

The Mormon Review

Books and culture from an LDS Perspective



From Kolob to Kobol

Glen A. Larson, et al, *Battlestar Galactica* (ABC, 1978)

Ron Moore, et al, *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi Channel, 2003-2009)

By James Bennett

A telltale sign that the day's lesson will be doctrinally suspect is when the instructor begins, as one did at the University of Utah Institute in the fall of 1989, with the bald assertion that the lost tribes of Israel are "not on this earth." But what makes for lousy CES instruction can be the stuff of great television, at least in theory. In practice, the TV show was *Battlestar Galactica*, and the greatness thereof depends entirely on your point of view.

The series debuted on September 11, 1978, hot on the heels of *Star Wars* mania, and critics were quick to dismiss this new space opera as a pale imitation of George Lucas's original, which prompted Lucas himself to bring suit against the producers of the series for copyright infringement. He lost, but that doesn't mean *Galactica* wasn't lifting a good chunk of its material from other sources.

Consider the show's premise, created by a Latter-day Saint: The human race, descended from the Lords of Kobol, is divided into twelve tribes, led by a Quorum of the Twelve, in search of the lost thirteenth tribe which settled "a shining planet known as Earth."

These people don't get married; they are "sealed for all the eternities." Along their journey, they meet a race of glowing, angelic super beings. "As you are, we once were," they tell the show's heroes. "As we are, you may become."

Plus there are lots of killer robots and things that blow up. (Which, come to think of it, would have made the initial institute class much more interesting.)

As space opera goes, the show holds up better than its critics would have you believe. The special effects work was as good or better than anything on the big screen at the time. Even today, the practical models used look more realistic than much of the computer-generated stuff that modern audiences have come to expect. The problem was that much of the footage was recycled to save cash, so that later in the series, every ship that is shot down explodes in exactly the same manner as all previous explosions.

As far as pulp television goes, the show is a lot of fun. The cast is led by a sturdy, post-*Bonanza* Lorne Greene, and the performances hold up well, even if the 1970s hairstyles do not. Some of the episodes are outstanding, notably the pilot, the ones with the Lorenzo Snow-quoting angels, and a two-parter with Lloyd Bridges as an interstellar Captain Ahab. Some are mediocre, and some, like the one with Oz scarecrow Ray

Bolger as an alien robot doing a soft shoe number, are just plain awful. But overall, its track record is impressive, and the show has a resonance it doesn't earn, due largely to its theological underpinnings.

Theologically, of course, the show is embarrassing, due to its tendency to sensationalize and

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distort LDS doctrines that are easily sensationalized and distorted. Years later, when *The Godmakers* presented the “Mormon Jesus” beaming down from “Starbase Kolob,” you could see *Galactica* as the likely source material. Producer Glen A. Larson, himself a Latter-day Saint, had no problem with borrowing LDS concepts and giving them a scientological spin.

Yet, in large part, this is why the show, which was ignominiously cancelled after a single season, still survives in the public memory. The show was overtly religious, and, like few television presentations before or since, treated matters of faith with genuine respect. In addition, the show was politically conservative. It depicted a military with more common sense than the weak, pacifist leader that ultimately doomed the human race to destruction. Like *Star Trek* before it, *Galactica* used a fantastic, surreal backdrop to wrestle with some heady philosophical issues. Yet unlike *Star Trek*, *Galactica* came out siding with the sacred, not the secular.

There has been no other series like it, before or since. That includes the second series titled *Battlestar Galactica*, which debuted in 2003.

The new *Battlestar Galactica*, reimagined from the old, was built on a foundation of contempt for what had gone before.

Ron Moore, the new producer, wrote a treatise about the new show claiming that it would essentially redefine the nature of televised science fiction. Where the old show was bright, fun, and optimistic, this show would be dark, gritty, and filled with in-your-face despair. As the show unfolded, you could almost

smell the reflexive disdain for its source material in the comments of those who followed its hype but not its story. It’s impossible to read an overview of Moore’s series without a ritualistic genuflection to the idea that the original series was hokey and trite and silly and filled with all manner of limburger. So even when the new show fell woefully short, which it did often, apologists took cover behind Dirk Benedict’s dated hairstyle. At least the new show didn’t have the cornball clothes! Or the goofy backdrops! Or Lords of Kobol!

Oh, wait...

See, the dirty secret was that much of the original show’s basic mythology actually did survive into the new incarnation. And when the new show shined – and it did, on occasion, have its moments – it was following in the footsteps of its predecessor. Unfortunately, it always refused to acknowledge that that was what it was doing. It showed a military that was oppressive and corrupt, led by leaders who sounded an awful lot like George W. Bush. They showed an Iraq-like occupation perpetrated by the killer robots, with the noble humans leading a righteous insurgency. Religion was for the dumb and the demented.

The producers were demonstrably embarrassed by where they had come from. They were ever lamenting the fact that they were forced to labor under the leaden weight of the cheesy title *Battlestar Galactica*, which was holding them back.

That last is a provably false assertion.

The only information people who tuned in to watch the initial miniseries had was that the show was named *Battlestar Galactica*.

That was a name with a history and not-insignificant brand equity. So the miniseries was a ratings smash. Yet when the show went to series, it lost a third of that original audience.

So who were the people who abandoned this show after the miniseries?

Wouldn’t it make sense to assume that a good chunk of them were people who liked *Battlestar Galactica* but recognized that this series bore scant resemblance to its namesake? As the show wore on, the ratings steadily eroded to the point where first run episodes were lower-rated than syndicated *Star Trek: Enterprise* reruns. Based solely on the ratings data, the show should have been cancelled after the second season, yet it endured. Why? Because the network and the producers and the intelligentsia were proud of it. They were proud of the audience they were alienating. The rubes and hicks that couldn’t see how nihilistic gloom was infinitely more sophisticated than the heroic optimism of the original series weren’t welcome. The new show mocked their religion, their politics, their morality, and wallowed in the despair that marks the absence of the things they hold dear.

The irony was that, in the end, God did it all.

Ron Moore began the series without having any understanding of where he was going. Consequently, he spent four seasons digging himself into so many deep plot holes that the only way to dig himself out was to provide the ultimate Deus ex Machina – it turns out that everything was being orchestrated by an unseen and unexplained deity figure, a god who, it turns

out, “doesn’t like to be called that.” It was a cheap, shoddy end to a sour, miasmatic series.

The word on the street now is that original series producer, Glen A. Larson, is attempting to bring the classic version of *Galactica* to the big screen. Will Mormons find it embarrassing? Probably. But if

it manages to restore the basic principles that made the first show so endearing, it’ll be worth watching.

At the very least, it will give institute teachers something else to talk about.

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