

Saul, David, and Mimetic Desire: A Girardian Reading of 1 Samuel 18-19

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This essay is a revised version of the presentation I delivered during the *Colloquium on Violence and Religion* held in Saint Louis University on July 8th-12th, 2015. This essay aims at scrutinizing the interpersonal relationship between Saul and David in the first book of Samuel 18-19. I understand that, alongside the two characters' uncomfortable coexistence characterized by the theological rejection on Saul, this story alludes to the intricate human relationships that shape the tension between two characters. In order to delve into the basis of these intricate relationships, I will use Rene Girard's mimesis theory as a hermeneutical lens in this project.

1. King Saul and the Rise of Mimetic Desire

As a king, Saul has a unique and powerful status that sufficiently *differentiates* him from others in the first book of Samuel. In the Girardian perspective, Saul's steady kingship represents a stable social order, the well differentiated state.¹ The intact function of a king as a source of *differentiation* is a crucial element that makes Saul's initial relationship with David stable (16:14-18:5). There exists an obvious *power imbalance* between Saul and David, so that none of them falls into any other relationship than that of a king and a servant.

For Saul, however, it seems that power does not truly come from his status alone. Saul's obsessive concern for gaining people's minds² (13:11-12; 15:24) signals that, he believes, the true power comes from the people. This belief seems to be revealed in his reaction to the song which was sung by the women in 18:7: "Saul has killed his thousands, and David killed his ten thousands." This song, which evidently reflects people's mind preoccupied by David's astounding victory over Goliath, raises an emotion of anger in Saul's mind. And Saul begins to eye David from this moment on (18:9).

The narrative presents well Saul's anxiety, the driving force that leads the relationship of the two. However, it does not go on to reveal the root of Saul's anxiety. Why does a king whose status has been impregnable have to be so sensitive to a single phrase of a song? Does his anxiety reflect a growing support of people for David or Saul's ongoing madness caused by an evil spirit (16:14; 18:10; 19:9)?³

¹ Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. by James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 107-108.

² James G. Williams rightly points out that "Saul was certainly concerned about everyone running away from him, about loss of popular support" when the people were scattering at Gilgal (13:8). James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (New York: HarperSanfrancisco, 1991), 134.

³ Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 162.

A Girardian reading allows us to understand that Saul's anxiety set up by the women's song is deeply rooted in a mimetic desire. The obvious object that Saul desires is power, or, more correctly, to gain people's minds. It seems that the desire to maintain power or gain people's minds has already existed in Saul's consciousness, but it is drastically intensified by the appearance of a rival.⁴ It is David, who is praised in the women's song, who provides Saul with a desire to be imitated. Saul's anxiety, in this sense, reflects his craving for being the likeness of David who is exalted by his people.

2. Complication: Saul's Kingship as a Differentiating Power

The intact function of a king as a source of *differentiation* complicates Saul's mimetic relationship to David. There is an unbridgeable status separation between Saul and others, including David. Saul's mark as the Lord's anointed one (10:1; 24:6; 26:9) symbolizes the ultimate effect of *differentiation* that Saul's kingship carries.

For this reason, Saul's people are a strategically important point that mediates his desire with David's desire (18:7, 16).⁵ Although David cannot be mimetically related to Saul on account of the differentiating power of Saul's kingship, the people as a mediator transmit the *imaginary David*, who desires the same power that Saul desires, to Saul so that Saul imitates David's desire. It is not the actual David but the *David reflected in people's praise* who becomes a rival/model for Saul. This idea implies that Saul's anxiety caused by the women's song reflects neither his narrow-mindedness nor ongoing madness, but signifies the powerful influence of mimetic desire on human relationships.

3. Saul and *Imaginary David*

Saul is mimetically related to the *imaginary David* in the sphere of his own consciousness, where he is not separated from David by "space, time, or social/spiritual distance."⁶ Saul's speech in 18: 8 alludes to the fact that his desire is reciprocally mediated by David's: they have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom? (18:8). It seems that, in the sphere of Saul's consciousness, David keeps signaling to Saul to 'imitate' his own desire for power or the people's mind, but, at the same time, giving 'a warning sign,' 'do not imitate me,' in order to keep his place. For Saul, this "contradictory double-imperative"⁷ draws him into mimetic relationship and, simultaneously, becomes a sign to threaten his kingship. David becomes the model-obstacle for Saul.⁸

The tension created from this relationship becomes externalized in the form of violence. On the next day, when Saul heard the women's song, he throws a spear toward David. The narrator attributes Saul's violent action to the work of the evil spirit from God (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים רָעָה, 18:10), so that Saul is colored by insanity. Mimetically understood,

⁴ Girard understands that a dead desire becomes alive and intensified in mimetic rivalry. In the story of Saul and David, it is David who intensifies Saul's existing desire. Rene Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. by James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 10.

⁵ They were his mimetic mirror of power. James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence*, 136.

⁶ Chris Fleming, *Rene Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008), 18.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

however, Saul's violence is the outcome of the mimetic relationship. The evil spirit symbolizes the *drastic escalation of mimetic rivalry*.⁹

However, even though Saul is caught in rivalry with David in his consciousness, Saul attempts to *disguise* this rivalry as if David's astounding achievements do not bring about any anxiety on the part of Saul, by giving David over a thousand men with whom he makes great success in the battle (18:13-14). A king in rivalry with a servant in this narrative would mean his loss of power, respect, and dignity. An interesting observation from this narrative is that there is no conversation of Saul with David until Saul meets David at the cave (24:16-21; 26:21, 25).¹⁰ Saul wittingly creates a gap between himself and David, which I think reveals his shrewdness in maintaining power.

Saul's shrewd disguise, however, does not completely conceal the violence developing in his mimetic relationship with David. Saul continuously attempts to remove David. And the exposed violence in his attempts counteracts his efforts to keep his kingship: the violence without a specific reason¹¹ labels him with *insanity*, which is marked by the "evil spirit (18:10; 19:9)". Obviously, the label, insanity, is not an appropriate description for a generous and powerful king.

4. Real David with Saul

David stands as a desire provider, model, and rival of Saul. In the sphere of Saul's consciousness, David initiates and develops the mimetic relationship. However, it is not clear as to whether David himself is mimetically related with Saul. Neither the narrator nor David's speech clarifies if David also desires to have power over the people's mind. All we can see is a submissive and passive manner with which David reacts to Saul's violence and hidden plots. When Saul throws a spear, David simply avoids it without any emotional or physical response to it (18:10-11). When Saul suggests bringing Philistines' foreskins as a marriage contract with his daughter, he accepts and brings twice amount of foreskins that were asked for (18:25-27). In addition, there is not a single hint that David brags about his victories and achievements. David's inward voice is veiled.

Due to the narrator's veiling of David's inner world, the readers of this story cannot clearly grasp whether David himself is mimetically involved with Saul. I suggest that David's submissive and passive actions, the markers that are left out to the readers, are enough to be taken as a sign that his relationship with Saul is not quite mimetic. It is plausible to think that David may have felt Saul's rivalry or, at least, Saul's uncomfortable sense toward him, because Saul's shrewd disguise does not conceal the violence grown out of his mimetic desire toward David. However, although "mimetic rivalry tends toward reciprocity,"¹² David does not respond with the same sorts of violent reactions that Saul showed to him. When chances fall into David's hand, he does not utilize them as does Saul. He does not appropriate people's growing support for him in a political way to overturn Saul's kingship (18:5, 16, 30). Later, when a decisive moment

⁹ As for the escalating rivalry, see *Ibid.*, 19, 22.

¹⁰ This encounter is also made privately, so that no one knows Saul's rivalry with David.

¹¹ Saul's shrewd disguise may hide justifiable reasons for his violence toward David from his people. Indeed, Jonathan later points out the injustice of Saul's violence, calling David as an innocent person (19:5).

¹² Rene Girard, *The Girard Reader*, 12.

to take Saul's life comes to David, he chooses to release him (24:6; 26:9). David rejects becoming a mimetic double with Saul, distancing himself from the way Saul has followed in order to gain power. Even though we assume that David conceals his long-term plan to get the throne of Israel,¹³ the external evidences for David signal his refusal of mimetic involvement with Saul. Whether or not David wittingly intends such an acquittal is veiled, but David's submissive and passive actions can be seen as a *mimesis breaker*.¹⁴

The narrative shows that, despite David's non-mimetic reciprocal reactions, he is still trapped in the mimetic relationship. His reactions do not restrain Saul's incessant fury to kill David (19:9-10, 19-23). Mimetic escalation in the sphere of Saul's consciousness grows until Saul himself falls out of the unending mimetic reciprocity through his death on the battlefield.

5. Conclusion

The mimetic relationship discussed in this presentation includes three participants, Saul, David, and the people in a collective sense. Due to Saul's mark as the Lord's anointed and his shrewd disguise to maintain his kingship, the mimetic nature in Saul's relationship with David is concealed in this story. In fact, Saul's mimetic relationship with David is hidden within the sphere of Saul's consciousness.

Saul's people function as a mediator who transmit a desire to be imitated toward him. In the sphere of Saul's consciousness, the women's praising David's achievements transforms into an invitation to the mimetic rivalry sharing a desire to obtain power as its object. Saul gets involved in the mimetic relationship with an imaginary David.

The narrative implies that the mimetic relationship so intensely binds Saul and David together that none of them can get out of the impact generated by this relationship. Saul's disguise to conceal his rivalry with David and to maintain the differentiating power of kingship is inverted into a threat, labeling him with insanity. His disguise does not completely cover the violence emerging from his mimetic relationship with David. Likewise, David cannot stop the mimetic escalations growing on the part of Saul. David's non-mimetic reciprocal reactions could not restrain or even delay Saul's fury developing out of his mimetic relationship with David.

Girard's mimesis theory casts light on the relationship of Saul with David. With this theory, we may reach at the deeper level of human relationships that this narrative does not clearly explicate. In Girardian perspective, this story alludes to the *ones who are trapped in the inescapable influence of mimetic desire*. Neither the one who conceals it nor the one who rejects or ignores it can restrain the persistent progression of mimetic escalation.

¹³ Jonathan Kirsch, *King David* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 66.

¹⁴ I understand that David's refusal is closely associated with his relationship with God who is able to drag David out of his mimetic involvement with Saul. We may glimpse at David's reliance on the power of God, when David refuses to take revenge on Saul, "May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you; my hand shall not be against you (24:12)." The discussion on David's relationship with God, however, may need another large discourse, which this paper does not go on to deal with due to the range of the current research.