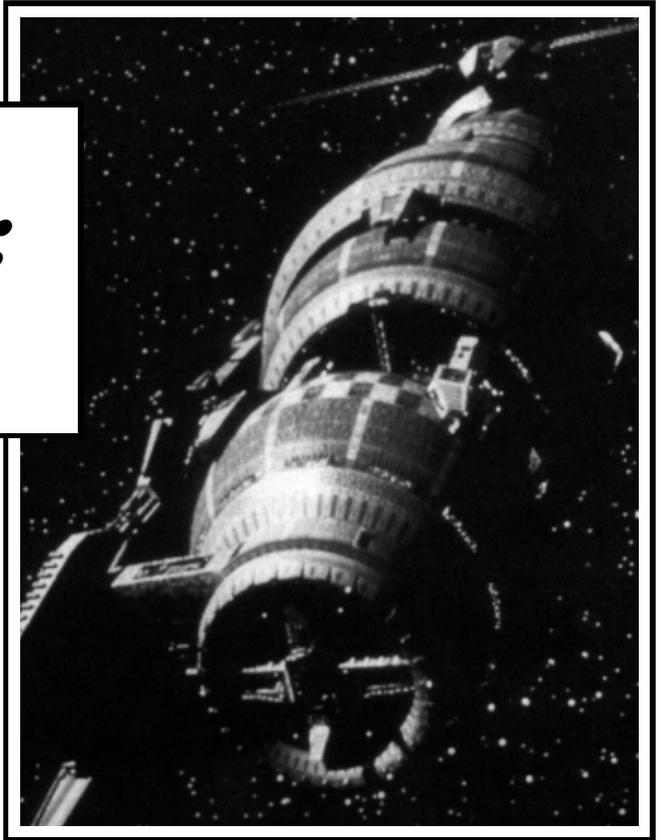


REFLECTIONS ON *BABYLON 5*: STAR TREK IT IS NOT

PAUL MARKS



Babylon Five is a television science fiction show about a space station called Babylon Five. I do not know what the political views of the creator (“J.M.S.”) or the actors are, so I can not claim to know what, if any, political message it is supposed to be presenting. What I will now do is explain some of the thoughts that *Babylon 5* provokes in me.

THE CONTRAST WITH *STAR TREK*

Babylon 5 has a low tech feel. People are shown doing such things as making coffee with coffee pots, rather than standing in front of a machine, saying “coffee” and having it appear. People on *Babylon 5* experience gravity because the station revolves, not because of some artificial gravity. (Artificial gravity appears only at a late stage in the show and is treated very differently to the way that other science fiction serials deal with it.) High tech looking weapons do appear in *Babylon 5*, but it turns out, for example, that “plasma hand guns” (PPG’s) are used because they are *less* effective than guns which fire bullets (“slug throwers”). It would be inconvenient to be on a space ship carrying any weapon that could inflict fatal damage to the ship. There is very little ‘techno babble’ in *Babylon 5*, that is, language designed to sound scientific in order to ‘explain’ some technological marvel, in language which is clearly nonsense to anyone with any scientific knowledge. In all these ways *Babylon 5* is in stark contrast to *Star Trek* — especially *Star Trek New Generation*.

The contrasts continue. In *Star Trek* poverty is something that only appears, when it appears at all, on worlds ruled by baddies, or on primitive worlds — although not on nature loving worlds. In *Babylon 5*, *Babylon 5* itself contains the poverty stricken inhabitants of “Down Below”. The Earth, which is ruled by the enemies of the main characters, has no visible poverty. Like the old Soviet Union, Maoist China or Nazi Germany, such things as homeless people on the streets are simply not allowed.

ARE THE MAIN CHARACTERS GOOD?

But are the main characters on *Babylon 5* the goodies? After all, they supported an attempted but defeated military coup against the democratically elected government of the Earth Alliance. That at any rate is how most of the viewers of *Babylon 5* would interpret matters. Science fiction is not known for supporting military coups against democracy. Nor are science fiction series known for having the goodies lose.

Unlike in most science fiction, the main characters in *Babylon 5* are often rather uncertain in their way of speaking. They say the wrong thing. When watching, I often find myself thinking: “Now what he should of said is ...” This might be blamed on bad script writing or bad acting, both of which things *Babylon 5* is sometimes guilty of. However there is more than this at work. The characters *themselves* sometimes recognise and regret that they did not say or do what they should have, and that outsiders often take advantage of this.

In one episode of *Babylon 5*, an Earth television team are making a documentary about *Babylon 5*, and at the



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end of the episode this documentary is shown. It is devastating. It tears apart the main characters of *Babylon 5*, largely by using against them their own words drawn from interviews which we have seen being recorded, little selective editing or quoting out of context being needed. These quotes are coupled with commentary from a professional presenter and a psychiatric expert back on Earth. The dialogue and acting of the ‘baddies’ in this episode is perfect. Without the audience’s inside knowledge, gained over many episodes, we would be as convinced as most viewers of the documentary on Earth that the main characters on Babylon 5 are paranoid and dangerously unstable. In the end the commander of Babylon 5, after watching the documentary in silence, simply stands up and turns off the television. There is nothing else he can do.

There have, as I say, been complaints about bad acting in *Babylon 5*. But what these complaints sometimes indicate is that the *characters* are not super beings, who always say and do everything right.

THE TRUTH ONLY EMERGES SLOWLY

The other complaint is about it not being clear what is going on. That our knowledge of this builds up so slowly is one of the main things that some people dislike about *Babylon 5*.

On the surface there is a story in each episode of *Babylon 5*. But it is clear even to a first-time viewer that this story is often not the important thing in the episode. What is important is how things fit in with what has happened before and with what may happen in the future. An experienced viewer rewatching an episode months later may well spot something that connects with the past or the future which he did not notice at the time. There are no comforting ‘resets’ in *Babylon 5*. Everything that happens in the past affects the future, and the universe changes.

The evil nature of the government of Earth emerges only very gradually over several series, and there are still things that we do not know. The alien races are important and we never finish learning about them. Babylon 5 only avoids being crushed by Earth because some aliens support it, of a race that had fought a genocidal war against humans — this being one reason why Babylon 5 is not popular on Earth. From the beginning of series one we think we know why the aliens fought that war, and we gradually learn why they stopped killing humans. (The aliens were winning the war, and hardly any of *them* know why the war was stopped.)

But in the present series we have just learned more about what we already ‘knew’. Another alien race is shown to commit the most terrible crimes, slaughtering millions of civilians, one or two of the most sympathetic characters in *Babylon 5* being aliens of this race, and intimately involved in these crimes. Characters, human and alien, and of various types, are complex.

They switch between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ as they face different choices.

PEOPLE MUST WORK TO FIND OUT WHAT IS GOOD

All of this explains why I think that a libertarian should be interested in *Babylon 5*.

Science is shown as able to do some things — but not as a panacea that can solve all problems, or change all customs.

Democracy does not mean freedom, and the nice people on the television may not be telling the whole story.

People face choices between good and evil, but these are not just straight moral choices. People must work and reason even to understand what are the good and evil choices — what is really going on, and what the consequences will be. Choices do indeed have consequences — and for ones’s own moral personality as well as for the material survival of oneself and others.

But this leads to the side of *Babylon 5* that some libertarians may dislike — the spiritual side. Whereas *Star Trek* would use ‘techno babble’ to ‘explain’ what is now scientifically impossible, *Babylon 5* implies, but much more rarely, a spiritual factor. For example the ‘organic technology’ of certain advanced races is not just a collection of cells. It has a certain personality and a connection — good, evil, or mixed — with the universe, which has a spirit of its own.

Against in sharp contrast with *Star Trek*, some *Babylon 5* characters — although not all — believe in defined formal religions which both shape their everyday lives and influence the decisions they make. But there is more involved than this. Like *Star Trek*, *Babylon 5* has its interventions from higher beings, who have been around for vastly longer than humans and other such species and who are much more powerful, but I am not referring to that. The general *mood* of *Babylon 5* is that the forces of evil are vastly more powerful than the forces of good. The baddies know more, and can do more. Yet, they *sometimes* lose. People trying to do what they have decided is right can sometimes do a bit more than seems possible. Events sometimes work in their favour. There is some weighting of the dice going on, if people make the supreme effort and are prepared to pay the price.

GOOD MAY RESULT

Some people would call this a mixture of mystical mumbo jumbo and self-indulgent script writing. Others would call it a message that in a dark universe where lies and coercion prosper and where people are condemned to humiliation, decay and death, there is still hope. If we continue to struggle, good may result — even if it happens years after our deaths and in ways that we have not imagined.