

Ann Eliza's life are Irving Wallace, *The Twenty-Seventh Wife* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961) and David Ebershoff, *The Nineteenth Wife: A Novel* (New York: Random House, 2008).

René Girard and Mormon Scripture: A Response

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This short piece responds to Mack C. Stirling's article, "Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of René Girard," 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 59–105. I offer a counter-interpretation of what I take to be (1) the thrust of Girard's own work on scripture and (2) the implications of that thrust for Girardian interpretation of specifically Mormon scripture.

Scripture through the Girardian Lens

Scripture, as scripture, is inconvenient. The Book of Mormon is exemplary in this regard. It appears in the hands of two young men or women on one's doorstep without warning, and yet it impatiently demands uncompromised attention from its reader. Indeed, not only does the Book of Mormon close by asking its readers to rethink the whole of world history carefully in light of the book (Moro. 10:3), but it also dares to assume that the pondering reader will naturally come to trust that the book is true even before asking God (Moro. 10:4).¹ The Book of Mormon's Old World predecessor—the Christian Bible—might be said to be slightly less inconvenient than the Book of Mormon (at least for believing Mormons). Offering recourse to the tangles of translation issues, to typological and allegorical readings justified by the relationship between the two testaments, and to a variety of rival but equally canonical traditions uncovered by historians and tex-

tual critics, the Bible provides the wary reader with a number of ways to get around passages with which one is not perfectly comfortable. Indeed, in an obviously reductive way (but not therefore without some truth), one might suggest that a major thread running through the history of biblical interpretation is the sustained attempt to render convenient what began as a decidedly inconvenient collection of texts. At least to some extent, the history of reading the Bible is the history of the battle between those who would convert scripture into something convenient and those who stubbornly insist on scripture's essential inconvenience. Among those currently battling in behalf of scripture's inconvenience is René Girard.

The evolution of Girard's work—which led to and follows from his conversion from atheism to Catholicism—is nicely summed up in Girard's recent and appropriately titled book, *Evolution and Conversion*.² Having developed, through work in comparative literature and comparative religion,³ a unique anthropological theory about the nature of myth and the origins of culture, Girard discovered what he has since defended as the Bible's remarkably distinctive place in world literature.⁴ His work, starting with *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* and continuing into the present, amounts to a systematic defense of scripture's indispensable inconvenience.⁵

Of course, for Girard, scripture is inconvenient in a very particular sense. He sees scripture as that literature whose burden it is to reveal the nature of mythology. Since Sterling has, in the article referred to above, provided a summary of Girard's basic anthropological theory, explicating myth's obfuscatory function, I need not outline the theory here. Rather, I would like to contextualize and clarify the stakes of Girard's project, touching on important Girardian points not emphasized in Sterling's discussion.

In large part, Girard's claim about scripture is framed as a polemic against the arguments of students of comparative religion. As Girard summarizes their position: "For centuries the most respected scholars have declared that the Gospels are merely one myth among many, and have succeeded in convincing most people [of the idea]."⁶ But Girard points out one crucial difference between the Passion narratives and the apparently parallel myths of the dying and rising God: It is only in the Christian story that

the one put to death is recognized as innocent. Whereas in every mythological account, the person/god persecuted and/or put to death is clearly presented as guilty, in the Gospels Jesus is innocent and that innocence “is advertised widely, and becomes the most talked-about and well-known news.”⁷

In short, though innocent victims had long been put to death to avert chaos, and though Jesus Christ was in many ways just another of those victims, there was a crucial difference between those events and what happened on Golgotha. Not only was Jesus an innocent victim, but His disciples *proclaimed*—and eventually convinced the world—that he was an innocent victim.⁸ It was precisely through the preaching of Christ’s innocent death that the scapegoat mechanism—which *had* been “hidden since the foundation of the world”—was fully revealed and, through this definitive revelation, effectively frustrated. The preaching of Christ’s apostles, coupled in particular with the actual textual production of the New Testament, marked the beginning of a whole history of demystification and demythologization, often unconsciously rooted in Christian scripture.⁹

For Girard, the inconvenience of scripture consists in its unsettling of society, in its essentially revolutionary character vis-à-vis the status quo. But if Christian scripture is straightforward in denouncing the violence of the scapegoat mechanism, why is it necessary for Girard to battle on behalf of scripture’s inconvenient character?

Ironically, as Girard is careful to point out, Christian scripture—even as it reveals the sacrificial mechanism at the root of culture—can be read sacrificially instead of redemptively. A whole chapter of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* is dedicated to outlining the relationship between this all-too-common “sacrificial reading” and the history of Christianity after the writing of the New Testament.¹⁰ As Girard summarizes: “Historical Christianity covers the texts [of scripture] with a veil of sacrifice. Or, to change the metaphor, it immolates them in the (albeit splendid) tomb of Western culture.”¹¹ Moreover, because Christianity has, historically speaking, determined to read the Christian scriptures as if they justified persecutory violence, rather than definitively revealing its wickedness, it has unfortunately been possible to dismiss Christian scripture as yet another exam-

ple of the violent nature of religion. The irony, however, is that this dismissal of Christian scripture is done, according to Girard, in the unnamed name of Christian scripture.¹²

Still more ironically, Girard himself has in part contributed to the Christian/anti-Christian dismissal of Christian scripture. In *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, Girard argues that the Epistle to the Hebrews founded the traditional sacrificial reading of Christian scripture and that it is thus, in some sense, out of place in the New Testament.¹³ Girard has more recently described this “hasty and wrong-headed dismissal of the Epistle to the Hebrews” as a “mistake,” and acknowledged that the error served to make of him “someone who could be used for anti-Christian propaganda.”¹⁴ Girard’s treatment of Hebrews made it possible to see him as yet another advocate of a very particular historical Jesus, one who would have been opposed to historical Christianity had he lived to see it because his actual message in the first century had really amounted to a bland ethical prescription for human flourishing, well-suited to modern liberal sensibilities.

Still more lamentable, in many ways, is the fact that the same “uncorrected Girard”—that is, the over-hasty Girard of *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*—can also be used by Christians with humanistic leanings to purge the Bible, Thomas Jefferson-like, of everything that offends their ideological sensibilities. That is, it is possible (selectively) to construe Girard’s theory as outlining a hermeneutic methodology that legitimizes removing anything from the scriptures that appears or might be used to justify religious violence.

Such readings make scripture more convenient: Purging scripture of everything that disagrees with their own (generally pacifistic) ideologies, such readers end up with a slimmer, less offensive volume of (what they regard as) unquestionably inspired texts. Girard’s name thus all too often becomes a trump card to be played when one hopes to avoid having to do the kind of painstakingly inconvenient textual work necessary to sort out what scripture has to say—the kind of work that is visible on almost every page of Girard’s writings. Much “Girardian” work, as a result, is remarkably uninformed—as much about Girard’s own larger project as about the nuances and difficulties of the scriptural passages dealt with (or, more correctly, not dealt with).

Girard, in sum, does not provide the key to determining which scriptural texts should be accepted or dismissed; he calls for a closer reading of *all* scripture with an eye to the way that it progressively reveals human nature and its complex relationship to violence.

A Girardian Approach to the Book of Mormon

I would like to explore the potential helpfulness of the Girardian project for making sense of Mormon scripture—as well as the potential helpfulness of Mormon scripture for the larger Girardian project. In order to give the most detailed attention to the nuances of the scriptural text, I will limit myself to an investigation of only one passage from Mormon scripture, one that appears to be a perfect embodiment of what Girard would call myth. It is particularly important, I believe, to take up this text because it has at least twice received explicitly “Girardian” attention in print. It is Nephi’s slaying of Laban.¹⁵

Even a passing familiarity with Girard would allow the reader to recognize that the whole Book of Mormon narrative is undergirded by the consistent rivalry between the Nephites and the Lamanites.¹⁶ Importantly, this rivalry at the level of the tribe seems to have been set in motion quite early in Nephite history. Only “forty years” after Lehi’s family took leave of Jerusalem, Nephi reported that his people “had already had wars and contentions with our brethren” (2 Ne. 5:34).¹⁷ That so much of the Book of Mormon’s larger narrative is occupied with the remarkably complex unfolding of this rivalry suggests that 1 Nephi can be read as describing both how this tragic rivalry was set in motion and how Nephi came to recognize and to deplore as tragic that same rivalry.¹⁸ My intention here is only to outline the way that Nephi goes about this double task. At the very heart of the matter, I believe, is the slaying of Laban.

I should, from the very beginning, distinguish my reading of this episode from two others, both of which take 1 Nephi as effectively uniform in portraying Nephi’s character. Each thus regards the singularity of his slaying Laban as the limit situation that radically confirms the continuity of Nephi’s character. On the one hand, 1 Nephi can be read as a consistent story of Nephi’s faithful obedience and of Laman’s unrelenting rebellion. According to

this reading, the slaying of Laban marks the moment of radical testing, during which Nephi—Abraham-like—has to prove his willingness to obey God without question. I call this approach “conservative.” In contrast is the “liberal” approach in which 1 Nephi is read as a mostly consistent story of what Nephi regarded as his faithful obedience and Laman’s unrelenting rebellion. According to this reading, slaying Laban marks the moment at which it becomes most possible to recognize that Nephi’s confidence in himself deserves at least to be regarded critically, if not directly called into question.

Importantly, each of these approaches has its respective way of making sense of what I regard as the two crucial moments in the slaying of Laban. They are 1 Nephi 4:10 (Nephi’s hesitation at the Spirit’s initial prompting to kill Laban) and 1 Nephi 4:13 (the Spirit’s explanation that “it is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief”). The conservative approach regards the first of these moments (Nephi’s hesitation) as evidence that Nephi had indeed come to his most extreme moment: If the infinitely obedient Nephi falters for a moment, this *must* be a test. The same approach takes the second crucial moment of the episode (“it is better . . .”) as the articulation of the Lord’s justifying logic that allows Nephi to proceed. The Lord, in His infinite wisdom, knows when the end justifies the means.

The liberal approach, on the other hand, regards the first moment (Nephi’s hesitation) as evidence that Nephi at least had an inkling that he ought not to listen to such a temptation. Even Abraham did not actually kill Isaac. The same approach takes the second crucial moment of the episode (“it is better . . .”) as Nephi’s work of convincing himself that he should indeed go through with the killing. Unfortunately vulnerable to his own human nature, Nephi seized upon a self-generated justification as a divine injunction even though it could not have come from the Lord.¹⁹

Neither of these approaches seems satisfactory. Indeed, it seems clear to me that each of them is inconsistent.²⁰ I will therefore propose a third way, one that attempts to leave behind what might be playfully described as the rivalry between conservative and liberal approaches to the text.²¹ Crucial to this third approach is recognizing that the story does not present Nephi’s character uniformly.²² Because the story both describes how the

Nephite/Lamanite rivalry was set in motion and also relates the revelatory events through which Nephi came to see this rivalry for what it was (and hence abandoned it), it seems best to read 1 Nephi as tracing the complicated process of Nephi's conversion, a process that began but certainly did not end with 1 Nephi 2:16.²³ The third reading I am proposing here sees Nephi as narratively suggesting that his conversion was worked out over the course of several revelatory events: 1 Nephi 2:16, 2:19–24, 4:10–18; and chaps. 11–14.

Importantly, the first of these revelatory events is recounted only in the briefest detail. Having listened to his brothers' complaints against Lehi, as well as to Lehi's stern rebuke, Nephi went to the Lord to decide what to believe. He explains the response: "Behold [the Lord] did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father" (1 Ne. 2:16). But, however grace-filled this event might have been, Nephi suggests that he originally took it as reason to plant the seed of a flourishing sibling rivalry. Apparently unable to receive the comforting word for what it was, Nephi concludes his recounting of the event by pointing out how it set him against his brothers: "wherefore, I did not rebel against [Lehi] like unto my brothers" (2:16).

This first revelatory experience gives way almost immediately in the narrative to a second. Having tried to let Laman and Lemuel know about his first experience with the Lord, and unsurprisingly finding that they "would not hearken unto my words," Nephi "cried unto the Lord for them" (2:18). The result was a communication from the Lord that Nephi significantly records at length. Obviously intended to serve as a further word of comfort and essentially telling Nephi to mind his own business where his brothers were concerned, the revelation introduced what unquestionably came to be regarded as *the* foundational covenant of the Lehitites in the New World: "Inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise" (1 Ne. 2:20). The revelation heavily emphasizes the necessity of obedience, twice mentioning "commandments" as the condition for receiving the promised blessings of the covenant. Importantly, though, the words of the Lord as recorded in 1 Nephi 2:19–24 never clarify *which* commandments are indicated,

and Nephi apparently does not bother to ask. Instead, moving forward with what the narrative, in my argument, portrays as zeal without knowledge, Nephi seems to have assumed he knew what was meant.²⁴

The narrative of 1 Nephi 3–4—recounting the return to Jerusalem for the brass plates—thus recounts the process by which Nephi found himself forced, at long last, to ask what exactly the covenant meant. The story begins with Nephi “return[ing] from speaking with the Lord” only to have Lehi tell him that he had received “a *commandment* of the Lord” (3:6; emphasis mine). Nephi responds with a perfect homily about his zealous commitment to keeping commandments: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath *commanded*, for I know that the Lord giveth no *commandments* unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he *commandeth* them” (3:7, emphases mine).²⁵ Nephi takes Lehi’s commission and his own expression of perfect obedience to it as evidence that his most recent communication from the Lord confirms his superiority over Laman in what will rapidly become a dangerous rivalry. Not only had the Lord told Nephi that his obedience would be rewarded with a position as “ruler” and “teacher” over Laman, but his father had issued the commandment to go to Jerusalem for the plates with the dual explanation that Nephi’s brothers were murmuring but that Nephi would “be favored of the Lord” because he was not murmuring (3:5–6).

Taking this differentiation between his own faithfulness and his brothers’ lack of fidelity as license to assume a position he had not yet been granted, Nephi endeavors to replace Laman as the leader of the group. Apparently Nephi believed that his obedience to the commandment to get the plates sufficed to make him Laman’s superior. The 1 Nephi narrative thus portrays the young Nephi as misappropriating the Lord’s genuine revelatory words. Nephi zealously places a kind of divine stamp of approval on what he himself has set in motion as a basic mimetic rivalry between him and his oldest brother.

A third divine encounter—the visit of an angel during the obviously rivalrous beating that Laman and Lemuel give to Nephi in the cave after the second failed attempt to get the plates—only allows Nephi to feel all the more transcendently justified in his pro-

fessions of innocent superiority to Laman. Thus, even before Nephi finds himself standing over the drunken Laban in Jerusalem's dark streets, he has already initiated, contributed substantially to, and even used several divine communications to solidify the basic mimetic rivalry between him and Laman, which will later become the basic mimetic rivalry between the Nephites and the Lamanites. If this discussion outlines how the tragic rivalry between the Nephites and the Lamanites was set in motion, what can be said about how Nephi came to recognize and deplore that rivalry? The revelatory word through which Nephi began to see his rivalry with Laman for what it was came in two crucial moments—(1) that of Nephi's hesitation at the Spirit's "constraint" and (2) that of the Spirit's explanation that one man's death would be "better" than a nation's dwindling in unbelief.

Significantly, when the Spirit initially instructs him to kill Laban, Nephi expresses horror, even disgust: "I said in my heart: Never at any time have I shed the blood of man. And I shrunk [sic] and would that I might not slay him" (4:10). As I read it, this encounter serves a double function. First, the nature of Nephi's rivalry with Laman is definitively revealed by his hesitation. Only at this point is Nephi's facade of perfect obedience stripped away to reveal that he has—despite all his professions of perfect fidelity—been Laman's mimetic double all along. Second, Nephi's expressed disgust—which Nephi reports in the form of a direct quotation, even though it was spoken "in [his] heart"—reveals the violent desires he harbors toward his brother. As Giorgio Agamben explains concerning disgust: "Whoever experiences disgust has in some way recognized himself in the object of his loathing and fears being recognized in turn."²⁶ The commandment to kill is repulsive to Nephi, and the narrative report of this excessive repulsion reveals that Nephi has been covering his ultimately violent desires toward his brother with a veneer of obedience.

The commandment to kill Laban thus becomes the revelation that begins to disentangle Nephi *from* mimetic rivalry, rather than the cultural manifestation that enmeshes him hopelessly *in* that rivalry.²⁷

The second crucial moment in this episode is the Spirit's explanation: "It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief." This communication

from the Spirit does not directly convince Nephi that he ought to kill Laban.²⁸ Rather, narratively it redirects his attention to the covenant he had received in the desert before Lehi told him that the Lord had commanded the brothers to return to Jerusalem; therefore, it prompts him to finally ask what commandments the covenant indicated. Distracted from the role that obedience to the commandments was to play in making him “a ruler and a teacher” over his brothers (the role Nephi had emphasized in his mimetic appropriation of the covenant), Nephi here recognizes that the covenant required obedience to “the commandments of the Lord according to the law of Moses.” These commandments were contained on “the plates of brass” (4:15–16). His still-to-be-born children would have to keep these commandments to receive the blessings promised in the covenant that Nephi had already made. Only after laying out this chain of connections does Nephi say: “*Therefore* I did obey the voice of the Spirit” (4:18; emphasis mine).²⁹

In the reading I am setting forth here, then, it was not until he faced the task of killing Laban that Nephi finally began to see how misguided his earlier interpretation of the Lord’s will had been. This recognition, I think, prepared him for the far more definitive revelation of the scapegoat mechanism that would come in the shape of his apocalyptic vision in 1 Nephi 11–14. In that vision, Nephi would come to see the consequences of the rivalry he had helped to set in motion and that had already—because of Laman’s now incurable hatred—spun beyond Nephi’s control. Significantly, it would be in the same vision that Nephi would see the coming of the Christ, the preaching of the apostles, and the basic unfolding of the Atonement. But all of these events were, when Nephi stood over Laban, still in the future. The first revelation helping Nephi to see what Christ would come to do took place when Nephi found himself dealing with the Spirit’s order to kill the unconscious Laban.

This reading, of course, leaves readers of the Book of Mormon with a God who could command Nephi to kill Laban—that is, with a God who is not necessarily opposed to violence in every circumstance. But no rigorously applied Girardian reading, it seems to me, can get around this God, as I hope I have here shown. Readers of the Book of Mormon will likely have to take the volume of

scripture—as they always have in the past³⁰—on the understanding that it preaches a God who is indeed sovereign enough to command that a wicked man be killed.

But this acknowledgement is, perhaps, simply saying that the Book of Mormon is inconvenient. According to the reading I have here laid out, the book not only attempts to undermine violent religion (revelation functions precisely to disentangle Nephi from a mimetic rivalry that proved the undoing of the entire Nephite nation), but it also holds in reserve enough of the sovereignty of God that it cannot be said to be a treatise—however cleverly interpreted to make it such—on pacifism. In the end, both liberal and conservative approaches are ultimately frustrated by the revelatory inconvenience of the Book of Mormon. Perhaps it would be best just to say that it is revolutionary.

Notes

1. I believe the best way of reading the exhortation of Moroni 10:4 is to take it as inviting the reader to ask God something like: “Are these things not true?” To ask *this* question is to come to the work of prayer with one’s mind more or less made up in advance that the book *is* true. Alexander Campbell recognized this dynamic as early as 1831 when he complained: “*I must believe it first, and then ask God if it be true!*” Alexander Campbell, “Delusions,” *Millennial Harbinger* 2 (February 7, 1831): 94; emphasis his.

2. René Girard, Pierpaolo Antonello, and João Cezar de Castro Rocha, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 17–55.

3. In, respectively, René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), and René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

4. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 44–45: “It is not because I’m Christian that I think as I do; it is because of my research that I became Christian.”

5. René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987). This book remains the core theoretical work of Girard’s larger corpus.

6. René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 101.

7. *Ibid.*, 108.

8. Girard reads the Old Testament in a kind of typological fashion: The Old Testament is filled with initial but ultimately failed attempts to announce the workings of the scapegoat mechanism. However, for Girard, it is only with the announcement of Jesus's innocence that the definitive revelation took place. For a good illustration of how Girard sees the Old Testament as just (barely) failing to reveal what the New Testament would definitively reveal, see René Girard, *Job, the Victim of His People*, translated by Yvonne Freccero (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1987).

9. See esp. Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 198–212.

10. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 224–62.

11. *Ibid.*, 249.

12. *Ibid.*, 253–62. Thus, as Girard puts it in *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 164, 179, today “we lament Christianity, the indispensable scapegoat, for there is no ritual without a victim, and in our day Christianity is always it, *the scapegoat of last resort*” (emphasis his). The result is that the modern era is one “that tries to escape from the Judeo-Christian orbit by ‘radicalizing’ the concern for victims in an anti-Christian manner.”

13. Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, 227–31.

14. Girard, *Evolution and Conversion*, 40.

15. The most substantial, important, interesting, frequently cited or simply standard interpretations of the story of Nephi's slaying of Laban are (as far as my research has taken me): Robert D. Anderson, *Inside the Mind of Joseph Smith: Psychobiography and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 45–46; Eugene England, *Making Peace: Personal Essays* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1995), 131–54; Fred Essig and Daniel Fuller, “Nephi's Slaying of Laban: A Legal Perspective” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1982); Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 1:117–21; Alan Goff, “How Should We Then Read? Reading Mormon Scripture after the Fall,” *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 137–78; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 16–23, 285–86; Brett L. Holbrook, “The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 39–72; Jeffrey R. Holland, “How Can I Explain Nephi's Killing Laban to My Nonmember Friends?” *Ensign*, September 1976, 83–84; Val Larsen, “Killing Laban: The Birth of Sovereignty in the Nephite Constitutional Order,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 1 (2007): 26–41; Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 96; Joseph Fielding

McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 4 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987–92), 1:43–44; Ben McGuire, “Nephi and Goliath: A Case Study of Literary Allusion in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 1 (2009): 16–31; William D. Morain, *The Sword of Laban: Joseph Smith Jr. and the Dissociated Mind* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1998), 92–96; Thomas W. Murphy, “Laban’s Ghost: On Writing and Transgression,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 105–26; Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), xii–xiii; Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), 98–102; Monte S. Nyman, *I Nephi Wrote This Record* (Orem, Utah: Granite Publishing, 2004), 65–68; Steven L. Olsen, “The Death of Laban: A Literary Interpretation,” *FARMS Review* 21, no. 1 (2009): 179–95; George Reynolds and Janne M. Sjodahl, *Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1955), 1:39; Eldin Ricks, *Book of Mormon Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1953), 69–71; Daniel N. Rolph, “Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 73–79; Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 103; Mack C. Stirling, “Violence in the Scriptures: Mormonism and the Cultural Theory of René Girard,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 59–105; Gordon Thomasson, “Madness, Differentiation, and Sacrifice, or Reconciliation: Humanity’s Options as Seen in 2 Maccabees and Genesis,” Paper presented November 15, 1984, Eighth Annual BYU College of Humanities Symposium on “Myth, Literature, and the Bible” (I have been unable to locate an extant copy of this paper, though Eugene England summarizes it briefly in *Making Peace*); Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 134–35; John W. Welch, “Legal Perspectives on the Slaying of Laban,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 119–41. Among these many articles, two give specifically Girardian attention to the Nephi/Laban story: England’s chapter in *Making Peace* and Stirling’s *Dialogue* article.

16. The task of exploring the complex relationship between this Nephite/Lamanite rivalry and the preceding Jaredite rivalries is a major burden of the Book of Mormon. Any serious, sustained attempt to take up the Book of Mormon through a Girardian lens would do best to begin with a thorough analysis of this complex entanglement—particularly as this entanglement places a heavy emphasis on the role of written texts (that is, of scripture) and associated stones (the work of translation) in

both the instigation and the dismantling of the scapegoat mechanism. See especially Alma 37:21–25.

17. Nephi here inaugurates what becomes a long history of referring to the Lamanites as the Nephites' "brethren." The way in which this term emphasizes the rivalrous nature of the relationship between the Nephites and the Lamanites should not be missed.

18. This approach to the Book of Mormon is a subtle variant on Noel Reynolds's several "political" readings of the small plates of Nephi. See his "Nephi's Outline," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1982), 53–74; "The Political Dimension in Nephi's Small Plates," *BYU Studies* 27 (Fall 1987): 15–37; and "Nephite Kingship Reconsidered," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, edited by Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 151–89.

19. Importantly, the liberal approach here can include—and indeed historically has included—a Girardian critique of the "It is better . . ." statement as a "classic statement of the scapegoat rationale." England, *Making Peace*, 141. See also Stirling, "Violence in the Scriptures," 96. Obviously, my reading departs from this approach.

20. On the one hand, the conservative approach regards the episode as Nephi's test of faith but then asserts that Nephi passes the test only by giving in to the Spirit's logic. On the other hand, the liberal approach takes Nephi to be the victim of his culture but nonetheless recognizes that his most natural inclination is actually against killing.

21. It is appropriate here to quote Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning*, 164: "The concern for victims has become a paradoxical competition of mimetic rivalries, of opponents continually trying to outbid one another. The victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors. And our neighbors do the same. They always think first about victims for whom they hold us responsible."

22. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 31–57, has recently argued for a somewhat similar reading of Nephi, though Hardy's Nephi is perhaps less *self*-critical than the one for which I'm arguing.

23. The conservative and liberal approaches together assume (albeit generally implicitly) that Nephi wants to claim an absolute conversion (1 Ne. 2:16), after which he was always, or at least always regarded himself as, unwaveringly faithful.

24. Hugh Nibley notes Nephi's misunderstanding in passing: "Lehi had a dream in which he was commanded to get these records [the brass plates] which, as he already knew, were kept at the house of Laban. Nephi does not know exactly the reason for this and assumes, incorrectly as it turned out, that the object was 'to preserve unto our children the

language of our fathers' (1 Nephi 3:19)." Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988), 111.

25. Lehi also uses "commandment" three times in his commission (1 Ne. 3:2-6). Nephi's triple mention of "commandment" seems meant to parallel and, so, to fully respond to Lehi's triple use.

26. Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 107.

27. The narrative contains no hint whatsoever that Nephi and Laban are mimetic rivals. Nephi's rivalrous double is always Laman, and the constraint to kill Laban is precisely what distracts Nephi from that crucial rivalry long enough to recognize the functioning of the scapegoat mechanism.

28. Even if this reasoning had directly convinced Nephi to kill Laban, it does not, strictly speaking, reproduce the scapegoat mechanism in the situation. The "many" for whom the "one" is to die here does not yet exist at the time the killing takes place. Nephi is thus not delivering a people reduced to undifferentiation from the reign of chaos but rather is acting out of simple necessity, which ultimately requires violence.

29. I work out this reading in my forthcoming book, *An Other Testament: On Typology*.

30. The Book of Mormon has been criticized for including this episode since at least 1836. The earliest rebuttal I have found of such criticism is Parley P. Pratt, "Dear Brother Cowdery," *Messenger and Advocate* 2, no. 20 (May 1836): 320.