
KATEKŌMEN

*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without
wavering. — Hebrews 10:4*

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“SCIENCE FICTION, ENTERTAINMENT, AND THE WARRANT FOR BELIEF: AN EXERCISE IN POPULAR APOLOGETICS”

By Ryan M. McGraw

Entertainment is never neutral. Human beings cannot set their hands to any task without communicating something of the world and life view that serves as the underpinning for their entire way of thought and life. This is not always a conscious process, but whether intentionally or not, the television and entertainment industries are inundating their audiences with a world and life view that, at its best, undermines and, at its worst, is openly hostile to the world and life view presented in the Scriptures. I do not pretend to be naïve enough to assume that all Christian families adequately reject the pressure to immerse themselves in popular entertainment. What concerns me deeply (even beyond this sad reality) is that popular entertainment has a tendency to indoctrinate many professed believers with challenges to the biblical world and life view that they are not equipped to deal with.¹

A POPULAR SCENARIO

As a case in point, consider the theme of the last two seasons of the popular science fiction show, “Stargate.” This show was so popular that it went through ten seasons and it has spawned two daughter programs. In the last two seasons of “Stargate,” the team of heroes faces a new group of enemies. These new enemies possess unspeakable power that can hardly be resisted, and they demand that all human beings worship them. In exchange, devout followers or “believers” are promised “ascension” to a higher plane of existence (which in the story amounts to a form of deification), while all unbelievers must be destroyed (ie, annihilated). In order to back their claims, these new enemies (who, by the way, are incorporeal or purely spiritual beings) send “missionaries” to perform “miracles” as proof of the power of their “gods” and as sufficient grounds to warrant belief in them and submission to their power and authority. These beings not only claim to have been responsible for the creation of humanity, but the “good guys” in the story accept this claim as an undisputed fact. As it turns out, these powerful beings were once human themselves, but through a process of evolution combined with human ingenuity and the powers latent within the human brain itself, they ascended to become the powerful god-like figures that they are. The heroes of the show, never once doubting the power or superiority of these ascended beings, boldly respond to their evidences and demands by asserting that miracles, displays of unimaginable power, and being the creators of other beings does not give

anyone the right to demand that the will of those whom they have created should bow down to them. On a popular level, this is the scientific community's way of saying to Christians (and to any other religions that they *mistakenly* place in the same category with Christianity): "Let's say that that your that God is the Creator of all, and that the miracles that he has done to prove his claims are true. So what?"²

Several assertions are implied in this story: 1. Gods gain their powers from their worshipers. If there is a "god," he is the creation of man and his power is only as great as the number of people that worship him. The show assumes that there is no such thing as a "god" unless he is given his powers by man or is in fact a projection of man himself. 2. All miracles can be explained in terms of either technological advancements or the innate power of the untapped resources of the human mind. The result is that all people without exception have the potential to possess the "power" of the "gods." 3. The status of creator demands some degree of respect, but being the creator of a people is not sufficient to demand worship, devotion, and service from them. The reason is that gods of this kind are altogether the same as those whom they have created. There is no Creator-creature distinction, and in due time, the creatures shall themselves become creators. Is it any wonder that the apostle Paul describes fallen human beings as worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever (Rom. 1:25)?

How is any of this relevant to the beliefs of contemporary society at large? After all, is it not merely science fiction? Interestingly, the plot of the show simultaneously serves as a polemic for *atheistic science* as well as the modern attraction to *mystic religions* that are currently in vogue. The point of commonality is that both atheistic science and mystical religion (such as the New Age religion) offer deification for man. According the world-view of "Stargate," if there are any "gods," man is entirely autonomous, his will is bound by no one, and the possibilities of what he is able to achieve are limitless. Mankind is not bound by omnipotence or humbled by omniscience, but rather through his limitless capacity for evolution and self-improvement, man *achieves* omnipotence and omniscience: it is simply a matter of enough time and effort.

SOME QUESTIONS

The scenario presented above is not original to "Stargate," but its basic philosophical underpinnings lie at the heart of every expression of the non-Christian world-view. In light of this, if a Christian watches a program such as this one, he or she is forced to come to terms with the question: "What grounds are sufficient to warrant belief and to demand worship and submission to divine authority?" "Stargate" has provided an answer to this question that represents the most genuine expression of the principle of autonomy that lies in the heart of fallen man: "The *are no* sufficient grounds to warrant belief and to demand worship and submission to divine authority." How should the Christian respond to this challenge?

The proper answer to this question can be summarized by considering separately the role of miracles in substantiating the biblical world-view, and the rights possessed by God as our Creator. First, are genuine miracles sufficient to warrant belief in the God of Scripture and submission to his authority? Not necessarily. The *miracles* of Christianity must never be separated from the *message* of Christianity. When Philip arrived in Samaria, Simon Magus had gained the ear of the people by awing them through his magic arts. "And they heeded him because he had astonished them with his sorceries for a long time" (Acts 8:11). Simon

Magus could easily have posed as one of the representatives of the powerful beings from the narrative in "Stargate." Philip came with his own miracles and even Simon was amazed when he saw them (v. 13). However, what drew the Samaritans away from Simon to the Gospel of Jesus Christ was not a contest as to whose miracles were better, "But," we are told, "when they believed Philip *as he preached the things concerning the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*, both men and women were baptized" (v. 12). As important as miracles were in substantiating the message of the Gospel (Heb. 2:1-3), the miracles of the Bible can never substantiate anything if they are detached from the content of the message that they were designed to substantiate. In a similar connection, Jesus himself depicted Abraham as telling the rich man in hell that if his brothers did not *first* believe Moses and the prophets, then they would not believe even if they saw someone raised from the dead (Lk. 16:29-31). This is closely tied to the second question with regard to the rights possessed by God as the Creator of all.

Second, if Christians prove that there is a god ("a god," not the God) that created the universe, is this a sufficient ground to demand submission to his authority? Again, not necessarily. You may immediately object: "Do not the Scriptures call us to worship and bow down before the Lord *because* he is our Maker (Ps. 95:6; 100:3)?" This is true, but we must never dissociate the fact of creation with the character of the Creator. In other words, it is vital to ask what *kind* of Creator we are talking about. If the creator is himself a creature (as in "Stargate"), then the authority and respect that he deserves is necessarily limited. In a sense, every human father is partly responsible for the existence of his children, yet who would conclude from this that every human father has the right to worship and to unquestioning obedience from his children, merely because he is the source of their life? The fact that he is a father demands a measure of respect, honor, and even admiration. Even in this case, however, if the God of Scripture did not exist, the question should be asked why children should honor their parents at all, even if they are partly responsible for the existence of those children? Who says that those who "create" life deserve honor from their "creators" if there is no greater authority than "common sense" and human reason to say so?

The only message that is able to bind mankind with full and absolute authority and to warrant unwavering belief is the message that comes from God as He is revealed in Scripture.

A FEW PRACTICAL OBSERVATIONS

First, beware of being inundated by popular culture, especially through means of popular entertainment. In the early fifth century, Augustine astutely observed that entertainment was the fastest and easiest way to change the thought and lifestyle of an entire culture. This thought pervades the early part of his *City of God*. The greatest weapon of Satan in the context of the popular culture of an unbelieving society is the gradual inundation and indoctrination of people with the anti-Christian world-view by means of entertainment. In the case of "Stargate," I do not believe that the assault upon biblical Christianity is overt, or possibly even intentional. In an interview, the director stated that the only *overt* message he intended in the show was that no one has the right to murder innocent people because they will not accept their religious beliefs (directed at Islam perhaps?). This illustrates the fact that most people do not view themselves as being in direct opposition to the God of Scripture. This makes popular entertainment even more

deadly and subversive to believers. In popular culture, you are not simply being presented with random beliefs and bits of information, some of which is “innocent” fun, and some of which you must reject as out of accord with your Christianity. If you submerge yourself in entertainment (especially through popular television), then you are likely undergoing a subtle shift in your thinking all the way across the board. After all, you are being presented with a philosophy of life, including its own epistemology, ontology, teleology, metaphysics, and resultant system of ethics. It does not matter whether this philosophy dons the garb of atheistic science, mystical religion, or anything in between. I do not doubt that that being inundated by anti-Christian philosophy via television, movies, and novels has been used by Satan as a primary cause of doubts for many believers as well as outright apostasy among others. The righteous must choose his friends carefully, for the way of the wicked shall lead him astray (Prov. 12:26). Somehow we have assumed that although bad company may lead us astray, bad television and bad movies shall have no negative effects upon our thoughts and behavior.

Second, beware of being entirely oblivious to what our culture is being indoctrinated with. We must always avoid that which is in itself immoral, but I have noticed that some believers are genuinely shocked when they discover what the average person in our culture believes. Sometimes the changes that God has brought about through sanctifying His people is so great that the pattern of unbelieving thought becomes so foreign to them that it seems incredible that anyone should think in such a manner. This is a virtue in many respects, and praise be to the Triune God if this is the case with you! Yet a danger arises when a naïve Christian is suddenly brought face to face with someone who does not think like a Christian and he or she finds himself or herself caught off guard and unprepared to give a reason for the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15). Sometimes part of the problem is a complete unawareness of how the natural man thinks and why he thinks the way that he does. This does not mean that believers should indulge in the popular lust for entertainment in the name of being “in touch” with the world around them. If we are honest with ourselves, do we not often tend to pervert the mandate that we must live all of life to the glory of God into justifying ourselves in doing what we want to do? If we must make a choice, it is better to be out of touch with our culture than to be absorbed into our culture and conformed to it before we know what has happened.

Third, our greatest tool in defending the Christian faith is the content of the Christian faith itself. The reason for this fact is that just as the presentation of a coherent pagan philosophy teaches people to think in terms of that philosophical system, so the Christian world-view is an alternate (actually, antithetical) and all-encompassing philosophy of reality. It is too often the case that the Christian (biblical) philosophy is subjected to criteria that other philosophies are not. For example, Plato refuted the philosophical systems of his opponents and replaced it with his own, yet no one accused him of “fideism” or of having no grounds to believe in his system. Well, actually, *I do* accuse Plato of having no grounds to believe in his system of philosophy, but that is due to the fact that apart from the fundamental presupposition of the God of Scripture, *no one* has any foundation upon which to believe in anything. The Christian philosophy of reality, by contrast to other systems of thought, has the advantage of being unique and, ultimately, the only genuine alternative to non-Christian thought, whatever form it may take. The supreme strength of the Scriptural world and life view, however, lies in the fact that the Holy Spirit bears witness by and with the Scriptures in the heart of man (Westminster Larger Catechism Question 4). In a sense, this is why the preaching of the Word has “worked” over the centuries in bringing sinners to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The world-view presented in the biblical system of thought is sufficient

to warrant faith in the God of Scripture through his Son Jesus Christ. This is nothing less than saying (as Paul did) that the Scriptures are sufficient, or “able,” to make one wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As Owen pointed out in his *Reason of Faith*, there is neither a hint nor a command in the New Testament that in order to convince the non-believer, we must first gather a host of extra-biblical data and historical evidence before people have warrant to believe in the divine authority of the Bible. For instance, when the apostle John wrote his gospel, he expected that what he wrote was sufficient in itself to bring sinners to faith in Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we do not seek to convince the non-believer of the truth of the Bible, but as the material above illustrates, it means that if we do not begin with deeper and underlying questions (i.e., our presuppositions), then all the evidence in the world will not be able to offer a proper challenge to unbelief.

The longer someone sits under the faithful preaching of the Word of God, the more they are inundated with answers to questions of ontology, epistemology, cosmology, and every other branch of philosophy. In other words, sitting regularly under the preaching of the Word is the reverse principle of sitting regularly at the feet of popular entertainment. The difference is that the biblical philosophy is internally coherent and consistent, whereas the unbiblical philosophy in whatever form it presents itself always falls under its own weight. Yet the Spirit of God never blesses the Christian message because it is a philosophy of life, but because it is the will of God as revealed in Scripture. Therefore, do not meet the non-believer on their own ground, but drag them (kicking and screaming if necessary) onto yours. The fact that the non-Christian has presupposed that the God of the Bible does not (even cannot!) exist is sin and their part, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit to convince the world of sin (John 16:8-9).

This scenario presented by the last two seasons of “Stargate,” though fictional, is a realistic representation of the type of thinking that believers must be prepared to deal with. This illustration demonstrates that the primary point of conflict between Christianity and non-Christianity is not a matter of evidence, but rather it is a matter of the world-view that provides the backdrop for interpreting the evidence. The carnal mind is enmity against God (Rom. 8:7) and unless the principle of autonomous rebellion that is lodged in the dark recesses of the heart of man is addressed, we shall always fall short of presenting a genuine challenge to all that he thinks and does. In addition, we shall fail to confront him convincingly with his need for the Gospel. As the philosophy behind “Stargate,” which is representative of much of popular entertainment, demonstrates, the most basic presupposition of man since the Fall is that *man is the measure of all things*. If you would stand against the assaults of Satan and stop the mouths of those who are in opposition, you must self-consciously, and unashamedly, begin with the principle that *the God of Scripture is the measure of all things*.

¹ I wrote this article some time ago and decided to leave it “as is” in the hope of being useful, rather than never letting it see the light of day because I do not have time to add the footnotes. I do not intend this to be a “scholarly” article as much as a popular analysis of culture. Rather than filling this article with footnotes, I would rather alert the reader at the outset to my own biases. At the risk of being grossly misunderstood, I hold to what has been called Van Tillian Presuppositional Apologetics. By presuppositional, I do not mean that Christians should not argue for their faith with non-believers, but that we insist that in a fallen world, mankind begins all thinking with one of two presuppositions. Either we presuppose the Triune God of the Bible as the necessary foundation to knowledge, being,

purpose, ethics, etc., or we presuppose (as Adam and Even did in the Garden) than man's autonomous reason is the unconsciously assumed presupposition of each of these same areas. This paper hopefully illustrates to some extent what this method looks like, without getting into extended controversies over apologetic methods. My primary influences are Cornelius Van Til, Greg Bahsen (on Van Til), Scott Oliphant, and (strange as it may sound to those of a different apologetic persuasion) John Owen.

² Cornelius Van Til often made the point that if a Christian succeeded in demonstrating that the miracles of the Bible, such as the resurrection of Christ, were true, this would not demand faith in Jesus Christ from the non-believer because he would import his own understanding into those miracles, leaving his fundamental world-and-life-view untouched. In a way, the premise of a television program such as "Stargate" vindicates Van Til's assertion that beginning with the historical evidences of Christianity is incapable of overthrowing the system of unbelieving thought that is ingrained into man's heart. He must be challenged at the more basic level of his fundamental presuppositions *before* he is able to receive and understand the miracles of the Bible in their proper light.