

# Why Nephi Killed Laban: Reflections on the Truth of the Book of Mormon

*By Eugene England*

This speculative essay wrestles with God-ordained violence in scripture by examining theories about biblical violence advanced by Northrop Frye and Rene Girard and then applying them to the Book of Mormon, especially the difficult account of Nephi's killing of Laban.

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UNTIL RECENTLY, ATTEMPTS to vindicate the central claim of the Book of Mormon—that it is a divinely inspired book based on the history of an ancient culture—have focused mainly on external evidences. Such attempts have examined parallels in the geographies, cultures, and literatures of the Middle East and Ancient America (especially parallels to knowledge that has become available only since Joseph Smith's time). These parallels are used to prove the Book of Mormon is consistent with ancient knowledge and forms which Joseph Smith could have known only through an ancient manuscript and revelation. This essay takes a different approach, based essentially on internal evidence provided by the book itself. I build my argument on work by Mormon scholars such as John Welch, Noel Reynolds, and Bruce Jorgensen but use techniques developed by non-Mormon literary critics Northrop Frye and René Girard in their work on the Bible.

Frye, by analyzing the Bible's unique typological literary structure and its kinds and quality of language, and Girard, by examining its uniquely revealing and healing response to divine and human violence, have each concluded that the Bible not only has literary qualities superior to those in all other books but is also divine. I concur with Frye and Girard—except in their claim of the Bible's uniqueness. One other book, the Book of Mormon, attains similar qualities of form and content and thus stands as a second witness not only for Christ, but for the Logos, the redeemed and redeeming Word.

A GLASS-WALLED classroom extends behind the BYU Study Abroad Center in Baden, Austria, near Vienna. On a windy spring afternoon in 1985, my wife Charlotte and I, with a few students, sat there watching apple blossoms and forsythia toss and lean over the fence from a neighbor's yard. Still weary from a late night arrival by train, we were helping to provide a respectable audience for a missionary "concert" we had just heard about at lunch. Only a few members from the local branch had been able to get transportation, and our small group included some investigators, some elders, and the mission president. We weren't expecting much.

Elder Kevin Kenner, tall and a bit awkward in his double-breasted pinstripe suit, announced that Cynthia Lang, a recent convert, would play Mozart's "Violin Sonata." Then he unbuttoned his coat, sat down at the piano bench, and placed his large hands on the Center's brightly polished black Yamaha. With a serious, generous face and strong body that moved with her bowing, Cynthia began to develop Mozart's strange, delightful patterns with that rare skill in a violinist that convinces you that the instrument is under full control—and we realized we were in for an unusual hour. When Cynthia had finished, Elder Kenner continued with some Gershwin and then announced that Lun Liang, a young man we later learned had just begun to investigate Mormonism, would perform on a Chinese violin. We lost all sense of duty, even of self, in the presence of continual grace—from Kreisler to Rachmaninoff, back to the Chinese violin, and on to more Kreisler and some Chopin for encores.

How strange the connection of these three superficially dissimilar people—a young missionary from San Diego, a woman of Eastern Europe's great tradition, studying with Professor Ernst Kuchel, and a shy Oriental, playing his delicate, two-stringed instrument with its drum-like sounding box. Though they divided the world in thirds by their geographical and cultural differences, they became absolutely united in one of the strongest human obsessions, making and listening to organized, patterned sounds.

Five days before that concert we had witnessed an equally strong human obsession, as we raptly listened to Malcolm Miller "read" the windows at Chartres Cathedral. For nearly thirty years he had been learning to read the "book," actually the library, miraculously preserved in the stained glass of one—and only one—of the medieval cathedrals and now available to a nearly uncomprehending modern world. His one-hour lecture could only open the first few pages of the first book there at Chartres, but what a fascinating, strange, yet satisfying vision unfolded. He read the third window from the right along the north wall of the transept—the story of Joseph, projecting him as a "type," a pattern for the future Christ. Then he read the three great western windows, quite recently cleaned, whose brilliance and clarity suggests how the whole cathedral looked inside when it was young (and might again when funds for cleaning the other 170 windows can be found). The central window on the west gives the greatest story in human history: God becoming like us in order to save us. On the right is the pattern of preparation for that event, Christ's descent through the loins of Jesse, and on the left are the details of Christ's life and death after the incarnation.

We went to the nave to read the great rose windows, the north one part of the pattern of Old Testament preparations, the south one, focused on Mary, continuing the story of patterns in Christ's life that corresponded to the typological preparations. Everywhere I felt the obsession with order, pattern, types, and parallels, prophecies, and fulfillments in literal but meaningfully similar structures: the "soldiers" coming before Christ—the Old Testament prophets who foretold him—marshaled on the north; Christ and his "soldiers" that followed him, the martyrs and confessors, along the south; the four major prophets of the Old Testament with the New Testament evangelists literally standing on their shoulders; the Garden of Eden as Old Salem,

the “lost peace,” to be completed in the New Jerusalem; and, giving a shock of recognition to careful readers of the Book of Mormon, a deep green cross for Christ, based on the medieval legend that the tree he was hung upon was made from Eden’s Tree of Life.

**T**HE BOOK OF Mormon? Yes, because that most typologically structured book—the only one that uses biblical patterns with even greater intensity and consistency and ultimate significance than the Bible—has as its central pattern what Bruce Jorgensen has called “The Dark Way to the Tree,” an archetypal journey to a tree which is multiple in form. With that image the Book of Mormon unites, to create greater understanding and power, four patterns of the human pilgrimage: (1) Adam and Eve as Everyman and Everywoman finding their dark but necessary way to the Tree of Life through partaking of the Tree of Knowledge. (2) Christ providing the essential means for all men and women from Adam and Eve onward to make that dark journey, by personally taking his life’s journey and ending upon a tree—death on a cross that makes possible eternal life. (3) Lehi’s dream establishing the pattern into our subconscious through the powerful, patterning drama of the journey through darkness to the tree that represents God’s love through Christ (1 Ne. 8 and 11). This dream begins the Book of Mormon narrative and, as Jorgensen has shown, becomes the type for its main stories, such as the conversions of Enos and Alma the Younger, as well as its overall structure, which invites us all to participate in an individual journey of salvation, even as God is leading the whole earth (and human history) through such a journey in order to make our own journeys possible (1979, 218–30). (4) Alma giving universal intellectual power to the pattern with his explication, uniquely appropriate for modern, science-oriented skeptics, that the central crux of the pilgrimage—how to know the truth and act upon it—is best symbolized as planting a seed, growing a tree, and partaking of the fruit (Alma 32:28–43).

What Wallace Stevens called the “rage for order” is what preoccupies us most characteristically in all human ages. For a thousand years the precisely measured, lifted, and hanging stone circle of Stonehenge engaged a large community of ancient Britons in enormous physical effort—and effective political organization to sustain that effort—which was clearly aimed at making sense of their world. Now modern particle physics exacts increasing billions of dollars to build huge circular superconducting accelerators that might unlock the basic pattern—the numbers at the root of matter and energy—that will reveal something of the ultimate nature, and essential oppositions, of physical reality, of what Lehi called “things to be acted upon” (2 Ne. 2:13).

But mere pattern is not enough. It is not fully clear whether music is central to human experience because it demonstrates to us again and again that patterns can be discovered in our fundamental environment of sound and time, or whether human beings need to create patterns against the prevailing chaos and simply find satisfaction in doing so, however ephemeral those patterns may seem. But in either case, it remains true that music does not fully satisfy us. Wallace Stevens said that we have poetry because without it we do not have enough, but (as his own work, in its increasingly nihilistic though nostalgic despair, demonstrates) *with* it we still do not

have enough. Like the builders of Stonehenge, we continue to yearn not only for pattern, but for meaningful, saving patterns, involving what Lehi called “things to act”—living agents, mortals and gods.

In Austria we asked Elder Kenner, after his last encore, whether he had enough time to practice. He said the mission president had encouraged him to take what time he needed, but that he most often, without regret, let his central work of teaching the gospel take priority. We saw Sister Lang the next day as she led the singing at her LDS ward in Vienna, expressing her new faith with a more comprehensive joy, I believe, than when she played her violin for us. And Lun Liang, if he accepts the gospel of Christ, will find its patterns, what Joseph Smith called “the ancient order of things,” more satisfying, I also believe, than the music he brings with him from China or that he is finding in Vienna.

Patterns obsess us because they emphasize what is most fundamental in the universe, what is repeated, necessary, irresistible, final. But there is a deepest pattern, the source and goal of all our searching for pattern, what Northrop Frye in his book of the same title calls “The Great Code.” It is the great scriptural pattern which, beyond what the universe is and has been, also images for us what life can be at its most satisfying, fulfilling, and enduring. That is the pattern Frye finds uniquely in the Bible. He traces the way that pattern has ultimately shaped our mythology, our metaphoric patterns, and our rhetoric itself—in a word, *all* our literature, not just that which directly alludes to the Bible. I believe that Frye’s most important claims for the Bible can also be demonstrated for the Book of Mormon.

Actually, the Book of Mormon seems to me even more amenable than the Bible to Frye’s analysis. It is clearly patterned by a single mind, that of Mormon, and the resulting unity is remarkably similar to the patterns only now being explicated in the Bible by critics such as Frye. I believe that, given adequate attention by sympathetic critics, the Book of Mormon will provide an even deeper, more intellectually consistent, and powerful witness than the Bible for the Logos—both for Jesus Christ as our divine and only Savior and also for the Word, for language imbued with divine power.

Frye has long been intrigued by the Bible’s unusual potential for “polysemous” interpretation, that is, for being understood and having enormous influence not only at the literal, historical level but even more so at various metaphorical levels. He has examined particularly the typological level, which connects events and people throughout history in a cohesive pattern of images and imitations of the process of salvation through Christ. He has also pointed to the success of medieval and subsequent commentators with the “moral” and “anagogical” levels of interpretation (at the moral level each passage is understood as teaching us, in addition to the literal story, how to imitate Christ’s life in the practical world, at the anagogical level how to see our lives in the context of life in eternity with him).

Frye has finally concluded, and sets out in *The Great Code* to demonstrate, that “polysemous meaning is a feature of all deeply serious writing, and the Bible is the model for serious writing” (1982, 221). He argues that the biblical achievement with language is unique and its influence so powerful on all other uses of language that it alone has guaranteed the very possibility of retaining polysemous meaning in our modern culture, despite powerful influences to the contrary.

Such claims, of course, imply a particular history of language, which Frye provides. First he makes a crucial distinction, not provided in the single English word “language,” between the sound patterns that make up a language, which of course cannot be adequately translated, and the essential sense or force or dramatic patterns of the language, which can. This latter is the French *langage*, as opposed to *langue*. *Langage* is “a sequence of modes of more or less translatable structures in words, cutting across the variety of *langues* employed, affected and conditioned but not wholly determined by them” (1982, 5). This is a valuable distinction; it turns us from exclusive attention to the formal elements of literature, such as sound patterns, multiple meanings, prose rhythms, concision, texture, and puns, that have preoccupied much literary criticism in this century. Such preoccupation has diverted us from other, perhaps weightier, matters, such as the patterns of sin and salvation. In the process we have been kept from full appreciation of the literary merit of the Bible—and almost any appreciation of the literary merit of the Book of Mormon. The prose of the book has been criticized as dull, flat, even awkward (overuse of clumsy phrases like “And it came to pass”), and the extraordinary beauty of its concepts has been neglected (the remarkable philosophical sophistication of 2 Nephi 2 and Alma 32, the uniquely full and moving understanding of the atonement in Mosiah 3–5 and Alma 7, 34, and 42). Thus we have focused on *langue* (which might have been extraordinarily beautiful in the original but which, except for chiasmus—which we are learning to appreciate more fully—is untranslatable), rather than Frye’s *langage*, the meanings that survive translation.

According to Frye, the Bible is unique in its consistent power to preserve and to recreate in each new reader the reality of metaphorical language and typological patterns, because of the force with which it brings those two elements of *langage* into the modern world. It does this because, surprisingly, it is myth and metaphor that answer the question: What is the “literal” meaning of the Bible? Frye also argues that the Bible invokes “a historical presence ‘behind’ [its language], as [French literary critic Jacques] Derrida would say, and that the background presence gradually shifts to a foreground, the re-creation of that reality in the reader’s mind” (p. xx). That historical reality is, of course, the typological keystone, Christ’s involvement with the world, and it is a reality that I think Frye senses, though he never quite admits, is uniquely saving.

Frye is essentially right about the nature and importance of the Bible’s contribution, by sustaining into the modern world the power of metaphorical language, to *all* our literature. He is certainly wrong in his claim for the uniqueness of the Bible (p. 80). For there is one other book that preserves the full power of metaphorical language, typological structure, and Christ-centered moral and eschatological meaning for our secular, literalistic world. There is a second witness to Christ not only as the Savior of each individual and all the world but to him as the Logos, the Word. It witnesses that Christ is the one who used language, both as God and as a man, in ways that provide the most important clues to our nature and potential as his children, and it reminds us we are inheritors of that same crucial gift of language. That second witness is the Book of Mormon.

Bruce Jorgensen has already cut a deep swath into the rich harvest of typological



interpretation awaiting us in the Book of Mormon. In “The Dark Way to the Tree,” he has demonstrated the book’s potential with definitive examples and a persuasive overall typological reading and at the same time has developed a theory of the value of such a reading. The following passage summarizes much that I have said and suggests the quality of Jorgensen’s contributions:

For [the Book of Mormon prophets], typing or figuring or likening, guided by revelation, is simply the one way to make sense of the universe, time, and all the dimensions of individual and communal human experience. [Their work] may suggest a theology of the Word, which in turn might suggest a philosophy of history and of language.

History may well be ... a sequence without story. Yet to write history is to compose it . . . , to *figure* it, to order it by concept and metaphor. The minds that made the Book of Mormon clearly believed that this was not only possible but essential, even crucial, if humanity was to continue. Further, those minds believed that the master-figures [in the typology] were both immanent and transcendent: that God could and would reveal them to human minds, and that once received, [they] would be seen (and could be used) to order all experience. . . . Likening, then, . . . might be seen as the root-act of language itself, logically prior to the utterance of any word even if temporally simultaneous with it. . . . The dynamics of the Word in the Book of Mormon entail a view of language deeply at variance with the post-modernist view that we dwell amid infinitely self-referential and nontranscendent signs. . . . The Book of Mormon seems . . . to say that signs point beyond themselves not finally to other signs but ultimately toward God. Our trouble . . . is to read them. (1979, 222–29)

Besides Jorgensen, Richard Rust and George Tate (in Lambert 1979, 230–46, 247–55) have made important contributions to typological analysis of the Book of Mormon. Stephen Sondrup (1981) and Noel Reynolds (1982) have built on John Welch’s discovery of the use of the Hebraic poetic pattern, chiasmus, in the Book of Mormon. What is needed is for one of these perceptive analysts to explore the relation between chiasmus and typology. Chiasmus is the small-scale use of repetition, with inversion, of words, concepts, and other language units, focused on a central turning point (such as abc-cba); typology, however, is the large-scale repetition of events, persons, images, etc., all focused on the central event of Christ’s mortal life. Both these formal devices seem to have developed as natural expressions of a way of thinking and experiencing that we need to understand and recover in order to approach the formal beauty and powerful message of the Book of Mormon and how the two are integrated.

I hope that both scholars and ordinary readers will follow Jorgensen’s lead into typological analysis and will also explore the Book of Mormon text more fully on the basis of other leads by Frye. One of the most intriguing avenues, I think, might be an examination, using the Book of Mormon, of some of the cruxes and problems Frye finds in his analysis of the Bible. Because the Book of Mormon is more unified and has had fewer problems of transmission and translation, it might provide better

answers to some questions than the Bible.

In addition, I am convinced from my own study and teaching that a typological focus on the Book of Mormon can help us to understand the Bible itself in new ways. Such analysis and reflection will help us to see, much better than we do now, I believe, that both books provide, in their unique *langage*, the most powerful way to do the most important thing words can do—that is, in the Book of Mormon prophet Jacob’s words, to “persuade all men not to rebel against God, . . . but that all men would believe in Christ, and view his death, and suffer his cross and bear the shame of the world” (Jacob 1:8). That possibility for language, as a direct access to the meaning and the experience of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, brings us directly to René Girard.

**F** RYE’S WORK ON the Bible has provided us with new insights to help us appreciate the formal elements of the Book of Mormon, its metaphorical language and typological structure that are of a force and quality that rival the Bible. Girard, another brilliant modern literary critic, has given us new theoretical tools by which we can explore the unique power of the Christ-centered content of the Book of Mormon, which is comparable, even in some ways superior, to that of the Bible. Girard did not begin with the Bible, but his work in anthropology led him to see the close similarities between various mythologies and the Bible record that have led modern scholars and many others into a dogmatic religious relativism—but also helped him see crucial differences that powerfully “make manifest the uniqueness and truthfulness of biblical perspective” (1984, 8).

In *Violence and the Sacred* and *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, Girard first presented convincing evidence, from his thorough study of anthropology, classical mythology and literature, and modern writers like Shakespeare and Dostoevski, that a mechanism we all recognize from common experience is indeed the central mechanism of human conflict. We are motivated largely by desire. Like most human activity and feeling, desire tends to be imitative: that is, we often desire the things others desire, especially the things desired by those we admire, our models, largely because they desire them. Such desires, focused on the same objects, inevitably lead to envy, rivalry, to blaming others and scapegoating them even as we imitate them, and to various forms of cruelty and violence.

Girard has demonstrated with numerous examples from mythology and literature that all societies learn to survive this terrible process of imitative desire and violence, which tends to spread like a plague as people naturally respond to hurt by hurting others and to opposition to their desires with revenge. Groups of people, sensing the threat of expanding imitative violence, choose a scapegoat on which to focus blame and violence rather than acknowledging that imitative desire and revenge are the true sources of difficulty. Masking the scapegoating process in ritual and rationalization, even using their religious and literary forms to do so, people rationalize and justify violence against the innocent scapegoats.

In Girard’s most recent book, *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World* (1987), he argues that there is one effective alternative to the plague of imitative desire and violence that destroys both individuals and nations, despite their elaborate

mechanisms for controlling the mechanism through scapegoating and then hiding it through self-deception and ritual. Imitative desire and violence always break out in new cycles until they are faced and overcome, and Girard argues that the ideas and power necessary to do that are found uniquely in the central Judeo-Christian theology and ethics recorded in the Bible and epitomized in the life and death of Christ. He reads Hebrew history as a progressive effort to reveal the violence mechanism and renounce its basis in scapegoating by taking the side of the victim. He finds in Christ's clear and persistent identification of the violence mechanism and his clear refusal to participate in it or to allow others to conscript him into it the final victory over violence and thus the potential redemption of all humans and all human history.

Christ's unique answer is to renounce inauthentic desire and to eliminate the category of enemy—thus removing rivalry, blame, jealousy, revenge, scapegoating. For Girard, the Bible is our greatest and truest book because it refuses to participate in the suppression of violence through scapegoating. Instead it reveals the innocence of the scapegoat victims and offers examples, notably in the stories of Joseph in Egypt and Christ, of how permanently to stop the cycle of imitative and self-perpetuating violence by totally refusing to participate in it. The Bible, particularly in the Gospels, offers Christ's forgiveness and unconditional love in imitation of Christ as the only solutions to violence.

A growing body of impressive evidence demonstrates the power of Girard's ideas to stimulate new thinking about the great myths, classic literature, and the scriptures. For instance, a reading of *Oedipus* by Sandor Goodhart offers good internal evidence that Sophocles does not, as most have assumed, simply agree with the traditional Oedipus myth's obscuration of the mechanism by which scapegoats are selected and unjustly victimized. Rather, Sophocles provides powerful hints that the Theban community conspires, and gets Oedipus himself to submit, in a kind of ritual sacrifice—scapegoating a man who had in fact not been guilty of parricide (Goodhart 1978).

Gordon Thomasson has done a detailed reading of the Genesis account of Joseph and his brothers, building on Girard's insights, that reveals in even more detail the processes of scapegoating and mimetic violence there; he relates that story to the version of Joseph's story recalled in the Book of Mormon and to the striking parallel there between the stories of Joseph and of Nephi and *his* brothers. Thomasson traces the ways commentaries on the Joseph story from ancient rabbinic to post-holocaust times display "an amazing willingness to explain away or modify crucial details" so that Joseph "becomes less admirable, less of a threat to our own consciences, and consequently a more justifiable victim." In particular, the commentaries "neuter the Joseph story as it might apply to us, and undermine the significance of his refusing to retaliate against his truly guilty brothers" (1984, 17).

In much current Mormon commentary (including, I fear, some of my own teaching), I note a similar tendency to see Nephi, like Joseph, as a favored son who somewhat insensitively and self-righteously intrudes upon his brothers' feelings. I have often heard people say of Nephi, as they do of Joseph, "With a younger brother like that, no wonder the older ones got mad." We thus conspire in the process Girard



has so brilliantly illuminated as common in most mythology and much literature—justifying victimization and even the violence of the older brothers and clouding the ethical issues of sacrificial violence versus self-sacrificing reconciliation. Girard’s perspective thus can help us better appreciate Nephi’s remarkable efforts to stay out of the cycle of rivalry, reciprocal violence, and victimization with his brothers. But Girard can also perhaps help us penetrate one of the most troubling cruxes in Nephi’s account, the killing of Laban.

**T**HOMASSON REMINDS US of the interesting parallels between events in 1 Nephi and details of the scapegoat tradition from Leviticus 16. Girard claims that the Leviticus account is a *product* of the violence mechanism operating in Hebrew society as well as a religious ritual. Part of that ethically questionable Hebrew tradition was the choosing of *two* scapegoats, by lot, one to be sent away and one to be killed. Precisely as predicted by the age-old violence mechanism Girard describes, Lehi and his family are made scapegoats for Jerusalem’s troubles, which Lehi has prophetically warned them about. Rather than face those troubles and repent, the community focuses its growing anger on Lehi, “even as with the prophets of old, whom they had cast out, and stoned, and slain” (1 Ne. 1:20), forcing Lehi, who has been warned by the Lord, to take his family and flee for their lives. When Lehi’s sons return for the brass plates, Laman, chosen by lot to approach Laban, the plates’ keeper, is scapegoated by Laban in classic Girardian terms (that is, accused of a crime, robbery, to justify Laban in his envious desire to obtain his treasure), and is cast out and nearly killed. But then Laban himself is made into a scapegoat, and the punishment of death he had decreed for Laman is meted to him by Nephi.

The problem with this otherwise merely interesting parallel to the Leviticus tradition of two scapegoats lies in the justification offered for killing Laban, “It is better that one man should perish than that a nation should dwindle and perish in unbelief” (1 Ne. 4:13)—a classic statement of the scapegoating rationale. Girard claims that the rationale is the foundation of human violence and is absolutely repudiated by Christ—a repudiation Girard argues is the chief evidence that the Gospels and Christ are divine (1987, 141–79). But Nephi tells us that that rationale is here expressed by the Spirit of the Lord—and he claims that Spirit also makes the ethically troubling claim that God not only uses his divine ends to justify violence by God but also as the rationale for a demand that his children also use violent means: “The Lord slayeth the wicked to bring forth his righteous purposes” (1 Ne, 4:13).

Girard goes to great lengths to show that the Old Testament passages seeming to implicate God himself in violence are records of a people gradually working their way beyond an understanding of God that all other cultures retained: Though “in the Old Testament we never arrive at a conception of the deity that is entirely foreign to violence,” in the later prophetic books, Gerard claims, God is “increasingly divested of the violence characteristic of primitive deities” (1987, 157). Girard’s analysis is persuasive, focused on a close look at the “suffering servant” passages of Isaiah, where we humans are clearly identified as the ones who wrongly ascribe

responsibility for violence to God (Isa. 53:4). Girard also examines explicit rejections of violence of any kind (even God's "righteous" vengeance) that emerge in the Old Testament: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:10). Such rejections become completely clear in the Gospels, where Christ explicitly describes the change from Old Testament patience with violence to absolute New Testament nonviolence: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good" (Matt. 5:43–44).

Girard does not ignore the few passages in the New Testament that seem to contradict this demand by Christ, such as the cleansing of the temple and Christ's claim that he came not to send peace but a sword (Matt. 10:34). As with the similarly troubling passages in the Old Testament, he deals with each in detail, persuasively showing that each can be seen best as descriptive of what was then still a violence-prone culture (rather than an expression of what Christ himself wants) or as a reading we impose from our own still violence-prone culture. In a few cases Girard claims a passage must simply be rejected as inconsistent with Christ's overwhelmingly central and oft-repeated nonviolence.

It is important to recognize that Nephi, recounting the killing of Laban many years after it happened, quotes the Spirit as using almost exactly the same words as the Jewish priest Caiaphas used in an ends-justifies-means argument to condemn Christ, "It is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not" (John 11:50). John, the recording evangelist, shows the dramatic shift from the Old Testament to the Gospel perspective when he writes that Caiaphas thus accurately, though un-knowingly, "prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation" and also for all "the children of God"—not be sacrificed or scapegoated in the usual manner. This raises the interesting but rather troubling image of Laban as a type for Christ, since the deaths of both figures are described as bringing the salvation of whole nations: Laban's death made possible the obtaining of the brass plates, the literal "word" that brought salvation to the Nephites, and Christ's death fulfilled his full mission as Logos, the "Word" that saves all peoples, including the Jews.

But even more troubling is the evidence, not only from the Bible but in the Book of Mormon itself, that Nephi's account directly contradicts the full revelation of God's nature as the One revealed in Christ who utterly rejects violence—and who demands we do the same. Fred Essig and Dan Fuller have written an exhaustive but inconclusive study of the legal status, in the religious and moral code of the Israelites, of Nephi's rationalizations for killing the unconscious, drunk Laban with his own sword. They remind us, "Few passages of the Book of Mormon have inspired more criticism. . . . Many point to this episode as evidence against the Book of Mormon being an inspired document" (1982, 1). Though they clearly wish to counter that criticism, they finally admit, "Until we more thoroughly understand the role of Deity in the daily affairs of ancient Israel and how that role was perceived by the Israelites, we may neither condemn nor extol the acts of Nephi" (p. 25). It is very difficult to wait for such understanding, which may be completely beyond

scholarship, when this passage from the Book of Mormon is used by anti-Mormons to attack the book and by investigators to reject it. Some Mormons themselves continue to use the passage to justify troubling, violent rhetoric and even violent action—by assuming that the Spirit does indeed teach that the end justifies the means. (The fundamentalist Laffertys even used the passage in court to defend their “inspired” slaying of their sister-in-law and her baby.) For those of us troubled by such rhetoric and actions, no other passage has seemed more contradictory to New Testament, as well as other Book of Mormon, teachings about the impartiality and absolute goodness of the Lord—and about the central role the rejection of violence plays in Christ’s mission.

This is not the place for a full analysis of the Laban story, but I offer some reflections, based on Girard’s insights, to illustrate how his work can help us approach the Book of Mormon: First, is it possible that Nephi’s decision—or at least his rationalization—was simply wrong? This very young man, already a victim of scapegoating and life-threatening violence by his own brothers, knew of Laban’s murderous scapegoating of Laman. He had now found Laban temporarily vulnerable but still a threat to himself and his goals, which he was convinced were divinely inspired. He may have very naturally been tempted toward revenge. Thirty years of reflection may have genuinely convinced him that the Lord would have directed him to kill Laban to obtain the plates in this extreme circumstance—and thus make possible the preservation of his people, which he had witnessed. The text lends some support to this possibility: Nephi is still, much later, troubled by the experience and its moral meaning. His account contains a remarkable combination of unsparing completeness and honesty with what seems like rationalization, even obsessive focusing on what might be unnecessary but psychologically revealing details (see 1 Nephi 4, especially verses 9, where Nephi notices the sword before anything else and examines its hilt and blade in detail, and 18, where, after lengthy rationalization, he confesses, in what seem to be unneeded specifics, “[I] took Laban by the hair of the head, and I smote off his head with his own sword.”). Clearly he had gone over the experience very often and with some ambivalence.

I also find some indication that throughout his life Nephi continued to be deeply troubled by something that may have been—or included—this killing of Laban: In his remarkable psalm of self-reflection, in 2 Nephi 4, Nephi asks, in obvious continuing pain, “Why should I give way to temptations, that the evil one have place in my heart to destroy my peace and afflict my soul? Why am I angry because of mine enemy?” (v. 27). There is no evidence that he was that angry with Laman and Lemuel or even the Lamanites as a whole; he may well have been angry enough with Laban to kill him and then feel continuing remorse, which lead to eventual self-justification. On the other hand, the psalm speaks of his enemies quaking, which seems to refer to Laman and Lemuel quaking before him in 1 Nephi 17. And Jack Welch has pointed out to me that the very details Nephi is careful to include, though to us they seem strangely irrelevant—such as that he entered the city not knowing where he would go and his insistence that the Lord delivered Laban into his hand—are the details that would establish that the killing was not premeditated and thus not murder (these conditions are stated in Exodus 21:13–14 and Numbers 35:22).

A reading that sees Nephi as making a mistake certainly challenges our conventional ideas. We think that a prophet of God, even before he is called, should be above such self-delusion and that the word of God is somehow above revealing such human mistakes. We tend to assume unconsciously that the Book of Mormon tells us only what is best to do rather than revealing what actually was done. We do this despite the book's own warning in its introduction that "if there are faults they are the mistakes of men." However, an interpretation such as I have postulated actually increases my conviction that the account has a psychological richness and sophistication, particularly given Girard's insights, that is extremely hard to imagine Joseph Smith—or anyone else—concocting. Even a reading that blames Nephi provides interesting and unusual evidence that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be, an account of real experiences by a real person from the Israelite world.

There is another possible reading of this event that I believe is the best. But, though it avoids the problems I have just reviewed, it raises what I find to be even more profoundly troubling questions, questions that Girard has also been troubled by in his work with the Bible and has clearly not yet resolved. What if God truly did command Nephi to slay Laban, but not for the very questionable reasons most often offered by Latter-day Saints—reasons that God himself has denied often in other scriptures? What if it was an Abrahamic test, like the command to Abraham to kill Isaac? What if it was designed to push Nephi to the limits of the paradox of obedience and integrity and to teach him and all readers of the Book of Mormon something very troubling but still very true about the universe and the natural requirements of establishing a saving relationship with God? What if it is to teach us that genuine faith ultimately requires us to go beyond the rationally moral—even as it has been defined by God, when God himself requires it directly of us?

This is the position taken by Jeffrey R. Holland in his devotional address to the BYU student body, 17 January 1989, "The Will of the Father in All Things." He suggests that the story of Nephi killing Laban is given so prominently and in such personal detail at the very beginning of the Book of Mormon to force all readers to deal with it and to focus "on the absolutely fundamental gospel issue of obedience and submission to the communicated will of the Lord. If Nephi cannot yield to this terribly painful command, if he cannot bring himself to obey, then it is entirely probable that he can never succeed or survive in the tasks that lie just ahead" (p. 6). I think Holland is right, but most of us need a little more help with the question, Why does God test our obedience, not only by asking us to give up our inferior desires and habits and holdings, not even by demanding at most our lives, but by asking us to turn directly against our greatest *values*, the very commands *he* has given us?

Here is the paradox: Nephi is asked by God to directly violate Christ's demand that we reject all violence, even against those who "deserve" it, and never again try to justify our violence by projecting it onto God ("If ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. . . . But love your enemies, and do good. . . . and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil" [Luke 6:33–35]).

Girard recognizes, and seems to anguish over it, that much of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, describes a natural order in human affairs with which

God seems to have to compromise in order to ultimately change it. Perhaps we can come to Girard's aid a bit here. The evidence of Joseph Smith's inspired revision of the Bible, and the clear statement in Doctrine and Covenants 1:24 that God's revelations are given to prophets "in their weakness, after the manner of their language" (which must include their world view), indicate that the Bible and the Book of Mormon are at least partly limited to the perspectives of the writers, not simply to that of God himself. It is natural that those writers, though prophets, would perceive reciprocal violence and scapegoating with some of the limitations Girard has documented as occurring in all mythology and literature, as well as all cultures.

Girardian analysis of Shakespeare has helped us see how the great dramatist pushes the scapegoat mechanism to tragic extremes—not to accept it but to reveal it more fully and make us abhor it. Thus Shakespeare becomes a kind of therapist, creating Active dramas that imitate and thus reveal the mechanisms of violence and the ways we try to hide them. Shakespeare's plays also demonstrate how such therapy may be achieved through dramatic shock—even the telling of half-truths, used by such healing figures as Prospero and Cordelia.

Could it be that God, having similarly to deal with the limitations placed upon him by human agency, could create a dramatic fiction for Nephi, as both a test and a therapy, that reveals to him *in extremis*—and also to us—that he too can become a scapegoater capable of imitative violence? Or could it be (and this is what, finally, I believe myself) that, as Holland and others have suggested, God was both teaching and helping Nephi to develop, through this Abrahamic test, into a servant and leader who could be obedient—but that God was also teaching Nephi (and us) the costs and limits of such obedience? Transgression of God's commandments against violence is only excusable in the extreme case of certain knowledge that God is commanding the transgression and even then will properly exact a toll of reluctance and anguish in the true servant of God.

Certainly the experience with Laban taught Nephi something he never forgot, as is evidenced, perhaps, by his psalm of repentance—and is certainly shown in his harrowing, complex memory of the event many years later. The experience, it seems, profoundly changed him. Soon afterwards he had the privilege to be the first among the Nephites to receive full vision of the life and mission of the still far-future Christ and to understand his Atonement, symbolized in the tree of Lehi's dream ("It is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men" [1 Ne. 11:22]). Based on that understanding, he later states unequivocally the true nature of God as revealed in Christ, the absolute opponent of all imitative desire, all violence, all scapegoating, in a way that seems to directly contradict his own earlier report of what an angel had told him about God:

The Lord God hath commanded that men should not murder; that they should not lie . . . that they should not envy; that they should not have malice; that they should not contend one with another . . . and that they should do none of these things; for whoso doeth them shall perish. For none of these iniquities come of the Lord; for he doeth that which is good among the children of men . . . and all are alike unto God. (1 Ne. 26:32–33)



WHILE WE WERE in London four years ago, just before the trip to Chartres and Vienna, we saw, at the National Theatre, a version (based on the York cycle) of the medieval “Mystery Plays.” These are the cycles of connected dramatic stories, generally taken from the Bible, that were performed annually at the feast of Corpus Christi (the main celebration of Christ’s Atonement), each segment performed by one of the town’s guilds of workers. Much like the great cathedral windows, the plays taught the scriptural story of salvation to a mainly illiterate populace. In addition, much like our restored temple endowment ceremony, they served remarkably well to involve actors and audience in a reconfirming understanding of their own literal place in the ongoing divine drama, in patterns of grace that would save each of them, as well as Adam, Noah, Mary and Joseph, and Peter, James, and John.

The somewhat modernized script enacted by sympathetic and skilled actors in this production involved us in a surprisingly moving reconfirmation of our own faith in and understanding of salvation through Christ. One of the most powerful scenes was the sacrifice of Isaac, prolonged by an imagined dialogue between the son on the altar and his father with the knife, that stretched out our pain, shared with them, at this potential violence by God upon his own children and upon his own teachings. This, of course, heightened both our relief at God’s saving intervention and our awareness of the medieval authors’ genius (which has been confirmed by the work of Frye and Girard) in cutting immediately from this scene to the annunciation of the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ. The significance and force of this connection is intensified in the text by Abraham’s cry as he sees Isaac’s increasing anguish and knows he must now act, “Jesu, on me thou have pity/That I have most in mind.” This anguish is echoed in God’s words, after his intervention, to Abraham:

Like thine Isaac, my loved lad  
Shall do full heartily his Father’s will,  
But not be spared strokes sore and sad,  
But done to death upon a hill. (Harrison 1985, 48)

In the London production, the effect was heightened even more when a group of actors representing the butchers’ guild, traditionally assigned to play the sacrifice of Isaac, came forward. In a complex, ritual dance of controlled violence at the completion of the sacrifice, they ended by interweaving their long sword-like butcher knives into a Star of David and carried it up to the balcony where it became the star of annunciation of Christ’s birth.

The typology is certainly clear and has been recognized by many, but the connections between God’s apparent endorsements of violence and the violent victimization of his own son, which saves us, have not been very adequately explored. I think the Book of Mormon can help here, mainly because it provides the basis for an understanding of the At-one-ment of Christ that can complement but go beyond Girard’s fruitful ideas. The Book of Mormon provides as yet unexplored hints, suggesting connections between such things as Nephi’s killing of Laban and his remarkable visions soon after of Christ as the “condescension of God” (the one who does not look down in judgment upon us from a physical and moral distance but who literally descends with us into mortal pain and suffering and

sickness [2 Ne. 11:26]). Many subsequent Book of Mormon scriptures explore that idea that God accomplishes the Atonement by transcending the paradox of justice and mercy, using the same image of condescension, of descending *with* us: He is the “Lord Omnipotent” who gives us the law and will ultimately judge us, but he is also the suffering servant who “will come down from heaven . . . and shall dwell in a tabernacle of clay” (Mosiah 3:5) and thus will learn how to save us by literally taking upon himself our “pains and sicknesses” and “infirmities, that his bowels may be filled with mercy” (Alma 7:11–12).

The Book of Mormon is quite consistent, I believe, with Girard’s very helpful focus on the Atonement as achieved through love rather than through traditional sacrifice, through reconciliation rather than payment. It makes much clearer than the (perhaps truncated) New Testament account that the center of Christ’s At-one-ment was in the Garden of Gethsemane, not on the cross. As King Benjamin teaches and the Doctrine and Covenants powerfully reconfirms in Christ’s own words, it was there, when Christ momentarily shrank from what he knew was necessary and then fully joined all humankind as he experienced the worst sense of alienation and pain we can know—in fact, descended below all and the worst of our experience in order to raise us to accept our acceptance by him—it was there that “[blood] came from every pore, so great [was] his anguish for . . . his people” (Mosiah 3:7; D&C 19:18).

Perhaps most startling is the unique Book of Mormon testament that many people, such as King Benjamin’s audience, who lived many years before Christ, were able to experience the Atonement fully, were saved and completely changed into new creatures, long before the Atonement actually occurred in history. According to this witness, the Atonement was not a sacrificial event that saved people from that moment on but an expression of unconditional love from God that freed them to repent and become like God simply by knowing about it, by hearing the word, whether expressed before Christ lived or after.

In addition the Book of Mormon gives perhaps the most direct affirmation in scripture of Girard’s claim that Christ’s Atonement put an end to all claims for the legitimacy of sacrifice and scapegoating:

[Christ’s atonement will not be] a sacrifice of man, neither of beast, neither of any manner of fowl; for it shall not be a human sacrifice. [But] then shall there be, or it is expedient there should be, a stop to the shedding of blood; then shall the law of Moses be fulfilled. . . . And thus he shall bring salvation to all those who shall believe on his name; this being the intent of this last sacrifice, to bring about the bowels of mercy, which overpowereth justice, and bringeth about means unto men that they may have faith unto repentance. (Alma 34:10–15)

Besides confirming some of Girard’s insights, the Book of Mormon also can help us go beyond Girardian analysis to see the proper role of justice, of punishment, even of God’s own participation in processes that involve or threaten violence. Amulek’s discourse on the Atonement in Alma 34 and Alma’s in Alma 42 make much clearer than anything available to Girard in the Bible the crucial role of justice

in God's plan for our redemption. The Bible's well-known accounts of what seems like divinely directed or justified violence and its tendency, especially in the Old Testament, to obscure the violence mechanism Girard identifies, may result from imperfect attempts to express the principle of God's justice. The Book of Mormon more clearly shows why God must use justice to establish conscience in us before his forgiving love, which ends the cycle of violence, can effectively operate.

For instance, Alma teaches his son Corianton that God affixed laws and punishments, "which brought remorse of conscience unto man"; if he had not done so, "Men would not be afraid to sin . . . [and] the works of justice would be destroyed, and God would cease to be God" (Alma 42:18, 20, 22). He also teaches Corianton that such a necessary condition places man "in the grasp of justice," and it is therefore necessary that "God himself [atone] for the sins of the world, to bring about the plan of mercy, to appease the demands of justice, that God might be a perfect, just God, and a merciful God also" (Alma 42:14–15).

A major problem for many of his readers is Girard's explanation of how original violence lies at the foundation of society and religion and then how that original violence is continually obscured over time, even in God-directed biblical cultures. The Book of Mormon may be able to help us understand how the constraints of human nature and agency require God, in working out a possible plan of salvation for us, to cooperate in—or at least allow—that natural obscuring process. Perhaps it is only in such a way, in which the processes of quid-pro-quo justice and thus imitative violence work with full force for a while, that our consciences can be adequately formed by justice. Then, as the Book of Mormon uniquely explains, such demands of justice in our own minds can be appeased by the plan of God's mercy (Alma 42:15). Thus our consciences, which remain too self-critical to accept Christ's forgiveness and acceptance of us, can be overpowered by the bowels of his mercy (Alma 34:15). Our difficulty with the apparently contradictory scriptures may be a matter of understanding how God's justice and his mercy work together to bring us to self-knowledge and guilt, but also to self-acceptance and repentance.

In addition to all this, the Book of Mormon provides the only example I can find anywhere of a group actually practicing Girard's implied unique solution to imitative violence—and with the predicted results. The people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, a group of Lamanites converted to the Christian gospel, whose ancestors had continually used the Nephites as scapegoats for their own troubles, make a covenant with God "that rather than shed the blood of their brethren they would give up their own lives" (Alma 24:18). In keeping with that covenant, they ritually bury their weapons. When attacked by vengeful Lamanites, they respond with astonishing and effective courage but in a way directly contrary to the universal pattern of reciprocal violence Girard has revealed: They "would not flee from the sword, neither would they turn aside to the right hand or to the left, but . . . would lie down and perish, and praised God even in the very act of perishing under the sword" (Alma 24:23).

When the Lamanites see this, the reverse pattern, what Girard calls the "benign reciprocity of love," takes over: "There were many whose hearts had swollen in them for those of their brethren who had fallen," and they too "threw down their weapons, and they would not take them again" (Alma 24:24–25). According to

Mormon, the recording prophet, over a thousand were killed, but they were saved in the kingdom of God—and more than that were converted. Most important, the violence was stopped in a way that actually ended it, rather than setting up continuing cycles of revenge—as the winning of battles, no matter how justified, always does. Speaking from the perspective of 400 years later in Nephite history, Mormon draws a pointed lesson for his modern-day readers:

Thus we see that, when these Lamanites were brought to believe and to know the truth, they were firm, and would suffer even unto death rather than commit sin. . . . They had rather sacrifice their lives than even to take the life of an enemy; and they have buried their weapons of war deep in the earth, because of their love towards their brethren. And now behold I say unto you, has there been so great love in all the land? Behold, I say unto you, Nay, there has not, even among the Nephites. (Alma 24:19; 26:32–33)

It would be hard to imagine a better complement to Girard's analysis of the end of the Joseph story. In that episode Judah is being tested by Joseph, who has had a cup placed in Benjamin's sack and threatens to keep him in Egypt and let the others go. But Judah, archetypal head of the Jews, the race most made a scapegoat in our world—and the race which produced Jesus—this Judah, in an exact reversal of what had occurred when Joseph was originally scapegoated by his brothers, now offers to take Benjamin's place, to sacrifice self rather than make another a scapegoat. He thus moves Joseph to tears and to the forgiveness that ends the cycle of violence and reconciles him with his brothers. As Girard writes, "This dedication of Judah stands in symmetrical opposition to the original deed of collective violence which it cancels out and reveals" (1984, 15). In exactly the same way, the dedication of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi stands in symmetrical opposition to the original deeds of collective violence by Laman and Lemuel and their descendants, which produced the ongoing spiral of reciprocal scapegoating central to the Book of Mormon narrative.

**B**UT I FIND in the Book of Mormon an even more powerful support for and also extension of Girard's work. The central question still remains how to cope with the desire leading to envy and rivalry that sets in motion all the problems that produce violence and our consciences' demands for reciprocal justice. For Christians, including Girard, the question is how Christ's Atonement makes it possible for us to stop the cycle even before it starts—or at least to make repentance and forgiveness possible so it can end.

The Book of Mormon provides the best answer. King Benjamin teaches precisely how the redemptive process works and can be maintained. First he proclaims the essential and primary reality of the Atonement, by which Christ extends unconditional love to us, even in our sins. Consistent with Amulek and Alma, he teaches that we can be moved by Christ's unconditional love to overcome the demands within ourselves, placed there by our God-given consciences, to punish ourselves and others. This breaking the bands of justice, he claims, enables us to accept Christ's mercy and forgiveness and become new creatures. Intensely moved by

learning of Christ's love, the group of Nephites actually go through that saving process and begin to rejoice that they are indeed changed, that they "have no more disposition to do evil, but to do good continually" (Mosiah 5:2).

King Benjamin also reveals the only way to maintain change, to retain "a remission of your sins from day to day" (Mosiah 4:26). The key is humility, the abdication of imitative desire through recognizing that we are "all beggars" (Mosiah 4:19). Just as God does not reject us for our sins, does not refuse to love us or to extend his healing grace and continual blessings because we sin, so we must respond to those who beg help from us though they do not "deserve" it. We must never judge their desires or condition; we must never think that "the man has brought upon himself his misery; therefore . . . his punishments are just" (Mosiah 4:17). If we do so we "have great cause to repent," and if we fail to repent we "have no interest in the kingdom of God." Instead, we are to constantly recognize our own weaknesses and our own position of dependence on God, judging no one else but engaging constantly in specific acts of sacrificial love, "feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants" (Mosiah 4:26).

The point the Book of Mormon makes much more clearly than I find made in the Bible is this: to continue experiencing the Atonement with Christ after we have received his grace, we must extend it to others. Christ makes us into new creatures, into persons strong enough not to act contrary to what we know—that is, not to sin—if we will merely accept Christ's merciful, undeserved love; he gives us power to repent, the "means" by which we can "have faith unto repentance" (Alma 34:15). But if we then continue judging others, we will unconsciously judge ourselves. We must constantly give mercy to be able to accept it. We must never exact revenge, even in the name of perfect justice. We must not take vengeance, even upon ourselves, the sinners whom we know, from the inside, most certainly deserve it.

These two passages from the Book of Mormon, the account of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi and King Benjamin's address, provide a basis for meeting one of the main criticisms made of Girard's work. Even those who find that his hypotheses fit the available facts better than any others are troubled that despite the claim that his work can help us cope with violence in our lives and in relations between nations, neither he nor his disciples have offered concrete, practical steps toward the goal (North 1985, 10). Active, self-sacrificing love, even of our enemies, and non-judgmental, merciful feeding of the hungry are seldom recommended and even less seldom practiced in our world. The Book of Mormon provides powerful evidence, in theory and example, that they could work—in fact are essential for our salvation.

**W**HAT DO THESE reflections on some exciting recent literary criticism—and a reconsideration of Nephi's killing of Laban—suggest about the truth and value of the Book of Mormon? That none of us can dismiss it. No one has mastered or explained or exhausted it. It not only stands up to the most sophisticated modern thought about literature, but it continues to challenge our most sophisticated ethical, theological, and political concepts. I am encouraged by my study so far to find that what Frye and Girard have claimed for the Bible can also be claimed, point by point



and often more clearly and usefully, for the Book of Mormon. But more important, their insights deepen my understanding and appreciation of a book I already believe is both as historically true and as spiritually valuable as the Bible. As I approach difficult parts of the book, such as the Laban story, with these new tools, I find the book responding with truth and richness.’

Girard has focused on content, Frye on form. Girard has taught us a new ethic to look for at the heart of the Logos, mercy over justice; Frye has taught us a new way to get to that heart, pattern over reason. The Book of Mormon, if we will work to find it so, is a restored second witness to both the ethic and the pattern, to Christ as redeemer and to Christ as the Logos.

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So why did Nephi have to kill Laban? I still don't have a complete answer to that question, but that is not the essential question. With a shift of focus I have discovered a few answers to a question that really matters: What does this story teach me about the Savior? Destroying the Enemy. Prophets in the Book of Mormon repeatedly wrote of the necessity of the scriptures in remembering the covenants and thus walking the path of eternal life. By obtaining the plates, Nephi allowed his people the opportunity to gain eternal life. To an infinitely greater degree, Jesus' Atonement allows us to make those covenants and institutes the path to exaltation. He too shrank and begged for another way to accomplish His mission, but ultimately He knew there was no other way.