he was killed. Some scholars have attributed Onan's death to his contraceptive practice in which he spilled his semen on the ground. This school of thought uses this text as a proof-text to prohibit artificial contraception within the marriage bound (Armstrong, 2017). The question that is germane now is whether the major problem in this text is that of contraception or a breach of agreement which bound Onan together with Tamar. A good look at the Genesis 38: 8-10 will suffice:

8 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאוֹנָן בְּאֵלֶי-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲחִידָה וַיִּבְמָה אֶתְהָ אֶתְהָ וְתִקַּם זֶרַע לְאִחִידָה׃  
 9 וַיִּגְדַע אוֹנָן כִּי לֹא לוֹ יִתְּנָה תַגְרָע וְהָיָה אִם-יָבֵא אֶל־אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲחִידָה וְשָׂחָת אֶרְצָהּ לְבַלְתִּי נַתְּרוֹ-זֶרַע לְאִחִידָה׃  
 10 וַיִּרְעַע בְּעֵינָיו יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיִּמָּת גַּם-אִתּוֹ׃

*Then Judah said to Onan, "Go in to your brother's wife, and perform your duty as a brother-in-law to her, and raise up offspring for your brother." And Onan knew that the offspring would not be his; so it came about that when he went in to his brother's wife, he wasted his seed on the ground, in order not to give offspring to his brother. But what he did was displeasing in the sight of the LORD; so He took his life also, (NAS).*

### 2.1 וַיֹּאמֶר (way-yo-mer)

The phrase וַיֹּאמֶר comes from אמר (amar) verb qalwaw consecutive imperfect 3rd person masculine singular, which is translated as "to say, speak, say to one self, intend, and command." When the ו particle conjunction prefixes the verb (amar), it reads way-yo-mer, meaning "and he said, spoke, or commanded" (Harris et al, 1981:118.0). Looking at the word אמר in the context of the Judah-Tamar narrative in Genesis 38, having lost his first son Er to an undisclosed wickedness, Judah was forced by the existing culture of levirate institution in the Ancient Near East to see to it that his second son, Onan took over the responsibility of producing an heir for his late brother. Hence, Judah commanded (אמר) his son to marry the widowed Tamar: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאוֹנָן (and Judah commanded Onan... Genesis 38:8). The levirate marriage appears to be customarily in force in the cultural setting in which the Judah-Tamar narrative was written. This would explain why Onan could not raise any objection when Judah, his father gave that order (Sahgal, 2012).

### 2.2 וַיִּבְמָה (we-yabbam)

וַיִּבְמָה (we-yabbam) is a phrase that comes from the verb piel imperative masculine singular יִבְמָה yabbam. The verb is used in Genesis 38 verse 8 with ו particle conjunction. This denominative verb basically means taking up the duty or responsibility of marrying the widow of one's brother who died without a male child for the main purpose of raising a seed for the dead brother. The root of the verb is possibly a piel denominative verb derived from the noun yabam, which means brother-in-law, but which built its distinctive detail from the brother-in-law's role in the levirate marriage law (Harris et al). The verbal root of this word only appears in the Hebrew Bible in two different instances (Harris et al); the first one is in Genesis 38 while the second one is in Deuteronomy 25. In the first context, which is Genesis 38, יִבְמָה is used by Judah to compel his son, Onan to marry Tamar, his brother's widow and produce an offspring for him, who would continue his lineage and inherit his property. In this regard, Onan was to have sexual intercourse with Tamar to fulfill this responsibility. This clarified rule in Genesis 38 is referred to as the levirate marriage law.

This law, which was codified in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, was meant to enable a man who died in Israel without a child (most especially a male child) have a child posthumously, who would build his household and ensure that his property was preserved in his name. It should be noted that this law of יִבְמָה was only enforced in the event that a man died without a male child. By this law, the first male child from this arrangement was considered the deceased brother's regardless of the fact that the child was produced by proxy (Meyers, Craven and Kraemer, 2000:198). The essence of this arrangement was to ensure that the property belonging to the deceased brother was retained within the family and that the widow was adequately taken care of by the son raised by proxy. Because a widow was legally forbidden from remarrying outside her late husband's family (Shagal, 2012), "...Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and perform your duty as her brother-in-law, and raise up seed to thy brother" (Genesis 38: 8). It appears that the main purpose of yabbam was not for marriage but for raising an offspring who would perpetuate the name of the deceased. Onan was therefore under obligation to perform that duty and nothing less.

### 2.3 זֶרַע (zera)

The word זֶרַע (zera) is noun common masculine singular absolute; it is used 224 times and it is referred to in the Old Testament as sowing, seed or offspring. The word is used in four major semantic ways. One, it is used for the period of planting; two, it is used to refer to the seed that is sown or the outcome of what is planted. Three, it refers to seed as semen, and four, the seed as in the promised offspring in the line of

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Harris et al, 1981:582a). In Genesis 38, עָרַע is used to denote 'seed' as semen and it only applied here to a male offspring who the levirate culture expected the Onan to raise for his late brother, Er. Robert Alter (1981:2-22) submits that male children were highly valued in a patriarchal family setting like the one under review because they were seen as the perpetuators of the family name and inheritors of the family properties. Hence, the responsibility placed on Onan's shoulder was וְרָעָה לְאִתְּיָךְ ("and raise a seed for your brother"). In other words, he was expected to secure his brother's name by giving him עָרַע (a male child) through his union with Tamar (Olanisebe and Oladosu, 2014).

#### 2.4 אִם-בְּבֹא (im-bba)

אִם-בְּבֹא (im-bba) is a combination of אִם particle conjunction and בֹּא verb qal perfect 3rd person masculine singular. אִם can be translated as 'if' used in a condition that is capable of being fulfilled (Holladay, 2000:586). בֹּא (bô) is the fourth most commonly used in the Old Testament and it is used about 2570 times to mean to "go, enter a house, arrive, or to die." It is also used to describe sexual relations between the opposite sex. Its antonym is 'y'f, meaning to go 'out,' while its synonym is 'h'lak,' which means to 'go out' (Harris et al, 1981:212.0). The combination of אִם with בֹּא verb qal perfect can be translated as 'whenever.' In this same way, the LXX interpreted אִם-בְּבֹא εἰσῆρχετο, meaning 'whenever he goes in to her' (Thayer, 2000:3867). By this exegesis, אֹנָן (Onan) is presented as repeatedly performing the same act of coitus interruptus every time he slept with תָּמָר (Tamar): אִם-בְּבֹא אֶל-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֹנָן (whenever he went in to the wife of his brother, Gen 38:9).

#### 2.5 שָׁחַט (shahat)

שָׁחַט (shahat) is verb pielwaw consecutive 3rd person masculine singular, which means to destroy or corrupt (Harris et al, 1981:2343.1c). The verb שָׁחַט appears only three times, and is used to refer to dishonour or moral harm. It is, perhaps, an additional form of שָׁחַט, which has the same interpretation. שָׁחַט is translated as pit, destruction, corruption, grave. The LXX translates שָׁחַט with words for "corruption or destruction" eleven times, "death," five times, and "pit" three times in the areas where a verb 'dig' is associated (Harris et al, 1981). The narrator in Verse 9 of Genesis 37 leads the reader into the mind of Onan that because he knew that the offspring which would result from his union with Tamar would not be reckoned in his name but in the name of his deceased brother, Er. In order to guide against producing a child that would not be called his own, Onan שָׁחַט (destroyed) the semen by spilling it on the ground each time he slept with Tamar (Mathewsson, 1989).

#### 2.6 אֶרֶץ ('eres)

אֶרֶץ ('eref) is noun common feminine singular absolute directional heh which appears about 2400 times in the Old Testament. Specifically, אֶרֶץ is the fourth word that is most frequently used in Old Testament; it appears about 22 times in the Aramaic sections (Harris et al). אֶרֶץ is used in the Old Testament to denote the earth, the land of Israel or piece of land or on the ground (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1907:863) as it appears in Genesis 38:9. Onan engaged in withdrawal of the male organ every time he slept with Tamar, thereby destroying the semen by spilling it on the ground - וְשָׁחַט אֶרֶץ לְבִלְתִּי נָתַתִּי וְאֶרְעָה לְאִתְּיָךְ. Certain section of the church has used this passage as a proof-text to condemn artificial contraception, with the submission that God condemns all forms of contraception that is not open to procreation (LeMaire, 2016:2065-69).

#### 2.7 עָרַע (wayyera±)

עָרַע (r<sup>1±a±</sup>) is a verb qalwaw consecutive imperfect 3rd person masculine singular homonym, which is originally translated as evil, or bad. The denominative verb, cognate adjectives of the root 'r' feature in Akkadian 'raggu' which means evil or bad, and Phoenician 'karatepe' which is translated as 'evil men' or 'the evil' (Brown et al, 1907:941). When the ו particle conjunction prefixes עָרַע (r<sup>1±a±</sup>), it is pronounced עָרַע (wayyera±). Onan's failure to fulfill the purpose of levirate marriage by making Tamar pregnant was עָרַע in the sight of Yahweh (עָרַע עֵינֵי יְהוָה), and because Yahweh was against this evil deed, Onan was punished by death (Saad, 2021).

#### 2.8 גַּם-אֶתּוֹ (gam-eto)

גַּם (gam) as used in Genesis 38 is a particle conjunction, which is translated as "again, but, even, alike, in like manner." גַּם is a particle which appears in over 750 places denoting addition (Holladay, 2000:1592). Most times גַּם is repeated in a sentence while it is sometimes ignored in English translation (Harris et al, 1981:361a). גַּם is used with (et) particle direct object marker suffix 3rd person masculine singular homonym ל. אֶת is a particle in Hebrew that has no translation. However, it was initially used to denote 'degree,' a translation which later lost its value as the language developed. When אֶת is attached to a word, it lays emphasis to such word (Harris et al, 1981:186.0). In other words, אֶת is used to put greater emphasis on גַּם as it is presented in Genesis 38: 10 גַּם-אֶתּוֹ (gam-eto). Verse 10 of Genesis 37 reads that Yahweh put Onan to death for his wicked act which the narrator tries to record in the text. Earlier in verse in verse 7, Yahweh had put Er to death for an evil deed that was so great to have warranted death penalty. In verse 10 however, the narrator makes use of גַּם particle conjunction to let the reader know that Onan committed an act that was as wicked as the one committed by his elder brother, and Yahweh killed him גַּם-אֶתּוֹ (also or just as the brother was killed).

### 3. The Concept and Purpose of Contraception within the Marriage Bound

An examination of the concept and purpose of contraception within the marriage bound is very critical in understanding the motivation of Onan for resorting to the practice of coitus interruptus in his *yabbam* relationship with Tamar. What was the purpose of Onan's "contraceptive act"? Did his practice of coitus interruptus serve the purpose of contraception within the framework of marriage? Contraception is a reproductive health programme aimed at planning and preventing pregnancy through interference with the natural process of ovulation, fertilization and implantation (Encyclopedia of Children's Health). While people may choose contraception for various reasons, contraception serves the same purpose worldwide, which is prevention of pregnancy (Stancey, 2022). Making use of contraception greatly reduces the chances of getting pregnant. The use of contraception becomes necessary for couples who desire it because a woman's body starts a monthly process that might make her to be pregnant. Women generally are able to become pregnant from when their monthly menstrual cycle starts until it stops at menopause when this menstrual cycles stop. Conception in a woman begins when a man's sperm meets a woman's egg, after which fertilization occurs in a fallopian tube which connects the ovary to the uterus. Pregnancy results when the fertilized egg freely moves down the fallopian tube and implants in the uterus (Marshall, 2021). It should be noted that most contraceptives are mostly for women with the exception of vasectomy and male condoms (Stancey, 2022). The major reason is to enable couples have their babies based on choice and not by chance. Contraception serves the purposes of allowing couples:

1. Have the right number of children they can effectively cater for.
2. Have enough space between the first birth and subsequent births.
3. Avoid having children in late reproductive age.
4. Make the right contraceptive choices (Stancey, 2022).

Using contraceptives based on these purposes are of spiritual, economic, social and health benefits. Spiritually, in Genesis 1:28, God gave man the gift to procreate; this gift is coupled with the responsibility of being good steward over this gift (Carlso, n.d). Hence, when couples have children they can cater for and have them at the right time, they are likely going adequately provide for them. Economically, contraception assists couples in planning their families based on the available economic resources. Contraception is of great health advantage to women as adequate birth spacing helps them to fully recover health-wise before another stressful stage of pregnancy (Benefits of Contraception Use, 2013). This goes a long way in reducing the rate of mother and child morbidity and mortality as well as reducing other health-related complications related to pregnancy. Today, there is a social stigma that is always placed on either too frequent pregnancies or too many children; using contraception helps couples in addressing this stigma. Moreover, a well-planned family size can promote a well-planned education which may not be available in a condition of unplanned family (RCCG Counseling Handbook, 2000). The concern now is whether Onan's motive for engaging in coitus interruptus whenever he slept with Tamar met the purposes discussed above.

### 4. Implication of Genesis 38: 8-10 on the Question of Contraception

It can be reasonably argued that the whole experience of Tamar in Genesis 38 narrative has its root in what transpired from verse 7 to verse 10. After the narrator makes the reader understand in verse 6 that Judah, playing his fatherly role found Tamar as a wife for his firstborn, Er, verse 7 quickly brings the reader to the judgment that was passed on Er because of his wickedness before Yahweh. According to the custom of levirate marriage prevalent in most ancient cultures, Judah was saddled with the responsibility of making sure that the name of the deceased did not go into extinction (Burrows, 1940:23-25). Hence in verse 8, וַיֹּדַע אֹנָן כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה הַנְּהַרֵּעַ אִם-יָבֵא אֶל-יְהוָה אֶת-אִשְׁתּוֹ אֲחִיו וְשָׁחַת אֶרְצָה "...Judah said unto Onan, Go in unto thy brother's wife, and perform your duty as her brother-in-law, and raise up seed to thy brother." This would be the first time the levirate marriage institution would be mentioned if the chronological arrangement of the TANAKH is followed (Abasili, 2011:280). Being the culture of the land (Coats, 1972:465-66), Onan, the second child had no option than to than to oblige his father since the grace to decline this order was a later inclusion which appears in the 'Deuteronomistic' version of the levirate law (Deuteronomy 25: 5-10).

The Hebrew word for the responsibility placed on Onan is יַבְבָּם (*yabbam*) (Olanisebe and Oladosu, 2014), which implies that Onan must produce בְּרֵעַ (a male offspring) for his late brother for the purpose of propagating his name and inherit his property (Shagal, 2018). Although no one knew what was going on in Onan's mind, the narrator however makes the reader understand that he knew that the child that would come from this culturally and specially arranged marriage would not be reckoned in his name. Onan had this in mind hence, אִם-יָבֵא whenever he went in to Tamar; he acted in a way that would prevent Tamar from being pregnant. Precisely, Onan obstructed coitus and spilled the semen on the ground. In reproductive health, it is called withdrawal or pull-out method. This act was a wicked act before Yahweh and he slew him - וַיִּרְעַב בְּעֵינָיו יְהוָה אֶתְּוֹ אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה וַיָּמָת גַּם-אֶתוֹ -

It will be right to argue that Tamar's widowhood predicament is intrinsically linked to Onan's act of coitus interruptus; this act turned Tamar to a second time widow; a condition which sent her out of her matrimonial family. The germane question now is whether

Onan's "contraceptive" act should be linked to contraception as it is in reproductive health, or whether withdrawal method of contraception within the framework of marriage should be prohibited based on this text. Did Yahweh slay Onan because he practiced contraception? As earlier discussed, verse 8 of chapter 38 states very clear the what Judah asked Onan to do, which is to perform the duty of a brother-in-law to his brother's widow. This duty was to raise אָרֵר (male child) for a man who died childless (Kim, 2012). The Hebrew verb אָרֵר used in this verse is only found in Genesis 38: 8 and Deuteronomy 25: 5-10, and the main purpose of this verb אָרֵר is to build a relationship between a brother-in-law and the wife of a deceased brother and produce אָרֵר for his brother (Abasili, 2011). Forrest Bivens submits that the levirate marriage in Genesis predates the one made into law by Moses in Deuteronomy 25 for about 400 years which reveals that most of the legal stipulations are a reflection of already existing practices around Ancient Near East which are not disclosed in the Bible. Bivens further argues that it was possible that Yahweh gave the statute in orally or through 'a non-canonical written source' before the Moses was inspired to put it down in Deuteronomy (Forest Bivens, n.d). Regardless of whether the source of this practice commanded by Judah is known or not, the certain thing about this verse is that Onan well understood the requirements of the practice and this was expected to bind his conscience. Onan's disobedience to his father's command was a rebellious act against Yahweh.

Another germane issue that could be raised is whether the Hebrew word בֹּרֵר (bô<sup>o</sup>) used to describe the sexual relationship between Onan and Tamar for the purpose of raising a seed was also meant to institute a marital relationship. While all submissions regarding these verses can only be taken chiefly from silence, two possibilities can be deduced: one, that because the word אָרֵר (zera) used to describe the offspring is noun common masculine singular absolute (Harris et al, 1981:582a), it is possible the relationship was only for the purpose of just giving the deceased a male child that would continue the name of the dead brother, inherit his property, and provide security for the widow (Belkin, 1970:277). Secondly, it is possible that this relationship was beyond just producing a seed but also to include having the widow as a wife. A reference to this is found in Deuteronomy 25:6 which states that only the first child בְּכוֹרָה (bekol) would be reckoned in the name of the deceased (Harris et al, 1981:1220). By inference, the other children born within this marriage would then be considered biological children of the brother - "And it shall be, that the firstborn which she beareth shall succeed in the name of his brother which is dead, that his name be not put out of Israel." וְהָיָה הַבְּכוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר תֵּלֵד לָקוּם עַל-שֵׁם אָחִיו הַמֵּת וְלֹא יִמְנָתָה שְׂמֹנוּ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: Regardless of whether the relationship between Onan and Tamar was only to produce an offspring or to institute a marriage bound, the fact that remains clear is that there was a breach of agreement and betrayal of trust on the part of Onan.

Why did Onan act the way he acted or what pushed him to resort to using contraception in his marriage with Tamar? The rationale for his action is clearly revealed by the narrator in verse nine that Onan knew that the אָרֵר (seed) would not be considered his biological son rather, he would be regarded as his late brother's son (Abasili, 2011). This arrangement did not augur well with Onan; he therefore chose to prevent the fulfillment of this arrangement through coitus interruptus – an intentional withdrawal of the penis from vagina before ejaculation. In doing this, Onan אָרֵר (shaumat) destroyed the semen by allowing it to spill on the אֶרֶץ (eref) ground (Arnold, 2009:327-28). What could have made Onan unwilling to give his brother an heir since doing that would have made him preserve his brother's heritage and obey the requirements of the law? Verse 9 of chapter 8 provides a clue that Onan refused because he knew that the child from that relationship would be considered his brother's own and by implication, would be entitled to inherit his father's property as well as the firstborn inheritance. In the Jewish custom, the nest of kin was legally the one to inherit the estate of a deceased man, and according to tradition, the firstborn was the one to head the family and control the family property (Jacobs and Greenstones). In the words of Arnod (2009:327), Onan was prompted to prevent procreation knowing that if he failed to have a son for his brother then, his brother's 'double portion' as the first son would automatically be given to him and his children. Onan therefore was overtaken by selfish interest over loyalty to his brother and family. Abasili (2011:560) corroborates this position when he argues that:

Since Onan consciously denies Tamar the possibility of procreation, it can be interpreted that he merely uses Tamar as an object of sexual gratification. The unjust implication of such action becomes more significant when interpreted against the background of the role of married women in patriarchal Israel society.

Davis (2008:79-94) also submits that more privileges were attached to the traditional "double portion" of the father's inheritance given to the firstborn. He argues that additional responsibilities like special blessings, assumption of priestly office, leadership position and authority, and power to procreate. These blessings were given for taking the responsibility of leading the *bene* Yahweh. Looking at Onan's behaviour in the context of the analysis above will quickly explain the motivation behind his prevention of coitus. With the death of Er, Onan would automatically become the firstborn and all these privileges would revert to him. Onan like a brave and smart man quickly made up his mind not to allow his late brother have an heir in order to have access to these firstborn privileges.

In verse 9, the use of אִם-בָּאָהּ (im-bba) which is interpreted "whenever he went in to his brother's wife..." instead of "when he went in to his brother's wife" indicates an act which happened frequently rather than just being a one-time occurrence (Mathewsson, 1989). Reflecting this same understanding, the LXX rendered this phrase with ὅταν εἰσῆρχετο πρὸς τὴν γυναῖκα τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ (Thayer, 2000:3867). This means Onan did not just practice coitus interruptus once; he did it every time he copulated with Tamar. The narrator writes that what Onan did was displeasing to Yahweh who killed him (Genesis 38:10). What exactly was Onan's offence that made Yahweh to kill him? Could it be because he failed to fulfill the levirate law which compelled him to produce a seed for his deceased brother? Or could Yahweh's anger be traced to Onan's practice of coitus interruptus, which in contemporary reproductive health is known as a method of contraception? What exactly was אָרֵר (r<sup>1±a±</sup>) in the sight of אָרֵר? Some scholars have reached a general consensus that although spilling of the semen (coitus interruptus) is not permitted among the Jews, the basic crime committed by Onan was his failure to fulfill the purpose of the levirate

marriage, which is producing a son for his brother and securing a future for the widow (Tamar) left behind. Wenham (1994:16-50) also maintains that Onan's action violated the promise of Yahweh to the Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that he would bless them and make the fruitful in the land. This violation of Divine agenda (and not Onan's use of withdrawal method) perhaps led to Onan's untimely death.

Going by the exegetical analysis above, it might not be correct to argue that the use of contraception was what aroused Yahweh's anger against Onan. The reasons are not farfetched. One, there is no place where the Bible whether implicitly or explicitly discusses about contraception, and no modern contraception method was available in Bible times (BBC, 2009). Although the repeated commands in the Torah appear to be an order from Yahweh for Jews who were the custodians of the Torah not to use contraception (Feldman, 1992:29-33), the early Rabbis argued that the command was limited, and that a couple could avoid having children if they had produced a family of reasonable size (Schenker, 2000:77-86). In the midrashic exegesis of Genesis 38:6-10, the Rabbis suggest that Er and Onan died because they engaged in unnatural intercourse with Tamar. According to their interpretation, Er acted in this manner to prevent Tamar from losing her beauty as a result of the stress of motherhood, and that Onan did so because he knew the seed would not be his own.<sup>1</sup> None of these rabbinic interpretations sees Onan's sin in the light of contraception. Vayigash, Siman 10 sees Er and Onan's death as a punishment for Judah, who deceived his father into believing that Joseph was dead<sup>2</sup> rather than contraception.

Some have also interpreted the  $\text{וַיִּקַּח}$  (also) inserted at the end of verse 10 to mean that Er, the brother of Onan was killed for the same offence (that is, for the practice of coitus interruptus) that Onan committed. To this school, Er and Onan violated Tamar and the marriage bed and they both paid for their acts (Forest Bivens). This position is often used by those who oppose artificial contraception to argue that two brothers from the same family were killed for contraceptive offence. This idea however does not have biblical support as the exact nature of Er's wicked act is not revealed. The  $\text{וַיִּקַּח}$  that is inserted might be interpreted that Er and Onan committed heinous crimes, too great to attract death penalties; Yahweh decided to kill Onan for his wickedness the same way he killed Er for his own wickedness.

Over the centuries, biblical scholars have provided credible opinions as to why Yahweh declared Onan's act as wicked. Some see his wickedness in the light of his disobedience to his father's command, which is tantamount to disobeying God whom the father represented. Others have seen it in the context of the violation of the levirate marriage and failure to produce a seed for his brother (Abasili, 2011:280). While Onan appeared to be fulfilling his levirate duty, he was actually renegeing on his responsibility. It has also been postulated that Onan's wicked act was that of rejecting the primary purpose of marriage, which is procreation (Forest Bivens), while many see his wickedness in his greed and materialistic tendencies to inherit his brother's estate which could only be achieved if he did not give his brother any seed. Others see Onan as only been enticed by selfish sexual pleasure rather than being prepared for marital and parental responsibilities (Abasili, 2011:560). While it cannot be arguably denied that Onan used his knowledge of the then known method of preventing semen from entering the vagina, which is coitus interruptus to prevent Tamar from being pregnant, it will also be in order to examine the motive behind what Onan did vis a vis the purpose of contraception within the marriage bound. This is because an act cannot be separated from its motive.

The fact that the incident in Genesis 38:8-10 is not really about contraception in general does not mean that the text has nothing to say about contraception within the framework of marriage. In Genesis chapter 1 verse 28, the word  $\text{וַיְבָרֶכְהוּם}$  (wayyomer) "and he blessed them" (Holladay, 2000:595) to be fruitful and multiply can be interpreted as "and he prophesied;" which can be seen as a prophetic oracle and blessing from Yahweh to his creatures to increase and multiply across the globe, and not in the context of giving birth to children indiscriminately. A morally and religiously acceptable contraception must be done within the confine of marriage; it should be with the consents of both parties – the man and the wife. It should not be to completely prevent procreation and should not be motivated by greed and self-interest. Finally, contraception should not be done in such manner that will plunge the other partner into traumatic challenges. Onan violated all these purposes, and this made his action sinful before Yahweh.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper rightly argues that Yahweh did not kill Onan because he used contraception in his levirate marriage with Tamar, but he was killed for wrongly using contraception to achieve his selfish interests which among others were his desire to inherit his late brother's firstborn estate and unbridled desire to satisfy his sexual urge with Tamar. This research also argues that if Onan had produced offspring for his brother as the levirate marriage demanded, he probably would not have been killed. Onan took the advantage of the patriarchal family structure (Walby, 1990:20) to subject Tamar to excruciating plight through his repeated contraceptive act. Whether coitus interruptus is an artificial method or a natural method of contraception is not the concern of this paper; the major issue that this paper has been able to address is that Onan did not use his coitus interruptus to space his children or to limit the number of children. He did not engage in this act for any health related reasons and he did not obstruct coitus with the consent of his wife Tamar. All of these should be put into consideration before a contraceptive act would be said to have taken place. Contraception should not be for the purpose of exploiting and humiliating

<sup>1</sup> William Davidson, "Yevamot 34b." *The William Davidson Talmud*. Accessed 16/1/22 from <https://www.safaria.org/Yevamot.3a.13?lang=b>.

<sup>2</sup> Tamar Kadari, "Tamar: Midrash and Aggadah." *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*. Accessed 16/1/22 from <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/tamarmidrash-and-aggadah>>

another partner. In fact, this paper argues that coitus interruptus should not be a variant for withdrawal method. The latter serves only the purpose of contraception while the former serves other purposes which may not be contraception.

Consequent on the above findings, this paper recommends that Genesis 38: 8-10 should not be used as a proof-text to prohibit any form of contraception as the text does not in any way reveal that Onan was killed for practicing contraception. Secondly, all forms of contraception, be it natural or artificial seek to achieve the same motive of prevention of pregnancy. These methods should then be wisely used within the confine of marriage and not for selfish motive. Finally, contraception is not child prevention. Hence, any contraceptive act that is aimed at completely preventing procreation as in the case of Onan is unethical and unacceptable.

---

#### Acknowledgements:

HoD and staff, Department of Religious Studies, Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria.

**Funding:** None.

**Competing interests:** None.

---

#### Reference

- Abasili, Alexander Izuchukwu, (2011). "Genesis 38: The Search for Progeny and Heir." *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 25 (2), 276-288.
- Abasili, Alexander I. (2011). "Seeing Tamar through the Prism of an African Woman: A Contextual Reading of Genesis 38," *OTE* 24/3, 555-573.
- Alar, Chris, (2021). "Is Contraception even Allowed?" Accessed 25/10/21 from <http://form.thedivinemeracy.org/dona>.
- Armstrong, Dave. (2017). "Bible Versus Onan's Sin and Punishment." *National Catholic Register*. Accessed 13/12/21 from <https://www.necregister.com.blog/bible-vs-contraception-onan's-sin-and-punishment>.
- Arnold, Bill T. (2009) *Genesis, The New Cambridge Bible Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belkin, Samuel, (1970). "Levirate and Agnate Marriage in Rabbinic and Cognate Literature." *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 60, 4, 277. University of Pennsylvania Press. Accessed 14/11/21 from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1453556>
- (2013) "Benefits of Contraception Use" *Family Planning*. Accessed 11/7/22 from <https://www.familyplanning.org.nz/news/2013/benefits-of-contraception-use>.
- Bivens, Forrest L. (n.d) "Exegetical Brief: Genesis 38:8-10 – Is the Sin of Onan Applicable to Birth Control in General?" Accessed 16/8/22 from <https://static.squarespace.com/static/50299cae4b096e761d8aac/t/54c12633e4b03df342088222/Gen+38+-+BivensOnan.pdf>.
- Broussard, Kalo, (2021). "Onan and Contraceptive Sin." Accessed 19/1/21 from <https://www.catholic.com/gal>.
- Brown, Francis D.D., S.R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, (1907). *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Burrows, Millar, (1940). "Levirate Marriage in Israel." *JBL*, 59, 23-25.
- Carlo, Allan. (n.d). "History of Contraception in the Protestant Church." Accessed 6/7/22 from <https://www.bound4life.com/history-of-contraception-in-protestant-church>.
- Coats, George Wesley, (1972). "Widow's Rights: A Crux in the Structure of Genesis 38," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34, 465-66.
- (n.d). "Contraception" *Encyclopedia of Childre's Health*. Accessed 12/8/22 from [www.healthofchildren.com/C/Contraception.html](http://www.healthofchildren.com/C/Contraception.html)
- "Contraception." *Religion* (2009). Accessed 12/7/22 from [www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/christianethics/contraception\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/christianethics/contraception_1.shtml)
- Davidson, William "Yevamot 34b." *The William Davidson Talmud*. Accessed 16/1/22 from <https://www.safaria.org/Yevamot.3a.13?lang=b>.
- Davis, Anne K. (2008) "Israel's Inheritance: Birthright of the Firstborn." *CTS Journal* Vol. 13, Spring, 79-94. Accessed 6/9/21 from [file:///C:/Users/USER/Desktop/Dissertation%20Documents/IsraelsInheritanceBirthrightofFirstbornSon\\_by\\_AnneKDavis.pdf](file:///C:/Users/USER/Desktop/Dissertation%20Documents/IsraelsInheritanceBirthrightofFirstbornSon_by_AnneKDavis.pdf)
- Feldman, P. (1992). "Sexuality, Birth Control and Childbirth in Orthodox Jewish Tradition," *CMAJ*, 135, (1), 29-33.

- Harris,R. Laird;Gleason L. Archer; Bruce K. Waltke, (1981).*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament Vol. 1 & 2* ed. Chicago: Moody Press.
- Holladay,William L. (2000).*A Concise Hebrew And Aramaic Lexicon Of The Old Testament Based Upon The Lexical Work Of Ludwig Koehler And Walter Baumgartner*.E.J. Brill and Wm. B. Eerdmans: E.J. Brill and Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1592.
- Jacobs, Joseph; Greenstone, H. Julius., (n.d).“Inheritance.”*JewishEncyclopedia*.Accessed 28/12/21 from <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/8114-inheritance>.
- Kadari,Tamar “Tamar: Midrash and Aggadah.” *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*.Accessed 16/1/22 from <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/tamarmidrash-and-aggadah>>
- Kim,Dohyung (2012) “The Structure of Genesis 38: A Thematic Reading.” *Vetus Testamentum*62 (4), 550-560.
- (2000).“Family Planning in Marriage” *Marriage Counseling Handbook*. Lagos: RCCG, Ogba.
- LeMaire, William, (2016).“The Roman Catholic Church and Contraception.”*Intern Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 5 (6), 2065-69.
- Marshall,Sarah, (2021). “How Pregnancy (Conception) Occurs,” *Health Link – Health Advice* 24/7. Accessed on 12/8/22 from <https://myhealth.alberta.ca/Health/Pages/conditions.aspx?hwid=tw9234>.
- Mathewsson,Steven D., (1989).“An Exegetical Study of Genesis 38.”*Bibliotheca Sacra*,Vol. 146, 373-92.
- Meyers,Carol; Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, ed., (2000).*Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*.Boston, Massachusetts; Houghton Mufflin.
- Olanisebe, Samson O. Olusegun A. Oladosu, (2014). “Levirate Marriage Amongst the Hebrews and Widow's Inheritance Amongst the Yoruba: A Comparative Investigation.” *Verbum Eccles.* (Pretoria: Online Version) Vol. 35 No. 1. Accessed 6/9/21 from <https://www.scholar.google.com>.
- Ongesa,Cosmas M., Mwongela, Francis, (2019). “The Moral Evaluation of the Contraception Debate.”*International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education* ( IJHSSE) Vol. 6, 10, 54-60. Accessed 14/11/21 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0610006>.
- O'Reilly, Kelvin R., (2019). “Contraception, Ideology and Policy Formation: Cohort Change in Dublin, Ireland.” *Culture and Reproduction*, 221-236.
- Perman, Matt, (2006). “Does the Bible Permit Birth Control?” *Desiring God*.Accessed 19/1/21 from <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/does0the-bible-permit-birth-control>.
- Rakoczy, Susan, (2016). “A Gendered Critique of the Catholic Church’s Teaching on Marriage and the Family: 1965-2006,” *Scriptura* Vol. 115, (11), 2.
- Rhonheimer,Martin, (1989).“Contraception, Sexual Behavior, and Natural Law.”*The Linacre Quarterly*, Vol. 56, (2), 20-57. Accessed 13/11/21 from <https://doi.org/10.1080/00243639.1989.11878006>.
- Saad,Toni C., (2021).“The Sin of Onan and Contraception,” *The Heythrop Journal* Accessed 14/11/21 from <https://doi.org/10.1111/heyj.13986>.
- Sahgal,Smita, (2012). “Levirate in Ancient Israel: Overlapping Frames with Early Indian Practices of Niyoga,” *Advances in Science Research Journal*, Vol. 1, 201-211.
- Schenker,J.G. (2000). “Women’s Reproductive Health: Monotheistic Religious Perspectives,” *Int. Journal of GynaecolObstet*, 70, 77-86.
- Stancey,Dawn, (2022) “The Purpose of Using Birth Control”*Verywellhealth*. Accessed on 12/8/22 from <https://www.verywellhealth.com/why-use-contraception-906692>.
- Thayer,Joseph Henry, (2000).*A Greek-English LexiconOf TheNew Testament Being Grimm's Wilke'sClavis Novi Testamenti*.International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc.,
- Walby, S. (1990).*Theorizing Patriarchy*.Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford, UK and Cambridge USA.
- Wenham,Gordon, (1994).*Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2. Dallas, TX: Word Book.