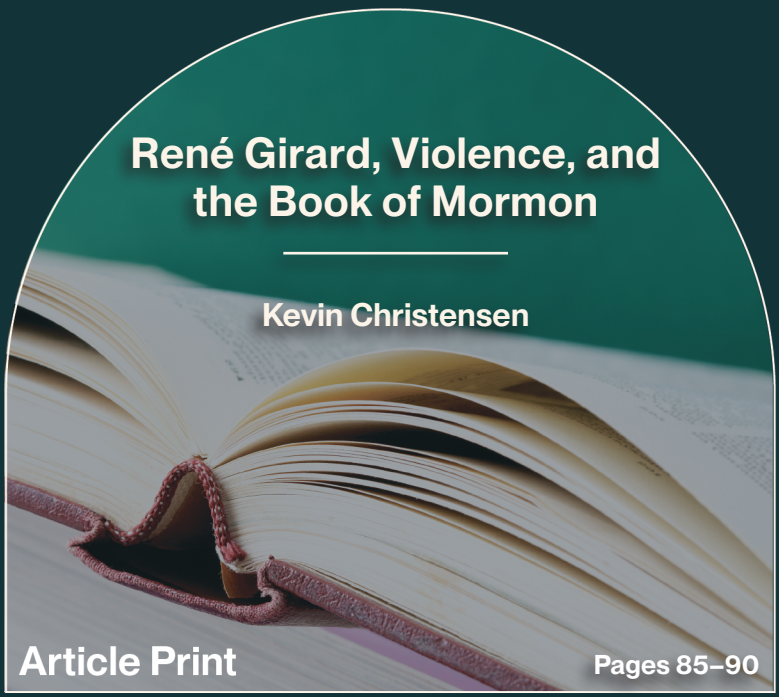
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René Girard, Violence, and the Book of Mormon

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René Girard, Violence, and the Book of Mormon

Kevin Christensen

Review of Alan Goff, *A Stop to the Shedding of Blood: The Book of Mormon, Violence, and the Sacred* (Draper, UT: Common Consent Press, 2025). 427 pages. $18.95 (paperback).

Abstract: *Alan Goff's new book,* A Stop to the Shedding of Blood*, is a valuable reading of the Book of Mormon with and against René Girard's theories of imitative violence and scapegoating. He provides helpful introduction to the work of Girard, engages Latter-day Saint scholars such as Eugene England and Mack Stirling who have drawn on Girard, and provides his own readings of many Book of Mormon stories. While he respects and admires Girard, he takes the position that Girard's theories on violence should be treated as useful tools in many situations, but not an absolute that applies to all situations.*

Alan Goff has published many notable essays over the years, first coming to notice when a review of his BYU Master's Thesis appeared in the second edition of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* in 1990,[1] where the author noted that here was an up-and-coming Latter-day Saint thinker to watch.[2] Goff's own essays

1. See Daniel B. McKinlay, (1990) "Alan Goff, 'A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and the Book of Mormon,'" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* 2, no. 1, (1990): 86-95, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol2/iss1/12/.
2. See Goff's personal autobiographical account: "Alan Goff on Alan Goff; Also, Alan Goff on Joseph Spencer on the Book of Mormon," *By Common Consent* (blog), 21 February 2014, bycommonconsent.com/2014/02/21/alan-goff-on-alan-goff-and-on-joseph-spencer-on-the-book-of-mormon/.

soon began appearing in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, *BYU Studies Quarterly*, *Proceedings of the 2002 Joseph Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History at Brigham Young University*, the *International Journal of Mormon Studies*,[3] *Interpreter*, and others.

Besides his professional career as a liberal arts professor at DeVry University in Phoenix, Arizona, and his frequent publications in FARMS journals and books,[4] and later *Interpreter,*[5] Goff has been a regular presence in the Mormon Scholars in the Humanities community and other similar scholarly circles focused on literature and history. Up to now, he is most noted for his application of Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* to show how the Book or Mormon demonstrates an equally sophisticated use of type scenes and allusion. He is also known for his devastating and insightful discussions of literary theory and Positivism as an ideology that toxically pretends not to be an ideology and the crucial effects it and other ideologies have on both the writing of histories and approaches to Latter-day Saint scripture.

In his new book, *A Stop to the Shedding of Blood*,[6] Goff turns his talents to exploring René Girard's important theories of scapegoating and violence. On the way, he discusses the use of Girard by Latter-day Saint thinkers such as Eugene England and Mack Stirling. While he respects and admires Girard, Goff takes the position that Girard's theories on violence should be treated as useful tools in many situations, but not an absolute that applies to all situations. His argument is akin to Joseph Smith's complaint about creeds, that they "set up stakes and say, hitherto thou shalt come and no further,"[7] to Joseph's insight that "by p[r]oving contrarreties, truth is made manifest,"[8] and to

3. See Alan Goff, "To Insinuate all Ideas and Inevitably Mislead Historical Judgment: Epistemological Metaphor in Mormon Biography," *International Journal of Mormon Studies* 6 (2013): 81-108, jmssa.org/wp-content/uploads/IJMS-VOLUME06-ARTICLE-GOFF.pdf.
4. For many of Goff's earlier works, see scholarsarchive.byu.edu/do/search/?q=author%3A%22Alan%20Goff%22.
5. For much of Goff's more recent work, see interpreterfoundation.org/all/author/alang.
6. Alan Goff, *A Stop to the Shedding of Blood: The Book of Mormon, Violence, and the Sacred* (Draper, UT: By Common Consent Press, 2025).
7. See "Journal, December 1842–June 1844; Book 3, 15 July 1843–29 February 1844," p. 129, *Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/journal-december-1842-june-1844-book-3-15-july-1843-29-february-1844/135.
8. See "Letter to Israel Daniel Rupp, 5 June 1844," p. 1, *Joseph Smith Papers*,

Lehi's observation that "there is an opposition in all things" (2 Nephi 2:11).

Following a 37-page introduction to the topic of "Violence and the Sacred," Goff devotes a lengthier section to introducing the work of French anthropologist René Girard. The central insight from Girard explores how mimetic rivalries lead to violence and how scapegoating then becomes a means to temporarily heal the social divisions caused by the violence and rivalry. Girard began exploring imitative desire in literature and then wrote on social violence from an anthropological perspective. His third book, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*,[9] brought those perspectives to a close reading of the Bible. Girard had been an atheist but was impressed by what he saw as a distinct contrast between myths, in which the scapegoat blamed for society's ills is always depicted as guilty (as in Oedipus, who really had killed his father and married his mother), and the Bible accounts of Joseph of Egypt, Job, and, especially, Jesus, who are depicted as innocent of the charges against them. That insight led to Girard's conversion to the Catholic faith and producing many books exploring the topic.

In the third, lengthier section of Goff's book, after surveying Girard's work and its reception, Goff provides his reading of many Book of Mormon stories both in light of and against Girard's view. He also engages with Eugene England's use of Girard, especially England's *Dialogue* essay "Why Nephi Killed Laban."[10]

Goff explains his purpose:

> Although I confront Girard's project with doubts and questions, I also want to articulate my great admiration toward his boldness and textual dexterity. I have read only a handful of

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josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-israel-daniel-rupp-5-june-1844/1.

9. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
10. See Eugene England, "Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 22, no. 3 (Fall 1989), 32–51, scholarlypublishingcollective.org/uip/dial/article/22/3/32/243122/Why-Nephi-Killed-Laban-Reflections-on-the-Truth-of. See also the later version, "A Second Witness for the Logos: The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Literary Criticism" in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh Nibley,* ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, vol. 2 (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 91–135, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/mi/19/.

> readers (Robert Alter among them) who so consistently provide valuable textual insights into traditional works of literature that I care deeply about, deeply enough to challenge. I have raised my doubts and reservations in this chapter to highlight the wisdom of Girard's readings as I perceive them and engage troublesome problems. . . . I have dispersed additional scruples throughout the book in proximity to the specific readings I feel the need to engage. I view my criticism of Girard to be a way to honor his legacy and influence. (p. 127)

Goff then engages the implications and limitations of Girard's work for various discussions in the Book of Mormon, and by various Book of Mormon readers. He starts with "The Sacrificial Soteriology of the Book of Mormon" (p. 131), that is, the how and why of the at-one-ment, the various metaphors used to frame interpretations (such as "ransom"), and how the Book of Mormon readers and texts respond. He then provides chapters on the deaths of Laban and Abinadi, Nephi's conflicts with Laman and Lemuel, the Lamanites as victims, King Noah and "the Scapegoat Kings of the Bible," a chapter on those who persecuted the prophets, the ideal of pacificism and complexities of the story of the anti-Nephi-Lehies, $Nephi_2$ and the mob at the marketplace, the martyrdoms at Ammoniah, the account in 4 Nephi of a period without any divisions, and how the divisions returned.

For example, in a chapter on the death of Abinadi, Goff observes,

> The confrontation between the Israelite prophet and the Zenifite governing elite is a classic case of Girard's scapegoating pattern. It also repeats the archetypal pattern that starts with the institution of kingship in the Hebrew Bible: the king and his bureaucracy expanding the monarch's authority and the prophet upholding the interests of God and covenant to provide a check and balance on the monarchy. . . . A major element of that covenant outlines the prophet's obligation to call the king to repentance when he neglects the interest of the disenfranchised in order to pursue his own advantage. (pp. 212–13)

On the other hand, when discussing Nephi's slaying of Laban, and also considering a range of interpreters, including Sterling, England, Welch, Spencer, and Aus, Goff observes that "all readers are advocates for moral and ideological positions, but sometimes the texts

push back on the interpretive schemes we overlay on them" (p. 182). Goff observes,

> As difficult as it is to accept that the God of the Bible and Book of Mormon isn't always an orthodox Girardian, stories such as this illustrate the difficulty with being committed both to Girard's ideas and the Book of Mormon as a revealed text and "the most correct book of any book on earth." Not only does this story endorse violence, but it also attributes guilt to the victim of that violence. Both themes violate Girardian prescriptions. (p. 196)

Goff also notes the contrasts between Abinadi as an innocent victim and the guilty King Noah being made a scapegoat by his own priests. In so doing, Goff demonstrates that while there are stories beautifully illustrating Girard's theories, there are also stories that operate in tension with them, making an enlightening experience.

Personally, I have valued my own previous readings both of Girard and Latter-Saint interpreters who have applied his insights to the Book of Mormon, and for that matter, episodes of scapegoating and violence in Latter-day Saint history, such as Haun's Mill and the Missouri expulsion, the Martyrdom, Mountain Meadows, and the anti-polygamy crusade. I have long admired Goff's insights in all his writings that I have been able to acquire. He shows a capacity to provide fresh insights into familiar stories, and also to think about the ideological conditions that enable and impede seeing. As a scholar who is very much aware that "the knower contributes to that which is known," he does not suppose that his words are the last and final words, but rather, makes notable efforts to raise reader awareness of how much each of us can know more of both the words and worlds we explore. Goff remains an important Latter-day Saint scholar to watch, and this book provides welcome insight and enlightenment.

I have only a few quibbles with the way he engages other Latter-day Saint commentators who draw upon Girard and who discuss the Book of Mormon counsel with regard to violence and dealing with adversaries. The one instance that comes to mind is his brief mention of "the summary execution of king men rebels and traitors by $Moroni_1$" (p. 354). Goff includes an important discussion of the War Chapters in Alma. He discusses the contrasts and comparisons of Amalekiah, who, the text observes, persuaded many members of the Church via his skill at flattery, boasting, and stirring the hearts of people to anger

and feeding their ambition and resentments (rhetorical tools that obviously remain in service today) and $Moroni_1$ (p. 305–84). On the point of $Moroni_1$ and "summary execution," I remain more persuaded by Nibley's argument that

> '*as they did lift their weapons of war to fight against Moroni,* they were hewn down and leveled to the earth' (Alma 51:18). The victims were not helpless prisoners but armed warriors on the field of battle.[11]

Goff's overall point remains valid: while as a general principle, the Book of Mormon authors disapprove of violence, they do acknowledge special circumstances in which it may be necessary. But that does not include summary execution of political opponents.

A Stop to the Shedding of Blood is an informative and enlightening book. I found it thought provoking and rewarding, and therefore very much worth the reasonable price of purchase and time in reading.



Kevin Christensen *became a technical writer in 1984, working in California, Kansas, Missouri, and from 2004 to 2025 working for Ansys near Pittsburgh. Raised in Utah, he served an LDS mission in England, and has a BA in English from San Jose State University. Since 1990, he has published more than forty articles in a range of Latter-day Saint publications, including* Dialogue*,* Sunstone*,* FARMS Review of Books*,* Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*,* Insights*,* Meridian Magazine*,* FARMS Occasional Papers*,* Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*,* Interpreter*,* Square Two*,* FAIR*,* Remembrance and Return: Papers in Honor of Louis Midgley*, and, in collaboration with Margaret Barker, an essay in* Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries*. In 2025 he retired to Tooele, Utah, where he lives with his wife, Shauna.*

11. Hugh Nibley, "Freemen and Kingmen in the Book of Mormon" in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 357, scripturecentral.org/archive/books/book/the-prophetic-book-of-mormon. Also see p. 357, citing Alma 60:16, how king men had gone about "taking up their swords against us."

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