

Henry VIII and Onan: Role of Sex

Henry VIII keeps showing up in my notes. First, his ignorance about how anatomical gender was determined led him to blame his wives for not giving him a male heir. He, like most of humanity until recently, didn't know the male sperm determined gender. Second, he attempted to divorce Catherine because he claimed he should have never been allowed to marry her because she was his dead brother's widow. His argument here comes from Leviticus 18: 16, and 20:21 where it says that you should not uncover the nakedness of your brother's wife, and you should not marry the wife of your brother under penalty of childlessness. Interestingly, he knew of this before he married her and had received a special papal dispensation to marry her in the first place.

However, there was a well-known exception to this rule, namely that of the Levirate marriage. In this situation, if a brother dies without a male heir, his brother is supposed to take his widow and have a child with her and this child will be counted as his brother's (Deuteronomy 25: 5-10). In Deuteronomy, if the brother does not wish to, then they can perform a ceremony known as the halitzah.

Here's why this has been on my mind. One of the arguments against masturbation relies on a misunderstanding of this type of obligation. Specifically, in Genesis 38: 6-11, Onan does not want to have a child with his brother's widow Tamar and so during sex with her pulled out and let his sperm "spoil on the ground." For this, YHWH kills him.

Here's what fascinates me about this type of rule. The Levirate rule and the halitzah exception in Genesis, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy all come from different sources, different time periods, reflecting different traditions. Indeed, as one goes throughout Genesis, we find individuals engaging in all kinds of relationships that are later forbidden (e.g., Jacob was married to two sisters, Judah has a relationship with Tamar (yes, the same Tamar)). However, the essential issues are all glossed over and all used in one inconsistent mesh to undergird historical objections to masturbation.

There are interesting issues here: are all things permitted unless expressly forbidden, did YHWH change his mind and allow the halitzah exception, and if so what does this say about Onan? What guidance does this give individuals.

More to the point, these issues bring up questions about the place of non-procreative sexual acts, from masturbation to oral sex to the use of contraception. In the world today, many organizations oppose contraception, believing that no secondary act should interfere with conception, and link this to passages in the Jewish texts. This has led them to oppose contraception in AIDS ravaged parts of Africa, to refuse treatment of STDs on the grounds that the people should not have been having sex in the first place, to resist the HPV vaccine, and to promote pharmacists being allowed to refuse prescriptions for birth control on the grounds that the women should not be having sex.

Here's what I see as the broader issue: what is the place of sexuality in a healthy adult. In our culture, we have tended to allow males full use of their sexuality, excepting perhaps masturbation. Indeed, the historical terror of masturbation can only be likened to the irrational terror of the dangers of marijuana and some of the same "symptoms" are used to describe both. What about females? Historical data, especially when discussing "hysteria" shows that its causes were largely in unsatisfactory sex and its treatment was quite simply masturbation to orgasm. Until the advent of reliable contraception, it made a certain sense to encourage women to be more careful about who they had sex with. What about now? While we still have organizations that promote virginity until marriage (usually aimed at women), what ethic would I promote. What would I tell my classes or if I had a daughter?

What is the place of sexuality in the world of a healthy adult? I don't have all the answers, and there are some trends that concern me (e.g., what are the effects of viewing ever more pornography, especially of more degrading types such as bukkake). I have decided, however, that it's great that our bodies can give us so much pleasure, and sexuality's place in my life is to be determined more by my goals and values, and decided by some of the same tools used to decide those in other areas (e.g.,

evidence, respecting others). So, if you must judge me for drinking, inhaling, and the pursuit of other carnal pleasures, know that I am just trying to find my way as I respect you enough to allow you to find yours.

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