

## Mimic Jews and Jewish Mimics in Antiquity: A Non-Girardian Approach to Mimetic Rivalry

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Girard may have been on to something when he attempted to trace religious violence back to a struggle between mimetic rivals, but the resulting theory has been rightly criticized for its indifference to the particulars of historical context. With help from post-colonial scholarship, this paper aims to rethink the concept of mimicry as used by scholars of religion by situating an example from ancient Judaism, Josephus's description of the Samaritans as hostile doubles of the Jews, in the particular cultural environment in which this ancient historian wrote. The author hopes to contribute to our understanding of the Samaritans, and of Josephus as a slippery double in his own right, but the essay's real point is to caution against any generalizing approach to mimicry by stressing it as an adaptive behavior, a tactic, whose motives and workings are best understood within the particular cultural habitat to which the mimic is responding.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE, like violence in general, often targets victims deemed threatening because of their otherness, but it is also sometimes the case that victims, far from being alien, are very familiar, even similar to the perpetrator. One of the most influential explanations for this kind of conflict is that of René Girard. Girard famously argued that it was likeness, not otherness, that was the main precipitant of

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*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2009, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 922-940  
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfp054

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Advance Access publication on November 6, 2009

religious violence. Human behavior, he argued, is driven by an instinct to be like others; humans desire certain objects in the world not because of their own intrinsic value but because they see others desiring those objects too and mimic them (and are mimicked in return). The ensuing escalation of imitation and rivalry can endanger the rivals themselves but also the larger community if the doubles do not redirect their mutual antagonism. This, according to Girard, is how humans developed surrogate violent practices often labeled "sanctified violence"—animal sacrifice, scape-goating, the persecution of witches, Jews, and others—all arising in his view to deflect the destructiveness of mimetic rivalry away from the community toward a third-party surrogate conveniently unable to strike back.<sup>1</sup>

Does Girard's remain a viable interpretive model for understanding religious mimicry or has nearly three decades of criticism succeeded in discrediting his approach? A survey of scholarship leads to an ambiguous sense of Girard's potential relevance. In some corners of academia, he continues to inspire enthused devotion and emulation, as witnessed by the "Colloquium on Violence and Religion," a society that seeks to develop and apply Girard's theory of mimesis through annual conferences, a journal entitled *Contagion*, and an ongoing bibliography that has now reached 20 volumes. In other corners of academia, on the other hand, Girard's theory has been met with suspicion among scholars who find its claims over-reaching, reactionary, monolithic, and theologically objectionable. Of particular relevance for my argument here is a criticism articulated by the anthropologist Elizabeth Traube (1979), who argued that Girard's approach obliterates the cultural artifacts it purports to illumine by ripping them from the contexts in which they had meaning.

I confess to being a skeptic myself, but one puzzled by a problem left in the wake of this criticism: what is one to do with cases of mimetic rivalry that do seem to follow the pattern Girard detected? Are such cases simply to be ignored for fear of repeating Girard's mistakes, or is there another way to understand them that does not isolate them from the specific cultural and social contexts in which the scholar finds them embedded?

These are the questions this essay seeks to wrestle with as it reexamines what seems to be a fairly straightforward case of mimetic rivalry in the writing of the first-century Jewish historian Josephus and his

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Maud Gleason, Ra'anan Boustan, Bert Harrill, and the participants of the "Sanctified Violence" conference held at the University of Minnesota in October 2007 for their helpful and encouraging responses to earlier forms of this essay.

description of the Samaritans, a people settled in the northern part of the land of Israel. The Samaritans as Josephus depicts them are a race of mimics. Descendants of foreign peoples settled in the territory of the former northern kingdom of Israel, the Samaritans at first tried to join the Jews, seeking to participate in the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple, but the Jews rejected them. By Josephus's own day, they had developed into full-fledged doubles, building a temple "similar to that in Jerusalem" (*Ant.* 11.310) and (in Josephus's view, falsely) claiming descent from the Israelite tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh just as the Jews claimed descent from the tribe of Judah (11.341). The Samaritans' genesis as described by Josephus seems to exemplify the Girardian drama of mimetic rivalry—the Samaritans see what the Jews have; model themselves on them, and eventually become mimetic rivals, vying for the same identity claimed by the Jews. In fact, it seems all too clear a case; whereas Girard had to penetrate beneath the textual surface to detect mimetic rivalry, here it is depicted openly, without disguise or sublimation. Can one understand this case outside a Girardian framework? Can one reconstruct why Josephus is so explicit in articulating the rivalry, why it would appear on the surface of his narrative rather than remain hidden in its subtext? And does it enrich one's understanding of it to try to situate it within the specific historical context in which Josephus was operating as a writer?

We will not get very far in answering these questions by trying to investigate the Samaritans themselves. There is evidence apart from Josephus that Samaritan culture resembled Jewish culture—the Samaritan Pentateuch is a mirror image of the Jewish Torah, for example—albeit with minor differences. And if archaeologist Yitzhaq Magen is to be believed, the Samaritan temple on Gerizim, now excavated, may indeed have been modeled on the one in Jerusalem as Josephus claims, resembling the Temple plan as described in biblical sources (Magen 2002; Magen et al. 2004: 3–6). But whether such resemblances can be attributed to a mimicking of Jewish practice, or ought to be explained in another way, is a question that cannot be answered since, as is often the case in mimetic relationships, it is difficult to tell the copy from the original. Ancient Jewish sources—especially Josephus—cast the Samaritans as the imposters, but Samaritan sources insist that it is the Jews who are the mimics, and there are a few modern scholars (e.g., Nodet 1997: 12) who take their side in this dispute, arguing that Samaritanism is the more authentic survival of ancient Israelite culture.

More accessible than the historical Samaritans is Josephus's description of the Samaritans, and here I think we can make some progress in our quest to contextualize the mimetic rivalry he describes. Although

Josephus certainly has not lacked for scholarly attention over the last century, much of that interest has focused on writings like the *Antiquities* (Josephus's account of Jewish history from its beginning to the Roman period) as a source for ancient Jewish history, and it is only relatively recently that scholars have resituated his work in the cultural context in which it was actually composed, that of Rome under the Flavian emperors Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian (Goodman 1994; Mason 2003; Weitzman 2004; Edmundson et al. 2005; Sievers and Lembi 2005). In the light of their scholarship, it is becoming clear that, at least as an author, Josephus was something of a double of himself, mimicking the literary practices and social attitudes not just of the Greeks—a point long recognized—but of the Romans too. Recognizing Josephus as a mimic is the key to understanding his depiction of the Samaritans, I propose: there is a tacit mimetic struggle to be found in his writing beyond, or rather behind, the mimetic rivalry between the Jews and the Samaritans that the *Antiquities* records, a struggle between the mimic Josephus and his Roman models.

To make its argument, the following analysis will focus on two interrelated literary maneuvers in Josephus's account, not just to illumine his depiction of the Samaritans but to explore the role of mimicry in the construction of Josephus's own sense of identity as a Jew. As recent classical scholarship has helped to make clear, Roman culture of Josephus's day was preoccupied by mimicry of a sort, anxious to distinguish between the real and the fake, the authentic and the illusory at a time when the boundary between these had become difficult to recognize. Registering this anxiety, Josephus's narrative develops its own way of addressing it, and it is that response, an attempt to mimic the quality of authenticity, that I aim to tease out through the following reading.

### POLYMORPHOUS PERVERSITY

The first of these two maneuvers involves a somewhat paradoxical attempt to mimic a mimic—the flatterer as imagined in Greco-Roman culture. The flatterer was depicted by Greek and Roman authors as a shape-shifter, able to assume various guises as he sought to accommodate the tastes and interests of its victim. This figure received considerable attention from Greek and Roman writers in the late Republic/Early Empire—authors like Philodemus of Gadera, Plutarch and Maximus of Tyre, who developed the image of the flatterer as someone obsequious and very adaptable (Gadd 1996). In treatises like Plutarch's *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*, the flatterer appears as chameleon-like,

assuming whatever guise will make him agreeable to those he seeks to deceive:

The flatterer, since he has no abiding-place of character to dwell in, and since he leads a life not of his own choosing but another's, molding and adapting himself to suit another, is not simple, not one, but variable and many in one, and, like water that is poured into one receptacle after another, he is constantly on the move from place to place, and changes his shape to fit his receiver. (*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 52A-B)

Elsewhere Plutarch proposes an experiment to catch a flatterer in the act. Change your own opinions or preferences, he recommends—profess to like something that formerly offended you—and the flatterer will find some way to change accordingly (52F–53B). One of the things that flattery imitated was friendship, defined in Greco-Roman culture as a relationship of like-mindedness (cf. Cicero's definition of a friend in *On Friendship* 1.7 as a "second self"). A skillful flatterer would therefore align himself with the tastes and interests of his victim, and since one of the traits of a true friend was candor, he would even imitate sincerity itself, posing the very problem of how to tell a flatterer from a friend that motivated Plutarch to write his treatise in the first place.

In this as in so much else, the Romans mimicked the Greeks, and so the flatterer became a stock figure in Roman comedy and rhetoric as well (Damon 1997: 11–14). There the flatterer took on certain specifically Roman attributes but also retained many of the conventional characteristic he had in Greek literature, including his fickle, chameleon-like character: "I praise whatever they say," says one such figure in a play by Terrence, "if they turn around and say the opposite, I praise that too. If someone says no, I say no; if he says yes, I do too" (*The Eunuch* II. 251–252). Indeed, the figure of the flatterer—or the *parasitus* as such figures were known when the Greek *kolax* was translated into Latin—became even more of a preoccupation in the early imperial period as Roman elite culture was overrun by what classicist Anne Duncan (2006) has called "extreme mimesis"—the dissembling and role-playing characteristic of flattery.

Josephus draws on this stock figure in his portrait of the Samaritans, depicting them as self-serving shape shifters who switch their allegiance and their very identity to align themselves with the succession of rulers who conquer Palestine in the post-biblical period. There is no reason to think the historical Samaritans were any more prone to flattery than anyone else under Hellenistic-Roman rule. To the

contrary, there is both archaeological and literary evidence that the Samaritans, far from aligning themselves with rulers like Alexander the Great, may actually have rebelled against their Macedonian conquerors, and Josephus himself reports Samaritan uprisings during the Roman period as well. All this takes backstage in Josephus's narrative, however, which instead stresses the self-serving sycophancy, always shifting loyalties, and mutable identity of the Samaritans from the very first time they are introduced in book IX of the *Antiquities*: "they alter their attitude toward their circumstances. When they see the Jews prospering, they call them their kinsmen . . . but when they see the Jews in trouble, they say that they have nothing whatever in common with them nor do these have any claim of friendship or race, and they declare themselves to be aliens of another race" (290–291).

The paradigmatic example of Samaritan shape-shifting is Josephus's description of the Samaritans' encounter with Alexander the Great, a scene long recognized as a composite, heavily fictionalized account shaped by Josephus's larger agenda in the *Antiquities* (Cohen 1982–1983; Golan 1982). When Alexander the Great conquers Palestine, the Samaritan high priest initially supports the Persians, expecting them to win, but the moment it becomes clear that it is the Greeks who are more powerful, he and the Samaritans abandon Persia and offer their allegiance to Alexander instead:

Seeing that Alexander had so signally honored the Jews, (the Samaritans) decided to profess themselves Jews. For such is the nature of the Samaritans, as we have already shown somewhere above. When the Jews are in difficulties, they deny that they have any kinship with them, thereby indeed admitting the truth, but whenever they see some splendid good fortune come to them, they suddenly grasp at the connection with them, saying they are related to them and tracing their line back to Ephraim and Manasseh, the descendants of Joseph. (*Ant.* 11.340–341)

A few paragraphs later, after Alexander's visit to Jerusalem reveals how favorable he is to the Jews, the Samaritans adjust their identity not once but several times, first professing to be Jews, then when pressed by an apparently suspicious Alexander, claiming to be Hebrews who were called Sidonians of Shechem (343–344).

Beyond the Samaritans' side-switching, one can recognize in this account another motif often associated with the flatterer in Greco-Roman literature, the role of envy as a motivation for both the imitativeness of the flatterer and also his resentment of what he imitates.

The Greek and Roman understanding of envy was shaped by Aristotle who defined envy as a kind of pain felt when perceiving the prosperity of another who is similar to oneself (*Rhetoric* II. 1388a: 35–36). In an effort to secure that prosperity for themselves, the envious strive to imitate those they envy, but they fail for lack of ability or effort, and the resulting frustration breeds animosity, a desire to pull down those they once sought to imitate (Konstan and Rutter 2003). Plutarch, who tells his own story of how Alexander fell prey to flatterers in *How to Tell a Flatterer* 65c–d, assumes envy as one of the motives of the flatterer—“he is by nature envious” 65b—though the flatterer knows to conceal his true feelings from his superiors. In this Hellenistic understanding, envy is what underlies the Samaritans’ behavior in Josephus’s account: provoked to envy by the sight of the Jews’s good fortune (it is often the sight of good fortune that stirs envy), the Samaritans first try to refashion themselves as Jews in an effort to obtain the same benefits the latter enjoy, and when that effort fails, they seek to discredit the Jews.

Josephus’s portrait of Antiochus IV, the villainous Greek king who provoked the Maccabean revolt, allows him to illustrate the other side of the Samaritan’s shape-shifting flattery, the way they distanced themselves from the Jews when it no longer served them to claim that identity. Most of this section of the *Antiquities* draws on the account of the Maccabean Revolt in 1 Maccabees, paraphrasing its narrative fairly closely, but one of Josephus’s most substantial additions is yet another manifestation of Samaritan fickleness:

When the Samaritans saw the Jews suffering these misfortunes (Antiochus’ persecution), they would no longer admit that they were their kin or that the temple on Mount Gerezin was that of the Most Great God, thereby acting in accordance with the nature as we have shown; they also said they were colonists from the Medes and the Persians. (*Ant.* 12.257–258)

Plutarch compares flatterers to vermin who abandon the body of the dying as their blood loses its vitality: they throng and thrive in the presence of power, but when that is gone, they quickly slink away (*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend* 49D). That is how Josephus’s Samaritans behave; as soon as they perceive any danger in professing to be Jews, they slink away, adopting some other identity that will keep them in good favor with their rulers.

In both of these episodes, the Samaritans’ behavior stands in sharp contrast with that of the Jews in the same period. In the Alexander episode, the foil for Samaritan fickleness is the Jewish high priest who,

having taken an oath of loyalty to the Persian king, remains committed to him despite the danger of provoking Alexander until God directly orders him to submit to the Greeks (*Ant.* 11.325–328).<sup>2</sup> Josephus develops a similar contrast in his description of Antiochus’ persecution by prefacing his description of the Samaritans’ response with an account of Jewish steadfastness:

The worthiest people (among the Jews) and those of noble soul . . . held their country’s customs of greater account than the punishment with which he threatened them if they disobeyed; and being on that account maltreated daily, and enduring bitter torments, they met their death. Indeed, they were whipped, their bodies were mutilated, and while still alive and breathing, they were crucified, while their wives and the sons whom they had circumcised in despite of the king’s wishes were strangled, the children being made to hang from the necks of their crucified parents. (12.255–256)

In a similar vein, just after the Samaritan passage, Josephus returns to the Jews, introducing the Maccabees as people willing to sacrifice all for their religion. He introduces Mattathias, founder of the Maccabees, as a man who believed that “it was better for them to die for their country’s laws than to live so ingloriously” (12.265–267), and he follows this description with material that illustrates the Maccabees’s unwavering commitment to Jewish law (268–284). By interweaving such descriptions, much of it taken from or inspired by 1 Maccabees, with its description of the Samaritans’ shifting loyalties, the narrative establishes a clear contrast between the two peoples: the Samaritans repeatedly switch identities to suit their shifting interests whereas the Jews remain loyal to their ancestral identity even when doing so results in torture and death.

The difference between the Samaritans and the Jews in this episode corresponds exactly to the difference between the flatterer and the true friend. A true friend is not fickle; his attitudes are consistent and uniform because they are shaped by an unwavering commitment to the good, whereas a flatterer, always wishing to appear agreeable, is constantly adapting himself to the tastes of whoever he is trying to please. A flatterer might appear sincere, but he would never risk doing or

<sup>2</sup> Johnson (2004: 71–74) has recently shown how Josephus tampered with a strictly chronological presentation of events in this episode precisely in order to accentuate the contrast between the craven opportunism of the Samaritan leader and the steadfast loyalty of the Jewish high priest.

saying anything that might undercut his interests: "There is no fear that I may ever be thought guilty of flattering you," the orator Dio Chrysostom declares to his imperial audience, "because I did not flatter the hateful tyrant (Domitian) or utter a single ignoble or servile word, at a time when many were glad to save their lives by any deed or word at all" (*Oration* 3.12-13). What distinguishes Dio's praise of the emperor from flattery, what proves its sincerity, was the speaker's readiness to risk his life rather than betray the truth. A similarly uncompromising commitment to principle, a willingness to risk death rather than betray oneself, is the very trait that distinguishes Jews from Samaritans in Josephus's account. Even when it was fatal to observe Jewish law, Jews remained committed to it, whereas the Samaritans, like the flatterer, did whatever they thought would save their lives.

Writing of a different historical age, the post-colonialist theoretician Homi Bhabha has observed that the "final irony" of mimicry—by which he means the way in which colonized subjects ape the manners of their imperial masters—is the subject's desire to emerge as authentic through mimicry, to seem real through imitation (Bhabha 1994: 88). Something like that irony can be detected in Josephus, for the very trait by which he seeks to convey the authenticity of Jewish identity—his repeated emphasis of how willing the Jews were to die rather than betray their allegiance to God—seems itself to be an imitation of Roman culture in this period. As Carlin Barton has observed, "the Romans judged the weight of a person's words not against an abstract standard of truth but by how much was risked in speaking" (Barton 2001: 61-62). A speaker willing to die or suffer injury in order to guarantee his or her claims was believable; a speaker unwilling to risk anything, far less so. Among the examples Barton cites is the case of the centurion Julius Agrestis who, when the emperor Vitellius refused to believe his intelligence reports, decisively confirmed the truth of his words by slaying himself on the spot (Tacitus, *Historia* 3.54), and of Brutus' wife Portia who demonstrates her credibility to her husband by stabbing herself in the thigh (Plutarch, *Brutus* 13). For a Roman, a willingness to suffer pain—or even better, to give up everything altogether—was the ultimate validation of probity, proving that a speaker's words were not motivated by the self-interest or fear that spawned flattery.

What proves that the Jews are not imposters in Josephus's account is precisely this willingness to risk all. In *Against Apion*, a kind of sequel to the *Antiquities*, Josephus struggles to prove his own veracity as an historian against Greek critics who questioned whether the Jews were as ancient as they claimed, and his response illustrates the role of this motif as a guarantor of sincerity. Much of Josephus's argument

involves pointing out the discrepancies and errors in what his Greek critics claim, but that by itself does not prove that the Jews are who they say they are, and thus Josephus offers another proof of their identity, the most convincing proof from a Roman perspective: the Jews would sooner die than betray their allegiance to God and his laws.

It is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard (the Scriptures) as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and if need be, cheerfully to die for them. Time and again before now the sight has been witnessed of prisoners enduring tortures and death in every form in the theatres, rather than utter a single word against the laws and the allied documents. (*Against Apion* 1.42-43; emphasis mine)

This is in contrast to the Greek who would not endure the slightest injury even to save the entire collection of his nation's writings because he knows their falsehood (44-45). In the *Antiquities*, as we have seen, Josephus develops a similar distinction between the Jews and the Samaritans, and he does so, I am suggesting, to implicitly underscore the authenticity of the Jews: to show that what they claim about themselves is not self-serving imposture, in a way that would be particularly convincing to a Roman sensibility.

#### THE RESEMBLANCE OF THINGS PAST

The second mimetic maneuver at work in Josephus's description of the Samaritans is harder to demonstrate, but it is plausible if we can grant the Greek-writing Josephus a knowledge of Roman literature written in Latin. The salient passage is Josephus's description of the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim as a counterfeit cult modeled on the one in Jerusalem. In book 11 of the *Antiquities*, Josephus explains the origins of this temple: shortly before Alexander the Great conquered Palestine, a governor of Samaria named Sanballat had persuaded the disgruntled brother of the high priest in Jerusalem to defect to Samaria with the promise to build him a temple of his own "similar to that in Jerusalem" (*Ant.* 11.306-312). Alexander himself gave Sanballat the permission to build this temple, thus establishing the Samaritan cult on Mount Gerizim. Later, when describing the destruction of this temple by the Hasmoneans, Josephus repeats that the temple was "built after the model of the sanctuary in Jerusalem" (13.256). In other words, the Samaritan temple, like Samaritan identity itself, is an act of mimicry.

As we have noted, there may be something to Josephus's claim that the Gerizim sanctuary resembled that in Jerusalem. Even if that is the case, however, there is also evidence that Josephus's assertion of a

resemblance is a fictionalized motif: the historian's description of another rival temple in almost the same terms. Sometime in the mid-second century CE, a priest named Onias fled Jerusalem to Egypt where he secured royal permission to build a temple at Leontopolis on the site of a ruined Egyptian temple. There is just enough evidence from other sources to suggest a Jewish fortress did exist there, but inconsistencies in Josephus' two accounts—in the *Jewish War*, Josephus' account of the Jewish Revolt, the priest in question is Onias III whereas in the *Antiquities*, he is Onias IV—unsettles one's confidence in its details (Gruen 1997). What is important here is the story's resemblance to Josephus' description of the Samaritan temple, both temples are modeled on Jerusalem: "So Onias took over the place and built a temple and an altar similar to that at Jerusalem, but smaller and poorer" (*Ant.* 13.72). Josephus mentions this resemblance every time he refers to the Leontopolis temple (*J.W.* 1.33; *Ant.* 12.388; 13.285; 20.236), with one exception late in the *Jewish War* where for some reason he abruptly changes course and pointedly denies the resemblance (*J.W.* 7.427).

Why Josephus describes the two major rivals to the Jerusalem Temple in such similar terms is not clear, but there is reason to suspect that the two descriptions are themselves a mimicking of Roman literature, their model, the quintessential Roman text, Virgil's *Aeneid*. During the course of that work, in book 3.294–659, the hero Aeneas and his comrades meet two figures from their Trojan past: Helenus, a brother of Hector, and Andromache, Hector's widow, now married to Helenus—Trojan exiles like Aeneas who have settled in a newly formed colony at Buthrotum. Virgil makes Andromache into a nostalgia-obsessed figure bent on recovering her lost husband Hector by conjuring his ghost, and living in a city which is itself an attempt to simulate the city of Troy. In fact, as Aeneas approaches Buthrotum, it strikes him as a double of Troy, albeit on a diminished scale, not just a memorial but a mimetic reproduction of the original: "As I advance, I see a little Troy, a Pergamus that mimes the great one, and a dried up stream that takes its name from Xanthus (a river of Troy)." (*Procedo, et parvam Troiam simulataque magnis Pergama, et arentem Xanthi cognomine rivum adgnosco.*) The scene is the closest known parallel in ancient Roman and Greek literature to Josephus' description of the Samaritan and Leontopolis' temples, even mirroring in its description of Buthrotum as a "little Troy" the depiction of Leontopolis as "smaller" than Jerusalem.

Can we conclude from this parallel that Josephus has actually modeled his portrait of the Samaritans and Onias' temple directly on

Virgil? The question cannot be resolved definitely, though there is circumstantial evidence to support such a possibility. Josephus did have occasion to draw on Greek poetry (Chapman 2005), and Virgil, as the most influential Roman writer in the first century CE, was certainly in a position to influence Josephus' narrative as well (cf. Horbury 1999). His writings were widely disseminated—a line of the *Aeneid* was found at Masada of all places—and they soon penetrated popular imagination, as reflected, for example, in the etching of some twenty Virgilian quotations on the walls of the city of Pompey (Palmer-Bonz 2000: 61–86). In Josephus' day, Virgil had many imitators in the Flavian period, and scholars have even detected the echo of Virgilian phrases here and there in Josephus' writing.<sup>3</sup> All this recommends Virgil as a possible literary model for Josephus, but it has to be acknowledged that the evidence is lacking to definitively prove such influence: we do not know whether Josephus could even read Latin, and though Virgil was eventually translated into Greek, a language Josephus knew, there is no attestations of such translations in the first century.

My intention here, however, is not to argue for this scene as a direct prototype for Josephus' description of the Samaritan temple, but to use it to reconstruct its possible resonance for Roman readers, and the cultural posture to which it might have been aligned. Of particular relevance is the episode's suggestion that Virgil was being tacitly critical of simulation, mimicking the appearance of an ancient people, as a cultural tactic. Although the inhabitants of Buthrotum have succeeded in imitating many of the qualities of Troy, Maurizio Bettini (1997) has observed, there is something deficient in the copy they have produced: their Troy is smaller than the original, its river dried up. Buthrotum gives narrative form to one possible way of connecting oneself to the past, reviving it through imitation, but it is a strategy that seems to fall short somehow, and it stands in contrast with another, more successful tactic that the poet seems to favor, the one that connects Aeneas himself to his Trojan past. Aeneas too seeks to preserve his Trojan identity, but he succeeds in doing so not by imitating it but by salvaging a physical remnant of Troy, a direct and tangible connection to his ancestral tradition—the *Penates* or household gods of Troy entrusted to Aeneas by the ghost of Hector.

The contrast Virgil develops here implies something about Rome's relationship to the past. In the very act of writing the *Aeneid*, a poem

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Marcus, the translator of the Loeb edition of Josephus, detects the influence of *Aeneid* 4.173–190 on *J.W.* 3.433ff.

modeled on Homeric epic, Virgil illustrates the role of mimesis, of imitation, in the construction of Rome's identity as heir to the ancient mythological traditions of Greece. But Virgil's description of Buthrotum suggests he was not completely satisfied with an identity rooted in simulation and resemblance. As Tim Whitmarsh (2001: 47) has observed of Greek literature written under Roman rule in the second century CE, imitation (in this case, imitation of ancient literary predecessors) served to establish a relationship between the present and the past, but it also provoked an awareness of difference, of discontinuity, of fakeness. Virgil's description of Buthrotum as a diminutive, lifeless copy of Troy, one that reproduces its appearance but not its substance or scale or vitality, seems to register that awareness of the discontinuity built into imitation, but his poem also implies that Rome itself had found a way to overcome this problem, establishing itself as a truly seamless continuation of Troy not by mimicking its appearance but by incorporating a physical vestige of it, a direct link to the past, in the form of cult objects transported by Aeneas from Troy to Italy, the Penates safeguarded during Virgil's day in the Roman temple of Vesta.

The difference between the two tactics at work here—an identity rooted in the imitation of the past versus one directly connected to the past through the incorporation of a physical remnant—happens to correspond to the difference between the Samaritans and the Jews as Josephus describes them. The Samaritans embody the same tactic reflected in Virgil's account of Buthrotum; their connection to Israelite tradition is based on resemblance, a temple "similar to the one in Jerusalem," but as Josephus clearly implies, it is a fake, not an authentic continuation of the Mosaic cult but a counterfeit. Josephus does relate one episode in which the Samaritans seek to recover a physical vestige of their past by ascending Mount Gerizim in search of sacred vessels hidden there by Moses, but the effort fails, forcibly obstructed by the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate who prevents the Samaritans from ascending the mountain (*Ant.* 18.85–87). No physical link connects the Samaritans to the ancient Israelites from whom they claim descent, and that lack of a connection, Josephus implies, is yet more proof of their inauthenticity.

In contrast, the Jews have a far more tangible link to the past, the direct connection established by various relics preserved from biblical times. Following his biblical sources, Josephus acknowledges that the Jews had lost their original Temple and that much of its contents had been plundered by Nebuchadnezzar, Antiochus IV, and other rulers, but some of its vessels survive, a tangible vestige of the original Temple that establishes the Second Temple as an authentic continuation of its

cult. Here and there, moreover, Josephus makes a point of mentioning other remnants of the biblical past that have survived into his own day: the priestly crown on which Moses had inscribed God's name (8.93); and the tomb of David and Solomon (16.179–183). The role of these relics in Josephus's larger effort to establish the antiquity of the Jews is, I would argue, akin to the Penates' role in the *Aeneid*; they underscore Jewish authenticity by physically linking the Jews to their Israelite ancestors.

Without being able to prove Virgilian influence, my point in drawing this connection is to suggest the possibility that Josephus's description of the Jewish/Samaritan contrast may mimic how the Romans saw themselves in relation to other peoples claiming a similar Trojan identity. What connects Aeneas and his Roman descendants to Troy, and what therefore renders Rome a more authentic continuation of that culture than other communities claiming a similar pedigree, is their preservation of sacred relics, tangible remnants from the Trojan past. This is precisely the kind of direct link to the past that authenticates Jewish identity in Josephus's account, in marked contrast to the ersatz identity of the Samaritans based on simulation. Reading Josephus's account in the light of the *Aeneid*—not an implausible intertext in this period even if Josephus's familiarity with it is impossible to demonstrate—the Roman reader was in a position to potentially recognize in the Samaritans' cult the same kind of simulated, illusory identity rejected by their ancestor Aeneas, and to find in the Jews a kindred tradition, a similarly authentic culture connected to the past in the same demonstrable way that their own culture was.

If there is merit to what I have been arguing here, mimicry plays a double role in the construction of Josephus's narrative as one of the techniques by which it is composed *and* as something the narrative must conceal about itself for its author and his people to seem authentic. Like the Samaritans as he describes them, Josephus's self-image, the way he depicts his people to his audience, is constructed from a kind of mimicry, imitating the literary behavior of his Roman masters. But paradoxically, Josephus engages in this mimicry precisely to disguise its role in his narrative. The Greco-Roman tropes he imitates all have to do with how to tell the difference between the real and the ersatz imitation—between the model and those who envy it, between the truth-teller and the shape-shifting flatterer, and between those really connected to the past and those who merely simulate that connection. Josephus mimics these rhetorical traditions, I am suggesting, to deflect the suspicion that he and his people were themselves mimics, aligning the Samaritans with what his Hellenized Roman audience would have



regarded as deceptively self-serving behavior as a way of diverting attention from the role of imitation and imposture in the construction of his own identity and narrative.

### CONCLUSION: RESTORING MIMICRY TO ITS NATIVE HABITAT

Where Girard may be able to help us to deepen our understanding of things is in his insight that this kind of mimicry is a vexed relationship, an act fraught with anxiety and potential danger. Model and mimic threaten each other not only because they are vying for the same object, but because each threatens the other's identity, calling the other's authenticity into question. Nowhere does Josephus express such anxiety directly but Girard's approach invites us to read between the lines, and there, precisely in his description of the Samaritans, are hints of an author anxious to demonstrate his authenticity, seeking to prove to his audience that he is *not* a mimic. While I doubt I would have been able to detect such a possibility without the inspiration of Girard, however, it is also clear that his approach cannot do justice to the particulars of the mimicry at work here. The mimetic rivalry described by Josephus, the struggle between the Jews and the Samaritans, actually conceals another mimetic struggle that underlies the text, one in which the Samaritans are not doubles but decoys devised by Josephus to deflect the suspicion of mimicry away from his narrative onto another external target.

The point of this analysis is not to argue that we need yet another grand theory of mimicry to displace Girard, much less to propose one myself. The reader familiar with what post-colonialist scholarship has said about mimicry will recognize the influence of Homi Bhabha's notion of the "mimic man" on what I have argued here (Bhabha 1994)—the African, Indian, or Caribbean subject of modern colonial rule who partially reproduces the customs, religion, and race of his masters—but that model too can mislead if we overgeneralize and overextend it, for as Roger Bagnall (1997) has argued for Hellenized Egypt, modern colonialism is an imperfect analogue for understanding the relationship between subjects and rulers in an ancient context. Bhabha's "mimic man" allows certain insights into mimicry probably unreachable from within a Girardian framework, but it too cannot fully illumine the distinctive mimetic drama that unfolds between the lines of Josephus's writing. If what I have argued here is correct, one needs to understand something of the particular cultural environment in which Josephus was operating—the mimetic anxieties and resources peculiar to Flavian

period Rome—to grasp what it was that Josephus was trying to imitate (the notion of authenticity) and how the figure of the mimic within his narrative, the Samaritans, fits into this strategy.

But why is context so important for understanding mimicry? My answer to this question is drawn from the workings of mimicry in nature. It is humbling to read the scientific literature (e.g., Dautenhahn and Nehaniv 2002) which suggests, among other lessons, that Girard's effort to draw on the natural world as an analogue for human mimicry (cf. Girard 1977: 147) involved a gross simplification of a much more complex reality (apes, it seems, may not "ape" in the way people have long thought, nor parrots "parrot"). Even so, I would nonetheless venture to draw one lesson from the natural world. There is an astonishing number of mimetic tactics out there in the world around us, including Batesian mimicry, aggressive mimicry, Bakerian mimicry, Vavilovian mimicry, even auto-mimicry (when one part of an organism mimics another part), among many other mimetic tactics. The evolution of these tactics can only be understood in context, in relation to the particular habitat in which the mimic operates and the predators, perils, and resources to be found in the environment. The same holds true for cultural mimicry, I am arguing, which is not to suggest that all of the two dozen or so mimetic strategies identified by biologists has an equivalent in cultural practice but to observe that, when viewed in the light of the wide range of mimetic options found in the natural world, the few concepts of mimicry available to those seeking to understand culture and religion appear greatly overgeneralized and contextually detached.

Girard, Bhabha, and their respective followers may seem to have exhausted the subject of mimicry, but if biological mimicry is any guide to what the possibilities are, new insights may yet await those willing to recognize that the term "mimicry" encompasses a wide and varied range of cultural strategies developed in response to the opportunities and threats of particular historical habitats.

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REVIEW ESSAY

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*Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, December 2009, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 941-960  
doi:10.1093/jaarel/lfp066

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Advance Access publication on November 3, 2009