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TELEVISION AS THE NEW LITERATURE: UNDERSTANDING AND EVALUATING THE MEDIUM

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SYNOPSIS

In a culture that has largely shifted from print to visual entertainment, television is the new literature. Given that the average American spends some five hours a day watching television, it is to the advantage of the Christian apologist to seek to understand, interact with, and develop responses to the ideas presented in popular television programs. It is also necessary to learn to exegete the medium. Similar to the process of biblical interpretation, exegeting television involves the application of the concepts of interpretation to the form of television. This involves, for instance, understanding the context of ideas presented in television programs, making lateral connections, fairly evaluating ideas presented, and keeping in mind the intent of the author. Moreover, because print and television differ in significant areas in reference to their functions and abilities, understanding these differences is also important. This does not mean that one form is better than another in every instance, but that each form—print or video—brings with it certain capabilities that the other medium lacks or is deficient in accomplishing. As a dominant medium of popular culture, television deserves serious attention from apologists who wish to demonstrate the differences between ideas promoted in popular culture and those within the Christian worldview. In order to interact effectively with ideas presented on television, Christian apologists must also have some understanding of the philosophical disciplines of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology.

SIDEBAR

Lost. First airing in 2004 and concluding in May 2010, *Lost* is an ABC drama about the lives of a seemingly diverse group of individuals who are brought together as the result of a plane crashing on an uncharted island. Characters face not only physical challenges, but internal struggles as they come to grips with guilt, relationships, redemption, destiny, and moral choices and their consequences, and seek to

understand the meaning of life and their place and purpose in the world. Not limited to the island, character development also takes place through clever flashbacks and, in the final season, something viewers refer to as flash sideways events.

FlashForward. Based on a 1999 book of the same title by Robert Sawyer, the ABC program *FlashForward*, which completed its first and only season in late May 2010, begins with a global event, wherein nearly everyone on the planet experiences a blackout for a period of two minutes and seventeen seconds. During this blackout, people see glimpses of their futures six months ahead. The show primarily centers on FBI agents seeking to unravel the mystery of the blackout, while characters must grapple with the often surprising events they have foreseen, bringing to light issues regarding destiny, free will, and determinism.

Battlestar Galactica. A reimagining of the television program that first aired in the late 1970s, *Battlestar Galactica* aired on the Syfy Channel between December 2003 and March 2009. It tells the epic story of a group of humans who have lost their planetary homes as a result of an attack by the Cylons, a race of highly advanced machines created by human beings, but now evolved, so to speak, to the point where their artificial intelligence and even appearance mimics that of humans. Many overt examples of metaphysical issues are addressed in the program including tensions between monotheism and polytheism, faith, belief, knowledge, and more. Many ethical issues are also represented in various storylines.

24. Starring Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer and airing on Fox, *24* began in late 2001, concluding in May 2010. Built on the unique television show premise that each season takes place in real time over the course of a contiguous twenty-four-hour period, the show is known for intense action, suspense, drama, and ultimately the need to prevent a disaster, usually of a terrorist variety. Its most significant contribution relevant to this article relates to ethics, as characters are often tortured or face torture or find themselves in difficult moral situations that require them to act, usually for the greater good.

Dexter. A Showtime production, *Dexter* packs a stylish, intense program into a weekly show that has entered its fifth season. It is based on a book, *Darkly Dreaming Dexter*, by Jeff Lindsay. Avoiding the typical police drama, *Dexter* adds a twist in that the main character, Dexter Morgan, is not only a forensics expert with the Miami police department, but also a serial killer. Dexter chooses his victims methodically, selecting only “bad people” of one kind or another, such as murderers. Obviously, *Dexter* touches most directly on issues related to ethics.

Nielson Company statistics indicate that the average American watches 151 hours of television per month. To put this figure in perspective, it calculates to about 5 hours a day, 1,812 hours per year, or 75.5 *days* of television viewing a year.¹ Television is

a portal to a myriad of sounds, images, commercial messages, and, more importantly, a world of ideas.

While talent-oriented programs such as *Dancing with the Stars* and *American Idol* regularly draw large audiences, other programs ranging from drama to science fiction also capture the attention of millions of viewers every week. Shows such as *Lost*, *FlashForward*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Dexter*, and *24* are not only filled with action and suspense, they also contain their share of insights into more philosophical realms. This does not mean that these programs thoroughly contemplate the depths of the ideas of David Hume, the implications of Immanuel Kant's epistemology, or the many-layered ethical ramifications gleaned from Plato's *Republic*. Nevertheless, such programs have the potential to influence millions of individuals, predisposing them, in some cases, to the Christian message, while in other instances challenging or opposing Christianity.

THE AGE OF ENTERTAINMENT

The call to engage the ideas presented in popular television programs is one every Christian, to one degree or another, must answer. As a key and dominant medium of pop culture, television not only entertains millions, but also influences them via ideas. Moreover, my contention is that film and television are the new literature. As Neil Postman expressed it in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, we have moved beyond the age of exposition or typography and into the age of entertainment or show business. This monumental shift from a predominantly print-based culture to one of multimedia entertainment has moved us from a "Have you read...?" mentality to a "Have you seen...?" perspective. In other words, the majority of Western people do not spend their time reading in-depth philosophical works and debating the finer points of the implications of ideologies contained therein, but instead they discuss the latest films and television shows.

Christian apologists have long engaged in the so-called culture war, ideologically battling questionable aspects of culture and popular culture, criticizing anti-Christian ideas in films, pop music, art, and more. Too often, however, our criticisms are more noise than substance, more hostile than empathetic, and engaged more in name-calling than in reasonable evaluation. Consequently, the impact of television on culture requires us to adapt and, in turn, learn to exegete the medium. In the realm of biblical interpretation (hermeneutics), learning to exegete passages is foundational to properly understanding a text. The interpreter must, for instance, understand a passage in its immediate and broader contexts, make lateral connections with other relevant data and ideas, draw out of the text what it says (exegesis) rather than read into it what it does not say (eisegesis), fairly seek to comprehend the intentions of the author, and analyze and evaluate the material under discussion. Similarly, the critic of television must learn to exegete the medium in such a way that is even-handed, relevant, contextual, and integrated.

To this end, this article will seek to illustrate and apply such insights to various television programs, concentrating on three key areas of religious and philosophical relevance: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. First, however, it will be to our

benefit to offer a brief comparison between print and television in order to better understand the differences of the mediums and, as a result, better evaluate the medium of video, whether film or television.

TABLE 1

	Print	Television
1	Mostly conceptual (linear ideas)	Mostly visual (images, often nonlinear)
2	Usually requires concentrated thought	Usually requires little concentrated thought
3	Can build rational arguments	Favors entertainment over rational discourse
4	Requires literacy	Generally does not require literacy
5	Usually a quiet endeavor	Usually a noisy endeavor
6	Records the great ideas of human history	Mostly transient, fleeting
7	Print is active	Mostly passive

Each point in Table 1 deserves some brief commentary. First, print is mostly conceptual, meaning that it deals not only with ideas, but with linear ideas. This means that a careful author states his or her case, interacts with competing ideas, arrives at conclusions supported by premises, and so forth. Given the nature of print, such endeavors most often take a linear approach, meaning that they have a definite beginning point and move towards definite conclusions, with orderly material arranged and assessed along the way. Television, however, is often far from conceptually and ideologically linear. Instead, popular forms of television favor images. But television is also often nonlinear when it comes to ideas. This is not to say that television always tells disjointed stories. The point here is more to observe that television is not nearly as successful as print in communicating well-reasoned, linear ideas.

Second, meaningful print takes concentrated thought. Effort must be placed on the part of the reader to comprehend the ideas of the author. We may disagree with the conclusions, but our disagreement will ideally come from our assessment of the ideas, assessment that takes active intellectual engagement. Television usually requires little concentrated thought. We press a button and are instantly bombarded by images and sounds meant to entertain us, not draw us into deep philosophical engagements. This does not suggest, however, that television cannot grapple to some extent with deep philosophical questions, but merely to demonstrate that television is not a form that favors concentrated intellectual pursuits. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule both with some literature and with some television programs.

Third, print can build rational arguments and, in fact, excels in this endeavor. Were this article material presented as a YouTube video, for instance, its form would significantly change as a necessity of the medium. While video can build fairly simple arguments, it usually favors entertainment over rational discourse. In fact, when television attempts to turn itself into a medium of rational discourse, it often fails miserably. Televised political debates, for instance, more often than not fail at communicating rational, linear discourse and are instead reduced to sound bites. Candidates often have only a few minutes or less to attempt to make a point about issues that are usually quite complex and involved.

Fourth, print requires literacy, while television usually does not. That is why even children who do not know how to read can stare at a television for hours. They are mesmerized by images, sounds, characters, and stories, rather than being drawn into television by its ability to demonstrate syllogisms with ease. This is not to say that video has no application or use within Christian endeavors; merely that it is a different form with different capabilities.

Fifth, print is usually a quiet endeavor, while video is usually noisy. A typical episode of the action show *24* is filled with pulse-pounding music, gunfire, cars speeding down a highway, cell phones ringing, and various individuals threatening one another. Print, however, is often associated with quiet contemplation. That is why academic libraries do not play loud rap music to tickle the ears of professors or students while they research the finer points of Hegel. In short, some ideas require silence, or at least quiet, for our minds to grapple with them properly.

Sixth, print records the great ideas of human history, while television is mostly transient and fleeting. Who, for instance, will seriously turn to the 1970s and 1980s show *M*A*S*H* for an in-depth history and understanding of the Korean War? Will the film *Saving Private Ryan* provide historians with a robust understanding of World War II? Granted, both the television show and the motion picture mentioned can indeed succeed in other ways. They can, for instance, give viewers a feel for the setting and challenges of both the Korean War and World War II. But neither film nor television is as successful as print at recording the great ideas of human history.

Finally, print is active, while television is mostly passive. Print is naturally passive if one fails to open a book and read it, but interacting with print is an active endeavor. Beyond the capacity for literacy, print also demands a certain level of common ground, such as understanding words, and also engages the intellect of the reader as he or she seeks to understand the meaning of the author. The mind, then, is active when it comes to reading. Television, on the other hand, is largely passive. We watch as predetermined events, in the case of television shows, unfold before us. Every now and then an idea may engage us, but too often the program has already moved on to something else and the thought passes or we fail to engage the thought actively.

With this said, print and television also share some notable similarities. Both print and video can tell a story, evoke emotions, evoke ideas, entertain, and can be artistic. Jesus did not hand out tracts of parables but instead told audible stories. As

such, we should not be so quick to dismiss television's ability to tell stories and communicate truth. Instead, where appropriate and relevant, apologists need to begin to see such mediums as a point of ministry contact—an opportunity to share the true Christian story with those already interested in stories.

TELEVISION AND WORLDVIEW CONCEPTS

In order to better exegete the medium of television thoughtfully, we must have some basic ideas in mind relative not only to theology, but also philosophy. Ideas are the substance of worldviews and worldviews, in turn, shape the ideologies of individuals. Philosophically, exegeting television requires some grasp of the areas of ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology. Ethics is probably the most commonly encountered in television programs, most likely because the foundational elements of storytelling often require characters to struggle with moral challenges, and because ethics is easier to show than metaphysics or epistemology. Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with questions of right and wrong and, consequently, moral choices.

Metaphysics deals with questions about ultimate reality. It is, by definition, beyond the physical. Examples of metaphysical questions include, "What is real?" "Does God exist?" "Does life have any meaning?" "Is there life after death?" "What is the nature of mind?" and "Does free will exist?" Although metaphysics is more difficult to show on television, that does not preclude characters or situations from addressing metaphysical themes.

Epistemology is even more difficult to address via television. Epistemology deals with questions of knowledge. How, for instance, do we know what we know? What criteria exist to know whether or not something is true? How can we justify truth, if at all, or belief? Is the basis for knowledge internal to our consciousness or external? Are some forms of knowledge foundational? Most television programs that even bother to venture into epistemological realms do so simplistically. For instance, a character may state, "How do I know what to do? I follow my heart." Hence, a rigorous discussion of epistemological grounds in relation to decision making, usually relating to ethics, is avoided and shifted to an emotional appeal. Neil Postman referred to television as "the command center of the new epistemology."² Epistemology is paramount to every worldview. After all, if our method or theory of knowing is faulty, there's a good chance that our entire worldview is similarly flawed. At any rate, what follows is a discussion primarily of two areas of philosophy—ethics and metaphysics—in relation to a sampling of contemporary television programs: *Lost*, *FlashForward*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *24*, and *Dexter* (see sidebar). The goal here is not a thorough analysis of each show, but to provide examples of engaging and exegeting television programs from a uniquely Christian perspective.

TELEVISION'S MORAL DILEMMAS

Chronicling the real-time exploits of Jack Bauer, *24* is primarily an action show. Nearly every season, Jack faces ethical dilemmas. As always, the stakes are incredibly high—a

nuclear device may go off in a major city, for instance. With little time to sort through the implications of his actions, Jack decides that the best thing to do is torture someone. It seems the most expedient way to provide the greatest good to the greatest number. This is not to say that Jack is unaware of the ethical implications of torture, but he reasons that the end justifies the means.

The ethical system underlying much of *24* is utilitarianism, which seeks to determine right or wrong on the basis of whether it is harmful or beneficial to the greatest number of people. A particular act is not viewed as inherently right or wrong. Instead, the focus is the outcome. A utilitarian *act* is not concerned with moral rules, but instead seeks to follow general guidelines that are apparently present in society and have stood the test of time. A utilitarian *rule*, however, is based on the belief that if a generally accepted rule has been deemed good, it should not be violated.

Utilitarianism has several shortcomings. Who decides what is beneficial or harmful to the most people in the long term? On what basis is something deemed “beneficial” or “harmful”? Based on our limited understanding, it is conceivable to choose what may appear to be the greatest good at a particular time, only to end up causing problems in the future. Utilitarianism may also be used to justify immoral actions such as slavery. After all, according to the principles of utilitarianism, the enslavement of a minority is a small price to pay for the benefit of a majority.

Dexter is another program that demonstrates various ethical dilemmas.³ The main character is a serial killer, but also a forensics expert. Although the show is clear that the main character is deeply troubled psychologically, Dexter nevertheless rationalizes his murders by reasoning that such deaths will result in the greater good. In one episode, Dexter says to one of his victims, “Soon, you’ll be packed into a few neatly wrapped Hefties and my own small corner of the world will be a neater, happier place...a better place.”⁴ Thus, Dexter justifies his ongoing murders, citing the greater good he is doing for society at large. Not without a moral center, albeit a twisted one, Dexter often appeals to “the Code of Harry,” referring to his deceased foster father, a police officer who helped Dexter channel his aggressions and, in fact, taught him how to get away with murder. Similar in reasoning to *24*, *Dexter* also is representative of utilitarianism in action.

Dexter’s reasoning is obviously flawed, particularly so from a Christian perspective. First, God condemns murder. Second, vigilantism goes against the God-ordained structure of society that places such punishments in the hands of government, not rogue individuals (Rom. 13:1–5). Third, Dexter’s brand of justice leaves no room for future potential repentance on the part of those he murders.

UNREALITY VS. ULTIMATE REALITY

Although these programs also grapple with ethical issues, and to some extent epistemology, the focus on this section is the metaphysical content in *Lost*, *FlashForward*, and *Battlestar Galactica* (*BSG*).

Lost and *FlashForward* are overt in their references to destiny or fate versus free will or, in some cases, chance. In *Lost* certain characters, particularly John Locke, believe

strongly in destiny, believing that some force such as a mysterious island is directing and purposefully maneuvering the lives of certain individuals. *Lost* at times speaks of “course corrections” to reality, meaning that reality somehow adjusts to human choices in order to nevertheless bring about inevitable outcomes.

In *FlashForward* the fact that a global blackout has given billions of people glimpses of the future causes some characters to question whether or not free will is a reality or an illusion. Are, for instance, the events seen in the flash forwards predestined or can they be changed? If they are predestined, then do our choices matter? If they are not predestined, then is there any real purpose or meaning to our choices? When one character learns that his flash forward involves the death of a woman and her children, he takes extreme measures, committing suicide, thereby avoiding the deaths of those individuals. His suicide and the reasons for it are highly publicized and people are relieved that the future, it seems, can indeed be changed.

Over the centuries Christian theologians have also turned their attention to seeming puzzles involving free will and predestination. If God is sovereign, then do human choices ultimately matter? Will God “course correct” reality as needed, as *Lost* intimates the universe will do? Can the future be changed, as *FlashForward* suggests? These questions are addressed by various theological and philosophical models such as compatibilism, determinism, and issues regarding causation, free will, and God’s foreknowledge. Fatalism is a potential pitfall, being the idea that nothing human beings do really matters.

A broader approach to responding to fate as depicted in popular television programs is to focus on God’s providence. Within Christianity, history has a divine and directed linear purpose. Therefore, history is not random or cyclical.⁵ God does not leave reality to chance, but instead works in His creation, meaning that He is immanent (present and active) in creation. But what of the relationship between God’s sovereign providence and human free will? We will not solve every nuance of the puzzle here, but we can say that biblically speaking our choices do matter, perhaps most significantly in reference to our own moral character and how choices shape our nature for better or for worse. Ultimately the Christian worldview gives meaning and hope to reality, as opposed to fatalistic or nihilistic views that end in despair. The Christian view of history will culminate in a climactic, God-directed end to an arc that began with despair and pain (the Fall), but will end with redemption, restoration, peace, and joy.

Perhaps more than any other science fiction program to date, *Battlestar Galactica* made the once-nerdy realm of science fiction appealing to the masses. *BSG* also addressed issues of spirituality, belief, and God directly, not as mere passing references or vague nods. One character, Gaius Baltar, is initially a skeptic if not an outright atheist.⁶ His people are polytheists, but he will have none of it. What is surprising is that it is the skeptical Baltar who later begins to have unexplainable visions. A woman appears to him, appearing like the Cylon woman who seduced him in order to obtain defense secrets that ultimately allowed the Cylons to decimate the home worlds of the Colonials (humans). Much later in the series, it is revealed that the visions were in fact real, and the result of apparently angelic beings influencing the affairs of human beings.

Another metaphysical area of interest in *BSG* concerns monotheism versus polytheism.⁷ Monotheism is the belief in one theistic God, while polytheism posits many gods. Interestingly, it is the Cylons who worship what they call the one true God, while the Colonials are polytheists. The Cylons, in fact, are eager to set their human progenitors straight by emphasizing that belief in the gods is not only wrong, but even harmful. Only by seeking the one true God can humanity find any semblance of redemption and salvation. Although this sounds Christian, ultimately the show is devoid of any really meaningful Christian message beyond monotheism. After Baltar sees himself as a messiah figure, he makes no mention of sin, but instead preaches a message that human beings are perfect as they are, sounding far more like New Age philosophy than anything Christian.

BSG seeks to tie up some loose spiritual ends in its series finale. Baltar utters the following metaphysically charged words: "I see angels. Angels in this very room. Now I may be mad, but that doesn't mean that I'm not right. Because there's another force at work here. There always has been. It's undeniable—we've all experienced it...Whether we want to call that God or gods or some sublime inspiration or a divine force that we can't know or understand, it doesn't matter...It's here, it exists...God's a force of nature, beyond good and evil."

It's unfortunate that Baltar's speech essentially provides a stamp of approval for religious pluralism, basically stating that it doesn't really matter what one believes so long as one believes in something. Contrary to Baltar's statement that "it doesn't matter" what we call this "divine force," it most certainly does matter. Unless we are willing to jettison the logical law of noncontradiction, it is impossible for all views of the divine to be true. God, for instance, cannot be personal and transcendent (theism), but also an impersonal force permeating everything (pantheism).

As for Baltar's claim that God is "a force of nature, beyond good and evil," that too is flawed. The implication is that God is limited to the bounds of nature, but in theism God is transcendent, meaning that He made the universe and is not confined within it. Ethically speaking, if God is indeed beyond good and evil, then where do moral standards come from? Such a statement suggests that God is morally neutral, when in reality God is in His very nature a morally good being.

ENGAGING THE NEW LITERATURE

Most people view television for entertainment purposes, but this does not mean that television programs are absent of any substance when it comes to philosophy and theology. Moreover, whether we like it or not, television is a dominant medium of pop culture. With individuals watching as much as five hours or more per day, television is not an area Christian apologists can simply avoid without consequences. As ethical, epistemological, and metaphysical ideas are presented to one degree or another on television, viewers will be influenced by such presentations. Consequently, it is important for the apologist not only to understand and exegete the medium of television, but also to interact with those who may reject or misunderstand Christianity because television has presented opposing viewpoints.

The goal is not to turn apologists into rabid television viewers, but to underscore the extensive influence television has on our culture and to demonstrate the need to understand and evaluate television programs in light of Christianity. Television is in many respects the new literature. To neglect our understanding of it or to minimize its relevance is detrimental.

Robert Velarde is author of *The Wisdom of Pixar* (InterVarsity Press), *Conversations with C. S. Lewis* (InterVarsity Press), *The Heart of Narnia* (NavPress), and *Inside The Screwtape Letters* (Baker, forthcoming). He received his M.A. from Southern Evangelical Seminary.

NOTES

- 1 "Television, Internet and Mobile Usage in the U.S.," Nielsen Company Report, February 23, 2009; available at http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/02/3_screens_4q08_final.pdf.
- 2 Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 78.
- 3 A caveat is in order here in reference to *Dexter*, as the show routinely reaches what would require an R rating in a theater, depicting bloody violence, sexual exploits, and a steady barrage of bad language.
- 4 *Dexter*, Season 1, pilot.
- 5 *Battlestar Galactica*, for instance, repeatedly posits a cyclical view of history.
- 6 At least two other characters are also self-described atheists: Commander William Adama and the Cylon character John Cavil.
- 7 Some have posited that influences such as polytheism within *BSG* are the result of Mormon theology due to Glen A. Larson's involvement in the program since Larson, who created the original *BSG* in the late 1970s, is Mormon. However, any vestiges of Mormon influence on the more recent *BSG* series are typically subtle references.