

## **What sorts of difference does René Girard make to how we read the Bible?**

*Presentation for the 2009 Theology and Peace Conference, a gathering of lay people and clergy from many different denominations who are interested in furthering the impact of Girard's thought through their preaching, teaching and pastoral practice, Chicago, 26 May 2009*

I'd like to take us into this question by way of John 5. So imagine the scene, please. We are close by the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. There is a pool called "House of Mercy" and over it there are five porticoes. Beneath these lie a multitude of the ailing. One of them has been ill for thirty-eight years. Now, with what eyes do we look at what is going on here? If we are so inclined we can see merely a place that has a name, an architectural structure, and some water. We can observe, furthermore that there is something slightly pathetic about the spot, a gathering point for the long-term infirm. Makes the name "House of Mercy" seem ironic, or slightly cheesy, like calling a cemetery "Happy Fields". But each one of the details can set a different scene if we allow it. For instance, it will escape no one's attention that a passage which ends with a discussion of Moses' writings, begins with a scene set under five porticoes. Then again, in Psalm 23, we are told that "The Lord is my Shepherd", so it is appropriate enough that near a Sheep Gate "he maketh me to lie down beside still waters", for such are to be found in the pool. Too still, in fact, since everyone is waiting for the waters to be "troubled" by an angel, heralding a lucky cure for the first one in after the "troubling". There are many lying there. And they would have known that the one who makes them lie down does so for the purpose of restoring their soul, and that the Goodness and Mercy of the Lord will allow them to dwell in his House for ever. Yet somehow, one gets the impression that the crowd at the House of Mercy by the Sheep Gate was not quite what the Psalmist had in mind.

Does the man who has been ill for thirty-eight years know his scriptures? If he did, he would know that in the wake of an act of disobedience by a set of warriors, who had presumed to wage an un-called for war on the Amalekites and Canaanites in strict disobedience both to God and to Moses, God had forbidden the people of Israel from advancing further, and they had been stuck for thirty eight-years<sup>1</sup>. It was only after thirty-eight years of wandering in the wilderness of Moab, when the entire generation of the men of war had died out, that God gave

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<sup>1</sup> Dt 2,14

Moses permission to stop going round in circles, and told him to advance once more, by crossing the brook Zered and entering a new territory. Nothing as dramatic as crossing the Red Sea. Just crossing a wadi. Even if the sick man didn't know his Scripture well, he would have known that forty years is a full generation, and that thirty-eight is a good way to symbolize something falling just short of a generation, a hint of "those who didn't quite make it".

Jesus has come up to Jerusalem for an unspecified feast. He comes to our pool. Seeing this particular sick man and learning that he has been lying there a long time, Jesus engages him in one of those strangely asymmetrical dialogues to which St John often treats us. He asks him whether he wants to be healed. Something about Jesus' tone must have suggested that he was wondering why someone who had been there that long hadn't made it to the front of the queue to be cured. Did he really want to be cured? Hence the sick man's reply is not simply "yes", but rather an explanation of why he never manages to get to the front of the queue in time. He *wants* for someone to help him in, unlike the sheep in the Psalm, who, having the Lord as his shepherd, *shall not want*. Jesus neither discusses, disputes, or sympathizes with this. He gives the man an order to rise, pick up his pallet, and walk. Rather as the Lord ordered Moses and the people to rise and cross the wadi Zered. The One who "maketh me down to lie" has made the place of lying down mobile, and enabled the one who had lain so long in one place to move and lie down, move and lie down, in a more profitable rhythm. The trek to the Promised Land can start up again.

Only now are we told that it was the Sabbath, for a group of the Observant question why this man is carrying a pallet. Presumably, they didn't know he'd just been cured. All they saw was someone performing a "work" on the sabbath, thus infringing the Law of Moses. The man enlightens them: the reason he is carrying his pallet is that he was told to do so by the man who cured him. Maybe his thought process worked as follows: "This is the first day of the rest of my life. I've been stuck with enforced rest for long enough. If someone can cure me on the Sabbath, and in addition gives a minor instruction to carry my pallet and walk, surely it is not unreasonable to obey him?". The Observant however look upon him not in the first place as a person who has just been brought to health and mobility, but merely as one who was infringing the Law. Now hearing that it is someone else who has induced him to this law-breaking they turn their attention to that person. They do not ask "Who healed you?". Instead, their question "who told you to take up your pallet and walk?" clearly means "who induced you to break the law?". The sabbath law provides for them a complete lens through which to perceive the reality of what has gone on.

The healed man doesn't know who it was who cured him, since Jesus has withdrawn, owing to there being a crowd in the place. The dynamic of a crowd, the mutual draw and fascination which lead people to think and move as one, is always hostile to whatever Jesus is about. Where there is a crowd he will always be invisible, until his "lifting up" which will allow crowds to see him, and some to learn what they have been about. So the healed man owes the Observant an answer as to who turned him into a law-breaker. But later, in the Temple, with enough going on of different sorts to prevent too much sudden group cohesion, Jesus finds the healed man. We don't know whether the man had come to the Temple to give thanks for his cure, or merely to take part in the Feast that was on at the time. But there he is. And Jesus seeks him out and tells him "See, you are well! Sin no more that nothing worse befall you". In other words, following Psalm 23, the Lord who is his shepherd, having led him beside still waters, and having restored his soul, now leads him in paths of righteousness. Or, following Moses, this Israelite who has been permitted to cross the wadi is warned against the murmuring and backsliding that would have kept him in Egypt, or in the wilderness of Moab.

The dynamic of "Rise, take up your pallet and walk" is "be mobile – keep going". The five books of Moses were not supposed to be five porticoes giving shelter to paralysis, when not actively promoting helplessness, leaving people stuck beside a still water waiting for some superstitious passing of an angel. Those books are supposed to be a dynamic path to be trodden by an Israel under orders from an active Lord who opens up a way in the sea, or at the very least commands people to cross a wadi. The pathos of the difference between the helplessness of the Israel that the Lord finds on his visitation of the pool and the power and strength of the Israel that the Lord intended to bring into being, and is witnessed to in Moses' writings, this pathos provides the context for the sign which Jesus performs here.

It is also the basis for the discussion which follows on from this sign, at which we will now look. The healed man goes back and tells the Observant who it was who had healed him. They once again read the healing through the lens of the sabbath law. For them this is a make-or-break issue. If the healing, and the minor instruction to carry the pallet which ensued from it, had taken place on the sabbath, then it could not be from God, since God rested on the sabbath. So a healing on the sabbath must come from some other source. It is at this point that Jesus gives one of those lapidary answers which was so important that St John thought it worth while explaining it in some detail. "My Father is working still, and I am working." Formally speaking this sounds like a denial of Genesis 2, 1-3; where it says that the heavens and the earth were finished, and God rested. In fact

it is more interesting than that. It is part of a quite different relationship to the sacred text than one that had become “normal” among the Observant group, having developed since the return of the “Judahites” from Babylon<sup>2</sup>. This different relationship might be referred to as “synchronous” and “liturgical” rather than “historical” and “legal”. One where the sabbath rest is not a fence against continuing creation, but a gift that is a prophetic sign of God’s rest into which people are invited to enter.

And Jesus personally instantiates this synchronous, liturgical reading. The Father, the Creator, El Elyon, is still working, we are still not yet at the seventh day. And I AM is working. That is to say, YHWH, incarnated in the priestly figure who was God’s Son, is working. Creation is not a background affair, but a permanently contemporary affair involving us now, and YHWH is opening it up for us in the person of Jesus. In such a reading, you would expect YHWH to be doing the same thing now as he is described as doing alongside Moses, not because God is tied to some historical drama, but because the scriptural drama is itself a good, permanently contemporary guide to what YHWH is now doing. Moses points to this activity in much the same way as a particularly perfect, conical volcano thrown up at some stage in the distant past points to the permanently contemporary power which throws up perfect conical volcanoes, and might do so at any moment.

Hence the significance of the “sign” given in the person of the man healed by the pool. “You want to know what YHWH and Moses is all about? – *this* is what YHWH and Moses is all about. Setting someone free so that he can walk to worship the Lord on his mountain and rejoice at the feast in his House. So don’t be tempted to pit Moses against Moses by making your reading of the sabbath law the enemy of YHWH’s dynamic project”. Now the Observant knew perfectly well what this meant. When Jesus called God his Father, he was not engaging in some nice, friendly talk of the sort which we might indulge in by saying something like “we’re all children of God”. He was doing something much more specific. He was indicating that he was the priestly incarnation of YHWH. This notion was available to the Observant since they had no difficulty in referring to the consecrated High Priest who came through the Temple veil into the Court as the Son of God<sup>3</sup>. But along with that liturgical notion of the Son of God went the strict understanding that the Son of God was in fact God himself, YHWH, equal

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<sup>2</sup> It is these “Judahites” – that is an observant religious party, that gives its name to the subsection of the Hebrew people known as the “Ιουδαῖοι” to whom St John refers, and which we typically translate as “The Jews”. We thus confuse a modern ethnic term with an ancient term closer to a partisan ideological grouping, one that was originally a subsection of the ethnic group of the “Εβραῖοι”.

<sup>3</sup> Cf John 10, 36.

with El-Elyon. For the Observant, “Son of God” was not a term indicating a subordinate reality, but a term indicating the liturgically incarnate form of an equal reality with God. You can see the problem: to break the sabbath is one thing, and can easily be sorted out. But to treat the Creator in such a way as to indicate that you consider yourself to be his contemporary emanation and instantiation, thus making of the sabbath a function of your own activity, rather than allowing your activity to be curtailed, or at least judged, in the light of the sabbath, this is something at a different level of magnitude.

From this point on, until the end of Chapter 5, St John gives us a discourse from Jesus, and I will return to that soon, since it raises huge questions about reading Scripture. But first I would like to pause, since I hope you have been saying to yourselves “he promised us a talk about the sorts of difference which Girard makes to how we read the Bible; yet so far he hasn’t mentioned Girard, nor has he performed what we might call a “Girardian reading” of a text, since there’s not much about either a moment of persecution or the mimetic nature of desire in anything he’s said. Just some more or less fanciful Old Testament references which anyone could have dug up”. If you have been saying that, I want to say “hooray – I’m halfway to getting my main point across”. Because my main point is to try to get across to you something of the sheer *freedom* in reading texts which is, for me, one of the principal legacies of learning from Girard.

I guess that many of you shared the sort of excitement I felt when I first read “The woes against the Pharisees” in *Things Hidden* or any of the chapters in the second half of *The Scapegoat*. Or when I heard René explain “The woman taken in adultery” even before he had written it up in *I saw Satan*. It was and is the excitement of experiencing someone handling scripture in a way that none of us had ever seen or heard it handled before. It was not like the massively erudite deliverances of our Scripture professionals, which so often leave us impressed, or depressed, by their knowledge, but no more enflamed by, or loving of, the sacred pages themselves. On the contrary Girard’s readings don’t tell you much about Girard, nor stun you with his erudition. Rather he seems to be reading Scripture from within a logic that is proper to Scripture itself, as though the same spirit which had enabled Scripture to be written was enabling it to be read, so that you, the reader, end up seeing more and more in Scripture than what Girard points out himself, and you find yourself loving and treasuring the Scriptures even more. You get the sense that you are, at last, beginning to understand the text “from the inside”.

It is because of this that I wanted to start with something which seemingly has little to do with any “Girardian themes” in Scripture. And yet which is vital if we

are to avoid bibliolatry. That is, to recall the sense, from which I hope we all learn, of someone who simultaneously takes texts extremely seriously, and yet not seriously at all. Girard really looks in a very detailed way at what particular texts say, and then appears to throw them all up in the air so that the textual elements come down any which way, but “any which way” turns out to be extraordinarily powerful, coherent and whole. It is having seen Girard do this, time after time, that I have begun to get a sense of Jesus doing the same thing, time after time in the Gospels. In other words, what Girard does with texts is in itself an education in the art of “doing things with texts” which is what we see Jesus do in the New Testament. When we can glimpse that this is what is going on, so many of the apparently arcane arguments set in an ancient world suddenly become alive and contemporary.

Now there is something consistent which has enabled Girard to read texts in this way. It is not simply an adorable personal quirk of his. And it is something which can consistently help us avoid bibliolatry. It is the realisation that the centre of meaning is not to be found in the texts themselves. The centre of meaning is real, historical, non-textual, or not primarily textual, and the texts themselves are certain sorts of monuments to this real, historical, pre-textual reality. At Hiroshima and Nagasaki, so intense were the explosions that the light from them etched what look like photographs of buildings and protrusions on the walls of other buildings. Each one of those light-etched walls is a monument to the unimaginable, and unsurvivable reality of the explosion, some hints of whose force can be read off from its monuments. And for Girard the centre of meaning, the unimaginable explosion, is a highly agile and dynamic centre in which two apparently opposed things are happening at the same time.

The first of these is entirely offstage and entirely beyond any sort of direct knowledge of ours, only detectable in the traces thrown up against some textual walls (and just conceivably, some cave walls, as at Çatalhöyük). This is the postulate of the founding murder, a dynamic postulate which suggests that, however it happened, over whatever huge length of time it happened, the central building block which has enabled our human cultures to come to be and to survive at all is the all-against-one of collective lynching. All human cultural forms flow from this. Ancient mythical texts do not point to this in a simple affirmative way. On the contrary, they dance round it, mostly hiding it, occasionally glimpsing it, sometimes horrified by what they see, sometimes complacently satisfied with the order which has resulted. The point is not “if you read ancient texts you will see that Girard is right”. Because of course, if you want you can read anything at all into ancient texts. The point is this: if you accept Girard’s postulate, you will find that the ancient texts make much more

sense than they have before, in a way which is much more worthy of respect than we are inclined to acknowledge, and that there was and is a certain rationale in what we call the “primitive” mind which, while we cannot go along with it, is not at all stupid, and is a serious part of what has enabled our own ways of being and living together to survive and thus of what has allowed us to exist as we do now.

The second part of this unimaginable explosion is also prior to any text, but it has been reaching into our foreground and into our texts in a strange and unique way through the adventure of the Hebrew people, culminating in the making explicit, public, evident and frontstage of something which had been structuring and running people without their being aware of it up until then. The apparently necessary lie by which we bring into being and maintain order, culture, language, memory, thus finding ourselves established as humans, is shown to be exactly that – a lie. So the offstage structuring reality is gradually over time brought closer and closer to the surface, less and less dishonestly, in the interpretations which we glimpse in the Hebrew Scriptures, until finally that offstage structuring reality is brought centre-stage and made completely visible and obvious in the Passion. Thus the lie is undone, and we find ourselves embarked on the possibility of humanity becoming something much better, more interesting, more responsible than we had imagined, and simultaneously we start to discover how very much more dangerous to each other we can be than we had thought, and how much more precarious is our stability, given that the comfort of “the old lie” only reassures for as long as we don’t know that it’s a lie.

I hope that what I have sketched out here is the formidable act of communication which Girard postulates as both a botched but comprehensible “emerging foundation” and its overcoming in our midst. This, which I call the “centre of meaning”, is prior to any texts. And this means that, before we even pick up the pages of the Scriptures to read them, we have already agreed to approach the text in an entirely different way than would be the case if, for instance, we were to start by assuming that texts offer clear windows or mirrors into the realities which they are describing, or that we are upstream of the texts, and that real meaning flows from us to them. Instead, we find ourselves downstream from the texts, and both we and the texts are way, way downstream from the very, very subtle and dynamic centre of meaning. So we begin to become aware of texts as being themselves always very unstable realities, which can be read this way and that. However we also become aware that there is an historical reality which is an act of communication towards us by someone else, who is not simply one of the authors of the texts, an act of communication that is completely contemporary, stable and coherent and to which our texts do bear witness if we read them in the same spirit as that which allowed them to be written.

Now what I want to say is this: whether or not you agree with what Girard says, with this or that detail of the mimetic hypothesis, what seems to me to be undeniable is that anyone who understands what Girard is about does find themselves thrown into the deep-end of all the central contemporary questions concerning Revelation, Hermeneutics, textual origins and so forth, and in a way which illuminates all of them at once. Part of the freedom which I have received and learned from reading Girard is that once in that deep-end there seems to be no limit to the doors which are currently being opened up by modern scholarship, and which start to make sense and can be put together by us. I guess this is why I was rather annoyed recently to hear an ancient Cardinal refer to Girard's thought, somewhat dismissively as a "système", because he meant by that something which tended to circumscribe and limit scholarship. I have found Girard's thought to be something much closer to a "centring insight", because it has opened up for me ways of synthesizing the possibilities inherent in so many approaches which owe nothing to Girard at all – I think of what I have learned from Margaret Barker and other Old Testament Scholars like Mark S. Smith who are helping us break out of the straightjacket which nineteenth century German Biblical Scholars put upon the sacred page. Or what I have learned from Duncan Derrett about the sheer subtlety, sophistication and playfulness of the network of allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures which pulsate just beneath the surface of the texts of the Apostolic Witness. And many of you have found just such doors opened up by other thinkers, like Walter Wink or Walter Brueggeman, and the list goes on.

So, before returning to John 5 let me just point to a few of the ways in which Girard sets us free to handle the sacred page in a manner that is appropriately reverential, but not at all idolatrous. The first, which I have already commented on, is that the event is prior to the text, so what we have in the text is evidence of interpretation flowing from that event. From the basic distinction between interpretations which tend to cover up the event and interpretations which are part of the allowing the event to be seen for what it is, a huge freedom in reading the texts flows. We do not need to be at all frightened of this freedom in interpretation. In fact we are anchored in our relaxedness about it by the knowledge of the truth behind the distinction between texts which cover up persecution and texts which reveal it. Once you know that, the texts can be about a huge variety of things, so many things that it doesn't matter, so long as you are yourself aware of the danger that *you* might use the texts to cover up, rather than reveal complicity in, the human reality of persecution.

A second freedom brought to us by Girard's handling of the text derives from the realisation that the basic scenario – a murder complacently accomplished, or

revealed with fear and trembling – is also the basic liturgical scenario for acts of worship. And this feeds in with the realisation that, somewhat contrary to what we imagine, liturgy is prior to text. It is not the case that we have the Bible, the Bible says we ought to have acts of worship, so we must devise acts of worship, and borrow some of the texts from the Bible to fill up the time during our gatherings. Quite the reverse: once you become aware that not only the murderous scenario, but also the liturgical scenario, is prior to the texts, then you begin to get a sense of quite how many of the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures were born for liturgical purposes, in order to explain and interpret particular gatherings, only gradually becoming what we refer to, deeply misleadingly, as “a book”. Deuteronomy, for instance, really does sound entirely different depending on whether it is read as a book of legislation, or as a long sermon, full of recapitulations, and reminders of a permanent “today” when all that is being said is to be embraced and put into action. Mary Douglas has an astounding reading of Leviticus<sup>4</sup> as being a detailed textual walk around the different topographical parts of the Desert Tabernacle, an extraordinary act of textual liturgical mnemonics to take the place of something which had ceased to exist.

Once this liturgical priority is perceived, then the many repetitions, slightly different versions of the same story, word play across long chunks of text, and allusions within stories, all start to make sense: we are not dealing with texts which were written as “completed books” for people to buy, take home, and read, as we might do with the latest Grisham or Scarpetta. What we have instead is, often enough, something much more like a mixture between preacher’s manuals and orchestral scores: the former in the sense that what is being provided is a series of paths, guides and stories by which a master expositor is to make alive the event that is being celebrated, the feast that is being rehearsed; and the latter in the sense that each performance is unique, that there is real skill, accomplishment, practise and judgment required in rendering the silent annotations into the audible form that is their realisation, and that the meaning of the score is only to be sensed in the performance. This was even more evidently the case in the distant past, when the system of pointing which provides the vowels for the entirely consonantal Hebrew text had not been fixed, so living performers genuinely provided, as their own highly responsible act of interpretation, the succession of vowels which could yield vastly different meanings.

Now it seems to me that Girard enables us to be very relaxed in accompanying our growing sensitivity to this perception of our texts, because he is giving us the

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<sup>4</sup> *Leviticus as Literature* OUP 2001.

tools to make sense of storytelling surrounding key scenarios. If there is always a danger, in any human gathering, that whatever the positive benefits of that togetherness, some veiled act or movement of exclusion is afoot, then the capacity to highlight the contemporary presence of some amazingly violent and awful stories, and show their being overcome, is always going to be a source of enlightenment. I think Girard accomplishes this by always attending to the physical interactions described in the scenario, as well as by giving such a rich account of the pattern of desire that is at work.

To give an example: in Girard's reading of the woman taken in adultery, the fact that Jesus is defusing a potential lynch-mob is, once one has a tiny hold on Girard's thought, perfectly obvious. Yet it is the little details which, once grasped, can never be forgotten. An ordinary scripture scholar could have pointed out that while no one knows what Jesus was writing in the dust, the fact that he was doing so, in the context of a discussion about what Moses commanded, is an enactment of YHWH writing the original tablets which Moses, in his anger, had cast to the ground thus turning them to dust. It means that the law of Moses as it stands is always a secondary version, and YHWH's intention is always prior to it and at some distance from it. But Girard's observation that when Jesus, in the face of the questioning of the potential lynch mob, bent down and wrote on the ground, it was by the physical movement of his arm that he was distracting attention both from the woman who was being so horribly shamed, and from himself, using his fingers to draw people's eyes towards a different centre of fascination, thereby defusing the anger and immediacy of the lynch mob: that observation, blending the physical description in the text with an intelligence of the working of desire and how these two highlight what YHWH is doing, is in a different category of genius.

My penultimate point, before returning to the text of John 5 is to emphasize how because Girard provides us with the workings of an extra-textual, but permanently contemporary source of meaning for our texts, he also teaches us how responsible we must be in our handling of those texts. It is very much more difficult for us to use the texts as a shield against our own responsibility. It is not, ever, "what the Bible says" that is the straightforward justification for this or that source of action. But always the question "how do you read?". And we know about everyone else, but rarely about ourselves, that "how does somebody read", as evidenced in texts, can always be answered in one of two ways: "they read for self-justification, and in their reading, cover up their own and their friends' complicity in violence" or "they read as people who are being exposed as frauds and liars who are becoming aware of the unpalatable nature of their involvement

in violence”. Whatever the subject at hand, one or other of these is underway (and often, of course, a subtle and self-deceiving mixture of the two).

But this means that part of our responsibility as perpetual makers- contemporary of the centre of meaning which is witnessed to in our texts is to be found undergoing the same discovery as enabled the sacred texts to be written, to wit: that of our own fraudulence, flakiness, lack of “having got it”, and of our being taken for an adventure by someone much weightier and more consistent than ourselves. A Girardian reading of Scripture, as you would expect given the Girardian understanding of the Spirit that brought the Scriptures to be, is one which is both relaxing as to its own fraudulence which is being uncovered, and yet appropriately scared of the potential for damage which our own self-righteousness and blindness can cause. I don’t think that you can really be a Girardian reader of Scripture except as someone who is undergoing the experience of being forgiven. Which is merely to say that Girard has highlighted for us, and filled out for us, something which should be perfectly obvious: reading Scripture is only a truthful discipline if it is a penitential discipline, and being ready to be found to be a sinner is a precondition for being a speaker of the Christian word.

The final point at which I would like to look before returning to John is this: because Girard offers us a centre of meaning that is both prior to history, yet historical, liturgical, and contemporary, it means that the whole question of the relation between the texts of the Hebrew Scriptures and those of the Apostolic Witness (or New Testament) comes into a much fresher light. Rather than seeing two juxtaposed histories, of which one is newer and the other older, it makes much more sense to see the Hebrew Scriptures as being a permanently contemporary vision of who we are, and the Apostolic Witness being the permanently actual interpretative key revealing what has really been going on all along as the Word comes into the world. In this sense, what Girard has given us is an extraordinary tool for breaking free of the twin temptations which have beset Christian reading of the Scriptures: – the Marcionite temptation of attributing to some other god all the really unpleasant and violent passages of the Old Testament, and the Fundamentalist temptation of applying the words “God” and “Lord” univocally across both Testaments. Nor is this a Christian temptation alone: the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel were wrestling with the same temptations close to six centuries before Christ, as are shown in their differing

justifications for moving beyond the child sacrifice apparently enjoined in the book of Exodus<sup>5</sup>.

Back to John 5, so that we can see some of this in action. Let me be quite clear that I'm not attempting a complete "reading" of Jesus' discourse here. What I'm doing is pointing to ways in which John, who is, ironically enough, writing a text, shows Jesus both as prior to texts and meaning and as reading texts, and how John's presentation of Jesus is illuminated by the mimetic understanding of desire. In other words, I want to point out what a sophisticated discussion of hermeneutics is at work in this discourse.

First of all there is Jesus' complete awareness that we are who we are given to be by another. As humans we have no grasp of ourselves. We are run by the social other. It is only other people who point to who we are, and as we see or hear them pointing and take on board what their pointing says about us, so we learn who we are and act accordingly. Jesus indicates very clearly that he has no grasp of himself. He is who he is entirely thanks to his doing what he sees the Father doing. And he, Jesus, finds himself to be who he is, as he becomes what he sees the Father doing. This is why he doesn't bear witness to himself: he's well aware of the psychological danger that by bearing witness to oneself one is allowing oneself to be defined by an argument within one's social grouping. This too is why he doesn't pay attention to the witness of other human beings, even John the Baptist. Instead he relies for his identity on the works that his Father is bringing into being. These works are the works of the Creator, and since his Father is bringing these works into being through him, he is able to rest in the knowledge that he is the One who the Scriptures point to. Please think of the sheer psychological daring and yet relaxedness of this!

Then there is Jesus' complete understanding that flowing from his awareness of being involved on the inside of the act of Creation as YHWH, he is also the living fulcrum, the living criteria of judgment. He is not in the business of trying

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Ezekiel 20, 25-6: <sup>25</sup> *Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live.* <sup>26</sup> *I defiled them through their very gifts, in their offering up all their firstborn, in order that I might horrify them, so that they might know that I am the LORD;* and Jeremiah 19, 3-6: <sup>3</sup> *You shall say: Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I am going to bring such disaster upon this place that the ears of everyone who hears of it will tingle.* <sup>4</sup> *Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods whom neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah have known; and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent,* <sup>5</sup> *and gone on building the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind;* both interpreting Ex 22, 29-30: *You shall not delay to make offerings from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.* <sup>30</sup> *You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep: seven days it shall remain with its mother; on the eighth day you shall give it to me.*

to judge people, yet judged they will be by their attitude towards him. And this means by their attitude towards the living victim which he is in the process of instantiating. So he is the criteria for judgment in both real life and scriptural text. In both our stories and the lives which en flesh them we expel, kill, drive out and justify ourselves over against, victims, convinced that we are right. And here we learn that the real criteria are not ours, but those en fleshed by Jesus. And it is these criteria, those of the crucified and living victim, which will tell the real story, and are starting to do so already, uncovering the buried dead who had no one to tell their story, because they died so that others could keep alive a lie.

Finally there is Jesus' awareness, as John indicates it, of how this alters the reading of Scripture. For there is a rigorous reading going on here: Jesus says something very strong indeed to his listeners:

You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent<sup>6</sup>.

This refers back to Deuteronomy, where Moses says to the people of Israel:

Then the LORD spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of words but saw no form; there was only a voice<sup>7</sup>.

But even this was only what that generation heard, since so terrified were they that they didn't want to hear any more, but besought Moses to go and himself hear the words which they couldn't bear, and they would listen to him:

"Go near, you yourself, and hear all that the LORD our God will say. Then tell us everything that the LORD our God tells you, and we will listen and do it."<sup>8</sup>

In other words Jesus is engaged in a strictly hermeneutical discussion: those to whom he is talking are, according to their own texts, those who neither saw the form nor heard the words. Their only access to the words are by "listening to Moses". This means that the key question they face is "whose word is abiding in you?", which means "what is your hermeneutical key?", or "who is speaking

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<sup>6</sup> Jn 5, 38.

<sup>7</sup> Dt 4, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Dt 5, 27.

through you when you read these texts?" Because it is the one who is speaking through you whose voice will be heard in your interpretation of the words.

Jesus points out that the only access any of them have to what is really going on in the texts is their ability to discern who is bearing witness to him in what he is doing contemporaneously – in other words it is if they can perceive the Creator at work in what Jesus is doing now that they will be able to read the Scriptures, not vice versa.

"You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life. I do not accept glory from human beings. But I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe when you accept glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the one who alone is God?"

Once again, Jesus' understanding of the mimetic issues at play in reading the Scriptures are completely evident: if we get our reputation, that is to say our glory, from one another then we will always be ground down in the hermeneutical circle, only able to reflect each other, and only able to tell truths of convenience rather than undergoing the possibility of being told the inconvenient truth by Another, one who is not part of the social other. The One, in fact to whom the scriptures point. The love of God would be found in us if we were able to bring together YHWH's self-revelation and the victims in Scripture and in real life who YHWH brings to life and holds in being. And it is this One who is speaking, who is YHWH and the victim finally revealed as the same person, this one is the criteria for the love of God and knowledge of Scripture.

Jesus ends this discourse with further reference to Moses, who has of course been present as the one whom Jesus is making contemporary ever since the miracle under the five porticoes with which we began:

"Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father; your accuser is Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?"

Once again, this is part of a rigorous reading of Deuteronomy, in which it becomes quite clear that Jesus is identifying himself with the promised Prophet of

Deuteronomy 18, 15-22<sup>9</sup>. He is also, however, reminding his listeners that Moses himself, at God's behest, wrote the book of Deuteronomy, and sang the song which is its conclusion *as an act of witness against the people of Israel*. The notion of Moses as witness against his people is not an anti-semitic one: it is very exactly what Moses himself said:

"Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God; let it remain there as a witness against you. For I know well how rebellious and stubborn you are. If you already have been so rebellious toward the LORD while I am still alive among you, how much more after my death! Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officials, so that I may recite these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to witness against them<sup>10</sup>.

To sum up, in John 5 we have a text in which Jesus performs a rich and complex sign – a real, non-textual event - against a backdrop of a set of references to the Mosaic project. From there he moves on to a rich reading of Deuteronomy in which that text becomes alive, seen as a real pointer to YHWH's project and what it is all about, one in which Moses' role is respected but relativised according to Moses' own criterion. And during all of this Jesus illustrates how he is the real instantiation of the hermeneutical principle at work in the giving and reading of the Scripture.

What I hope to have shown is that here, it is not so much that traditional Girardian "themes" are explicitly at work, but that Girard's approach to texts, and his opening up of mimetic psychology give us an enormous freedom to read a text like this from within. Thus we are left in even greater awe at John's achievement. For John shows Jesus as being the living, active hermeneutical principle who is the Creator, contemporary with and prior to the texts of Scripture. These only come alive when YHWH who is our victim, is heard by us and his interpretation is spoken through us as words which abide in us. Only thus

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<sup>9</sup> Dt 18:15-22 <sup>15</sup> *The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.* <sup>16</sup> *This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: "If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die."* <sup>17</sup> *Then the LORD replied to me: "They are right in what they have said.* <sup>18</sup> *I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command.* <sup>19</sup> *Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.* <sup>20</sup> *But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak-- that prophet shall die."* <sup>21</sup> *You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the LORD has not spoken?"* <sup>22</sup> *If a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.*

<sup>10</sup> Dt 31, 26-28.

do we break out of going round and round in circles, fooling ourselves, rather than allowing ourselves to be broken open and spoken to by the same One who spoke to Moses and gives us the living criteria by which to recognise his living dwelling places.

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