Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of René Girard

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Introduction

Many who revere the scriptures as the inspired word of God are nonetheless disturbed by them. The scriptures contain inconsistencies and outright contradictions. Particularly disturbing for many are scriptural portrayals of God as wrathful, vengeful, and violent. This article will introduce these problems with several examples from the Old Testament, then present a succinct overview of René Girard's theory of culture because of its unique value in helping us to interpret these difficult texts. The final portion of the paper will present selected texts from the LDS canon in light of Girard's theory.[1]

Second Samuel 24 begins ominously: "Again the anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah'" (2 Sam. 24:1, New International Version [NIV]; unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from this translation). David took the census, against the advice of his general Joab, but then felt very guilty. He prayed for God to take away his guilt, and the next morning the prophet Gad brought David a message from the Lord. He must choose among three different punishments for Israel: three years of famine, three months of defeat in war, or three days of plague. David chose the plague, "so the Lord sent a plague on Israel" (v. 15), killing 70,000 people in three days. As the Lord was about to finish the job by destroying Jerusalem, he "was grieved because of the calamity" (v. 16) and stayed the hand of the destroying angel. David then pled with God to stop killing innocent people and instead let any further punishment fall on him. Gad, obeying God's

next command, told David to build an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. David purchased the land, built the altar, and offered sacrifice. "Then the Lord answered [David's] prayer in behalf of the land, and the plague on Israel was stopped" (v. 25).

This is a strange and troubling text, which raises difficult questions about the nature of God and his relationship with humankind. The text gives no reason for God's anger against Israel. Why then would God incite David against Israel? Why did David feel so guilty after simply taking a census, especially one commanded by God Himself? Why would God kill 70,000 ostensibly innocent Israelites? What accounts for the strange options of three different punishments? Why didn't the plague simply end in three days, as originally agreed? Why did God feel sorrow for massive death and destruction that He Himself caused? Why did God direct David to build an altar? Why was animal sacrifice necessary to turn away the wrath of God and terminate the plague?[2]

We are presented with a capricious God who is willing to kill Israelites, whether for David's sin of taking a census or for unspecified sins of the nation in general. This Deity doesn't care what method He employs (famine, war, or plague) or whom He kills (but insists on the killing itself). He apparently isn't ready to stop killing after the agreed-upon three days of plague but nonetheless experiences remorse and is placated by animal sacrifice.

Worse yet, the familiar account of the destruction of Pharaoh's army by God and Moses in Exodus 14 portrays a God who exults over the impending death of Pharaoh's soldiers and who declares that by destroying the Egyptians He brings Himself glory (vv. 4, 17, 18). We are told that "the Lord hardened the heart of the Pharaoh King of Egypt, so that he pursued" the Israelites into the Red Sea (v. 8), then asked Moses to stretch forth his hand so that the waters would drown Pharaoh's entire army. What are we to make of a God whose glory consists, in part, of His ability to annihilate humans at will? Can we trust our redemption to such a God?

Jeremiah depicts God as similarly vindictive. In Kings and Chronicles, Israel's sins against its covenant with the Lord are well documented. In Deuteronomy, the penalty for covenant violation is destruction of the nation (Deut. 28:15–68, 30:11–20). Jeremiah portrays God as assuming personal responsibility for the imposition of this penalty:

> Therefore the Lord Almighty says this:
> "Because you have not listened to my word, I will summon all the peoples of the north and my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon," declares the Lord, "and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants and against all the surrounding nations. I will completely destroy them and make them an object of horror and scorn, and an everlasting ruin." (Jer. 25:8–9).

Do we follow the plain sense of this text and assume that God personally sent the Babylonians to do His work of punishing Judah? Do we believe that God was with Nebuchadnezzar and his soldiers in their murder, rape, and pillage because they were His servants? Were they less culpable in their greed and bloodlust because the punishment was necessary and deserved? Are such atrocities ever deserved? Is offensive war ever consistent with the will of God?

As a fourth example, Judges 9 tells the story of Abimelech, son of the famous judge Gideon. After Gideon's death, Abimelech seized the rulership at Shechem by murdering his seventy brothers in collusion with Shechem's citizens. The youngest brother, Jotham, escaped and cursed both Shechem and Abimelech with causing each other's destruction by fire. After three years of Abimelech's misrule, "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem" (v. 23), resulting in the city's rebellion and in reciprocal violence from Abimelech. Abimelech besieged and burned Shechem but was killed during a siege of an allied city when the defenders dropped a millstone on his head, ending the civil strife. The account concludes: "Thus God repaid the wickedness that Abimelech had done to his father by murdering his seventy brothers . . . [and] God also made the men of Shechem pay for all their wickedness" (vv. 56–57).

This narrative is fascinating because of the parallel appearance and virtual equivalence of the following ideas: (1) prophesied destruction by fire, (2) God's sending an "evil spirit" between Abimelech and Shechem, (3) God's wrathful vengeance on Abimelech and Shechem, and (4) the mutual destruction of wicked men in a civil war. Must we conclude from this story that God directly inspired a civil war to inflict a justified vengeance on two unrighteous parties? What does the destruction of the wicked by "fire" really mean, and what role does God play?

Finally, Jeremiah 7:21–23, an often-overlooked and challenging text reads:

> Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh.
> For in the day I brought them out of the land of Egypt, *I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.*
> But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.' (Revised Standard Version, emphasis mine).

This text makes the startling assertion that God did not command animal sacrifice in ancient Israel, flatly contradicting extensive writings in the Pentateuch. Attempts to resolve this discrepancy have included dismissing Jeremiah's statement as prophetic hyperbole, deliberate mistranslation from the Hebrew (NIV), asserting that Jeremiah referred only to personal (not communal) sacrifices, and the claim that God is referring here only to sacrifices done when Israel was in a state of gross apostasy.[3] None of these approaches provides a satisfactory answer.[4] If God did not initiate ritual animal sacrifice or need it, then where did it come from and why does much of the Bible claim that it did come from God?

Overview of René Girard's Mimetic Theory

René Girard (b. 1923) has developed a theory of human culture which yields important insights when applied to these questions raised by the Old Testament narratives. Girard trained as a historian but spent most of his distinguished career teaching literature. He began his intellectual and spiritual journey as an agnostic but ended as a committed (Catholic) Christian. He was elected to the Académie Française in 2005 and received a Lifetime Scholarly Achievement Award from the Modern Language Association in 2008. From his study of Cervantes, Flaubert, Stendhal, Proust, and Dostoevsky, Girard developed important insights into the mimetic nature of human desire, which he published in his influential *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961).[5] (See also his interview in this issue, which discusses several of these topics.)

Girard extended his insights in *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), rooted in his study of Greek tragedy and human anthropology.

Here, Girard postulated the origin of archaic religion (sacrificial ritual, prohibitions, and myth) in the nonconscious, unanimous killing of human victims by a mob. Girard believes that all human culture descends from archaic religion. His third great series of insights is about the relationship of biblical revelation, particularly Christ, to human culture. These ideas were first published in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1978).

Girard's mimetic theory is conveniently organized in three parts: mimetic desire, the origins of human culture, and the Bible against human culture.

Mimetic Desire

Central to Girard's cultural theory is his exploration of human desire which he maintains is mimetic by nature—that is, we learn desire by imitating others. Furthermore, this imitation of others occurs, in large part, unconsciously and is inherently acquisitive. Girard distinguishes desire from universal physiological needs for food, water, shelter, etc. It is rather in the manner of fulfillment of these basic needs and in the genesis of other desires and their attempted satiation that desire, in the Girardian sense, comes into play. We learn from other humans what to desire and how to acquire it. Mimetic desire is therefore intimately connected to our learning capacity: "Everything that we know under the titles of apprenticeship, education, and imitation rests on this capacity for mimesis."[6]

We want things *because* others want them, have them, or seem to have them. It is the very possession of the object by another that signals its value to us. Thus, our desires are mediated to us by human models in the surrounding culture. The fundamental structure of human desire is therefore *triangular* and not *linear*. Our desires are not primarily or directly for the object (linear), but rather are absorbed from the model who leads us to the object (triangular). Desire is therefore neither spontaneous nor individualistic. It is learned from others.

As a corollary, Girard rejects the idea of the self as an entirely autonomous, choosing entity. Human beings exist only in, and because of, relationships to other human beings. We choose what to become by the models we choose to imitate. We do choose our models to some extent, but imitating *some* model is an inescapable

feature of human existence. It goes without saying that we unconsciously imitate some models, but we consciously chose others because we admire, respect, or love them.

We have all seen a child (the "model" in Girardian terms) who gets bored playing with a fire engine but becomes rabidly possessive when a second child (the "subject") wants it. Each has signaled to the other the value of the fire engine, and rivalry has arisen. Mimetic desire thus leads naturally and often unconsciously to mimetic rivalry.

Girard elaborates on the genesis of mimetic rivalry in the example of the master and his disciples:

> The master is delighted to see more and more disciples around him, and delighted to see that he is being taken as a model. Yet if the imitation is too perfect, and the imitator threatens to surpass the model, the master will completely change his attitude and begin to display jealousy, mistrust, and hostility. He will be tempted to do everything he can to discredit and discourage his disciple.
>
> The disciple can only be blamed for being the best of all disciples. He admires and respects the model; if he had not done so, he would hardly have chosen him as model in the first place. So inevitably he lacks the necessary "distance" to put what is happening to him "in perspective." He does not recognize the signs of rivalry in the behavior of the model. It is all the more difficult for the disciple to do so because the model tries very hard to reinforce this blindness. The model tries his best to hide the real reason for his hostility.[7]

Such mimetic rivalry is pervasive and can easily spiral out of control. Rare is the person who has not seen rivalries destroy families, church communities, or other institutions.

Mimetic rivalry can become all-consuming, destroying all sense of perspective, balance, and fairness. One's life becomes centered around the rivalry. The model literally becomes one's god or devil. He is a god because he is all-powerful, possessing the things, status, position, or person that the desiring subject wants more than anything in the world. He is a devil because he impedes, punishes, or ignores the deepest desires of the subject. The model is simultaneously good/evil, beloved friend/hated enemy, guide/monster, god/devil. He therefore has two faces. He is *bivalent*.

A serious mimetic rivalry makes life extremely miserable for the subject. He is at the mercy of intense passions, oscillating between inappropriate highs when he perceives he is gaining in the

mimetic battle and inappropriate lows when he perceives he is losing. Advanced mimetic rivalry (mimetic crisis) is ripe for resolution by violent means. The violence may be directed against the model (murder), against the subject (suicide, submission to the rival, insanity), or against a third person (scapegoat). In fact, it is surprisingly easy to shift anger and resentment to a third person. Frustration generated at work, for example, is often vented later on a spouse, child, or pet. Furthermore, virtually all of us have experienced the communion of joining with another person or two to criticize, demean, or make fun of another. We are all natural scapegoaters, often sliding into this behavior unconsciously.

Saul's mimetic rivalry with David illustrates virtually all of the ways of dealing with mimetic rivalry. After David's victory over Goliath, Saul brings David into his court. This is a place of honor but also indicates David's inferior status to Saul. However, David soon becomes more popular with the people (1 Sam. 18:5–16). Saul experiences an increasingly severe mimetic crisis, fluctuating between submitting to David (1 Sam. 25:16–22, 26:17–25) and trying to murder him (1 Sam. 9:11, 20:32–33, 23:1–14). Saul also blames (scapegoats) his son Jonathan for undermining him by supporting David (1 Sam. 20:28–32). He massacres the priests at Nob after they unwittingly support David (1 Sam. 22:11–19). The priests here have become surrogate victims in place of David. But all of these strategies fail to resolve Saul's mimetic crisis. Saul finally stages a great battle with the Philistines to regain popular acclaim. Before the battle, he consults the medium at Endor and is rebuked by the dead prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28), a probable lapse into insanity. Saul loses the battle and commits suicide (1 Sam. 31:1–6).

All of us, with rare exceptions, exist in a number of ongoing mimetic rivalries, which are generally held in check by social and psychological mechanisms such as the law, social structure, social distance, common sense, religious and ethical teachings, "low-grade" scapegoating, etc. Archaic humans, however, lacked many of these mechanisms or had them only in rudimentary form, according to Girard's theory. Given the powerful mimetic abilities of humans, the inevitable mimetic rivalries, and the disastrous effects of mimetic crisis, how did human culture originate in the first place?

How was it maintained? Why is the scapegoating reflex seemingly so natural to us? It is to these issues that we now turn.

The Origins of Human Culture

Girard asks us to imagine a group of archaic humans.[8] Resources are scarce; social bonds are limited and weak. Competition for food, shelter, mates, etc., is fierce. Individual mimetic rivalries flare up intermittently and sometimes dissipate. A stronger member of the group may, on occasion, kill a weaker member. The group leads a precarious existence in a constant state of mimetic tension because of continuous competition for survival and unresolved mimetic rivalries.

Now, imagine the group faced with a new external stress: famine, disease, catastrophic weather, etc. The level of tension and resentment increases. Individual mimetic rivalries heat up. One's rivals now seem different, evil, even monstrous. There is no one to trust. The world seems to be ending. The group, as a whole, is descending into a mimetic crisis, into a war of all against all. Relations between individuals no longer have any basis in affection, common sense, or mutual benefit. Everyone is possessed by fear, anger, finding fault, and hostility. Chaos reigns, and the group is faced with dissolution.

In the midst of such chaos, Girard hypothesizes, one person in a mimetic rivalry transfers his primary hostility from the rival to a third person. If the rival imitates the first person, two people will find themselves in agreement against the third person—a small island of stability in a sea of dissension. As more people imitate the original rivals, the entire group becomes rapidly polarized against one individual in a mimetic crescendo. The intense passions of hate, resentment, and blame which were formerly diffused through the group become focused on this one person. He now seems different, monstrous, inhuman, and guilty of causing all the group's problems. In reality, there is little or no difference between this person and the rest. However, in the collective, impassioned mind of the crowd, his evil and guilt are infinite. Abruptly and unconsciously, the crowd attacks and kills this "monstrous deviant." He has become the *scapegoat*. The mimetic crisis of all against all has shifted to a polarization of all against one.

The crowd, formerly at odds with itself, has now acted unani-

mously, psychologically transferring hostility, hate, anger, blame, and guilt to the scapegoat. The catharsis of violently eliminating the scapegoat is real and powerful. The crowd feels united, powerful, and guiltless. One has died (been killed) and facilitated the preservation of all. The peace and harmony are real and are experienced as overwhelming. In fact, these psychological effects seem utterly transcendent, completely beyond human control or ability. The crowd, therefore, perceives the catharsis as divine in origin—as sacred and holy. Thus, a human victim has been violently eliminated, but the crowd experiences communion with the divine. The *violent sacred* has been created by the mental projections of the crowd on the scapegoat-victim. The individual members of the crowd are not cognizant of their complicity in the killing. They simply remember the mimetic crisis as the wrath of God and the subsequent peace and harmony as the blessing of God.

After his obliteration, the scapegoat appears in a different light. Before, he was perceived as evil, inhuman, monstrous—someone who brought calamity. Afterward, he is seen as a source of peace, goodness, and harmony. He is therefore bivalent (both good and evil), like everyone's rival for whom he substitutes. The cause of the victim's death is similarly transfigured in the mind of the crowd. It is seen as the will of God, the work of God, or not even as death at all. This is a lie, but the crowd perceives it as truth. With this self-deception, the crowd hides its own guilt from itself and hides its own complicity in the murder of an (innocent) victim.[9] The crowd was deluded about the scapegoat's guilt before the killing and deluded about its own guilt, in the opposite sense, after the killing. Thus, the community maintains the myth of its own innocence. Its violence has become God's violence. The unanimous voice of the community has become, unbeknownst to it, the voice of God.

Girard maintains that human culture originated in countless such events since time immemorial. "Humanity springs forth from religion, i.e., from many 'founding murders,'" he has said.[10] The beneficial effects of sacred violence have thus been the foundation of human culture. Undifferentiated and chaotic violent energy from multiple mimetic conflicts in the crowd in mimetic crisis is focused on the scapegoat. This collective violent power is

then reflected back to the crowd as the differentiating violence of the cultural order. Undifferentiated and unfocused mimetic violence creates the communal crisis. Mimetic violence focused on the scapegoat solves the crisis and results in creation of culture. The scapegoat therefore structures human culture.

Archaic human culture consisted essentially of language and religion. Girard asserts that both originated in the scapegoat event. With respect to language, Girard accepts many of the conclusions of modern structuralist linguistics, which sees language as a complicated system of signs. Each sign gains meaning only in contrast to other signs. Differences between signs make a system of symbolic communication possible. Girard goes beyond structuralism to postulate that the first or original difference is the difference between the scapegoat and the crowd. The scapegoat victim is the first sign, the root of human language. From this first sign (difference), all other differences in language/culture are generated.[11] The scapegoat serves as an absolute referent in the symbolic system of language.

Religion is the other essential component of archaic human culture. Archaic religion consists of *prohibition, ritual, and myth*, each element arising from the scapegoat victim. Prohibitions (rules) come from the evil acts by which the scapegoat allegedly caused the societal crisis. Prohibitions are implemented by the communal will to prevent subsequent crises. Many common prohibitions, such as those against murder, theft, and adultery, correspond to our modern ethical notions. Other prohibitions seem mere superstitions.[12]

Ritual sacrifice also originated in the community's instinctive fear of returning to the original mimetic crisis.[13] The crowd, in the aftermath of the spontaneous murder, tries to imagine how to reexperience that sense of salvation. Rituals gradually evolve, recapitulating both the mimetic crisis and its violent resolution. Dancing, shouting, war games, the wearing of masks, etc. may be used to excite mimetic passions, thereby imitating the mimetic crisis. Then, these passions are focused on a victim who is ritually sacrificed, re-presenting the founding murder. Sacrificial victims may be human or animal, both representing the original human murder victim.

When ritual sacrifice is effective, it unifies the community

against the victim and serves as a mechanism for venting hostility, resentment, and accusation. It fosters peace and communal good will. The community feels that it is experiencing the blessing of God. Indeed, the community firmly believes that God has commanded the sacrifice and requires it to satisfy His wrath. Failure to offer a proper sacrifice will precipitate punishment, the wrath of God. Sacrifice also functions to order and differentiate society. Priests and their assistants, for example, have a special relationship to the violent sacred, differentiating them from the crowd. Economic exchange eventually grows up around temple sacrificial ritual, resulting in further differentiation. Society structures itself in relation to ritual sacrifice, which comes from the founding murder.

Myth is the retelling of the founding murder *from the perspective of the crowd trapped in the lie of its own innocence*. In myth, all human responsibility for the murder is effaced. Traces of violence are either removed completely or transferred to the gods. Myth therefore transforms human violence into divine violence and dead human scapegoats into living gods. For example, in the Babylonian creation myth, Marduk kills Tiamat to create the heavens and the earth. Humans are subsequently created from the bones and blood of Tiamat's lover Kingu.[14] This myth thus presents humanity as originating in the violence of gods. Girard maintains that human victims, killed by frenzied crowds, underlie all the idolatrous gods of archaic religion. Myths reflect the delusional belief of the crowd in its own guiltlessness and conceal the truth of the victim, violently murdered by the human crowd.

In myth, other events that seem totally beyond human control are readily connected to the transcendence of the violent sacred. Storms, earthquakes, floods, plagues, famines, and wars are seen as acts of a wrathful deity who is punishing the community for its sins. Similarly, fruitful rains, good health, good weather, and peace are perceived as God's blessings.

Girard believes that all other cultural institutions descend from archaic religion.[15] For example, our modern legal system uses a dose of carefully controlled "good violence" in a reasoned attempt to punish the guilty and protect society. The legal system is thus directly connected to the economy of ritual sacrifice where a dose of carefully controlled good violence (the sacrifice) effec-

tively discharges hostility and protects the community. Indeed, public executions in our culture have often served a quasi-ritual function, bringing people together and serving to vent anger not necessarily connected to the person being executed.

In summary, Girard argues that two essential features lie at the foundation of culture: (1) murder by the crowd, and (2) the lie that conceals the true nature of the murder from the crowd. Culture derives from scapegoating; we are psychosocially constituted and therefore trapped by the lie of sacred violence. We naturally think in sacrificial terms: better that one person should die than that all should perish. We unconsciously sanctify our violence as divine in origin and necessary for redemption. We therefore have great difficulty recognizing the truth of our own violence and its foundational role in culture.

The Bible against Human Culture

Girard finds in the Gospels the clearest revelation of the scapegoating mechanism. In the accounts of Jesus's life and death the mimetic nature and violence of human beings are clearly revealed. Jesus's story cuts unequivocally through the lie of sacred violence, allowing us to see the truth about ourselves.

The Gospels also contain the ultimate revelation of God's nonviolence and transcendent love. Jesus refuses to cooperate in any way with violence. He teaches love of one's enemy and is eventually crucified because of fidelity to this message. As Girard puts it, "A non-violent deity can only signal his existence to mankind by having himself driven out by violence—by demonstrating that he is not able to establish himself in the Kingdom of Violence."[16] Jesus conquers violence without violence; to do otherwise would be no victory at all.[17] Jesus came to end all communal sacrifice of the other by the shedding of blood, by making it impossible for us to deceive ourselves about it any longer. Jesus came to destroy the scapegoat mechanism of human culture.

A Girardian approach to scriptural interpretation of the Bible involves the two fundamental concepts already discussed: (1) the crowd's murder of a scapegoat and concealment of the murder by the lie of sacred violence that projects human violence on God; and (2) God is a god of utter nonviolence and transcendent love. Therefore, when the scriptures present God as violent, Girard

asks us to suspect that the text misrepresents God. Girard challenges us to identify traces of the violent sacred in the text, subtract it from our understanding of God, and use it to understand humanity.

Detractors of both Girard and Christianity claim that Jesus is just one more example of the dying and reviving God found in some pagan myths.[18] It is true that the Gospels recount the essential features of mythic culture-founding violence. Jesus's death has features both of uncontrolled mimetic mob violence and a ritualized execution. Even His closest disciples temporarily melt into the crowd by betraying, denying, or simply leaving Him. All are against one, putting Jesus in the place of all victims since the world began. As in myth, Jesus is venerated as God after his death. However, according to Girard, the Jesus of the Gospels "interacts" with myth to deconstruct it, just as He steps into the human scapegoating mechanism to destroy it. The critical difference between Gospel and myth is that *the Gospels are written from the perspective of the victim*. Myths are written from the perspective of the crowd which unconsciously sanctifies and divinizes its own violence by projecting it onto the gods.

According to Girard, the Gospels were written by inspired witnesses who step away from the crowd and tell the truth of a perfectly innocent victim, thus exposing human violence and revealing the full truth of the scapegoating phenomenon. Moreover, the Gospels bear witness that Jesus was God before He was crucified and resurrected; He was not divinized by the crowd's distorted transformation of its victim. His resurrection simply confirms that He is God. Witnesses of the resurrected victim bear witness of His divinity and the crowd's guilt and violence. In contrast to the Gospels, myth preserves the lie of the crowd's innocence. Jesus's empty tomb represents the repudiation of the mechanism of human culture and prevents mythical transformations of Jesus's death and resurrection. In contrast, Girard sees the sealed, whitened tombs to which Jesus compared the Pharisees (Matt. 23:27–28) as a perfect metaphor for human culture.[19] As the whitewashed tomb hides the victim's body, so does the mythology of sacred violence conceal our violence against the victim.

Jesus's disciples are called to a new community by repentance

(suspension of mimetic rivalry) and love. They are united in love with a living victim, whom they know, instead of being united by violence around a dead victim, whom they don't recognize. The new community will result from mimesis of Jesus as true disciples mediate Christ to others. In Jesus we have a new model, one who stands against human culture.

However, we naturally resist the revelation of the cross, a human tendency against which Jesus constantly struggles. An important example is Jesus's question, "How can Satan drive out Satan?" (Mark 3:23). Girard maintains that Satan (the name means "adversary" or "accuser") does drive out Satan in a very real sense; indeed, this is the very foundation of human culture.[20] One face of Satan is the mimetic rivalry of all against all: every man accusing his brother. This manifestation of Satan is driven out by the other face of Satan: every man accusing the scapegoat in the mimetic polarization of the crowd against its victim. Girard's Satan thus rules with violence but can also produce a temporary peace at the expense of our victims. Satan, manifested in our accusations and actions against our fellow human beings, is a murderer and liar from the beginning. The cross reveals the source of archaic religion in the "satanic" unanimous accusation of the crowd against its victim.

The purpose of the gospel revelation is to deconstruct archaic religion in all of its aspects and thereby destroy the grip of the violent sacred on the minds and hearts of humankind. It exposes myth as a lie by telling the story from the perspective of the victim. The gospel also destroys the efficacy of ritual sacrifice, which is diminished in importance when Jesus asserts that he "desires mercy and not sacrifice" (Matt. 9:13), condemned by Jesus's prophetic symbolic act in temporarily shutting down the sacrificial system of the temple (Mark 11:15–17), and ultimately undone by the cross, where our violence (the origin of ritual sacrifice) is definitively revealed to us. Finally, the gospel exposes the emptiness of prohibitions not based in love of God and one's fellow beings, such as the plethora of rules about Sabbath-keeping (Mark 2:23–28, 3:1–4) and the stigmatizing of menstruating women (Mark 5:24–34).

The gospel confronts every person with fundamental questions. Will I continue to sacrifice my fellow humans for my own benefit, or am I willing to sacrifice myself for their benefit? Will I continue to follow the sacrificial economy of Satan, or will I imi-

tate Christ in his voluntary self-giving for others? Will I construct my identity through the eyes of the persecuting crowd or through the eyes of Christ? To respond in the first way is idolatry; to respond in the second is true worship.

The Old Testament is a record of God's attempt to reveal the gospel to His chosen people, Israel. God's challenge is to speak to human beings according to their language and way of understanding. Human language, however, is formed and imprisoned by the scapegoating mechanism of human culture. God must find a way to use but transform these symbols, break us out of the system of sacred violence, and bring us to an understanding of the truth about Himself. As may be expected, this is an exceedingly difficult process. The revelation is not always perceived, frequently distorted, and sometimes ignored in the expediency of maintaining culture. Thus, in the Old Testament, texts of transcendent inspiration lie alongside texts that almost completely embody the myth of sacred violence. Nonetheless, the overall revelatory pressure in the Old Testament tends to expose the violence of human nature that lies at the root of culture, to put a human face on our victims, and to reveal the true nature of God. (See a Girardian reading of several Old Testament narratives in the Appendix.)

The story of David's census noted earlier is an example of a text that embodies a myth of sacred violence. In a Girardian reading of this difficult story, David himself decides to take a politically controversial census for military and/or taxation purposes and thereby infringes on tribal freedoms. Serious civil strife breaks out throughout the kingdom, and many people are killed. It seems beyond human control. It is the "wrath of God," and God is even blamed for the census. These elements are all mythological. Seeking an end to the crisis, David resorts to divination (three years of famine, three months of defeat in war, or three days of plague). Finally, at Gad's suggestion, David unifies the nation with a spectacular ritual animal sacrifice on neutral ground. The unity achieved by the sacrifice ends the crisis. Girard helps us to filter out the mythological elements in the text and to understand the real power that effective animal sacrifice had to unify, stabilize, and maintain ancient societies.

In contrast to David's census is the story of Joseph (Gen.

37–50) that shows the Bible's ability to expose myth and reveal the truth of the victim. Joseph's brothers envy him because of his favored status with their father. The brothers consider killing him but then sell him into slavery at Judah's suggestion. With time Joseph rises to the position of grand vizier in Egypt while his family descends into famine in Canaan. The brothers travel to Egypt and receive food from Joseph, whom they do not recognize. Joseph frames the youngest brother, Benjamin, now the father's favorite, for theft and arrests the brothers. He offers the brothers their freedom in return for Benjamin as hostage. Much earlier, the brothers had sacrificed Joseph for their (perceived) benefit, each hoping to become their father's favorite. Will they again sacrifice the favored brother for themselves? No. Judah, representing the ten brothers, begs to be held hostage instead of Benjamin. The brothers have passed from the desire to sacrifice others to a willingness to offer themselves for the other. In Girard's view, this change is the essence of Christian conversion.

This story clearly reveals mimetic rivalry and shows that true and lasting reconciliation does not come from the violent exclusion of a scapegoat victim who is later deified. Rather it comes from the living scapegoat's (Joseph's) love and forgiveness, coupled with the brothers' repentance and love. The contrast between the violent, scapegoating mechanism of archaic religion and true revelation could not be starker.[21]

Another revelatory high point of the Old Testament is the fourth "servant song" of Isaiah (Isa. 52:13–53:12), which Girard reads as typologically prophetic of Christ.[22] This passage describes a righteous, honest, and peaceful man who is persecuted and eventually killed as a "guilt offering" (Isa. 53:10). The community reflects on his innocent death with transcendent insight:

> Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.
> But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed by our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isa. 53:4–5)

Here, we see a persecuting community understanding the innocence of the victim, understanding that the victim is bearing the

consequences of their sins, and understanding that they have benefited from this.

Thus, though less consistently and thoroughly than the New Testament, the Old Testament also exposes mimetic rivalry and its sequel—the violent scapegoating upon which human culture is founded. It begins to overturn myth and other features of archaic religion which come from the violent sacred. For example, Judges 9, referred to earlier, is revelatory precisely because it equates God's wrath, God's sending an evil spirit, destruction by fire, and civil war. Perceptive readers are thus better prepared to understand subsequent texts about "God's" destruction of the wicked.

Jeremiah's surprising statement that God did not command ritual animal sacrifice during Israel's wilderness wanderings (Jer. 7:21–23) forms part of a substantial critique of ritual animal sacrifice by the pre-Exilic prophets (Amos 5:21–25; Hos. 5:6, 6:6; Mic. 6:6–8; Isa. 1:1–14; Jer. 7:21–23) and the psalmists (Ps. 50:5–15, 51:14–17). These texts question the relationship of ritual animal sacrifice to the Lord and its ultimate value in creating a bond between the worshipper and the Lord. The existence of these counter-texts is all the more surprising since Israelite religion centered on ritual sacrifice. A Girardian perspective sees these passages as instances of revelation from the true God against religion derived from the violent sacred.

Girard thus sees ancient Israel as a people journeying out of the violent sacred (myth, ritual, useless or harmful prohibitions) toward knowledge and worship of the true God. The journey does not occur in a straight line but rather with delays, reversals, and failures of understanding. Ancient Israelite religion is always a compromise between the violent sacred and true worship, even as revelation struggles to end or transform the violent sacred. Much of ancient Israelite religion, therefore, does not reflect the pure will of God but shows a dynamic interplay among revelation from God, Israel's spiritual sensitivity to the revelation, and vestiges of the violent sacred foundations of their social and cultural milieu.

Mormon Scripture and Girard's Cultural Theory

Joseph Smith's revelations on the state of ancient Israel under Moses can be profitably compared with Girard's insights. In his revelation on priesthood in September 1832, Joseph articulates

the concept that, without the ordinances and power of the Holy (Melchizedek) Priesthood, human beings cannot fully know God nor fully experience salvation (D&C 84:19–22). He continues:

> Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God;
>
> But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fullness of his glory.
>
> Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also.
>
> And the lesser priesthood continued . . . and the preparatory gospel;
>
> Which gospel is the gospel of repentance and of baptism, and the remission of sins, and the law of carnal commandments, which the Lord in his wrath caused to continue with the house of Aaron among the children of Israel until John. (D&C 84:23–27)

Because ancient Israelites resisted God's revelation, they lost access to the fullness of the gospel, to the fullness of the power and presence of God. In God's wrath (meaning God's absence), they were left with a "preparatory" gospel and the "law of carnal commandments."

The law of carnal commandments may refer to a set of precepts explicitly revealed by God for the carnal men and women who have rejected His gospel, which, from my observations, seems to be the majority LDS interpretation. However, I suggest a different reading. The text from Doctrine and Covenants 84 quoted above strongly implies that such "commandments" result from the hardened human heart in the absence of God. Furthermore, Doctrine and Covenants 29:34–35 clearly expresses the idea that God has never given a carnal commandment. Finally, "carnal" in KJV and LDS scripture exclusively describes fallen human beings who have yielded to the devil and hardened their hearts against God (Rom. 8:6–7; 1 Cor. 3:1–3; 2 Cor. 10:4; Heb. 7:16, 9:10; 2 Ne. 28:21; Mosiah 4:2, 16:5, 16:16, 27:25; Alma 30:53, 36:4, 41:11, 42:10; D&C 3:4, 29:35, 67:10). I conclude that "carnal commandments" are human attempts to please, propitiate, or approach God; they are not of divine origin. They have the potential to harm human beings. In Girardian terms, such laws

are derived from human culture or, in other words, from the violent sacred.

Joseph Smith and Girard thus seem to be in profound agreement that something important was missing from ancient Israelite religion. Furthermore, elements of the law of Moses and Old Testament religion seem to be of human rather than divine origin. How else can we explain the large number of laws which are obviously inconsistent with Christ's basic teachings? Men with crushed testicles were forbidden to enter the assembly of the Lord, as were descendants of Moabites or Ammonites down to the tenth generation (Deut. 23:1–3). Menstruating women and men with nocturnal emissions were "unclean" and contaminated anything or anyone they touched (Lev. 15). People with scaling skin disease ("leprosy")[23] were excluded from the camp of ancient Israel until healing was documented (Lev. 13). They were believed to be afflicted by God for some moral offense (Num. 12:9, 2 Kgs. 5:27, 2 Chr. 26:18–21). The ancient Babylonians, Greeks, Persians, and Arabs all had similar prohibitions.[24] These were all culturally determined prohibitions of the violent sacred, not divine in origin.

The topic of animal sacrifice is particularly interesting since the Joseph Smith scriptures also seem to confirm that God ordained such sacrifices. For example, God commanded Adam and Eve to "offer the firstlings of their flocks" (Moses 5:5). In a Girardian reading, "God's" voice is actually the voice of Adam's culture, and ritual sacrifice is of cultural origin.[25] Adam obeys but without understanding why. Then a revelation from God transforms the meaning of animal sacrifice: "This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father" (Moses 5:7). Girard similarly sees all victims of ritual sacrifice as typologically prophetic of Christ who came to stand in their place and who has been with all victims since the beginning. Moses 5:5–7 both confirms Girard's idea and confers symbolic meaning on the animal victim, a meaning that goes beyond the original cultural significance of the sacrifice.

There are other approaches to resolving the apparent contradiction between Girard's theory and God's "commanding" of animal sacrifice in Moses 5, which may be more congenial to LDS thinkers. Because ritual sacrifice played an immensely important

role in stabilizing and maintaining human culture, God may well have acceded to the needs of fallen humankind and permitted ("commanded") ritual animal sacrifice as a culture-stabilizing crutch at earlier stages of social and religious development. Another explanation is seeing animal sacrifice as God's way of moving humankind away from human sacrifice.

According to Girard, revelation begins a process of symbolic transformation designed to lead humans out of the violent sacred to true worship. This idea seems harmonious with several LDS texts:

> For the Lord God . . . speaketh unto men according to their language, unto their understanding. (2 Ne. 31:3)

> Behold, I am God and have spoken it; these commandments are of me, and were given unto my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. (D&C 1:24)

> And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men. (Book of Mormon title page; see also Morm. 8:17)

In Girard's theory, a nonviolent God has difficulty breaking through the barrier of human language which was formed in the violent sacred. I suggest that these LDS texts, which are unlike any in the Bible, confirm the presence of the barrier and the difficulty of surmounting it in the revelatory process.

For Girard, a critically important role that Christ plays is to end the mechanism of human sacrificial victimage, including ritual human and animal sacrifice and any other killing or abuse of another for communal or individual benefit. Christ gives himself as the "last sacrifice" to end all sacrifice of the other. This principle is directly confirmed by Amulek: "Therefore, it is expedient that there should be a great and last sacrifice, and then shall there be . . . a stop to the shedding of blood . . . and that great and last sacrifice will be the Son of God, yea infinite and eternal" (Alma 34:13-14). Although God directly commanded the end of animal sacrifice (3 Ne. 9:19–20), in Girard's view Christ's death functions in another important way to end communal sacrifice by the shedding of blood. This is by exposing it openly to the world. The violent unanimity of the crowd against its (innocent) victims is stripped of its mythological veil. This unveiling breaks the unanimity by engendering concern for victims and therefore robs the

scapegoat mechanism of its power. Society can no longer be stabilized at the expense of its victims. Ritual sacrifice does not work and is abandoned.

Girard emphasizes the importance of human culture in mediating our desires. Moses 6:55 provides a parallel: "Inasmuch as thy children are conceived in sin, even so when they begin to grow up, sin conceiveth in their hearts, and they taste the bitter, that they may know how to prize the good." We are conceived and born into a sinful, fallen world, and we inevitably imitate the sin that surrounds us. Having conceived sin in our hearts, revelation challenges us to prize the good, mediated to us by God (Moro. 7:11–12) and leave sin behind.

The Book of Mormon has much to say about the destruction of the wicked—sometimes describing it with passive verbs (1 Ne. 22:13–23, 2 Ne. 6:9–15), but more often ascribing an active role to God (1 Ne. 4:13; 3 Ne. 9:1–12; 3 Ne. 21:12–18). Doctrine and Covenants 29:9 also presents God as having an active role in the destruction of the wicked: "I will burn them up." Girard invites us to question these texts based on his theory of the violent sacred and our knowledge of Christ from the New Testament. Does Christ truly purify by killing or are these texts a result of literary convention, a depiction of God as presiding over the whole earth, or rhetoric designed to bring man to repentance?

The Book of Mormon provides a basis for critiquing the concept of a violent God who kills or orders humans to kill. The allegory of the olive tree portrays God as saying that He cut down the Jaredites in the promised land to make room for the Nephites (Jacob 5:43–45). However, the Jaredite narrative describes how they withdrew from God, hardened their hearts, and embraced civil war, leading to their destruction (Ether 14–15). Similarly, the "wrath of God," the frequently described force behind God's violence, is directly equated with human-caused wars (1 Ne. 14:14–16, 1 Ne. 22:13, Ether 14:21–25). Finally, Mormon after reviewing all of Nephite history concludes: "It is by the wicked that the wicked are punished, for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed" (Morm. 4:5). Mormon thus puts full responsibility for bloodshed on human beings, though

equating such bloodshed with the "judgments of God on the wicked" (Morm. 4:5; see also D&C 63:33).

Girard posits another way in which God may be understood as "causing" outbreaks of human violence, based on his interpretation of Jesus's provocative statement to His apostles: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). Jesus's suffering and death ruin the effectiveness of the scapegoating mechanism; the "second face of Satan" no longer has power to bring peace at our victims' expense. We are faced with a simple choice: We may repent and forgive, or we may descend deeper into mimetic rivalry without the protective effects of the scapegoat mechanism. We may attempt to find more victims (genocide) or more prestigious victims (regicide), but they will ultimately fail. The false unity of identifying an enemy and going to war will also fail. Violence will increase. Because the gospel robs ritual sacrifice and scapegoating of their effectiveness, often resulting in increasing endemic violence, God can be seen as causing violence because His action precipitated the human response of increased violence. Such increased violence is an unavoidable side effect of rejecting the gospel revelation. This is Girard's understanding of the mechanism of apocalyptic destruction.

The Book of Mormon (2 Ne. 30:10), like all scripture, maintains that God will destroy the wicked by fire before the second coming, which may refer to human wars and other conflicts or, more interestingly, to the baptism of fire which results in conversion to Christ. The best illustration is Nephi and Lehi imprisoned in the land of Nephi as they preach to the Lamanites (Hel. 5:20–52). Threatened with death, they are encircled by fire while the Lamanites are immobilized in a cloud of darkness, rebuked for their murderous desires, and challenged to repent. When they call on God, the darkness dissipates, the Lamanites also become encircled by fire, and the Holy Spirit enters their hearts. Might not much of the "destruction of the wicked by fire" in the last days refer to such conversions?

3 Nephi 8 describes a terrible destruction of many Nephite cities, leaving a thick darkness upon all the land. An excellent case can be made that this devastation resulted from a single massive volcanic eruption.[26] In 3 Nephi 9, speaking out of the dark-

ness, Jesus Christ explicitly states that He caused the destructions because of the people's sins. Should we therefore believe that Jesus directly triggered a volcanic eruption, willingly exterminated innocent children along with sinners, and surgically directed the destructive effects to result in the deaths of all accountable persons living below a certain standard of righteousness?

A Girardian perspective would, of course, challenge these conclusions. Living on this earth, which was created by God but the elements of which proceed according to natural law, is a risky business. God is not directly responsible for every volcanic eruption, tornado, or flood. He grieves with us in our sufferings and, at the same time, hopes that our sufferings will lead us to repentance. He is also willing in certain circumstances to *protect* us from the calamities of war and nature (Hel. 4:24–25, 1 Ne. 14:13–14, D&C 45:66–69, Moses 7:18–21).

Furthermore, even though 3 Nephi states that Jesus claims responsibility for the destruction, the thick darkness through which He speaks (3 Ne. 8:20–9:15) suggests the possibility that His hearers did not understand clearly. In fact, as the darkness later dissipates, the Father must make three efforts before the people can understand His introduction of Jesus (2 Ne. 11:1–7). Possibly God in 3 Nephi 8–9 was speaking to the people in the only language they could understand or hear, in language calculated to bring about repentance (3 Ne. 9:13–15). Finally, when Jesus descended among the Nephites, He acted, not with anger or continued destruction, but only with mercy, love, kindness, and healing.

Many Book of Mormon stories confirm aspects of Girard's theory and are, in turn, illuminated by it, providing these examples of mimetic rivalry: Nephi versus Laman and Lemuel, Nephi versus Laban, Jacob versus Sherem, Zeezrom versus Alma and Amulek, Ammon versus Lamoni's father, Moroni versus Amalickiah, Alma versus Korihor, and Shiz versus Coriantumr. In general, these accounts are not very nuanced. Almost all show God as firmly on one rival's side, and almost all include a violent attempt to end the rivalry.

Perhaps the most spectacular rivalry is that of Shiz and Coriantumr, the last Jaredites (Ether 14–15). They become so drunken with hatred for one another that nothing else in life has any

meaning except killing the other. All differences between Shiz and Coriantumr are erased. Both are simply vengeful, killing machines. Their followers imitate their bloodlust, resulting in a conflagration of culture-destroying violence. This result corroborates Girard's understanding of apocalypse as the end result of unchecked human desire after the gospel has been rejected.

The final wars between the Nephites and Lamanites also illustrate and confirm much of Girard's theory. After Christ appears, all of the survivors are converted and establish a society based on repentance, covenant love, and economic equality (4 Ne. 1:1–4). They suspend ritual animal sacrifice (3 Ne. 9:17–20) and have, at this point, moved beyond mimetic rivalry. Girard's theory predicts that, should they reject the gospel, they will descend into apocalyptic chaos. Ritual sacrifice will not be available to vent hostility. The power of law to retard mimetic rivalry will be effaced, since the law will have lost its sacred aura. Unchecked rivalry will first cause divisions in society and, with time, complete societal breakdown with erasure of all cultural structure. Attempts to unify the society against a common external enemy may be made, but the unity will not be lasting. Reversion to human sacrifice may occur, but it will not be effective.

This is precisely what we see with the Nephites. Peace and prosperity endure for two hundred years; then the people reject the gospel, resulting in pride, economic competition, and class divisions (2 Ne. 1:23–26). Two main groups emerge, reviving the ancient names of Nephite (those who at least nominally follow the gospel of Christ) and Lamanite (those who do not) (4 Ne. 1:35–38). By A.D. 300, "both the people of Nephi and the Lamanites had become exceedingly wicked one like unto another" (4 Ne. 1:45).

Wars between the two groups begin in A.D. 322 (Morm 1:8), increasing in frequency and severity over the next sixty-three years (Morm. 1–6). Finally, both peoples live only to make war with one another (Morm. 4:11), engaging in unspeakable brutality including the rape and murder of prisoners, cannibalism, and human sacrifice (Morm. 4:14–15, 21; Moro. 9:7–10). The Lamanites eventually exterminate the less numerous Nephites (Morm. 6) but, predictably, remain mired in violence: "The Lamanites are at war with another; and the whole face of this land is one continual round of murder and bloodshed" (Morm. 8:8). Interestingly,

Moroni explicitly attributes all these wars and destructions to "the hand of the Lord" (Morm. 8:8) even though his narrative has clearly shown that it was the people's rejection of the gospel which resulted in the destructions. Girard's theory provides a paradigm for understanding this savagery.

Girard's understanding of ritual and sacrifice also illuminates Captain Moroni's behavior as he rallied freedom-loving Nephites against the usurper Amalickiah in 73 B.C. (Alma 46). Moroni publicly tore his coat, wrote a slogan upon it, pronounced the land a land of liberty, and invited all to join him in making a covenant with God to defend liberty. The response of the people was immediate and vigorous. They rushed together around Moroni, tore their garments, cast the garments at his feet, and entered into a covenant with God to maintain their rights (freedom) and religion (Christianity). As part of the covenant, the people invoked a self-imprecatory curse upon themselves that they would be torn or trampled, like their garments, should they violate the commandments of God.[27] In exchange for this, they received a firm belief that God would protect their liberty and religion.

Moroni's coat/garment represents him. Its tearing represents his self-sacrifice or willingness to give himself for his people's liberty. The people are immediately unified around this living sacrifice. They offer themselves in turn, ritually indicated by tearing their own garments. The ritual exchange of sacrifice (originating in the violent exchange of a human victim for the crowd) is continued in the sacred oath where they give themselves to God in return for the belief/promise that God will preserve them. The people's gathering around Moroni as ritualized living sacrifices typifies the gathering of Christians around Christ. Christians are ideally living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1–2, Omni 1:26) who are committed to giving themselves for others. They gather around the ultimate living sacrifice (Christ) who has ended sacrifice by the shedding of blood.[28]

Moroni's ritualized event has marked structural similarities to two Old Testament stories. In the first (Judg. 19–20), a Levite gives his concubine to a mob to save himself. She dies as a result of the rape and abuse. He cuts her body into twelve parts, sending one part to each tribe. This sacrificial act unifies the people and they come together as "one man" (Judg. 20:1) to help the Levite exact

revenge. In the second event (1 Sam. 11), King Saul unifies all Israel against the Ammonites by cutting two oxen to pieces and sending the pieces throughout Israel. Again, the people of Israel turn out as "one man" (1 Sam. 11:7) and massacre the Ammonites.

These three episodes show a progression in sacrifice from a human victim to animal victims to a garment substitute for a victim. We also see a transformation in the meaning of sacrifice. In the first episode, the Levite sacrifices his concubine to save himself. In the last, Moroni sacrifices himself for his nation. This is precisely the kind of transformation of sacrifice induced by the gospel revelation, as Girard would see it. Interestingly, Doctrine and Covenants 20:8–9 confirms that the Nephites, in contrast to ancient Israel (D&C 84:24–27), had the fullness of the gospel.

Moroni, nevertheless, uses the language and power (unanimity against a common enemy) of the violent sacred to bring his army together. Captain Moroni, like almost all men, is trapped in structures of sacred violence—in the double-bind between Christ's gospel of love for one's enemy and the need to use violence to survive. Moroni, in God's name, violently defends his conception of Nephite liberty and does not hesitate to execute dissenters (Alma 46:30–36). He thus employs the economy of the violent sacred: It is better that a few die rather than that many suffer. Moroni resorts to sacrificial means (killing others) to save his nation and is convinced that he is doing God's will. Tellingly, Moroni claims that God had commanded him to go to battle against the Nephite "governors" if they would not repent and support the army (Alma 60:33) even though the chief governor and recipient of Moroni's threat, Pahoran, was innocent (Alma 61).

Another illustration of this double-bind—trying to live the gospel of love in a violent world—is the people of Ammon (Alma 23–27). These Lamanites grew up in a violence-saturated culture where they committed "many murders" (Alma 24:9). In approximately 80 B.C. they were converted to the gospel, repented of their sins, and felt that God had taken away the "guilt of their murders" or the "stain from their hearts" by the "merits of his son" (Alma 24:8–11). They saw themselves like their swords—formerly bloodstained but now clean and bright.

Their greatest concern was to retain their new spiritual life, and they concluded that they must never kill again, for any reason,

for fear of losing their tenuous grip on redemption. This belief shows remarkable insight into the corrosive effects of violence, even apparently justifiable violence, on the human soul. In a great communal ceremony, they buried their swords deep in the earth and made a covenant with God that they would die before shedding blood again (Alma 24:16–18). This gesture is clearly a type of ritual sacrifice, signifying that they died to violence in order to live in God. They ritually exchanged their swords for spiritual life.

The people of Ammon remained true to their covenant. When assaulted by a large army, they offered no resistance, with the astonishing result, that, at some point in the slaughter, their attackers suddenly became horrified by their own violence, dropped their weapons, and joined the people of Ammon in their gospel covenant of nonviolence (Alma 24:21–26). This action anticipates what Girard understands as one of the major effects of Christ's death on the cross. The cross is an open revelation to all humankind of its own disgusting violence, a revelation that motivates repentance.[29]

This situation, however, represents a double-bind. The people of Ammon were perfectly willing to die rather than shed blood, but the Nephites were not willing to allow this slaughter. They moved the people of Ammon deep behind their own borders, with the stipulation, willingly accepted, that the people of Ammon support the Nephite armies. Furthermore, the people of Ammon's sons became Nephite warriors in the next generation. Thus, even the most pacifistic people in this world find it virtually impossible to sever themselves completely from violence.

Joseph Smith received a highly significant revelation on peace and war when the Saints were ejected from Jackson County in 1833. It commands the Saints to "renounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to the fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children" (D&C 98:16). Earlier revelations had expressly forbidden the Saints to use violence (in contrast to the behavior of ancient Israel) to obtain land in Missouri (D&C 58:51–56, 63:26–31). There they would build Zion, a city of peace where "every man that will not take his sword against his neighbor must flee for safety . . . and it shall be the only people that shall not be at war with another" (D&C 45:68–69). The Saints were

thus challenged to build a refuge of peace for the world, protected by God and not by human weapons (D&C 45:66–67).

Doctrine and Covenants 98 forbids offensive war completely and even imposes restrictions on defensive war. The Saints, like all the Lord's ancient peoples, may wage defensive war only when "commanded" by God (D&C 98:32–33). Preceding this command will be an attack by an enemy to whom they must offer peace three times (D&C 98:34–36). This formula seems to be a rhetorical way of saying that the Saints should do everything possible to resolve conflict peacefully. If they do so, the Lord "will fight their battles" (D&C 98:37), suggesting, at the least, that God will not withdraw His spiritual blessings from them as they proceed to war.

This approach is very consistent with a Girardian perspective, which sees war as a human, not divine endeavor. Girard insists that God does not resort to violence to do his work. Defensive war and/or individual self-protection may be required for survival, so God may allow it (as He once allowed animal sacrifice), without ceasing to bless us spiritually. However, we must never divinize nor sanctify our violence. We must continually remember that God is calling humankind to learn to live without war.

The Old Testament portrays God as commanding Israel to "completely destroy" all of the inhabitants of Canaan (men, women, children, animals), ostensibly to prevent Israel from being contaminated by their idolatry (Deut. 7:1–2, 16; 20:16–18). Several Canaanite cities indeed seem to have been destroyed in this way: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor (Josh. 6, 8, 11).[30] Such genocidal offensive wars clearly contradict Christ's teachings. Furthermore, true righteousness is never established by exterminating all those who might mediate temptation. Jewish Bible scholars have similarly criticized these texts in Deuteronomy as representing neither the will of God nor historical reality.[31]

From a Girardian perspective, the Deuteronomy texts and the conquest of Canaan described in Joshua result from humans enmeshed in a myth of divinely sanctioned violence. The concept of holy war emerges directly from the violent sacred. One's community is seen as holy, righteous, and sacred. One's enemy is seen as evil, God's enemy, someone who provokes God's wrath. God will bestow his favor on those who annihilate ("devote to God") an enemy city—a frequent practice in the ancient world.[32] Israelites ab-

sorbed such ideas from the surrounding culture, not from God, and used them to divinize their own violence, murder, rape, and pillage.

LDS scriptures already cited also provide grounds for criticizing the commands of Deuteronomy to "completely destroy" the Canaanites. First is the description of the hard-hearted Israelites as having received "carnal commandments." We must therefore assume that not everything they did—or wrote—was in harmony with the will of God. Second is God's prohibition of offensive war, which applies to all of God's people at all times. Third is God's command to purchase Jackson County land instead of stealing it, a command to prevent the frenzied violence into which ancient Israel lapsed. All of these statements reinforce the concept that the violent conquest of Canaan was not God's will.

Nephi, however, justifies the slaughter of Canaanites by ancient Israel:

> And after they had crossed the river Jordan he [God] did make them mighty unto the driving out of the children of the land, yea, unto the scattering them to destruction.
>
> But behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity; and the fullness of the wrath of God was upon them; and the Lord did curse the land against them, and bless it unto our fathers; yea, he did curse it against them unto their destruction and he did bless it unto our fathers unto their obtaining power over it. (1 Ne. 17:32, 35)

Although Nephi argues that the Canaanites had rejected God's word, thus justifying their dispossession, scripture itself contests this view. Ancient Israel's sins and rebellions against God are well attested in virtually every book of scripture, but nowhere is it recorded that the Canaanites had heard, let alone rejected, God's word at the time of Moses or Joshua.

From a Girardian perspective, Nephi, though a prophet, held a partially mythical view of Israel's righteousness and the Canaanites' wickedness. Influenced by his culture, he accepted the myth of divinely sanctioned violence as justification for slaughtering the Canaanites.[33]

LDS scriptures occasionally present a more confusing relationship of the divine to violence. In the mission of Alma and Amulek in Ammoniah (Alma 8–14), their converts are burned to

death. They are imprisoned and tortured; but after several days, when a group arrives to subject them to more abuse, Alma and Amulek, filled with God's power, rise up, pray aloud for deliverance, and break their bonds (Alma 14:25–26). Their frightened persecutors begin to flee but are felled by an earthquake that destroys the prison, killing everyone inside except Alma and Amulek (Alma 14:27–28). The only action directly attributed to God is the power for Alma and Amulek to stand, break their bonds, and survive the earthquake. Whether the writer assumed that God sent the deadly earthquake or whether he intentionally did not specify an origin is not clear, leaving the text's relationship to divine violence ambiguous.

God's relationship to violence is also ambiguous in the story of Ammon's conversion of King Lamoni and his people (Alma 17–19). Ammon and his three brothers have refused the Nephite kingship so they can preach the gospel to the Lamanites. God promises their father that He will preserve their lives (Mosiah 28:7). Ammon is captured and volunteers to be Lamoni's servant. He is assigned duty as a herdsman, a dangerous occupation since Lamoni has executed previous herdsmen for failing to protect the herd against raiders who scatter the flock. When raiders attack, Ammon's fellows panic but regather the flock. Ammon, secure in the Lord's promise of protection, confronts them alone and kills six with his sling and one with his sword. He also cuts off the arms of others. Ammon, a missionary of the gospel, does not hesitate to engage in the violence endemic to Lamanite culture and thus receives serious attention from Lamoni.

The king has begun to experience guilt for killing many of his former servants and also begins to comprehend the cyclic murderous violence among his people (Alma 18:1–6). Ammon declares the gospel to Lamoni and converts him. Lamoni prays for mercy, is overcome by the Spirit, and falls to the earth "as if he were dead" (Alma 18:42). After two days, the worried queen approaches Ammon, who reassures her that Lamoni is not dead but rather is "sleeping with God" (Alma 19:7–8). Ammon promises the queen that Lamoni will arise in the morning and teaches her the gospel. The next day Lamoni awakes, declares that he has seen his Redeemer, and is again overcome, this time joined by the queen and the household servants.

One servant, Abish, who had been previously converted, summons the community to the king's house, hoping they will also be converted. Instead, they voice mistrust of Ammon as an agent of evil. One man, whose brother Ammon had killed, takes out his sword to attack Ammon, but falls "dead" (Alma 19:22–24). The multitude reacts with fear and contention. Abish takes the queen's hand, who arises and testifies that she is redeemed. The rest of the group awake and declare God's word to the multitude. Some are converted. Many are not.

This story illustrates how quickly an angry crowd, looking for scapegoats, can form but also shows God protecting potential victims from the crowd. If the bereaved brother had succeeded in killing Ammon, there is little doubt that his act would have been imitated by others and Lamoni's entire household would have been quickly exterminated. However, troublingly, the text strongly implies, although it does not explicitly say, that God killed Ammon's would-be murderer. Does God kill to prevent more killing? Was this man really dead or in the same state as Lamoni? The text says nothing more about him. But it does seem, in an absolute sense, that he was no more deserving of death than Lamoni himself.

Even more troubling is the glorification of Ammon's killing and mutilation of the marauders. True, he was acting in self-defense, but he had helped provoke the confrontation. In Girardian terms, Ammon gains a violent victory over his mimetic rivals; then, both he and his fellow servants present it as a manifestation of God's power (Alma 18:1–3, 22–35). The greatest paradox is that it is precisely Ammon's spectacular violence that prompts guilt in Lamoni for his own violence and prepares him to hear the gospel message. Furthermore, these very same people who are converted by Ammon's message subsequently take an oath of nonviolence and convert others by allowing themselves to be slaughtered. The text thus draws a sharp distinction between the "good" killing (justifiably committed by a righteous missionary) and the "bad" killing (unjustifiably committed by the unenlightened Lamanites). From a Girardian perspective, a more likely interpretation is that the text reflects the incomplete understanding that Book of Mormon people had of their own violence.

Approximately twenty years before the birth of Christ, Neph-

ite society reached a point of near total dissolution because of internal dissensions and wars (Hel. 10–11). Nephi, son of Helaman, unsuccessfully declared the word of God at considerable risk to his own life, but was assured by hearing God's voice:

> Behold, I declare it unto thee in the presence of mine angels, that ye shall have power over this people, and shall smite the earth with famine, and with pestilence . . . according to the wickedness of this people.
> Behold, I give unto you power that whatsoever ye shall seal on earth shall be sealed in heaven. (Hel. 10:6–7)

After two more years of bloodshed, Nephi prayed for famine, hoping the people would repent and not totally destroy themselves in warfare. Thousands died in the ensuing famine; and after two more years, the people finally repented. Nephi then prayed that God would end the famine; the rains came and the famine ended. Interestingly, Nephi did not personally smite the earth with famine or bring the rains. Rather, he asked God to grant his prayers. Did God therefore directly cause the deaths of the thousands who perished? A Girardian perspective would suggest not. Droughts occur in natural cycles. They may cause famine by themselves but are more likely to do so when warfare has depleted food reserves, destroyed farms, and diminished the labor pool. God can be understood as *indirectly* causing the famine: God spoke; Nephites rejected God's word; war ensued; famine resulted. Nephi's prayer can be understood as his hope that the natural consequences of war (famine, pestilence) would lead to repentance. Finally unable to wage war, Nephite repentance coincided with the end of the drought cycle, which they accepted as God's intervention, and with their renewed attention to farming. To this naturalistic explanation may be added the possibility that God intervened directly in nature to bring the rains, an action perhaps facilitated by the Nephites' faith and repentance.

In an alternative view, God both directly caused and terminated the famine, mercifully initiating a lesser evil (famine) to interrupt a greater one (war). However, this scenario implies a concept of God actively blessing His people when they are righteous and actively punishing them when they are wicked. In Girard's theory, such a concept of God originates in the "bi-valent" gods of the violent sacred and is not ultimately reflective of the true God.

The true God is "univalent." He offers us love, life, and salvation which He is able to give us as we heed Him. Death and destruction are the *natural* consequences of disobeying God, not God's work.

Noah's flood offers interesting scriptural texts about the relationship of God to natural disasters. Joseph Smith provided two texts about the flood: Moses 8:14–30 (expanded variant of Gen. 6:1–13) and Moses 7:28–45 (part of Enoch's vision with no corresponding variant in Genesis). All three texts state unequivocally that God sent or would send the flood because of man's wickedness. A Girardian approach would critique the literalness of these statements. The following arguments may be made: First, Girard's theory of the violent sacred helps us to understand why ancient cultures saw all transcendent events, including floods and war, as acts of God. Second, God speaks according to our language and manner of understanding (2 Ne. 31:3, D&C 1:34). Third, the first two points are reflected in the literary conventions of scripture. Fourth, God wants both scripture and the uncertainties of the natural world to foster humility and repentance (D&C 88:84–90, 43:22–26). Fifth, God uses literary convention, even if it is not literally reflective of ultimate reality, to promote repentance.[34] Sixth, the flood is described as a manifestation of God's wrath (Moses 7:34), just like war, which God clearly does not cause. Seventh, many scriptural texts describe God as doing other things which He clearly did not do: hardening Pharaoh's heart (Ex. 7:3; see Ne. 2:26–27), sending a delusion on the wicked (2 Thess. 2:1–12; see Ether 3:12), and killing Saul (1 Chr. 10:13–14; see 1 Sam. 31:4). Eighth, in the creation, God brought together preexisting "matter" whose elements then interact according to their inherent properties, eventually resulting in events such as epidemics, floods, earthquakes, etc.[35]

Prior to the flood, the earth was "filled with violence" (Moses 8:28, 30). In effect, there was a "flood" of human violence, matching Girard's understanding of the ease with which human violence can spiral out of control and destroy culture/society. The understanding that God personally sent the flood sees God as responding violently to human violence. One may argue that God acted in humankind's best interest in sending the flood, but this line of reasoning is dubious. The Old Testament itself attests that

the flood was not effective in producing a righteous humanity. Violence never cures violence. God certainly already knew that truth, even if humanity has yet to learn the lesson.

In the Gospels, sinful humans kill Jesus. In the flood story, the Lord kills sinful human beings. The two stories present a radical discontinuity. Can they both represent the truth about the same person? In the Girardian view, no. For Girard, the meaning of the cross is that God can and will redeem humankind without violent means.

A Book of Mormon story that, like the flood, seems to depict God acting violently to destroy the wicked is that of Korihor (Alma 30). Korihor, an "anti-Christ," argues publicly against Christ, prophecy, and the idea of remission of sins. Achieving significant popularity, he leads many into sin and unbelief. Because he has not broken the law of the land (Alma 30:7, 12), he is able to continue preaching, although he is expelled from two believing communities. Finally, he is bound and brought before Alma, who is both chief priest and chief judge in Zarahemla.

In the resulting confrontation (Alma 30:31–55), Korihor continues to deny God's existence and impugns the motives of the priests in the church. Alma bears testimony of Christ, challenges Korihor to believe, and states that Korihor is denying what he himself knows but is "possessed with a lying spirit" (Alma 30:37–42). The argument continues with Korihor demanding a sign of God's power and Alma offering additional arguments and warnings. Finally, Alma states that God will strike Korihor dumb (as the sign) if Korihor denies God again. Alma reasons that it is better that Korihor's "soul should be lost than that [he] should be the means of bringing many souls down to destruction by [his] lying" (Alma 30:47). (The text does not explain why being struck dumb would mean Korihor's damnation or why losing his soul alone—without dumbness—would diminish the effectiveness of his rhetoric.)

Korihor retreats to an agnostic position but repeats his refusal to believe without a sign. Alma then announces: "In the name of God, ye shall be struck dumb" (Alma 30:49). Korihor, who can no longer speak, confesses in writing that he always believed in God but that the devil had deceived him. He begs Alma to return his speech. Alma refuses lest Korihor's "conversion" be false. Korihor is *cast out* and forced to beg for a living, his influence among

the people destroyed. He is later trampled to death by the Zoramites. Meanwhile, frightened by Korihor's fate, his followers repent, ending dissent among the Nephites.

This story replicates several elements of sacred violence. Social dissensions occur. One person is blamed. Compelled to agree with his accusers, he is punished and expelled. The dissensions are resolved. Although the final step, divinization of the scapegoat, did not occur, did God wish Korihor to serve as a classic scapegoat? Korihor is clearly guilty to some degree of the charges against him, and his chief accuser, Alma, is a dedicated prophet and righteous judge. The text of the Book of Mormon does lead one to conclude that Korihor's fate is justified and that it is the will of God. Alma is presented as being guided by God to solve a serious threat to Nephite society and religion.

Girardian analysis of this story, however, notes the intense mimetic rivalry between Alma and Korihor, which Alma, despite his good motives, exacerbated. Although Korihor was not breaking the law, Alma insisted that Korihor confess belief. Ironically, young Alma had, like Korihor, attempted to destroy the church by leading people into sin and away from God (Mosiah 27:8–10). Doubly ironically, Alma was only converted after receiving a sign—an angelic visitation (Mosiah 27:11–24). Might not Alma have found a way to deal with Korihor that would be more in keeping with Christ's injunction to love and forgive one's enemy?

Alma shows some concern for Korihor's well-being but is perfectly willing to sacrifice Korihor's power of speech and cast him out for the good of the people. This approach embodies the economy of sacred violence: kill or expel one for the good of many. The text, however, directly implicates God in striking Korihor dumb. Does God, in fact, sometimes follow the economy of sacred violence, thereby proving one of Girard's essential postulates false? Although each reader must make that decision, Girardians would ask if the text may have undergone mythological transformation when it presents God as striking Korihor dumb. Was it truly God's will that Korihor be cast out? Would God treat Korihor so much differently than he treated young Alma?

A Girardian perspective also highlights the structural parallels

between Korihor and Abinadi (Mosiah 11–17). Like Korihor, Abinadi preaches against what he perceives as a false religion of his people and accuses the priests of exploitation. Abinadi is also bound without legal basis and brought before King Noah and his priests. He refuses their efforts to bring him to confessional unity, testifies of Christ's future mission, and is burned to death.

This structural analysis overlooks, of course, the issue of personal sanctity. Alma and his people were striving to live the gospel while Korihor advocated a dissolute lifestyle. Abinadi was a righteous prophet, while King Noah and his priests were dissolute. Still, seeing the two stories in parallel casts Alma's behavior into clearer relief, making it possible to learn more from him. Girard emphasizes that God wants us to move beyond structures of sacred violence, in addition to cultivating our personal sanctity. Both things are ultimately necessary.

One of Girard's essential theses is that God takes the side of the victim against the persecuting crowd.[36] In the Book of Mormon, God always takes the side of the righteous (crowd or person), meaning that these two perspectives are not always in harmony. The Korihor story raises the interesting question of whether a more righteous crowd can scapegoat (in the Girardian sense) a less righteous victim. Girard would answer yes. Even a righteous person can unconsciously slide into scapegoating, into the unjustified blaming of another for one's or society's problems. We must constantly be aware of the risks of maintaining a myth of personal sanctity purchased by means of self-deception about our own violence or that of our culture. The message of the cross is that we should look inside ourselves and root out all victimage of others.[37]

Probably the greatest challenge to Girard's theory from an LDS perspective is Nephi's murder of Laban, an event that happened when Nephi was young but which he wrote about much later (1 Ne. 3–4). It is certainly a difficult text for many who take the Book of Mormon seriously. After Lehi obeyed God and led his family from Jerusalem into the desert, the Lord ordered his four sons to return and obtain the brass plates held by Laban, an officer of the city. The faithful youngest son, Nephi, undertakes the task willingly while the two older sons, Laman and Lemuel, are reluctant. The first two strategies (a direct request and an attempt to purchase) fail, and Laban also issues death threats. Nephi swears, "As the

Lord liveth, and as we live, we will . . . [accomplish] the thing which the Lord has commanded of us" (1 Ne. 3:15). After considerable resistance, Nephi enters the city alone by night, without a specific plan. He encounters Laban, lying in the street, drunk and unconscious. Admiring Laban's sword, Nephi "was constrained by the Spirit that I should kill Laban" (1 Ne. 4:10). He hesitates and the Spirit reminds him that the Lord has delivered Laban into his hands and repeats the command to slay him: "Behold the Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes. It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief" (1 Ne. 4:13). Nephi beheads Laban, dresses in Laban's clothes, and deceives Laban's servant into giving him the plates.

This disturbing story confronts us with many unanswered questions. Who was the rightful owner of the plates? Why didn't God provide the record miraculously, as he subsequently did with the Liahona (1 Ne. 16)? Why couldn't the Nephites have received the law of Moses, the writings of prophets, and Lehi's genealogy by revelation? Why would the Lord send Nephi, a young man, to kill another person? Why couldn't Nephi have simply passed by the drunken Laban and obtained the plates by some other means? Did Laban deserve to die?

It is relatively easy from a human perspective to understand why Nephi might have been tempted to kill Laban. His level of stress would have been very high. His father's life had been threatened. His family had effectively been driven out of Jerusalem. His brothers were so resistant that they beat Nephi for his persistence. Nephi, absolutely convinced that God requires them to obtain the plates, has committed himself with an oath. He is convinced God wants him to kill Laban. Killing Laban seems to be an act of self-defense, a justified killing. It seems the most secure way to obtain the plates, perhaps the only way.

A Girardian analysis does not seek to condemn or scapegoat Nephi but rather to shed light on his dilemma. Nephi is in a mimetic crisis, and the Lord seems to deliver Laban—who represents all of Nephi's and his family's persecutors—into his hands. Eliminating this enemy/scapegoat promises to bring family unity and God's favor. After brief hesitation, Nephi yields to his culture's sa-

cred violence, perceived by him to be the voice of the Spirit, and kills the one for the good of the many. Laban's killing is the founding murder of the Nephite nation, partially and unconsciously mythologized by Nephi in the years before he writes his record. The text contains elements of self-justification by a great man who struggled internally for the rest of his life with the implications of his violent deed.

Believers in the Book of Mormon are rightly troubled by this Girardian approach. They argue that Nephi had spiritual experiences prior to the killing of Laban and had even seen an angel. Many would argue that such a spiritual person could not misinterpret the voice of the Spirit in such a circumstance. Does not a Girardian analysis attack the Book of Mormon itself? If we cannot trust Nephi's impressions of the Spirit, how can we trust any of the book's other spiritual manifestations? All believers would point out that Nephi went on to have incredible, transcendent, immensely important visions of Christ (1 Ne. 11–14) and profound Christ-centered theological insights (2 Ne. 30–32). Could such a person have deluded himself into murder as God's will and retained that delusion to the end of his life? Wouldn't God have told him the truth?

Girardians would counter that the text gives no good evidence that Nephi knew much of Christ prior to killing Laban. God would certainly forgive Nephi for "he knew not what he did" (cf. Luke 23:34). The Apostle Paul also unwittingly participated in killing but later received great revelations and knowledge of Christ. Moses, before his call as prophet, killed in questionable circumstances (Ex. 2:11–15). All human beings possess the potential for violence and self-delusion. All depend on God's grace for salvation, in part for sins committed in ignorance. Nephi's knowledge of Christ becomes strongly evident only after killing Laban. When Laman and Lemuel later seek to kill Nephi, Nephi does not resolve the problem by killing them. He leads his followers to found a new colony (2 Ne. 5). Instead of killing or expelling the wicked, Nephi suffers the burden of starting over.

From the Girardian perspective, the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon does not depend on Nephi's correctly interpreting the whisperings of the Spirit before killing Laban. The truth of any scriptural text, including the Book of Mormon, is

understood by reading under the influence of the Holy Spirit by the "lens of the cross" (see 1 Cor. 2:2). The cross, argues Girardians, reveals both God's nonviolent nature and humankind's scapegoating violence. All scripture must be interpreted from this perspective.

The traditional LDS interpretation of this event, which sees Nephi as the virtually perfect example of human obedience, cannot be harmonized with the Girardian.[38] In traditional LDS thought, Nephi was able to listen to the Spirit and obey the voice of God against the voice of his culture, which told him *not* to kill Laban (1 Ne. 4:10). A traditional LDS response might argue that, although Girard may be right that some scriptural texts result from projecting human violence onto God, there are clearly exceptions to this rule. God gave us life, and He has the right to take it away. Divine killing or divinely sanctioned killing is occasionally necessary, ultimately justifiable, and redemptive. Laban's death was necessary for the beneficial effects of the brass plates, as the plain sense of the Book of Mormon text indicates. Traditional LDS thought would thus reject the Girardian perspective as an absolute interpretive standard.

In contrast, Girardians will continue to see Nephi as a tragic illustration of the fact that even the most devoted individual may slide unconsciously into scapegoating and the violent sacred. Nephi stands as a warning against the seductive temptation to sacrifice one's rival in the name of God.

In any case, it is hard to argue that Laban was not *compelled* to hand over the brass plates.

This point leads to a final example of God's exposure of the human propensity toward violence. A revelation to Joseph Smith in 1839 states:

> The rights of the priesthood are inseparably connected with the powers of heaven, and . . . the powers of heaven cannot be controlled or handled only upon the principles of righteousness.
>
> But when we undertake to cover our sins, or to gratify our pride, our vain ambition, or to exercise control or dominion or compulsion upon the souls of the children of men, in any degree of unrighteousness, behold, the heavens withdraw themselves; the Spirit of the Lord is grieved; and when it is withdrawn, Amen to the priesthood of that man.

> We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and dis-position of almost all men . . . [to] exercise unrighteous dominion. (D&C 121:36, 37, 39)

This text confirms the Girardian insights that we attempt to use compulsion to cover our sins and to delude ourselves about it. Indeed, one purpose of this great revelation is to make us more conscious of these tendencies.

Even the best of people are prone to such behavior. The Book of Mormon, for example, was written by inspired prophets for people struggling to implement the gospel. Part of their struggle was against the structures of the violent sacred. They were faced with serious culture-threatening challenges: unbelief, internal dissension, evil deeds by members of their society, and wars. It is no surprise, from a Girardian perspective, that they did not always rise to the highest standards of Christ and that they sometimes used sacred violence to solve their problems. It is no surprise that these failures appear throughout the text, even though the narrators do not always recognize them as such. A Girardian perspective helps us to deal honestly with these issues and to learn from their experiences.

The revelation in Doctrine and Covenants 121 urges us to maintain our influence by persuasion, gentleness, and unfeigned love (v. 41). It concludes:

> Let thy bowels also be full of charity towards all men . . . [L]et virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God.
> The Holy Ghost shall be thy constant companion, and thy scepter an unchanging scepter of righteousness and truth; and thy dominion shall be an everlasting dominion, and *without compulsory means* it shall flow unto thee forever and ever. (D&C 121:45–46; emphasis mine)

This passage promises that the righteous will enjoy eternal dominions in the world to come—dominions that will be free of compulsion. If that is our eternal destiny, then, by implication, God must be ruling us even now without compulsion. Girard's work challenges us to believe in and imitate such a God, a God who accomplishes his work without compulsion, without violence.

Appendix

These eight examples provide additional Girardian analyses of biblical texts.

1. The story of the Fall (Gen. 3) illustrates Girard's concept of mimetic desire and scapegoating.[39] Eve learned her desire for the forbidden fruit from the serpent, like him rivalrously desiring to "be like God" (v. 5; see also Moses 4:1–4). Eve then mediated this desire to Adam. The desire was spontaneous for neither. When called to account by God, Adam blamed (scapegoated) Eve, who, in turn, blamed the serpent.

2. Girard finds it highly significant that the first murderer, Cain, founded the first city (Gen. 4).[40] This story identifies murder as the origin of human culture. Myth would have presented Cain as a hero or a god. In contrast to myth, the text condemns this murder as resulting from Cain's mimetic crisis, with his victim's blood crying to God from the ground. The Bible thus preserves Abel's voice, which would have been obliterated in myth.

3. In Exodus 7–12, God is portrayed as afflicting Egypt with ten plagues, culminating in the death of all Egyptian firstborn males. Israelites are protected by ritual animal sacrifice and escape from Egypt under God's protection, with God destroying Pharaoh's army. A Girardian interpretation sees as mythological the attribution of the plagues and other violence to God. God does not boast about His ability to destroy; rather, the text reflects the human desire for a powerful deity to vanquish one's enemies. Rather than originating in divine violence, the plagues indicate a mimetic crisis in Egyptian society, possibly induced by meteorological, entomological, and epidemiological disasters.[41] The deaths of Egyptian firstborn sons could represent human sacrifices attempting to resolve the crisis. The Lord is revealed, not in the catastrophic violence, but in leading the victimized Israelites to form a covenant society with Him.

4. In the apostasy at Baal Peor (Num. 25), plague smites the Israelites to punish their idolatry and sexual immorality with Moabite women. God commands Moses to execute the (non-guilty) leaders of the people to turn away His wrath (the plague). Instead, Moses tells the judges to execute the guilty idolaters. They do not. Israel remains paralyzed. Suddenly a brazen Israelite brings a foreign woman into a tent in the middle of the camp, an event witnessed by pious Israelites gathered at the tabernacle. Phineas, son of Aaron, enters the tent and kills the immoral couple with a single spear thrust, an act that averts God's wrath. The plague, which has killed twenty-four thousand, ends; and Phineas is rewarded with eternal priesthood.

According to a Girardian reading, the plague is human mimetic vio-

lence and impending societal dissolution. Israel is unable to solve the crisis either by judicial execution of the guilty or by ritual sacrificial substitution of innocent leaders. A spontaneous murder, which attracts the Israelites' mimetic approval, ends the crisis. The founding features of human culture are only partially concealed by the mythological elements of the text. Priesthood (to direct ritual sacrifice) results from the dual murder, consistent with Girard's theory of ritual sacrifice as a re-presentation of the founding murder. Furthermore, the biblical text names and gives the genealogy of Phineas's victims, thus refusing to let the victims be mythologized into demons, monsters, or gods.

5. The stoning of Achan also partly exposes the violent scapegoating at the base of human culture (Josh. 7).[42] The Israelite army has taken Jericho, killed every living thing (including animals), and given the treasure to the Lord. However, Achan kept some items for himself. As a result, when Israel besieges Ai, it is defeated. God reveals to Joshua that someone has retained some of Jericho's "devoted" treasure and identifies the guilty in a dramatic episode of increasingly refined ritual lot-casting. Achan, once identified, confesses his guilt, and "all Israel stoned him . . . before the Lord" (Josh. 7:25, 23). Astonishingly, his sons and daughters are also stoned and then burned. This excess killing of innocents should raise the suspicion of uncontrolled mob violence, especially since Deuteronomy 24:16 forbids executing children for their parents' sins. The probable mob violence and the ritualized execution of Achan revitalize and unify Israel, which then successfully annihilates Ai. As a final note, Girardians suspect that Achan was not the only Israelite who kept back "devoted" things, but rather was made to bear the guilt of many.

6. When the Old Testament unambiguously makes God the author of violence, Girard reads these texts as our delusion about our own violence. Nadab and Abihu, two sons of Aaron, "offered unauthorized fire" (Lev. 10:1) so "fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them" (Lev. 10:2). A Girardian perspective argues instead that they became scapegoats when the crowd, envious of their new power, interpreted them as transgressing a ritual prohibition. Killing them was the crowd's way to prevent God's wrath from falling upon themselves. Priests as ritual sacrificers had a special relationship to the power of the violently unanimous crowd. They had the privilege of using and channeling the power of sacred violence, but they also ran the risk that this power could spill out against them.

7. After Saul was installed as king of Israel, God sent Samuel to command Saul to take vengeance against the Amalekites for what they had done to Israel in the wilderness wanderings two to three hundred years earlier (1 Sam. 15). He tells Saul to "completely destroy" the Amalekites, killing all men, women, children, and animals. Saul does so, sparing only

the Amalekite king, Agag, and some choice sacrificial animals. Samuel subsequently reprimands Saul for this lapse in obedience, informs him that God has rejected him as king, and proclaims, "to obey is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam. 15:22). Samuel then kills Agag "before the Lord at [the temple in] Gilgal" (1 Sam. 15:33).

Girard's perspective asks us to see the massacre of the Amalekites as a humanly initiated endeavor, sanctified beforehand by ascribing it to God's will, possibly as a result of divination. Such ideas arise from the violent sacred: The enemies of one's culture are God's enemies. The Bible itself implicitly criticizes the behavior of Samuel and Saul, forbidding the killing of children for the sins of their parents (Deut. 24:16) and commanding us to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43–44). There is clearly mimetic rivalry between Samuel and Saul, with Samuel definitively gaining the upper hand by his spectacular sacrifice of Agag at the temple. Those who control sacrifice control the culture. It is ironic that the oft-quoted injunction "to obey is better than sacrifice" comes from a text actually describing the violent sacrifice of innocent others as obedience. In Girard's view, God does not desire such obedience—rather, its inverse.

8. David had the Ark of the Covenant transported with immense ritual scrupulousness into Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6). However, the ark was transported on an ox cart by men whose Levitical status was unclear. Prohibitions had already been violated since the law required that Levites transport the ark by using poles passed through rings on its sides. Furthermore, it could not be touched on pain of death (Ex. 25:12–15; Num. 4:15). When the oxen stumbled, it was already a mark of God's disfavor. Uzzah, one of the men responsible for transporting the ark, steadied it, and "God struck him down and he died there beside the ark of God" (v. 7).

Did God personally kill Uzzah for his well-intentioned though forbidden act? According to a Girardian reading, it is more likely that Uzzah was crushed by the ox cart, killed by his associates out of fear of God's wrath, or even died later of an unrelated illness. Any of these events would have been interpreted as acts of God, leading to this distorted understanding being recorded in the text.

Notes

1. A detailed analysis of Christ's atonement or any theology of postmortal human suffering (hell) lie beyond the scope of this paper.

2. Some of the problems in this text have been recognized within the canonical tradition. The version in 1 Chronicles 21, which was written later, says "Satan [not God] rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census" (1 Chr. 21:1). It also adds the detail that God sent fire from heaven as a sign that He accepted David's sacrifice on the threshing

floor and further adds that David chose Araunah's threshing floor as the site of the temple that David's son Solomon would build (1 Chr. 22:1). In the Joseph Smith Translation (JST), Joseph removed the phrase describing the Lord's repentance or grief after the deaths of 70,000 Israelites and changed it to Israel's repentance of a still-unspecified evil (JST 2 Sam. 24:16, 1 Chr. 21:15). Interestingly, Joseph left unchanged the discrepancy between 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles about who had initiated the census—God or Satan. Both Chronicles and the JST represent theological improvements over the original text in 2 Samuel. However, neither comes close to solving all of its problems.

3. Gary A. Anderson, "Sacrifice and Sacrificial Offerings," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Noel Freedman (New York City: Doubleday, 1992), 5:881–82.

4. Raymund Schwager, *Must There Be Scapegoats?*, translated by Maria L. Assad (New York: Crossroads, 2000), 80–91.

5. Girard's principal works in English translation are *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966); *Resurrection from the Underground*, translated by James G. Williams (New York: Crossroads, 1997); *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977); *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987); *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); *To Double Business Bound* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); *Job,* translated by Yvonne Freccero (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987); *A Theater of Envy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, translated by James G. Williams (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001); *Oedipus Unbound*, edited by Mark R. Anspach (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004); *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origin of Culture* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2007); and *Mimesis and Theory*, edited by Robert Doran (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008). Two recent book-length introductions to Girard are Chris Fleming, *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2004) and Michael Kirwan, *Discovering Girard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowly Publications, 2005).

6. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 290.

7. Ibid., 290–91.

8. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 64–69, and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 64–65, 93–97.

9. By "innocent" Girard does not mean guiltless in all respects but that the victim is innocent of all or most of all of what the crowd is pro-

jecting on to him. Suzanne Ross, *The Wicked Truth* (Glenview, Ill.: Doers Publishing, 2007), 212, insightfully terms this innocence of the victim "structural innocence."

10. Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 93.

11. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 99–104.

12. Examples are the prohibitions against boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Ex. 23:19) and against eating rabbit (Lev. 11:6). Although such prohibitions seem superstitious to us, they were undoubtedly very logical within the system in which they arose.

13. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 89–118. Girard's thesis is controversial. For reviews of other theories of the origin of sacrifice, see Joseph Henniger, "Sacrifice," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 12:550–54; James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 14–20; and Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

14. David A. Leeming and Margaret A. Leeming, *A Dictionary of Creation Myths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23–29.

15. Girard, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*, 48–83.

16. Ibid., 219.

17. Ibid., 205–15.

18. Jonathan Z. Smith, "Dying and Rising Gods," in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 4:521–27.

19. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 163–67.

20. James G. Williams, ed., *The Girard Reader* (New York: Crossroads, 1996) 194–210.

21. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 149–53, and Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 54–60.

22. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 155–57.

23. The ailment frequently translated as "leprosy" does not appear to correspond to the modern Hansen's disease caused by *mycobacterium leprae*. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, in the *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 3:816–24.

24. Ibid., 3:820–23.

25. In addition to equating culture with God, which may be difficult for many Mormons, this reading assumes that Adam lived in an already formed human culture. This assumption will not be acceptable to those who believe that Adam was literally the first human being.

26. Bart Kowallis, "In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi," *BYU Studies* 37, no. 3 (1998): 136–90.

27. See similar oaths in Genesis 15 and Jeremiah 34:8–10.

28. Girardian thought sees Jesus as condemning/ending both Jew-

ish sacrificial ritual and the Jewish temple itself. Robert G. Hamerton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 15–57. A temple that incorporated Girard's understanding of Christianity would require that the worshippers become living sacrifices who leave behind Satan's accusing crowd, who reject Satan's false peace, and who care for victims. In LDS temples, vicarious work for the dead ritually replicates the Girardian "good mimesis" of Christian discipleship where one disciple mediates Christ to another.

29. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 166–67, 206–9.

30. There is no archeological evidence for a siege and destruction of Jericho during the time of Joshua (late Bronze Age: 1550–1200 B.C.). Paul F. Jacobs, "Jericho" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000), 689–91. The location of Ai is uncertain.

31. Moshe Weinfield, *Deuteronomy 1–11*, in the *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 5:50-53; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 470–72.

32. For example, see the "Translation of the Mesha Stone" in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 320–21. King Mesha of Moab (ruled ca. 830 B.C.) boasts of "devoting" Israelite towns to his god, Chemosh.

33. My assumption, as should be obvious, is that Nephi and other Book of Mormon characters and events are historical. By critiquing Nephi's opinion, I am not implying that he was not a good man nor an important prophet. But he was also fallible, subject to cultural influences. I see the Book of Mormon as accurately transmitting Nephi's worldview to us. Many Bible scholars see the proscription against the Canaanites (Deut. 7:1–2, 20:16–18) as the product of Deuteronomic writers/editors about a hundred years before Nephi's birth. Weinfield, *Deuteronomy 1–11*. These texts and ideas would probably have been very influential during Nephi's youth and were probably recorded on the brass plates. Nephi's opinions therefore match what is known of Israelite culture about 600 B.C.

34. In Doctrine and Covenants 19:4–12, God explains that "endless torment" and "eternal damnation" do not mean no literal end but that He let both the phrasing and its incorrect interpretation stand so "that it might work upon the hearts of the children of men." Repentance was seemingly more likely if humans believed that the torments of hell, rather than God's mercy, were literally without end. Similarly, some may repent quicker if they see natural disasters as divine retribution for their

sins. In such ways, God may speak to us "according to our language and manner of understanding" (2 Ne. 31:3, D&C 1:34).

35. This eighth argument, based on rejecting *creation ex nihilo*, would not be acceptable to Girard personally.

36. This does not mean that God regularly saves victims from the persecuting crowd—to the contrary, human culture is based on the crowd's killing of victims. Rather, it means that, in Christ, God stands with all victims and confronts the crowd with its violence. The resurrection of Christ is, in a sense, the vindication of all victims since the foundation of the world.

37. This discussion exposes a weakness in Girard's theory. Granted, the goals of overcoming mimetic rivalry and violence in our own lives and of living without structures of sacred violence in our society are lofty. However, evil people really exist, harming others without compunction. Further, no human organization is totally free of sacred violence. How then, are we to live without violence in the meantime until God's transforming work is complete? Girard, for example, would certainly support actions that would prevent rapists and murderers from continuing to harm the innocent. I offer the following guidelines: (1) Use as little violence/compulsion as is necessary. (2) Couple the use of violence with preaching the gospel. (3) Seek actively to transform society into the kingdom of God. (4) Remember the corrupting effects of violence on its perpetrator, even if it is "justified." (5) Seek to avoid the temptation to dehumanize and scapegoat prisoners/criminals. (6) Remember that the violence is our violence and not God's.

38. Eugene England, "Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon," in his *Making Peace* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 131–57, presents an insightful Girardian analysis of the Nephi and Laban story. However, he stops short of its final implications and sees Nephi as undergoing an "Abrahamic test." I would simply note that Abraham did not actually kill Isaac and question whether God would test the youthful Nephi in this fashion before he knew much of Christ.

39. Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled* (New York City: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), 160–63.

40. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 144–49.

41. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 63–80.

42. Bailie, *Violence Unveiled*, 160–63.

John Sproul,
Baby baby,
acrylic on paper, 48"x 48",
2008.