

***Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the
Genesis of Violence:
A Response to Bruce Chilton***

JAMES G. WILLIAMS
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
SYRACUSE, NY 13244-1170

I would like to thank Bruce Chilton for the informed and collegial way that he has responded to *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*. He quite rightly places it in the context of René Girard's mimetic theory and then focuses on the issue of sacrifice in the ensuing critique of my book. There is much at stake here for all of us who seek to preserve and clarify the distinctive testimony of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. We are in an age when "postmodern" critics, whether literary, philosophical, or theological, tend (if not intend) to undermine the Jewish and Christian heritage of Western culture. We should be well aware of this tendency, whose inspiration comes primarily from Nietzsche and whose thrust has been transmitted into the contemporary period primarily through Heidegger and Derrida. However, a blind reaction to it will simply make of us "doubles" of postmodern interpreters, that is, rivals so preoccupied with the enemy other that our thinking is determined by them. In this context there is no problem more urgent than the ancient phenomenon of sacrifice and all that attends it.

Certain aspects of Chilton's review of Girard's theory are quite perceptive. He says, "In his treatment of the Gospels, Girard's analysis becomes openly ethical and programmatic (one might even say, evangelical)" (p. 20). That is certainly true. Girard's research has led him to an "evangelical" orientation not simply in the sense of the good news of the Gospel witness to the Christ, but in arguing that both scientific and religious truth converge and have their origin in the biblical testimony to the innocent victim and the God who is the advocate of victims. A typical statement is this one from *The Scapegoat*: "The invention of science is not the reason that there are no

longer witches, but the fact that there are no longer witch-hunts is the reason that science has been invented."¹ This opening up of the world to investigation is part of a long history, which does not run in a straight line or smoothly but which nonetheless moves inevitably toward disclosure of the collective violence and its ritual forms that undergird human culture. The unveiling of collective violence and victimization camouflaged in religion and culture comes primarily through certain distinctive biblical witnesses. Above all, in its clearest and most sustained form, it is disclosed through Jesus as the Christ in the New Testament Gospels.

With respect to collective violence and victimization, Chilton astutely notes that for Girard "texts of persecution and myths are comparable: a real victim lies at the origin of both" (p. 19). Both ancient and modern cultures share this concealment of violence. This is a crucial issue with many facets. On the one hand, biblical interpreters on a wide spectrum of denominational affiliations tend either to disregard large portions of the Bible because of the patent exclusivism, aggression, or violence that is narrated (e.g., the conquest of Canaan in the early part of Joshua) or to justify such behavior and attitudes on the basis of the Bible. But from the standpoint of the hermeneutics of the mimetic theory, the Bible—especially the Jewish Scriptures or Old Testament but also to some degree the New Testament—is a "mixed" text in which the witnesses of the tradition are struggling to articulate the revelation of the God who liberates victims as over against the myths of sacred violence dominating in the cultural milieu out of which Israel was called to become God's exception in the world. Girard's mimetic theory directs the interpreter to focus on what is *distinctive* of Israel vis-à-vis the other nations of the world, where one encounters founding events that are based on regenerative violence. Rome, for example, was founded by means of Romulus's slaying of Remus. This is simply reported in a neutral fashion by Livy in his history as something that occurred, and of course from a mythical viewpoint one would expect it to occur. Civilization begins according to Genesis 4 as the result of Cain's murder of Abel—but the innocence of Abel is affirmed and Cain must hear the divine voice that asks, "Where is Abel your brother?" The mark placed upon Cain is both a sign to protect him against the very violence he himself has committed and a reminder of God's question. Behind the question lies the victim.

On the other hand, a significant stream of modern and postmodern thought has ignored or denied that violence is at the root of our

1. *The Scapegoat* (trans. Yvonne Freccero; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 204.

cultural origins. A philosopher like Martin Heidegger, for example, spoke of violence, particularly in *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, as the work of *logos* as *polemos*, namely the creative violence, the sorting out and building in which the poets, thinkers, and leaders must engage as they fulfill the destiny of Being. But this, he maintains, is not the ordinary violence of human war or battle. This from a philosopher who presented a philosophical defense of National Socialism! One of his philosophical heirs, Jacques Derrida, has actually recognized the structure of violence and sacrifice in writing and texts but has so far been unwilling to move beyond the signifiers of texts to the signifier who, from Girard's standpoint, is the original sign, both signifier and signified: the innocent or arbitrarily chosen victim.²

I am also grateful for the question about covenant and sacrifice that Chilton raises. The question is whether I offer in fact "a major revision of Girard's theory" in viewing the covenant and its sacrificial instruments quite positively (p. 24). If indeed I do this it would not negate the entirety of Girard's mimetic theory, but it would certainly undercut Girard's hypothesis concerning the role of sacrifice as the primary ritual manifestation of the sacred, that is, projected violence. This is a crucial question, one that is sufficiently complex that I consider it better to deal with it later under the rubric of differentiation and sacrifice.

Now I will turn to the major issues raised in Bruce Chilton's response in which I think he has misunderstood Girard or me, or both. There are three subjects on which I will focus: mimesis, differentiation and sacrifice in Girard's work and in my book, and Chilton's model for understanding sacrifice.

MIMESIS OR MIMETIC DESIRE

Mimesis, or mimetic desire, is the foundation of Girard's theory. As Chilton indicates, Girard, in the tradition of Hegel and Kojève, views human beings as desiring being. But Girard departs from the Hegelian tradition in understanding desire as an empirical and finally anthropological reality, not as a metaphysical reality. He does not identify desire with human consciousness, as Hegel does, and he emphasizes the *object of desire*, which is what rivals contest and which mediates the "being" or "reality" of the model of mediator to the subject.

Human beings have very limited instincts, the genetic directives that serve as guiding and braking functions to other animals. Human

2. See Andrew J. McKenna, *Violence and Difference: Girard, Derrida, and Deconstruction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

needs and drives (neither of which could be called "desires") become actual and take certain pathways through mimesis or imitation of others. The result is desire that is mimetic. The dynamic of the human system is desire, the structure is mimetic. One could call this "imitational" desire. However, because imitation is a word that has become watered down and conveys no connotation of acquisitiveness, Girard prefers the classical word.

The *acquisitive* character of human desire lays the groundwork for human conflict. The subject not only seeks to be like the other; he or she wants to have what the other has and even to be what the other is. The object of desire is what the model or mediator desires, but what the desiring subject really wants is to be desired by the model, whereas the actual object of the model's desire is to be desired. The result of this relationship of subject to model can turn to conflict or violence. The message given off by the model may be "imitate me"—except in this one respect, "don't imitate me." A classical instance of this is Freud's so-called Oedipus complex. However, from the standpoint of the mimetic theory it is the desire to imitate the model/mediator (more or less the same as Freud's "identification"), not sexual attachment to the parent of the opposite sex, that may (but does not always or necessarily) issue in rivalry.

Of course, in human relationships conflict doesn't always emerge, and in most cultural contexts conflict and violence do not reign most of the time. Why not? Because cultural forms, which cannot be separated from what we now call the religious or the sacred, establish *differences*. These differences function to keep people from destructive rivalries yet enable them to enter into cooperative relations. I will discuss this further when I take up differentiation and sacrifice.

Chilton says, "The seed of destruction within desire is that it is 'mimetic'" (p. 17). He asserts similarly, toward the end of his essay, that mimesis "is, by practical definition, covetous rivalry" (p. 27). This is a crucial issue because if mimesis (or mimetic desire) is *inherently* a rivalry based on desire of what the other has, then any teaching or proclamation of "good mimesis" would be logically and theologically impossible. From the standpoint of Christian theology this would be a denial of creation (everything created good, Genesis 1) and so would amount to a denial of "original sin," which is predicated upon a good creation and the possibility of restoration, of new creation. Chilton therefore welcomes my explication of the covenant model of existence, which I "might have called *covenantal* mimesis, 'the powerful generative vision from which the Bible as a whole stems'" (p. 27). Chilton's insight into what I attempted to communicate is striking: I would accept "covenantal mimesis" as an excellent

term for what I have described as the Bible's generative vision. I did not intend to state or imply that it includes or could incorporate sacrifice as part of the covenantal mimesis *in its ideal form*. I will take up that issue in discussing differentiation and sacrifice. At this point I am concerned rather to comment on Chilton's point that I have departed from Girard in pointing toward this covenantal mimesis, and that I "correct" him in my claim that "in and of itself [mimesis] is a neutral capability of the brain and of every aspect of systems that can be considered 'human.'"³

In fact, Girard has not made himself completely clear on mimesis and the human condition. This lack of clarity may reflect the fact that his thinking was very much in process from the 1960s into the 1980s. Moreover, as an interdisciplinary thinker who has confronted the tradition of thought, stemming from Nietzsche, which fundamentally understands life or reality as differential or conflictual, originating in violence and returning to violence,⁴ he has perhaps occasionally played too much in his opponents' field and by their rules. But that is often a risk that a thinker has to take—and I think Girard is a great thinker.

So it is that if one begins reading Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* or *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, mimetic desire comes across as inevitably leading humans into rivalry and violence. However, if one reads on to the chapter on Freud in *Violence* or to Book III of *Things Hidden*, one finds that Girard does not construe human relations, whether parent-child or any other, as necessarily rivalrous, neurotic, or pathological. Some forms of behavior are good to imitate; it is just that children, disciples, and admirers do not know which these are to the extent that the model fascinates or dominates them.⁵ An individual finds it difficult, if not often impossible, to stop the imitation process and say, "To do this or to hold this attitude is good, to do that or to hold that attitude is bad." The only reality that helps us in this situation, from Girard's standpoint, is good mimesis. "Good mimesis" has two related but distinct meanings, as I indicate in my book.⁶ The first presupposes an underlying scapegoat mechanism that stems from collective violence and whose object, in an indirect and mostly camouflaged way, is to control violence. It could be called the "effective mimesis" of culture to the extent that it works in assigning and maintaining differentiations—the

3. *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991) 239.

4. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford and Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990, 1991) chap. 10.

5. See *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (trans. S. Bann and M. Metteer; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987) 290.

6. *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 261 n. 17.

differences necessary for language, roles, institutions, and every form of cooperative activity. However, if Girard held only to that sense of mimesis, his position would be little different from that of Thomas Hobbes or Joseph de Maistre, whose thinking was profound but thoroughly sacrificial. What really opens up our human potential, what makes of us potential contributors to a divine-human community, is a good mimesis that cannot originate in human desires and projection. This good mimesis is *revelation*. Girard has, to be sure, never employed the term "good mimesis," but this is the mimesis he has in mind in referring to those who aid Jesus in his mission of "starting the good contagion belonging to good reciprocity."⁷ Apart from revelation, or the sustained witness to revelation, human beings are given situations and moments in which they are able to realize good mimesis, but these occasions have been fragmentary outside of the sustained scriptural witness to the disclosure of the God of victims.⁸

In *The Scapegoat* this good mimesis, this divinely given model, is the burden of the chapters on "The Key Words of the Gospel Passion" and "History and the Paraclete." The reason for us to forgive one another is that we all fall short of the model/mediator who forgives, for we all, in some way, have worshiped or sustained blood-stained idols; but by the same token, we have all been forgiven if we are willing to accept this forgiveness and forgive one another. Good mimesis, divine in origin, is dynamic, not simply a pattern to copy. It takes form in community and forgiveness.

Mimetic desire is potentially destructive; it is also potentially creative. The point is not to remove oneself from desire but to create a better desire. Since we are blind to our own mimesis, to our self-representations and representations of others—as Paul states in his own language in Romans 7—we cannot create our own better desire and live out of it on a sustained basis apart from revelation and grace. Only through incarnation, through the Logos, the creator God who enters into our condition and exposes the mechanisms of desire and scapegoating, can we be liberated for a new desire, a new being.

So if Girard does not adequately clarify his understanding of mimesis in some parts of his work, I think what I have just sketched

7. The French text: "amorcer la bonne contagion de la bonne reciprocité" (*Things Hidden*, 297; English trans. 203).

8. I confirmed this point in a telephone conversation with Girard on November 2, 1992. At the level of the classical literary traditions he obviously appreciates the insights of the great Greek tragedians. He also acknowledges the insights of the Buddhist tradition concerning desire and determination by the world of suffering. However, for Buddhism the religious and ethical center of the disclosure of truth is not the innocent victim.

is true to his concept and intention. He has more and more come to appreciate how culture works and so he has become more positive about its sacrificial mechanism. That is, how would any of us in any social order survive without differentiating and surrogate functions that enable the totality of the system to survive and to transmit itself (perhaps often greatly modified)?

"Differentiating and surrogate functions" are the practices whereby we establish differences and sacrificial substitutes that keep us from getting so close to one another that we compete in violent ways but yet keep us close enough to each other personally and socially that we are able to work and exist together. On the other hand, the capacity of culture to survive and operate falls short of the gospel and the divine-human community of the kingdom of God. My understanding of Girard is that he has become more and more pessimistic about culture in the context of history as experienced and interpreted in the last two centuries.

In this paper I have used the adverb "inevitably" twice so far. I said that, according to Girard, the gospel's work of "opening up of the world to investigation is part of a long history, which does not run in a straight line or smoothly but which nonetheless moves inevitably toward disclosure of the collective violence and its ritual forms that undergird human culture." I also said that in a good portion of Girard's work, for example, the earlier parts of *Violence and Things Hidden*, "mimetic desire comes across as inevitably leading humans into rivalry and violence." Both are true. To coin a variation on Reinhold Niebuhr's famous dictum, "Sin is not necessary but inevitable," I would say: Rivalry and violence are not necessary but inevitable. The problem is not desire; the problem lies in the kind of mimesis. The good mimesis of the God of victims, to which the Law and the Prophets bear witness and which the Gospels attest as embodied in Jesus, has disclosed and will disclose the character of our mimetic predicament and point us toward a new age, a world to come.

DIFFERENTIATION AND SACRIFICE

According to the mimetic theory the slaying of the victim is the first act of differentiation. In the mimetic crisis everyone imitates everyone else in violent reciprocity and so all differences collapse. This is the epitome of chaos, and violence is probably the actual model of chaos for religious and cultural traditions. In order for the "other" to be really other, the other must be different from me/us, yet close enough to me/us or enough like me/us that a relationship of some sort can be established. But this is a delicate balance in which one is

often tempted to seek the being of the other by desiring what the other desires. When this balance is destroyed in violent reciprocity the latter is remedied by the discovery, not consciously or deliberately made but "happened upon," that the conflict and violence stops when everyone gangs up on a victim. The victim is the *emerging difference*. As I noted in my book, Girard's model is not based on dipolar structure, as in structuralism, but on *exception*: his is a model of the "exception in the process of emerging."⁹ This victim is the one who polarizes (or on whom is polarized) the desire of all the others that had got mimetically out of hand. So the victim is the first difference. And the relief from mimetic conflict or violence is so great that just as the victim was blamed for the group's ills during the mimetic rage, so now the victim is apotheosized, divinized. As a result, the victim as god or sacralized hero or ancestor is now the "Difference" by which the others become a community and define themselves.

I will not go into the particular implications that one could develop out of this. Suffice it to say that the three pillars of culture emerge from the divinized victim: prohibition, ritual, and myth. The community, as distinct from the victim/god, did not do and does not do (or ought not do) such and such an act that brought about the crisis in the first place (murder and incest are the two most common crimes, and of course both are dissolvers of differences). The community repeats the act that founded it by representing the crisis that threatened it and the slaying that (re)established it. The repetition of the slaying is enacted in sacrifice. And myth tells the story of the founding and the differentiations established. With myth comes the greatest possibility of displacement and deferral of meaning through shifts and transformations in the story and symbols. What Girard's theory about the pillars of religion and culture entails, in other words, is that the primitive sacred is violence: the collective violence of the community that is transmitted, transformed, and routinized in such a way that its object is to protect the community from violence.¹⁰

Now Chilton argues that Girard is wrong about the origin and function of sacrifice. I will take up his argument that the communal meal is the appropriate model for sacrifice in the third part of my response. Here I wish to respond to his appreciation of my so-called

9. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 20; see Girard, *Things Hidden*, 100-101.

10. This is the function of the mark on Cain in Genesis 4: to protect the founder of civilization ("he built a city," 4:17) from the very violence that he himself had committed in murdering his brother. However, unlike the typical founding myth, the mark is also a reminder of what he had done—a reminder, indeed, of the divine question, "Where is Abel your brother?"

departure from Girard. He suggests that this putative departure is partly deliberate and partly inadvertent. The conscious aspect of the departure he ascribes to me is my insistence "that any language implying the inherent superiority of Christianity or the 'Christian' Gospels should be avoided."¹¹ He quite rightly identifies my argument as "exceptionalist" as over against a "supersessionist" argument. From the exceptionalist position one sees Israel as an enduring remnant bearing the divine word in history, and one continuation of this remnant is the early Jesus movement. The supersessionist position is that Israel as an empirical people and tradition is the "oppressive husk" that perpetuates ancient myth and the sacred, and its true vocation is realized only through Jesus and the church.

Chilton holds that the inadvertent way in which I depart from Girard lies in my positive view of the covenant and its sacrificial expressions, particularly in the discussion of covenant and sacrifice in chapter 4 of *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*. He avers this to be "a major revision of Girard's theory, in that the sacred is no longer merely projected violence" (p. 24).

I am indebted to Chilton for his critique and partial appreciation of my understanding of the sacred and sacrifice, for his comments have forced me to review and think through once again what it is I want to say vis-à-vis Girard's thought.

I would say first of all that there is a difference in nuance between my understanding of the Testaments and Girard's, and perhaps a clear difference between my perspective and Hamerton-Kelly's. What I have done is put Jesus, the early Jesus movement, and the New Testament Gospels squarely in the Jewish tradition. I think, as indicated in my book, that there is adequate historical and literary evidence for holding this position. The tradition of the unique witness to the God of victims comes to fulfillment in Jesus and the Gospel witness to the disclosure of divine-human community. This is not un-Jewish, not anti-Jewish—it *is* Jewish in the sense that the basis of Christianity is Jewishly formed. What we call "Christianity" did not begin as Christianity but as a movement rooted in its Jewish matrix. Nor does this perspective deny the insights of rabbinic Judaism, particularly in its antisacrificial aspects. The problems emerge in the theological and political developments of ongoing church history in which the foundations of Christianity were more or less severed from Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures were coopted as the revelation of Christian truth. But there is one truth that is revealed, and a long historical struggle has been required to bring it more fully to light. From my standpoint, and I

11. *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 175, quoted on p. 23.

think a confessing Christian would have to affirm something like this, the Gospel witness to Jesus as the Christ is the clearest and most sustained representation of the message of the God of liberation and the exposure of violence that has been given to us. All the other foci of revelation are ones I have to see through the lens provided by the Gospels. My point is not to deny what I do not see or cannot see; it is rather to affirm what I have been given to see.

So I wish to avoid supersessionism. I don't think, however, that the problem too is, as Chilton states, that to "the concept of the victim itself might be too relative by definition to serve as the foundation of a systematic reading of the Bible" (p. 23). There is no way, of course, of absolutely establishing through criticism and theory any standpoint. One cannot, obviously, read everything as the same, or in terms of discrete passages (segments, historical periods, etc.), for with either of those alternatives there is the danger of falling back into myth or anti-myth, into the sacred as the sacred social order or the anti-sacred that seeks to destroy the sacred social order (e.g., Nietzsche). That is, those who adhere to a mythical interpretation, which always justifies the sacred as violence, and those who vehemently oppose it are in both instances determined by myth, for its upholders are informed and upheld by it and its opponents are obsessed with it. The two sides are caught up in the extreme mimetic rivalry of doubles.

No, one needs a center, a "canon within the canon," in order to read the Bible. What better center (door, key, or whatever the metaphor) than the innocent victim? Should not the center of Christian reading be the innocent victim who discloses "the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah" through a violent death in which he was numbered among the transgressors? Should not the Christian reading be undergirded by the innocent victim's resurrection from the fatal expulsion and execution to which he was consigned? And I do not mean to imply that the innocent blood is upon the heads of the Jews to the exclusion of others (although both Jews and Romans were clearly involved in Jesus' death). We are *all* implicated, just as the disciples who deserted him, one of whom betrayed him and one of whom denied him.

That is, only the victim, the one who becomes the sacrificial offering, can reveal the human predicament and its healing. But most victims do not have a voice. If they are human beings, they are not allowed to speak or they are accused of crimes that enable the community to discount their words. Animal victims cannot communicate in our world—beyond signaling to us the anguish of pain and suffering. Girard has acknowledged that there is no absolutely privileged place in language from which the truth may be known. "That is why the Word that states itself to be absolutely true never speaks

except from the position of a victim in the process of being expelled. Its presence among us is not humanly explicable."¹²

The logic of this perspective on revelation through the victim, which I think I share with Girard, is similar to one aspect of what I said earlier about two kinds of good mimesis. It is possible to identify both good mimesis in the sense of "effective mimesis," the mimesis that is properly differentiated so that culture can work, and good mimesis in the sense of the model of divine-human community in the Christ. Just as there is an effective, if not ideal mimesis, so also there is "good" sacrifice in the sense of effective sacrifice. That is, even though sacrifice in the sense of offering to God a human or animal victim is the ritual repetition of original violence, it does provide for a channeling of violence or the threat of violence into a communal act that reduces this threat to manageable proportions. It would, ideally, be better if we could cooperate and establish both functional and personal relationships without this outlet, in which we are trying to maneuver around violence, to "deceive" it.¹³ In other words, sacrifice, along with its substitutions in a contemporary Western world without the institution of sacrifice as such, is a much more desirable practice than the violence that can result from mimetic crisis. Caiaphas in the Gospel of John enunciates the principle that is the basis of all *Realpolitik*: "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50).

However, if there is a kind of analogue between effective mimesis and effective sacrifice, both good in the sense that they may enable human groups to survive and cooperate both within the group and between groups, the analogy breaks down in comparing the good or ideal mimesis of the kingdom of God and sacrifice. The ideal, the eschatological vision from a Christian viewpoint, is the overcoming of sacrifice; the need to establish or reestablish differences through the sacred, the *trompe-violence* of a ritual performance of violence in order to control violence, will no longer prevail. In historical existence as we know it, sacrifice in some form or substitutionary mode may be necessary—and indeed, one could argue that our national crises, as I describe in the last chapter of my book, stem from the breakdown of modes of sacrifice. The point is *not* to make sacrifice "the scapegoat of the genocidal outbreaks of violence which have become routine since the Enlightenment" (p. 29). Sacrifice and substitutions for sacrifice formerly protected us—up to a point. Because sacrifice, from the

12. Girard, *Things Hidden*, 435 (my translation).

13. See Girard's comment on Abel's animal sacrifice as a "trompe-violence" in *La violence et le sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972) 14. The English translation (p. 4) renders "violence-outlet."

Latin *sacrificare* (French *sacrifier*), is etymologically "to make sacred," the foundation and differentiations of culture have often purchased protection of human life at the price of human life, or at least at the price of a deep structure that validated both regeneration and the maintenance of equilibrium through violence. Christianity itself, as the primary bearer of scriptural revelation and desacralization in Western culture, has contributed to the demise of these older sacrificial modes; but new ones have not taken their place, and the practice of the mimesis of the kingdom of God is very difficult for large numbers of people over a long period of time in the world as we know it.

So it is that sacrifice, as essential to the structures of this world, has a provisional status, a status which is necessary "between the times" but which is pre-kingdom of God, pre-gospel. However, in the Christian vision of the restored creation there is no temple in the City of God, an absence which is announced in the Apocalypse. And of course in the Gospels the Christ, the meeting point of God and humans, replaces the temple.

It is in the light of the foregoing understanding, the provisional human need for "deceiving violence" and establishing differentiations, that I made positive connections between the covenant and sacrifice. It is better to institute the Levites as priests standing in the place of the firstborn and offering sacrifices on behalf of Israel than to experience the violence involved when the Levites slay 3,000 persons, killing brothers, sons, neighbors. This violence is the basis of their ordination (Exod 32:25-29). Admittedly I may not have made my meaning clear enough. I was trying to deal critically and sympathetically with very important and complex texts in Exodus and Numbers, so Chilton is not misquoting me but missing the context in which I intended to place my discussion of sacrifice in chapter 4, on covenant and sacrifice, as well as in chapter 3, on Moses and the Exodus. There are two main elements of that context: Israel's historical struggle to understand and to realize the revelation it had been given, and the limitations that were not to be exceeded until the prophets and the Jesus of the Gospels. Let me offer the following quotations to support these points and end this part of the paper:

These boundaries [of the Ten Commandments] are marked out in terms of allegiance to the God of the Covenant, allegiance to the covenant order, and control of mimetic desire and rivalry. In the binding of people to God, the altar [i.e., sacrifice] and the words of God in Moses' book are formally equivalent [in Exodus 24], but obedience to the divine word here begins the process of displacing sacrifice.

The biblical narratives themselves document human failures and resist all attempts to camouflage and mythologize these failures. . . . The failures are in part due to the weight of archaic cultural traditions in which mimetic desire, rivalry, and conflict are managed through victimization, scapegoating, and sacrifice.

The revelation struggling to make itself known in the covenant, commandment, and cultic texts reaches a new stage of clarity with the great prophets.¹⁴

THE MEAL AS MODEL FOR SACRIFICE

As he argues also in his recent book,¹⁵ Chilton proposes communal consumption as the best means of understanding sacrifice, "a feast with the gods, in which life as it should be—chosen and prepared correctly—is taken to produce life as it should be" (p. 26). I propose in turn that the mimetic theory provides a better hypothesis of sacrifice and enables us to uncover the very representational traps into which I see Chilton falling.

The mimetic theory has great explanatory power. Chilton suggests at one point that it explains too much. That is a common objection in our time. In objecting to any kind of universalizing hypothesis Chilton may have been affected by historicism, whose rival twin children are positivism and postmodernism. In the modern intellectual tradition leading to deconstruction, every text, every principle, every claim is set against its "other." Indeed, it is not too much to say that every explanation is sacrificed to its other, to the opposition that undercuts it. Now a theory and its attendant hypotheses may turn out to be wrong, but we should be free to pursue them. That is one of the fruits of the biblical revelation: the disenchantment of the world, opening it up to a search to understand how it works. Universal or maximalizing theories should be welcomed and, of course, subjected to rigorous criticism. But not to the criticism that they should not exist in the first place.

Now concerning the communal meal with the gods as a model for sacrifice, I agree that the meal is closely associated with sacrifice, as we have known since the pioneering research of W. Robertson Smith. However, the meal is better explained by sacrifice than sacrifice by the meal. The meal, specifically the communal consumption of the sacrificial victim, presupposes very definite rules, differences,

14. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred*, 117, 126, 127.

15. Chilton, *The Temple of Jesus: His Sacrificial Program Within a Cultural History of Sacrifice* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

practices that must be done just right. Where do they come from? What is their origin? The meal model simply presupposes some prior system that must be posited or speculated. In the emergence of human culture the meal *becomes* the model of community *par excellence*, and this is appropriate as a metaphor of God's reign and rule. However, it seems clear that when we look at instances of sacrifice associated with eating, "community" or the oneness of those partaking together is won through a differentiation process—the establishment of rules and roles—that stems from disorder or violence. In the process of preparation, slaughtering, and eating, attention is focused on the victim, as though the fate of the victim is something monstrous and wonderful. It is monstrous and wonderful from the standpoint of the sacrificing community. Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne have provided interesting descriptions of Greek culinary practices, but they tend to obscure the element of disorder because of their structural premises. I think Walter Burkert's commentary on Greek sacrificial practices in *Homo Necans* is more to the point.¹⁶ All the elements, from the initial washing of hands and sprinkling of the animal victim through the death-dealing blow and the great outcry of the women present to the eating of the entrails, bespeak the routinized repetition of an event of collective violence in which the victim is killed and eaten. Could the meal have laid the groundwork of the sacrifice? Unlikely. More likely it was vice versa, as indicated in the ritual order described by Burkert. As Raymund Schwager points out, "The moment of slaughter forms the emotional highpoint of the ritual, which is accompanied by the loud outcry of all those standing in attendance. The meal only occurs at the end, when the previous shuddering and fright changes to relief. This relief allows us still to trace the originary tilting of violence into peace."¹⁷

This process of transition from fear to relief and concord is still in display, though somewhat filtered, in Exodus 19 and 24. There are some problems concerning the composite character of the narrative in Exodus 24; however, if we put these two chapters together it appears that the people are in a state of trepidation at the foot of the mountain, whose boundaries may not be passed or even touched lest the LORD "break out" against the people (19:24). Moses conducts the covenant ritual, which includes dashing half the blood of the sacrificed oxen on the altar and half on the people. Then Moses, Aaron,

16. *Homo Necans: The Anthropology of Ancient Greek Sacrificial Ritual and Myth* (trans. Peter Bing; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

17. Schwager, "Rückblick auf das Symposion," *Dramatische Erlösungslehre: Ein Symposion* (eds. J. Niewiadomski and W. Palaver; Innsbruck-Wien: Tyrolia, 1992) 368-69 (my translation).

Nadab, and Abihu, along with seventy of the elders, go up and see God and eat and drink.

Chilton's model of the meal or communal consumption as the origin of sacrifice leaves his hermeneutics, in my view, still bound to the mythical understanding of the sacred social order. When he says, for instance, that "in sacrifice, consumption is probably a better metaphor to describe what is happening than death; the passing of the victim rarely arouses interest" (p. 26), I think he is defending that sacrificial perspective and not attending to the unique biblical demythologizing of the sacred, a demythologizing that invites us to see ourselves and read our texts in light of the victim. In the primitive context the death of the victim, the sacrificial offering (note the French *victime* and the German *Opfer*) occasions an emotional reaction of anguished lament, as Burkert notes. The act of killing and the act of eating are two sides of the same coin, so to speak, and both are accompanied by intense emotion.¹⁸

Moreover, Chilton's approach to sacrifice does not take into account the practice of offering human victims. We know it was practiced all over the world.¹⁹ The practice of child sacrifice was known to the Israelites and condemned in the tradition. However, that it was an earlier practice of many Israelites there can be no doubt. The divine command in Exod 22:29 (Heb. 22:28) affirms that the firstborn belong, in principle at least, to the God of Israel, and it is doubtful that the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) negates the principle. Moreover, in times of crisis there were some who reverted to this practice, as attested in 2 Kgs 16:3 and several passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Now of course, if the mimetic theory is basically correct, then the ritual of sacrifice functions to repeat both the crisis, the slaying of a victim, and the subsequent relief to the community; it does this moreover in a fashion that makes everything seem to be in order to the participants in the sacrificial event. Real death and violence are not associated with sacrifice from the mythic standpoint. It is a ritual, a practice that is simply "done," and has been done from time

18. See Euripides' depiction of the Dionysian cult in *The Bacchae*. In my judgment there is a strong trace of this kind of emotional reaction in Lev 9:22-24, where the people shout and fall on their faces when the fire consumes the holocaust and the fat.

19. The mimetic theory proposes that definite traces of this continue into the contemporary world and that in fact when old sacrificial forms break down there is a typical reversion to collective violence. One notable current example is the "ethnic cleansing" that is taking place in the former Yugoslavia. For a carefully researched study of one part of the world where the more primitive form of offering a human victim (the king) was practiced into the 1980s, see Simon Simonse, *Kings of Disaster: Centralism and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

immemorial. Indeed, there is evidence that in many rituals the victim, whether human or animal, communicates in some fashion that it is willing to be sacrificed on the community's behalf. Unanimity is crucially important in sacrifice and scapegoating.²⁰ To say that the death of the victim arouses no interest is to speak from within that mythical unanimity.

This matter of the attitude toward the victim is also related to Chilton's criticism of an aspect of my treatment of Saul in 1 Samuel. I observed that a close reading of the text does not indicate that Saul was a great offender against the social order.²¹ Saul, like other tragic heroes, was both the savior of his people and in some respects their scapegoat. He is condemned in 1 Samuel 13 for not waiting until Samuel arrives at Gilgal to offer burnt sacrifices. But I understand this passage essentially as I do 1 Samuel 15: Saul is the leader, the mediator contested by another mediator, Samuel; there is a crisis, with the Philistines pressing upon the Israelites and the troops, not a highly organized and disciplined lot, making demands upon him from their side. In addition, according to 1 Sam 13:8, he had waited the appointed seven days for Samuel. To assert that Saul was an offender against the social order is to chime in with the mythical voice speaking in much of 1 Samuel. This voice represents a sacrificial perspective and Saul is the sacrifice. In the book I stopped just short of describing Saul as a scapegoat after the model of Oedipus. I think the history of Saul and David cannot finally make of Saul an utter scapegoat, and there are even more evident signs in the story of David that the text reflects an attempt to critique the traditional understanding of sacral kingship.²²

In sum, the mimetic theory does not hold that sacrifice is demonic, but neither does it accept the representation of sacrifice according to the understanding of its practitioners who exist in the environment of myth. Sacrifice is the representation and management of violence. The meal model only perpetuates this representation and management by not questioning it from the standpoint of the distinctive biblical testimonies whose perspective is more favorable to the victim than to the persecuting community.

* * *

20. The modern totalitarian trial is an extension of this practice based on the need for unanimity, i.e., complete accord in the community. The accused is led out, confesses his or her crimes, and is then executed or imprisoned.

21. A point made some years ago by David Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1980).

22. See Hans J. L. Jensen, "Desire, Rivalry, and Collective Violence in the 'Succession Narrative,'" *JSOT* 55 (1992) 39-59.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my gratitude to Bruce Chilton for the time and energy he has devoted to coming to terms with Girard's work and mine. I agree with him that we should not assign fault to ancient antecedents as a way of avoiding the challenge to understand our own mimetic situations. We cannot, however, understand ourselves and one another without seeking to understand our forebears. Above all, we must come to grips with the *distinctiveness* of the biblical witness to the God of victims.