

Socrates Meets Jesus

Peter Kreeft

(Revised and edited by Jeffrey D. Breshears)

The following dialogue comes from the third session of Professor Liberalis' seminar on Christology at Desperate State University. As in the previous discussion, the participants include **Professor Liberalis (PL)**, **Socrates (S)**, **Paula Postman (PP)**, **Sunshine Newage (SN)**, **Chris Christian (CC)**, and **Thomas Keptic (TK)**. This dialogue, excerpted from Peter Kreeft's book, *Socrates Meets Jesus*, focuses on the gospel story of Jesus.

THE GREAT ENCOUNTER

Professor Liberalis: All right, let's get started. Our issue today is the historical Jesus as presented in the gospel accounts. Socrates, what did you glean from your readings?

Socrates: Far more than I imagined. And it is not a question of what I gleaned, but who I encountered. I now know why I was brought back to life and why I am here. It was to meet this person who was born 400 years after I died.

PL: Uh, that's quite a testimony! You almost sound as if you had a mystical experience reading the gospel accounts of the life of Christ.

S: I met the most unique and extraordinary person who has ever lived. So if that is tantamount to a mystical experience, then I suppose you can say that I had one, in a sense.

Thomas Keptic: I'm disappointed that you would be so easily impressed, and that you would abandon your traditional beliefs so easily the first time you read the New Testament. You seem to have exchanged your natural skepticism and your philosophical approach to life for a gullible religious faith that offers simplistic answers to complex questions.

S: Oh, I am not abandoning any of my former philosophy. I am just adding to it. I found nothing in the story of Jesus Christ that contradicts my long-held beliefs. I have always dealt in the realm of concepts that signify reality, but the difference now is that I have met a man who *personifies* those concepts and that ultimate reality.

TK: You mean, *personified*. He's dead, you know.

S: Oh, no. According to what I read, he is very much alive!

TK: I can't believe what I'm hearing. First, Bob Dylan, and now you! Well, actually, I'm not so sure about Dylan... But anyway, I've known a lot of Christian believers, and let me tell you, they all abandon reason once they embrace faith.

S: They *all* abandon reason – how can you be sure of that? But even if that were true, and if some believers – or even *many* believers – embrace faith as an escape from reason, that would merely acknowledge the reality of human ignorance and human weakness. It would not alter the innate truthfulness of the gospel story.

All I know is that when I read the story of Jesus, I was changed. I was led by the river of reason and swept into the ocean of Truth and Reality, and I will never be the same again.

PL: Socrates, I have to say that I never anticipated this. So you believe you were swept into the ocean of Reality, do you? You actually think you had a mystical experience?

S: *You* are the one who keeps referring to it as a "mystical experience." Personally, I do not see why you call meeting a person a mystical experience. Are you having one now?

PL: No, of course not. But I'm meeting a real person, you see. *You* only read a *book*.

S: On the contrary, I did not only read a book – I met a real *person*. The book was not the object of my experience, only the medium for it.

Paula Postman: So, Socrates, you have become a Christian! How... ummm... utterly *interesting!*

Sunshine Newage: Uhhh... yeah. Really. I am, for once, speechless.

S: I did not know that I had become a Christian. All I knew was that I believed in this Jesus. Not just my mind, but my heart, had been given over to him. I had to keep reading – I think it was halfway through the Book of Acts before I realized that I had become a Christian. So yes, to answer your question, I apparently am.

PP: That’s so...

S: Interesting?

PP: Uhh, yeah... *interesting.*

SN: Definitely interesting.

Chris Christian: Truly.

S: It would be *interesting* only if I had changed my philosophy. This, on the other hand, is far more radical than that. It is more like a new life – a new spiritual life.

CC: You mean, like being born again – only in a spiritual sense?

S: Precisely. I remember, that is how Jesus described it to Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. I believe that is the most descriptive and accurate of all images because only birth is as radical a change as this. It is a change not only in one’s mind, but also in one’s total being. Truly, something new has been born in me.

Now what I do not understand is how someone who has been touched by God as I have been can be anything but radically different. Yet I look around here at Desperate State, and there must be many students – and perhaps even a few faculty – who claim to be Christians. Yet how can one be a Christian and still have the same values and attitudes as everyone else? How could you look the same, talk the same, and think the same as non-Christians? How can their lives be so... so bland?

SN: Well, maybe they’ve never really had an experience like yours.



CC: Yeah. Remember, there are a lot of “cultural Christians” in America – people who grew up in Christian homes and in Christian churches, but who have never had a life-changing spiritual conversion. They call themselves “Christians,” but in fact they’re just nominal Christians.

S: That would be the worst form of deception.

CC: Yes, but apparently it’s widespread.

SN: Well, I’m happy for you, Socrates. If you’re satisfied and happy, so am I.

S: But Sunshine, *my* faith does *you* no good. You have to experience it for yourself.

SN: Oh, I’ve had a lot of spiritual experiences, Socrates. Let me tell you: I’ve been “born again” many times!

ON ARCHETYPES AND MYTHOLOGY

PL: Let’s not get too far off the subject. Now Socrates, I’m sure you know that many people – in fact, many different kinds of people – claim to have religious conversion experiences. That’s all fine and good if it makes a person feel comfortable and secure, but I’m sure you would agree that a person certainly *could* be living an illusion – he or she *could* be simply fooling themselves. That’s the problem with these kind of “spiritual experiences” – there is no rational or scientific basis for them. How can we possibly assess whether or not they are true? How do you know that *your* experience is not an illusion? How do you know *you* are not deceived?

S: That is a good and honest question, which I will endeavor to answer as best I can. Now, if I understand the New Testament correctly, it claims that the supreme Creator-God became a man so that men and women could become gods – “partakers of the divine nature,” as I read. I think it was the apostle Paul who wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” Now how can anyone possibly be the same after that, if it really happens?

PL: But that’s just metaphorical and mythological language! It’s not to be taken *literally*.

S: So you think it is only a myth?

PL: Of course. Surely, if you think about it, you will, too.

S: Oh, I can assure you that I *have* thought about it. (*Turning to Paula and whispering:*) Did he just call me “Shirley?”

PL: I’m sure you understand the power of myth. Your culture was the birthplace for much of the world’s mythology.

S: Oh yes, I understand myth. But when I read about this man Jesus and about his disciples and the early church, I find something so unmistakable, so distinctive, so strong and full of life and joy, that it’s like the noonday sun. If all these things really happened, then it is no wonder that the whole world was turned upside down. It is no wonder the people who met Christ either worshiped him or hated him. And it is no wonder the people who met his disciples either believed them and worshiped him, or did not believe them and persecuted them for telling this abominable, insane lie. It has to be all or nothing.

PL: It sounds like you’re defending fanaticism.

S: Oh, no. It is more like a marriage. It is like being passionately in love, and totally devoted to one another. But when I look here at the School of Religion at Desperate State University, all I see is dry scholarship. Most of you think you are studying a dead man rather than someone who is alive and active, just as I am alive and active.

PL: But Socrates, Jesus isn’t here as you are here.

S: The Bible says he is. His disciples certainly believed and acted as if he was. He himself promised to be. If it is not a myth, if he really rose from the dead, then he is not dead, but alive.

PL: But Socrates, you are taking this too literally.

S: I am? Do you not believe that Jesus rose from the dead?

PL: Yes – in a sense.

S: In what sense? That makes no sense.

PL: Sure it does. Jesus is an archetype. Surely you understand archetypes.

S: Of course I do – and please don’t call me “Shirley.” I am aware of what is meant to be archetype and what is meant to be history. And the clear claim of the New Testament is that the birth and life and death and resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ all happened in time and place – in other words, it happened *historically*. An archetype

does not actually happen; it is an eternal truth with a universal meaning, but it is not historical reality.

TK: Oh, but you’re wrong in thinking that Jesus is not an archetype.

S: I am not saying that he is not an archetype. I am saying that he is not *merely* an archetype. I am saying that he is also *historical*.

TK: I don’t think something – or someone – could be both.

S: Is that not the whole point of the Incarnation? That eternity became time, God became man, and myth became historical?

PL: So Jesus Christ *is* an archetype!

S: Apparently so. But clearly he is also historical.

PL: But the important thing is what Jesus represents – and what the resurrection symbolizes. We mustn’t reduce all this to sterile historical facts. See, that is the problem with literalists: the insistence on literal historicity misses the main point.

S: I agree, except that I believe the archetype somehow incarnated himself and became historical. Now I admit that I do not understand how a man can be both God and man, but clearly that is what the New Testament says. How can you read the New Testament and miss that?

PL: Listen, Socrates, I’ve spent my whole career as a theologian studying the New Testament.

S: Yes, and you have tenure, too.

PL: Yes, I do. And what you fail to appreciate is that there are many ways to interpret the Bible. You need to understand that the reason you interpret it literally is because you lack the hermeneutical sophistication to interpret it in a more nuanced manner.

S: Oh, I see. Then may I ask you an unsophisticated question?

PL: Certainly.

S: Do you believe Jesus really rose from the dead or not?

PL: Socrates, as I said, you are missing the point.

S: But you are not answering my question.

PL: It’s not that simple.

S: I don't see why not. Either Jesus rose from the tomb or he did not. There is no third option.

TK: Sure there is! You're ignoring the whole dimension of meaning and interpretation. You see, the real issue is, What does the resurrection *mean*?

S: Clearly, whatever else it may mean, it certainly means that a man who was dead came back to life.

PL: Socrates, you really need to read Rudolf Bultmann.

S: Rudolf what man?

PL: Bultmann. He is one of the theological giants of the 20th century and one of the major influences on my own thinking.

S: Well, what did he think about the resurrection?

PL: Something quite profound, I think. He said that even if the bones of the dead Jesus were found tomorrow in a tomb in Palestine, all the essentials of Christianity would remain intact.

S: *That is profound?* That may be what Mr. Bultmann said, but...

PL: *Doctor* Bultmann – he was a distinguished professor of theology.

S: Oh, pardon me. That may be what Dr. Bultmann said, but it clearly is not what the New Testament says. I remember what Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: "If Christ is not risen, your faith is in vain." Do you suppose Dr. Bultmann never read that passage?

PL: I'm sure he did. He probably preached sermons on it. But here's why the resurrection is so important: it represents the union of power and goodness. Jesus is the ideal man – the perfectly good man. The resurrection symbolizes power – the union of power with goodness. Death represents weakness and defeat: life represents power and victory. The problem of human life is that goodness seems weak and evil seems to triumph. The resurrection reverses that. It symbolizes the strength and power of moral goodness over evil, by the power of Jesus' life over death. The resurrection, you see, is the unification of the two great forces in the universe: power and goodness.

SN: Unification – I like that! Perfect harmony! Is that like the *yin/yang* principle?

PL: No, Sunshine, it's not.

S: But Professor, if the resurrection did not really happen, then goodness isn't really unified with power, is it?

PL: It doesn't have to happen literally for the meaning to be significant. An archetype doesn't have to be incarnated to be an archetype. The *meaning* is the thing, not the historical literalism.

S: So you say that the meaning of the resurrection is the union of goodness with power?

PL: Yes, that's what I've said.

S: Not just goodness, but goodness and power?

PL: I think you heard me correctly.

S: And you say the resurrection did not really happen?

PL: No, I haven't said that. I said it is not necessary to interpret it *literally*.

S: But to interpret it literally is to believe that it actually happened – historically and physically – not just in other people's minds. Yet you say that the meaning of the resurrection remains the same even if the historical event is no longer believed?

PL: The literal, physical, historical event, yes.

S: But if it did not happen in history, it is only a myth, an archetype.

PL: Correct.

S: So the historical Jesus did not have the power to rise from the dead, but the mythical Jesus does.

PL: Your words, not mine.

S: And rising from the dead means power?

PL: That's correct.

S: And Jesus represents goodness.

PL: Of course.

S: Then if Jesus did not really conquer death, it follows that goodness does not really have power. In that case, the metaphorical meaning is no longer valid, is it? For if the resurrection really happened, the meaning is that goodness has power. But if it did not really happen, then goodness does not have power. Does that not follow?

PL: No, it doesn't. It needn't be historically true, only mythically true.

S: Ah, but *this* myth is different from all other myths, for it is not only about goodness but about the union of goodness with power. The meaning of other myths is unchanged whether the myths have the power of history or not, but the meaning of this myth is the union of archetype with history, myth with fact, goodness with power. So how can its meaning survive the loss of half of its component parts – namely, its history and its power?

PP: But Socrates, why does the resurrection have to be literal and historical?

S: For several reasons. First, because it validates Jesus' claim to be divine since only a God can conquer death. Second, because it is the completion of his mission in life, the reason he became a man – to save humanity from death and the origin of death, which is sin. I do not claim to understand all that this means or how it works – I am merely saying what the New Testament clearly teaches.

TK: Well, congratulations, Socrates. You seem to have become a fundamentalist!

S: Oh, no. Not that word again!

THREE RIVERS

PL: Well, I have to say that I'm quite disappointed. I had thought that with all the wealth of mythic culture you brought to us you would be much more nuanced, more sophisticated, and more literary in approaching this whole thing of the resurrection. Tell me, what do you think of your Greek myths?

S: In some ways, they remind me of the Old Testament Jewish prophets I read about last week. They seem to point to Jesus.

PL: Excuse me?

SN: Now *that's* bizarre!

TK: Oh, really now, Socrates!

S: No, seriously. Many of our myths were about a god who sacrifices his life for humanity. In his dying and rising, he somehow wins eternal life for all humanity.

SN: So the Christ myth is not unique after all! It's just a universal, mythic archetype.

S: Indeed it is a universal mythic archetype. But it is also unique: remember, it actually happened! It may be a myth, but it is myth become fact. It may be an archetype, but it incarnated itself in history. You see, I had already known the basic outline of the myth. It was as if a story that I had always heard in mythic form suddenly became true in historical reality.

PP: That *is* remarkable – if it's true, that is.

SN: Far out! That's super-cool!

S: Actually, many of our myths seem to point to Christ in one way or another. I think I understood my own tradition's myths for the first time when I read the New Testament, rather as one would understand the meaning of a confused dream for the first time if he woke to find the very things he had dreamed about were right there in the real world.

PP: So how had you previously understood these myths, Socrates?

S: Wrongly. My rational mind dismissed them as mere legends and fables. I thought I could squeeze the moral truths out of them as you squeeze juice out of a fruit, and express those truths philosophically, leaving behind the dry rind of myth. Yet even as I did this, something in me warned against it, as if there was something that I was missing, something even more precious in the rind than in the juice. Now I see what it was. But it was not an *it*, but a *he*.

PP: So are you saying that you found prophets outside the Hebrew tradition – prophets in your pagan tradition, too?

S: Yes.

PL: Then you're admitting that religions other than Judaism and Christianity are valid paths to God.

S: Define "valid."

PL: Essentially true.

S: I would not put it that way, and I am no expert on other religions, but it seems to me that most of them contain at least *some* truth.

PL: So you agree that these other myths contain some profound truths?

S: Yes, although they often mixed truth with very silly errors.

CC: What about Satanically-inspired myths? Aren't some of these ancient myths spiritual deceptions? Don't some of them contain just enough truth to confuse people?

S: Oh, yes. There were certainly plenty of those in ancient mythology.

CC: So how would we know which myths were "divinely-inspired" and which were Satanic counterfeits?

S: Myths are imaginative stories constructed around core principles. If the core principles are erroneous – for instance, the glorification of war, raw power, greed, or sexual exploitation – then they obviously were not divinely-inspired.

CC: So the myths – at least some of the myths – were extra-biblical prophecies.

S: Yes, I suppose you could say that. As the Bible itself says, "God has not left himself without witness" – or something like that.

PL: And what about the great philosophers? Do you think they were prophets, too?

S: A true philosopher is a lover of wisdom and a seeker of truth. And all wisdom and truth reside in the character and nature of God, do they not? So in seeking truth and wisdom, a philosopher is seeking God, whether or not he knows it.

PP: So do you think any of the philosophers actually found the God of the Bible?

S: I think they found some important truths about God.

PL: So you agree that the Hebrew prophets, the Greek philosophers, and the worldwide myth-makers were all pointing to God.

S: Yes – at least, *some* of them were. Many of them seem to have a divine goal in common. But they also seem to have important differences. In terms of clarity, for example, the prophets seem the clearest, the philosophers next, and the myth-makers last. In terms of efficacy, here again the prophets seem to tell us the most about God, and perhaps the philosophers tell us the least. I had always thought that we philosophers knew more of God than the myth-makers did, but now I am not so sure.

PP: So do you think that these three traditions were like three rivers all running into the same sea?

S: Yes, from three different directions, which correspond to three aspects of the soul. The philosophers appealed to the intellect, the myth-makers to the imagination, and the prophets to the will.

PP: But any one of the three rivers can carry us to our common destination, the divine sea.

S: I am not certain about that. Perhaps in theory, but not necessarily in fact. Perhaps the river of philosophy is too cold or rocky for most people to navigate successfully. Perhaps the river of myth is too muddy and swampy, and many of its navigators get stuck before they reach the sea. Perhaps only the river of the prophets is pure and clear and deep and straight and safe for smooth sailing.

SN: That's a beautiful metaphor. I *love* metaphors!

RESURRECTION REDUX

PL: Let's return to our central issue. Socrates, when I asked you why you thought the resurrection had to be literal, you answered that it proved Jesus' divinity. Correct?

S: Yes, I did in fact imply that.

PL: Then you need to be aware that most of our greatest modern theologians disagree. Like me, they emphasize the symbolic significance of the resurrection over the physicality of it. Many of us think that focusing on the physicality of the resurrection is rather low-level and crude.

S: I have heard that many modern theologians think that way, but I seriously doubt their greatness – no offense to you personally. But if Jesus did not literally rise from the dead, what did?

PL: I don't understand. Why must some *thing* have risen from the dead literally for us to appreciate the significance of the resurrection principle?

S: Why use the term *resurrection* if nothing happened?

PL: Well, of course something happened. The real resurrection occurred in the hearts and minds and lives of Jesus' disciples. They changed from fearful, confused people to confident, purposeful people who spiritually conquered the Roman world.

S: What changed them?

PL: Faith in the resurrection – or at least, faith in the meaning of the resurrection.

S: But if the resurrection did not happen, their faith was a delusion. Did a delusion conquer the world?

PL: No. Resurrection faith is faith in Jesus' message and way of life. You're failing to appreciate the power of myth. The mythical truth lived on forever, even if his body was dead.

S: And Jesus' message is to have faith, to live by faith?

PL: Precisely. Now you see it.

S: I see – except that there is no *it* to see. It is like a hall of mirrors. What you are speaking of is pure *fideism* – faith in faith. That's like being in love with love instead of a real person, is it not? If there is no resurrection, where is the object of resurrection faith? And without an object, how can there be faith. As I read in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "faith is substance."

PL: Well, I'm a theologian, not a philosopher. I would have to ask my colleagues in the Philosophy Department about that.

S: Yes, I am sure I would find their explanation to be, uhhh... interesting. But it certainly seems to be a matter of whether a dead body came back to life. Abstractions aside, there are only two possibilities in the real world: either Jesus rose from the dead, or he did not. And there were only two possibilities in his disciples' minds: either they believed that he rose from the dead, or they did not. Therefore, there are four possible combinations. First, that he rose and they believed that he rose, which is what the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament declares. Second, that he rose but they did *not* believe it – in which case they lied when they wrote the Gospels and the epistles. Third, that Jesus did not rise and they did not believe that he did – in which case they also lied about it. And fourth, that Jesus did not rise but the disciples thought he did – in which case they unwittingly spread falsehoods out of ignorance or superstition.

PL: Okay – that's all obvious. So what's the point of all this analysis?

S: Simply this: that in three of these four cases, it is a falsehood that transformed lives and conquered the Roman world. I do not see how a falsehood can have such noble consequences.

PL: Myths are often very powerful and influential.

S: But the resurrection is presented in the New Testament not as a myth but as a historical fact. How can a falsehood produce truth and joy and moral power? How can a falsehood make a sinner into a saint?

PL: Socrates, you have a very unrealistic and naive understanding of history. How can anyone be sure what really happened 2,000 years ago in a tomb outside of Jerusalem?

S: We may not know what happened *inside* the tomb, but we know what happened *outside* of it. This faith in Jesus and the resurrection conquered the world. It seems that whether Jesus rose or not, his disciples certainly *believed* that he did. What else gave them courage in the face of persecution and suffering and death? If they knew the resurrection was a lie, what gave them the courage to die for a lie? If they were not assured by Jesus' resurrection that death was no longer to be feared, what made them so fearless in the face of death?

PP: Perhaps they were motivated by Jesus' life and his radical teachings.

S: His ethical teachings?

PP: Sure.

S: But most of Jesus' ethical teachings were not radically new. Most of them were taught by the Jewish prophets, and many of them were taught by me and other philosophers centuries before Jesus.

PL: Okay, I'll grant you that the sources do seem to argue for a literal resurrection. But you can't prove it really happened just from that. Besides, we shouldn't be so concerned with the literal and the material. That's rather crass and crude, don't you think? Don't you agree that the soul is what's important – not the body?

S: Yes, I agree that the soul is more important than the body. But there is at least one very good reason for being so crassly concerned with the material.

PL: Which is?

S: Is death a crass and crude and material problem? Is it not a literal, physical problem?

PL: Apparently so.

S: Then the solution to the problem, if it is to be philosophically consistent, must be a crass and crude and material solution – like a real physical resurrection.

TK: Well, there have been theories as to what happened to Jesus’ body, you know.

S: But they have all been decisively disproved, logically and historically, have they not?

TK: Well, maybe in some people’s minds. But that doesn’t stop other people from believing in them.

S: People such as liberal theologians?

PL: Hey, watch out! I’m one of those! If it weren’t for us, the Fundamentalists would prevail.

S: I’m beginning to wonder if Fundamentalists even exist. Are they not the ultimate bogeymen? It sounds like if they did *not* exist, you and your colleagues would have to *invent* them.

CC: Oh, Fundamentalists *do* exist, Socrates. Believe me, they’re out there! It’s just that Professor Liberalis wants to label anyone who holds to traditional biblical beliefs a “Fundamentalist.” You wouldn’t believe how many times my professors here at Desperate State have picked on me and my friends in class, harassing and ridiculing our beliefs while claiming to be so “liberal” and “tolerant.” And the worst part about it is that they usually misrepresent what we actually believe, and then they attack and ridicule us!

S: I can relate to that. In fact, it happened to me.

PL: Mr. Christian, if you feel so persecuted here at DSU, perhaps you’d feel more comfortable somewhere else – such as Bob Jones University or Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University, for instance.

CC: See, Socrates. That’s a perfect example of what I was saying!

S: Dr. Liberalis, what the skeptical scholars seem incapable of answering is the question, What did the disciples and early apostles get out of perpetuating the Big Lie of the resurrection? Why did they generate and perpetuate this grand conspiracy? As far as I know, they got ridiculed, ostracized, exiled, deprived of their property, and deprived of their civil liberties. Many were imprisoned, whipped, tortured, stoned, boiled in oil, fed to lions, and even crucified. Isn’t that true?

PL: Yes, both Christian and non-Christian sources agree on that.

S: And under torture none ever confessed that it was all a lie, a myth, or a fabrication, did they?

PL: Not that we know of.

S: This is amazing! I do not understand what could have made them endure such hardships and torture except their certainty that Jesus really did rise from the dead. If they did not believe in the resurrection and life after death, why would they give up the only life they knew was real for nothing?

TK: Good question. But it still doesn’t prove that the resurrection literally happened.

S: But it *does* seem to prove that if the miracle of the resurrection did not happen, then an even more incredible miracle happened.

TK: What is that?

S: That twelve Jewish peasants invented the world’s most fantastic and successful lie for no reason at all, and then proceeded to suffer and die for it as willing, joyful, and faithful martyrs.

PL: Well, stranger things have happened, I suppose.

S: Actually, I don’t think that is true. It would truly be the strangest thing that has ever happened.

PP: Well, I’m truly happy that you’ve found something to believe in, Socrates.

S: Only rejoice if what I have found is true, Paula. And that is what I believe I found in the Gospels: Absolute Truth – only it turned out not to be a principle but a person. And it is to that Person – that living Reality – that I will devote my life.

CC: Amen.

PP: Amen for sure! That’s what I want!

SN: But what *is* truth? Can we talk about that? Don’t we all have our own “truth”?

CC & PP: (*Groan*). We’ve covered that already!

PL: Well, let’s not jump to any conclusions, class. We don’t want a revival breaking out here in my Christology class!

S: Oh, professor, I wouldn’t worry about that!

