

The Old Gods are Fighting Back: Mono- and Polytheistic Tensions in *Battlestar Galactica* and Jewish Biblical Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

The representations of religious tension between the polytheistic humans and the monotheistic Cylons in the Sci Fi (now Syfy) channel's hit series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009) is nowhere more evident than in the human “convert” to monotheism, Gaius Baltar, who struggles to proselytize his minority beliefs to other humans. Ancient Jewish literature also highlights the patriarch Abraham's turn from a polytheistic past to a believer and follower of the one God. This article seeks to understand Baltar's belief and actions in light of Abraham's shift from polytheism to monotheism in ancient Jewish literature.

KEYWORDS

Battlestar Galactica; Abraham; Gaius Baltar; Monotheism; Polytheism; Second Temple; Rabbinics; Judaism

The representation of religious tension between polytheism and monotheism in the Sci Fi (now Syfy) channel's series *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009) is exemplified in Gaius Baltar, the human convert to monotheism, who struggles to proselytise his minority belief to other humans. While Baltar's sect of (mostly female) believers is small, his message is broadcast widely throughout the fleet; in various episodes during the fourth season President Roslin, Admiral Adama, and Chief Tyrol, for instance, are shown listening to Baltar speak about monotheism. The intersection of monotheism and polytheism in *Battlestar Galactica* occurs at the point where the dynamic religious belief in one god moves from the realm of the Cylons, who are considered “other” in the show, into the realm of the humans.¹ This movement happens through the figure of Gaius Baltar, originally a self-proclaimed atheist² who over the course of several seasons comes to believe in the One God proclaimed by the Cylons. Baltar's understanding of the One God is different than that of the Cylons: the Cylons believe in what Kevin Wetmore terms

¹ For a philosophical analysis of the interaction between the Cylon monotheism and the human polytheism, see Taneli Kukkonen, “God Against the Gods: Faith and the Exodus of the Twelve Colonies,” in *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Knowledge Here begins Out There*, ed. Jason T. Eberl (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 169–180.

² “Miniseries,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 0, Episodes 1–2, directed by Michael Rymer, written by Glen A. Larson and Ronald D. Moore, 8 December 2003, on Sci Fi.

“mystical monotheism,”³ while the theology of the Baltar sect more clearly reflects mainstream Jewish and Christian perspectives recognisable by the target audience. This article focuses on the monotheism of the Baltar sect and its sometimes-violent interactions with the polytheists as represented through the destruction and desecration of polytheistic sacred objects. The tensions between the newer monotheism, as represented by Baltar’s sect, and the normative polytheism of most of the remaining humans in *Battlestar Galactica* is illuminated by discussions of Abraham and the origins of monotheism found in Jewish biblical interpretation in the Second Temple and Rabbinic periods. I propose that one way to understand Baltar’s role in the religions of *Battlestar Galactica* is to see Baltar as an Abraham figure,⁴ a proclaimer of monotheism in a human world (or universe) that understands reality through a polytheistic lens. Like with Abraham’s discovery of monotheism and the one true God, Baltar’s monotheistic evangelising sometimes takes a violent turn.⁵ This article demonstrates the strong parallels between Baltar and the original founder of monotheism according to midrashic texts, Abraham.

The vast majority of humans in *Battlestar Galactica* are polytheists. They worship gods that seem to have been developed from—and, in accordance with the show’s finale, seem to develop into—the Greek gods. The religious language used by the humans is, however, a language reminiscent of Jewish and Christian theology, albeit in a polytheistic sphere. Ideas ranging from sin to salvation, angels, and sacred scrolls are developed throughout the show. Worship by the polytheistic humans can take place on an individual level, such as the scene of Kara Thrace, a.k.a. Starbuck, praying at her locker when she thinks that Lee has been killed in the initial Cylon attack,⁶ but overall the polytheism is a communal, ritually-oriented religion—hence the plural *Battlestar Galactica* equivalent of “amen”: “So say we all.”⁷ Humans and Cylons alike may also appear agnostic or atheistic,

³ As opposed to what is sometimes described as fundamentalist Christianity, although elements of this do exist in Cylon theology. For one understanding of the different theologies present in *Battlestar Galactica* see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. *The Theology of Battlestar Galactica: American Christianity in the 2004–2009 Television Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 38.

⁴ Compare with J. Robert Loftis, “What a Strange Little Man” in Eberl, *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy*, 29–39, where Baltar is compared to Judas.

⁵ On the tolerance or lack thereof between mono- and polytheism in *Battlestar Galactica*, see Chris Klassen, “Research Note: Rejecting Monotheism? Polytheism, Pluralism, and *Battlestar Galactica*,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23 (2008): 355–362.

⁶ “Miniseries,” *Battlestar Galactica*, 0.1–2.

⁷ Wetmore, *Theology*, 21.

for instance Captain Adama among the humans and “Number One,” also known as John and Brother Cavil among the Cylons.⁸

Baltar’s sect is based on the monotheistic tendency of the Cylons, which according to Wetmore’s analysis of theologies in *Battlestar Galactica* is built upon the mystical monotheism of a 14th century anonymous Christian text called *The Cloud of Unknowing*.⁹ While the Cylon religion exhorts followers to fulfil the role that their god intends, even when uncertainty exists as to what the role should be, Baltar’s monotheism is much more in line with standard biblical theologies: Baltar’s god is a jealous god; his god utilises prophets (e.g., Baltar)¹⁰ and angels (e.g., Head Six and Starbuck);¹¹ there is life after death;¹² and this god has a plan.¹³ The interaction between Baltar’s monotheism and the remnant humans’ polytheism is fertile ground for analysis, even more so than the interaction between the Cylon monotheism and the human polytheism, because both groups are humans, and because both groups of people exist in the limited physical space of the fleet: their interactions are frequent and at times violent.

Monotheism and Polytheism in *Battlestar Galactica*

Baltar,¹⁴ as previously noted, begins as a self-proclaimed atheist: “There is no God. Or gods, singular or plural. There are no large, invisible men, or women for that matter, in the

⁸ For example Adama in “Miniseries,” *Battlestar Galactica*, 0.1–2 and Cavil in “The Plan,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 0, Episode 22, directed by Edward James Olmos, written by Jane Espenson, 27 October 2009, on Syfy.

⁹ “A Measure of Salvation,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 3, Episode 7, directed by Bill Eagles, written by Michael Angeli, 10 November 2006, on Sci Fi; Wetmore, *Theology*, 38, 43–46.

¹⁰ Baltar and Roslin can both be seen as prophets of competing religions. Janice Liedl, “The Battle for History in *Battlestar Galactica*,” in *Space and Time: Essays on Visions of History in Science Fiction and Fantasy Television*, ed. David C. Wright Jr. and Allan W. Austin (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 189–208; Charlotte Elizabeth Howell, “Prophets in the Margins: Fantastic, Feminist Religion in Contemporary American Telefantasy” (Master’s Thesis, The University of Texas at Austin, 2011).

¹¹ Head Six self-identifies as an angel of God in “Torn,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 3, Episode 6, directed by Jean de Segonzac, written by Anne Cofell Saunders, 3 November 2006, on Sci Fi. Starbuck appears as an angelic figure after “Crossroads (Part 2),” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 3, Episode 20, directed by Michael Rymer, written by Mark Verdheiden, 25 March 2007, on Sci Fi.

¹² “Islanded in a Stream of Stars,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 4, Episode 18, directed by Edward James Olmos, written by Michael Taylor, 6 March 2009, on Sci Fi.

¹³ Wetmore, *Theology*, 65–66.

¹⁴ Baltar is indeed a complex character throughout the series. While this article focuses on his religious inclinations, other articles examine his character, e.g., Loftis, “What a Strange Little Man”; David Kopsell, “Gaius Baltar and the Transhuman Temptation” in Eberl, *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy*, 241–252; Jason T. Eberl and Jennifer A. Vines, “‘I Am an Instrument of God’: Religious Belief, Atheism, and Meaning,” in Eberl, *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy*, 155–229.

sky, taking a personal interest in the fortunes of Gaius Baltar.”¹⁵ However, Baltar, like Abraham as I will explore shortly, is called to the one true God. Baltar’s divine interaction occurs through Head Six, the model Six Cylon who at first seems to be a figment of Baltar’s imagination, but who later proclaims herself an angel of God.¹⁶ Head Six is Baltar’s most regular companion, although she cannot be seen by others.¹⁷ From nearly the beginning of the series, Head Six attempts to convince Baltar that he has been chosen by the one God to save humanity.¹⁸ Initially the fulfilment of this saviour role seems to be only through the saving of the human-Cylon child Hera—and Baltar does indeed fulfil this role by the end of the series¹⁹—but as the storyline progresses it becomes clear to the audience that Baltar is acting as a prophet and an evangelist of the one true God to humanity, tasks in which the Cylons do not engage.

The clash between the polytheism of the humans and the monotheism promoted by Baltar is epitomised in the episode titled “Escape Velocity.”²⁰ At the beginning of the episode, Baltar’s monotheistic sect is attacked by a group calling themselves the “Sons of Ares.” Through violence against the sect’s members, the Sons of Ares seek to disrupt the group and to assault Baltar; they are, however, unsuccessful in finding Baltar, who has hidden. Head Six comments on the attack, saying, “the old gods die hard.” Then, as Baltar looks at one of his followers, Head Six continues, “Even among your people.” He then notices that one of his followers is holding something in her hand: it is a medallion of Asclepius, the god of healing. Even among the believers of monotheism in Baltar’s sect, there can still be found some clinging to the “old” polytheistic religion. Head Six notes, “the old gods are fighting back.” The fight here is not just the physical attack exemplified by the Sons of Ares, but the mental struggle that the new believers must overcome in order to fully embrace monotheism and leave the old gods behind.

¹⁵ “Miniseries,” *Battlestar Galactica*, 0.1–2.

¹⁶ “Home (Part 2),” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 2, Episode 7, directed by Jeff Woolnough, written by David Eick and Ronald D. Moore, 26 August 2005, on Sci Fi.

¹⁷ Interestingly, Caprica Six—the first version of the number Six Cylon that viewers meet—is portrayed as seeing a Head Baltar, who is only visible to Caprica Six (“Downloaded,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 2, Episode 18, directed by Jeff Woolnough, written by David Eick and Ronald D. Moore, 24 February 2006, on Sci Fi). Both Head Six and Head Baltar are later seen in 21st century New York City, confirming their eternal nature (“Daybreak [Part 2],” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 4, Episode 20, directed by Michael Rymer, written by Ronald D. Moore, 20 March 2009, on Sci Fi).

¹⁸ “Miniseries,” *Battlestar Galactica*, 0.1–2.

¹⁹ “Daybreak (Part 2),” *Battlestar Galactica*, 4.20.

²⁰ “Escape Velocity,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 4, Episode 4, directed by Edward James Olmos, written by Jane Espenson, 25 April 2008, on Sci Fi.

Later in the episode, Baltar chooses to respond to the physical attack with an attack of his own. The scene begins with Head Six attempting to once again convince Baltar of his chosenness:²¹

[Baltar is holding the medallion of Asclepius that he took from his follower.]

Head Six to Baltar: People have room in their hearts for one great belief, you or the old gods. Which one will it be?

Baltar: Why can't I just be a man? Do I really need to take on the gods single-handed?

Head Six: Oh but imagine the kind of man you will be when you do. Surely such a man must be magnificent, larger-than-life, godlike himself.

Baltar: What are you talking about? It's not about that at all. It's about this.

[Baltar walks around the destroyed area, looking at his followers who are recovering from the attack by the Sons of Ares].

Baltar [yelling]: Stop! Stop. This is unacceptable. We have been targeted because of what we believe by those who answer to faceless gods that bear no relevance in our world. They want us to be afraid. And I'm tired of being afraid.

[The followers are all watching and listening to Baltar.]

Baltar: The time has come to make a stand. And that time is now.

[Baltar walks out, with the group following after him.]

Paula (Head Female Follower) [after running up to him]: Gaius, what are you doing? Where are you going?

Another follower: Gaius...?

[Scene switches to a priestess lighting incense during a polytheistic worship service in the Galactica Temple. Baltar and his follower open the hatch while the service begins.]

Baltar: We want justice, not these stupid old gods!

Priestess: Sir, we are having a service.

Baltar: Are you? But whom are you serving?

Priestess: I have to ask you to leave.

Baltar: Do you? Would you be serving Zeus? Apparently king of the gods who also happened to be—let me tell you—a serial rapist,

[Worshippers in the temple gasp]

Baltar: prone to giving birth out of his own forehead. That's very likely isn't it?

[Picking up the statuette of Zeus and throwing it to the ground.]

²¹ All transcriptions from *Battlestar Galactica* are my own.

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[People protesting, attempting to attack Baltar]

Baltar [shouting]: Well, gods, strike me down. What are you going to do?

Priestess [moving to stop Baltar]: Damn you.

Baltar [pushing the priestess away]: You ignorant witch, telling the people lies and stories. Maybe you want me to pray to Asclepius, who healed wounds with the blood of Gorgons, or Aphrodite or Artemis, or any other of this rubbish!

[Baltar picks up the incense sticks and throws them; people protest around him. One of Baltar's followers is seen to be writing on the wall.]

Baltar: How awful! [Continues to throw items used during the service; grabs the priestess and pushes her out of the way.] Out of the way, you hideous old witch. That's the kind of rubbish that you made. I will not be destroyed on this level.

[Enter two military police who grab Baltar to arrest him.]

Baltar: I'm with God already!

[Worshippers throw things at Baltar, attempting to grab him and push him while he is led out of the room by the military police.]

This scene is paradigmatic of the interaction between Baltar's monotheism and the other humans' polytheism in *Battlestar Galactica*. The Sons of Ares, clearly a minority within the larger polytheistic society, attack Baltar's sect because monotheism, from a human perspective, is associated with the Cylons. Up until this point, human survival has been at an us/them stand-off with the Cylons, with a few notable exceptions that actually confirm the case: for instance, Athena, Cylon model Eight, who gives birth to the Cylon-human hybrid Hera, fights for and sides with the humans. However, her own existence in the fleet is highly problematic, as can be seen in episodes such as "Sacrifice," where the existence of Athena—although she is not yet known by that name—gives rise to terrorist activities among some of the humans.²² Baltar's sect, like the existence of a Cylon living among and defending the humans, is an uncomfortable grey area that may be perceived by some of the humans as a slippery slope toward submission to the Cylons. The fear of groups like the Sons of Ares likely represents an understanding of Baltar's monotheism as a slow, psychological infiltration of Cylon ideas into humankind. Baltar's response, in attacking the polytheistic worship service, mimics on a smaller scale the violence carried out against humans by Cylons. That is, the physical attack is a straightforward attack on the humans, while the real danger from Baltar's sect is the underlying worry that Baltar is disseminating the beliefs of the "othered" Cylons and converting humans to the "other"

²² "Sacrifice," *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 2, Episode 16, directed by Jeff Woolnough, written by Rey Villalobos and Anne Cofell Saunders, 10 February 2006, on Sci Fi.

side.

The clash between polytheism and Baltar's monotheism permeates the remainder of season four. In the episode called "Faith,"²³ the dying leader Roslin engages in a discussion about the next life with another cancer patient, Emily, while Baltar's sermon is playing on the radio in the background. Baltar's god, Roslin argues, is the Cylon god. Emily counters that if Baltar's god is the one true God, he is the God of all, both humans and Cylons. A similar discussion takes place earlier in the episode when Baltar tells Head Six that he accepts "her god." She retorts, "He's not my God, he *is* God." Here, Roslin is clearly uncomfortable with the idea that there might only be one god, especially if that god is shared with the enemy Cylons. Similarly, Baltar, who himself is promoting monotheism, cannot help but say that the god he now worships is "her god," that is, the god of the Cylons and, therefore, not the humans.

Abraham's Beginnings as a Polytheist

In the ancient world, Judaism is seen by other religious traditions as being noteworthy because of its rejection of the worship of gods other than the God of Israel. Abraham²⁴ is seen as the archetype of Jewish monotheism, leaving his father and homeland behind in order to follow the call of the Lord:

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 12:1–3)²⁵

According to this account, Abraham is given nothing except the assurances of God to take with him on this journey. While Abraham's beginnings are portrayed as uncomplicated in Genesis, Jewish interpretation in antiquity exhibits a fascination with the question of why Abraham was called by God. The text as extant in Genesis does not provide an explanation, it only describes that Abraham is called away from his homeland and most of his family, and that God makes promises to Abraham if he obeys.

²³ "Faith," *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 4, Episode 6, directed by Michael Nankin, written by Seamus Kevin Fahey, 9 May 2008, on Sci Fi.

²⁴ Although Abraham's name is Abram up until Gen 17:16, I will refer to him by the name Abraham, just as the ancient interpreters generally did.

²⁵ Biblical quotations are taken from the NRSV.

Interpretations of this passage from Genesis occur as early as the book of Joshua,²⁶ which suggests that, as happened with other parts of the Pentateuch, intra-scriptural interpretation occurred at a very early stage in the production of the texts. The book of Joshua states that Abraham's beginnings were originally polytheistic:

And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many." (Joshua 24:2–3)

The passage from Joshua assumes that Abraham left the polytheism of his family in order to follow the one God, who promised him many offspring. The ease with which the book of Joshua notes Abraham's polytheistic beginnings suggests that this narrative, while not present in Genesis, belongs among the earliest strata of Jewish scriptural interpretation.

In the deuterocanonical books, too, Abraham's origins are assumed to be polytheistic. The book of Judith 5:6–9a makes a veiled reference to the beginning of Abraham's life:

These people are descended from the Chaldeans. At one time they lived in Mesopotamia, because they did not wish to follow the gods of their ancestors who were in Chaldea. Since they had abandoned the ways of their ancestors, and worshipped the God of heaven, the God they had come to know, they [the Chaldeans] drove them out from the presence of their gods. So they fled to Mesopotamia and lived there for a long time. Then their God commanded them to leave the place where they were living and go to the land of Canaan. (Judith 5:6–9a)

While this reference to the origins of the Jews does not specifically mention Abraham, it is clear that Judith here alludes to Genesis 11:28–12:3, which talks of Abraham's origins among the Chaldeans and his family's movement through Mesopotamia, before moving to Canaan at God's command. According to Judith, the family was forced to leave Chaldea because they had abandoned their polytheism: the Chaldeans, it seems, chased them out. The family left their original lands specifically because of the clash between their polytheistic neighbours and the family's new belief in the one God.²⁷

²⁶ As with many other books in the Hebrew Bible, the date is highly contestable. Most scholars hold to an exilic or post-exilic date (mid-5th century BCE or later), with some arguing that earlier traditions are extant in the text. See Gordon McConville, "Joshua," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, ed. John Barton and John Muddiman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 159–160.

²⁷ Deborah Levine Gera, *Judith*, Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 203–206.

Other Second Temple literature also discusses Abraham's origins as a polytheist.²⁸ The book of Jubilees, a second century BCE rewriting of Genesis and part of Exodus, portrays Abraham arguing with and separating from his father because of his father's idol worship (Jub. 11:16). Abraham argues:

What help or advantage do we have from these idols before which you worship and bow down? Because there is not any spirit in them, for they are mute, and they are the misleading of the heart. Do not worship them.²⁹ (Jubilees 12:2–3)

Abraham's father agrees with Abraham's argument but urges him toward silence in order to protect the family from societal retribution. However, Abraham chooses (eventually) to ignore his father's words, and he burns down the house of the idols (Jub. 12:12–14). There is a strong anti-idolatry emphasis throughout the book of Jubilees, especially in relation to the life and testament of Abraham;³⁰ this anti-idolatry should be seen as commentary against polytheists, who, according to the text, worshipped useless statues that could not respond. This tendency is also seen in the episode "Escape Velocity" when Baltar attacks the polytheistic worship service. Baltar throws around the statuettes and incense and demands that the gods strike him down for his supposed sacrilege. Baltar claims that, like Abraham, he is "with God already!" as he is arrested and taken away by the military police. While Abraham in Jubilees is not caught, his brother Haran does die in the fire Abraham sets in the house of idols: Haran is said to rush into the burning house, like other concerned polytheistic citizens, to attempt to save the idols.³¹

Abraham in the Apocalypse of Abraham

The Apocalypse of Abraham is a colourful combination of narrative and apocalypse, written in the first century CE in response to the destruction of the Second Temple. The

²⁸ See, for instance, Amy Elizabeth Paulsen-Reed, "The Origins of the Apocalypse of Abraham" (PhD diss., Harvard Divinity School, 2016) and for an examination of Abraham narratives into Late Antiquity, see Carol Bakhos, *The Family of Abraham: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Interpretations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), especially chapter 3, "The First Monotheist."

²⁹ Translation of Jubilees taken from Orval S. Wintermute, "Jubilees," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume Two*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 35–142. Other texts that look to Abraham's polytheistic beginnings include Philo, *On Abraham* 71; Pseudo-Philo, *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, 23:5; and Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.154–157.

³⁰ George W.E. Nickelsburg, "Abraham the Convert: A Jewish Tradition and Its Use by the Apostle Paul," in *Biblical Figures outside the Bible*, ed. Michael E. Stone and Theodore A. Bergren (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 1998), 156–157. On anti-idolatry in the Apocalypse of Abraham, see Paulsen-Reed, "The Origins," 172–173.

³¹ The burning of the house of idols and Haran's death in it is used by the author of Jubilees to explain Gen 11:28: "Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans." For more on Haran, see Genesis Rabbah below.

midrashic first half, chapters 1–8, explores Abraham’s early years in his father’s idol workshop. The second half, chapters 9–32, constitutes an expansion of Genesis 15 and depicts Abraham’s ascension directly into the seventh heaven where he is initiated into the divine mysteries and knowledge of the eschaton. It is the first half of the book that is pertinent to our analysis. The text describes Abraham’s multiple interactions with his father’s idols, as well as his reflections on the nature of idols, which eventually lead him to the conclusion that there must be one God beyond all gods.

In chapters 1–2, Abraham, a junior priest in his father’s temple, enters the temple and finds that one of the idols, Marumath, has fallen. Abraham and his father try to lift the idol, but its head falls off. This is no problem, as Terah just carves a new body for the old head. Following this story is one of Abraham selling five idols that his father has made. He is waiting on the road leading into town, when the donkey bearing the idols is frightened by a camel’s bray and throws them all off, smashing three. Abraham throws the three broken idols into the river, while the owners of the camel pay Abraham for all five of the statues—both broken and whole. In the next section of the text, Abraham is thoughtful over the nature of the gods:

What is this inequality of activity which my father is doing? Is it not he rather who is god for his gods, because they come into being from his sculpting, his planning, and his skill? They ought to honor my father because they are his work [...] And [...] the other five gods which were smashed³² in falling from the ass, who could not save themselves and injure the ass because it smashed them, nor did their shards come up out of the river.” And I said to my heart, “If it is so, how then can my father’s god Marumath, which has the head of another stone and which is made from another stone, save a man, or hear a man’s prayer, or give him any gift? (Apocalypse of Abraham 3:2, 7–8)³³

While Baltar reacts violently, Abraham in the Apocalypse of Abraham philosophises. It is through his observation of the ways of these gods—that is, their inability to do anything to protect themselves from destruction, and the ease with which his father can replace them—that Abraham begins to realise that these statues are not gods, just carved pieces of wood, metal, or stone.

Abraham’s shift in belief from polytheism to monotheism takes a humorous turn in the Apocalypse of Abraham when he is asked by his father to assist in preparing the

³² The text itself is inconsistent here. In chapter two, only three of the five statues were smashed and thrown into the river, while in chapter three Abraham’s musings are over five gods that were smashed.

³³ Translation of Apocalypse of Abraham taken from Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Volume One*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2016), 681–705.

midday meal by gathering woodchips. Buried among the woodchips Abraham finds a small statuette called Barisat, which he then places to watch over the fire while he gathers more woodchips. Upon his return, Barisat had fallen onto his back and his feet had landed in the fire, helping to further fuel it. Abraham sees this, laughs, and says, “Barisat, truly you know how to light a fire and cook food!” (Apoc. Abr. 5:10). The statuette continues to burn and “contribute” to the mid-day meal.

These episodes add to Abraham’s increasing dissatisfaction with idol-worship, resulting in a long soliloquy arguing for the inefficacy of these gods as well as the inappropriateness of worshipping natural elements such as fire, which could destroy both the statues and one another. Abraham ends with “if only God will reveal himself by himself to us!” (Apoc. Abr. 7:12). At this, the miraculous happens, and God is indeed revealed. God calls out to Abraham and, after explaining that God is the supreme god, commands Abraham to leave his father’s house so that he will not be “slain in the sins of your father’s house” (Apoc. Abr. 8:4). Abraham’s call here is sudden, and he responds with complete obedience: he hears the commands of the Lord and immediately exits his father’s house, which is subsequently struck down by the elements—thunder and fire—which burn down the house and kill Abraham’s father. The natural elements, which Abraham has just been reflecting on in the narrative (Apoc. Abr. 7:1–9), are controlled by this new God. This event serves as proof for Abraham, based on his previous meditation on the inutility of the elements and the statues, that this new god is the only true God.

Unlike Baltar in *Battlestar Galactica*, Abraham does not have to be prodded into his belief; Abraham’s journey is one of self-discovery. The violence that Baltar shows in the scene from “Escape Velocity” explored above is lacking in Abraham’s narrative in Genesis and in the Apocalypse of Abraham. Instead, the destruction of the statues in the Apocalypse of Abraham, while present, is done through natural events: they fall to the ground and shatter, they are destroyed by fire, and eventually they are destroyed by the one God who controls nature; it is the deity here who is destructive, rather than the worshipper. Both the Apocalypse of Abraham and *Battlestar Galactica* exhibit a clash between monotheism and polytheism. The Apocalypse of Abraham expresses this clash through acts of nature controlled by the one true God, with Abraham as a thoughtful observer of the events, while in *Battlestar Galactica* at least some of the polytheists, like the Sons of Ares, are actively violent against the beliefs of Baltar’s sect. Baltar leads his followers to respond in a similar fashion, not striking out against the human worshippers of the gods but against the statuettes in particular and, in doing so, striking out against the idea of polytheism through a disruption of the polytheistic service.

Abraham in Genesis Rabbah

Genesis Rabbah is a collection of exegetical midrashim compiled at the end of the fourth century/beginning of the fifth century CE. The traditions, however, are most likely much older and some may even derive from the Second Temple period.³⁴ Genesis Rabbah 38:13 is arranged like a typical midrash from this collection: it opens with a quote from the scriptural source that is going to be expanded upon, in this case Genesis 11:28. Here it is not Abraham's call by God in Genesis 12:1 that is the focus of this exegesis, but Haran's death in the presence of his father.³⁵ Rabbi Hiyya, a rabbi from the first generation of Amoraim (ca. late second century CE) provides commentary to explain the verse:

One time a woman came in with a bowl of flour, and said to [Abraham], 'Take this and offer it before them.'

He went and took a stick, broke the idols, and put the stick in the hand of the biggest idol.

When his father came back, he said to [Abraham], 'Why in the world have you been doing these things?'

[Abraham] said to [his father], 'How can I hide it from you? One time a woman came in with a bowl of flour, and said to me, "Take this and offer it before them." Then this idol said, "I'll eat first," and that idol said, "I'll eat first." One of them, the largest, got up and grabbed the stick and broke the others.'

[Terah] said to him, 'Why are you making fun of me! Do those idols know anything [that such a thing could possibly happen]?''

[Abraham] responded to [his father], 'And should your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?' (Genesis Rabbah 38:13)³⁶

In this scene, Abraham is left in charge in his father's idol workshop. A woman brings an offering of flour to Abraham who is to present it to the idols. Abraham uses this opportunity to grab a stick and break up all the idols except the largest. When Abraham's father returns, Abraham explains the scene in the following way: the biggest idol wanted the offering all to himself, and therefore when the other idols wanted to eat first, the biggest idol grabbed the stick and broke the others. This scene is reminiscent of the

³⁴ Hermann L. Strack and Gunter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 279–280. Due to the nature of the text, it is difficult to posit exact contexts for individual midrashim.

³⁵ Tepei Kato, "Ancient Chronography on Abraham's Departure from Haran: Qumran, Josephus, Rabbinic Literature, and Jerome," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 50 (2019): 180–181. This is similar to the interpretation in the book of Jubilees, see note 31.

³⁶ Translations of Genesis Rabbah are from Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis: A New American Translation. Vol. 2: Parashiyot Thirty-Four through Sixty-Seven on Genesis 8:15–28:9* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985). I have reformatted the quotations for ease of reading.

Battlestar Galactica scene with Baltar in the polytheistic worship service: both scenes use violence—Abraham through the smashing of the idols, and Baltar through the throwing around of the pagan statuettes and incense. However, the midrash is meant to prove a point through humour while the scene from *Battlestar Galactica* is meant to answer the violence against Baltar's sect with more violence.

In the Genesis Rabbah, Abraham's father Terah is naturally upset, and in his anger admits that the idols are unable to do such things; Abraham then gets cheeky with his father and responds, "And should your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?" Terah is not happy:

[Terah] took [Abraham] and handed him over to Nimrod.³⁷

[Nimrod] said to [Abraham], 'Bow down to the fire.'

[Abraham] said to him, 'We really should bow down to water, which puts out fire.'

[Nimrod] said to him, 'Bow down to water.'

[Abraham] said to him, 'We really should bow down to the clouds, which bear the water.'

[Nimrod] said to him, 'Then let's bow down to the clouds.'

[Abraham] said to him, 'We really should bow down to the wind, which disperses the clouds.'

[Nimrod] said to him, "Then let's bow down to the wind.'

[Abraham] said to him, 'We really should bow down to human beings, who can stand up to the wind.'

[Nimrod] said to him, 'You're just playing word-games with me. Let's bow down to the fire. So now, look, I am going to throw you into the fire, and let your God whom you worship come and save you from the fire.'

Now Haran was standing there undecided. He said, 'What's the choice? If Abram wins, I'll say I'm on Abram's side, and if Nimrod wins, I'll say I'm on Nimrod's side.'

When Abram went down into the burning furnace and was saved, Nimrod said to him, 'On whose side are you?'

[Haran] said to him, 'Abram's.'

They took [Haran] and threw him into the fire, and his guts burned up and came out, and he died in the presence of his father.'

"That is the line with the verse of Scripture: 'And Haran died in the presence of his father, Terah' (Gen 11:28). (Genesis Rabbah 38:13)

³⁷ In the biblical text, Nimrod is a king, a mighty warrior, and a mighty hunter (Gen 10:8–10, 1 Chron 1:10). In addition to Genesis Rabbah, other Second Temple and Rabbinic traditions associated Nimrod as a king in opposition to God and with the building of the tower of Babel, including Jubilees, Josephus, Philo, Pseudo-Philo, and the Talmud.

At the end the midrash returns to what it set out to do at its beginning—interpret Genesis 11:28, that is, Haran’s death “in the presence of his father.” Here the explanation that Abraham’s family were originally polytheists from Joshua 24:2–3 has been read together with Genesis 11:28 in order to explain how Abraham’s brother died “in the presence of his father.” The explanation revolves around the tension between monotheism and polytheism: Abraham’s mocking of the idols upsets his father Terah, who turns him over to the ruler Nimrod, where Abraham defeats Nimrod’s defence of polytheism with clever repartee. Nimrod responds by throwing Abraham in the fire—which Abraham subsequently survives due to God’s intervention. Abraham’s brother Haran, who does not seem to be either a practicing/believing polytheist or monotheist, decides that since Abraham has been saved by God from the fire, Haran will side with Abraham—but of course it is not Abraham in whom he needed to believe, but in God, and therefore Haran perishes in the fire “in the presence of his father.”³⁸

In many ways Haran is similar to Baltar in his disbelief; until season four Baltar’s own beliefs wavered between the atheism he claims at the very beginning of *Battlestar Galactica* and the monotheism that Head Six is always pushing onto him. Even after he seems to have fully accepted belief in one God, there are scenes that call his beliefs into question, such as in “A Disquiet Follows My Soul”:³⁹

Baltar: What manner of forgiveness are you seeking? Is it that of disobedient children? Are you...Are you children?

Woman 1: No.

Woman 2: No.

Baltar: Well, obviously, you’re a child. We have some children here. But to the rest of you, in your mind’s eye, are you all just children, who’ve transgressed against your father’s divine will?

Woman 1: No, we’ve done nothing wrong.

Baltar: Are you being punished for your multitude of sins? Are you?

³⁸ Akin to Abraham’s thoughtful reflection on the natural elements in the Apocalypse of Abraham, in this portion of Genesis Rabbah there is a clear disdain of the worship of natural elements. Abraham proves, through his clever banter, that the elements are all able to be defeated by another element or even by humans. Ultimately, it is only God who controls the elements—and thus God saves Abraham from the fire. The exchange between Nimrod and Abraham mocks outright the practice of worshipping the natural elements in polytheistic religions.

³⁹ “A Disquiet Follows my Soul,” *Battlestar Galactica*, Season 4, Episode 12, written and directed by Ronald D. Moore, 23 January 2009, on Sci Fi.

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Everyone: No.

Baltar: Is this really our lot, to have been led by a father to the promised land? We shouldn't have to suffer. To paradise, only to have paradise cruelly smashed to bits before our very eyes? Are these the actions of a father towards his children?

Everyone: No.

One Listener: It's not right.

Baltar: What kind of father is that? What have you done? What have you done to deserve this punishment? What sins have you committed? What dark thoughts have you harboured that condemn you...condemn you to wander through the universe without hope, without light? So you have to ask yourself, what kind of a father abandons his own children to despair and loneliness?

Everyone: No one!

Baltar: Perhaps we are not the ones in need of forgiveness. Perhaps we are not. Perhaps we have been wronged. Yes, that's right.

Baltar [Shouting]: Perhaps it is God who should come down here and beg for our forgiveness! Am I right? Am I right? Then shout it to God!

[All shouting]

Baltar [shouting]: What have you done for me lately? Where have you been? There is a disease aboard this ship and it is a disease of denial! Am I right? Don't tell me. Shout it to God!

Unlike Haran, Baltar owns his questioning and addresses it to God. This act, in and of itself, proves that Baltar believes that God will hear and provide answers. Haran, on the other hand, claims only to believe in the one God because his brother Abraham was miraculously saved from the fire; Haran appears as a pragmatist trying to save his own hide without any commitment to truth beyond self-serving reasons.

Abraham's near-death experience with the fire also provides contemporaneous commentary on the Jewish interaction with Roman suppression and Rabbinic martyrdom, noting especially the idealised view that the true believer in the one God, like Abraham, will be saved from martyrdom, while the one who only gives lip-service to belief, like Haran, will expire. The clash between mono- and polytheists in *Battlestar Galactica* is not idealised; unlike the midrash where Abraham is saved by his faith in the one true God, in *Battlestar Galactica*, humanity dies at the hand of the Cylon monotheists, and with the destruction of the resurrection ship, a facility which allowed Cylons to return to life in new physical bodies indefinitely, the Cylons can now be killed at the hands of the polytheists. In *Battlestar Galactica*, violence and death belong to both the mono- and polytheists. Whereas in the midrash God saves through faith, in the Syfy series believers (and unbelievers) of every kind are liable to die. Baltar's sect offers a bridge between the

two beliefs, but it also threatens both the human polytheists and the Cylon monotheists by its unique position as a monotheistic sect among the humans. Baltar's monotheism does offer an alternative to polytheism, but the alternative is not any more peaceful than the current status quo.

Conclusion

Baltar is most often compared with Judas,⁴⁰ but parallels have also been made comparing Baltar with John the Baptist and even Jesus. The scene from "Escape Velocity" analysed in this article is especially reminiscent for some viewers of the turning of the moneylenders' tables by Jesus in the gospels.⁴¹ In this paper I have argued that the figure of Abraham as the archetypal monotheist is yet another lens through which we can understand Baltar's character. Abraham begins to take on the attributes of a monotheist fighting his way among a culture of polytheists early in the history of interpretation, and by the late Second Temple and early Rabbinic periods, he is a philosopher who determines that there is only one god through his intellectual musings and observations of the natural world. Baltar, too, undergoes a transformation from firm atheist at the beginning to agnostic to believer in, and later prophet of, the one God by the end of the season four. Both figures serve as trailblazers in their largely polytheistic worlds and represent the archetype by which others—later Jewish interpreters for Abraham, and for Baltar, his followers—measure their own personal journey in a world that worships many gods. Analysed alongside the ancient interpretations of Abraham's religious journey, Baltar's character can be seen as a new Abraham, a proclaimer of the one true God in a universe where other humans are participants in a polytheistic tradition.

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⁴⁰ Loftis, "What a Strange Little Man," 30.

⁴¹ See Mark 11:15–19, Matthew 21:12–17, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–16.

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