

Socrates Discovers YHWH

Peter Kreeft

(Revised and edited by Jeffrey D. Breshears)

The following dialogue comes from the second 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)**. Navel Gazer, however, has dropped the course. This dialogue, excerpted and edited from Chapter 8 of Peter Kreeft's book, *Socrates Meets Jesus*, focuses on the character and nature of God as revealed in the Old Testament.

ON OBJECTIVE REALITY

Professor Liberalis: Hello, class. Good to see most of you back again. Now let's get started. Socrates, did you read the whole Old Testament like you said you would?

Socrates: Yes, I did indeed.

PL: And what did you learn from your read? Tell us first what it was you were looking for, and then whether you found it, please.

S: Primarily, I was looking for what Jesus meant when he used the term God. You recall that I was puzzled by Jesus' claim to be God. So the following train of thought occurred to me, and it seemed reasonable to follow it: In order to understand Jesus' great influence on history – which was the question I began with – I had to understand Jesus, of course. And in order to understand Jesus I had to understand his concept of himself, who he claimed to be. And since he claimed to be the God of the Jews, I had to understand the Jewish concept of God. And in order to do that, I had to read the Jewish Scriptures. So I did.

PL: Good. And what did you find?

S: A number of very surprising things.

First, as I said, I read the whole thing – all the history and all the prophecies and all the stories – with a philosopher's end in mind – the concept of God. And I learned a number of astonishing things which my previous concepts of God had not prepared me for.

Thomas Keptic: That's because we always view things according to our own prejudices and our own experiences, conditioned by our society. We're all prisoners of our culture. No one is objective.

Sunshine Newage: Oh, I agree.

S: Why not?

TK: Because our thoughts and our values are determined by our society and culture. That was true for you, and it's still true today.

S: But Thomas, that opinion seems to be like a man sawing off the tree limb he is sitting on; it contradicts itself.

TK: No it doesn't. How?

S: If every thought is totally determined by your social conditioning and not by the way things really are – independent of your social conditioning – then that thought itself is determined only by social opinion and not by the way things really are. So it is no more likely to be true than its opposite. You see, it leaves no ground to stand on to do the very thing you want to do – and the one thing that I want to do – to criticize and analyze and understand our society and culture. If we can never know how things really are, outside our society's conditioning process, then does it not follow that we can never criticize that conditioning and that society? In that case, we become mere status quo conservatives.

TK: Well, no one's ever accused me being that!

S: But you must either be a status quo conservative, or a liar, or illogical. For if it is true that we are merely a product of our society and culture, and if you are logical enough to draw the necessary consequence of that belief, then you must be a status quo conservative. So take your choice: Which are you – a teller of lies, a committer of logical fallacies, or a status quo conservative?

TK: Now wait a minute, Socrates! That’s what I don’t like about you! You think you’ve got it all figured out, don’t you?

S: No, I do not have it all figured out. But are there any other logical possibilities for what you are?

TK: Yes! I’m a radical skeptic. I’m a rebel, a dissident, a free-thinker. I reject the status quo!

Paula Postman: It’s true, Socrates. He really is!

S: If you are a radical, then you must have gotten your radical ideas from some source other than your society and its traditions.

PL: Excuse me, but we’re straying too far off the subject. Let’s get back to the main issue, the question of the Jewish concept of God. We really don’t have time in this class to explore all these other issues.

S: We don’t? Why not?

PL: Well, because our classes are scheduled very tightly. We only have an hour.

S: Do you mean that the university puts a time limit on the pursuit of truth? That’s very odd.

SN: Well, Socrates, some of us have a life *outside* this institution!

PL: Yes, welcome to the modern world, Socrates. We’re busy people. We’ve got things to do, places to go, people to see...

S: But the pursuit of truth is the greatest...

PL: I know what you’re going to say. Look, we all value education around here. But we take it in moderation. Wasn’t that a paramount virtue in your society – *sophrosyne* – “Nothing in excess”?

S: *Sophrosyne* was indeed considered a great virtue when applied to worldly matters such as the pursuit of pleasure. But *I* never advocated moderation when it comes to truth and beauty, justice and wisdom, or the pursuit of knowledge and understanding.

PL: Well, as I said, we have too many other priorities these days.

S: Too many priorities? It sounds like you have too many distractions. What could be more important than...

REVELATIONS

PL: Uh, excuse me, Socrates, but you were going to tell us what you learned from reading the Old Testament.

S: (*Sighs.*) Yes – very well. I was about to say that my old concept of God was profoundly shocked when I read these ancient Jewish Scriptures. For I found there a concept of God that I had not encountered before.

PL: Please share with us your new insight.

S: Certainly. The first and most important is simply the belief that there is one universal God. Most people in my day thought there were many gods, but some strongly suspected that these were only various manifestations of the one God.

PL: And who was this God, Socrates?

S: Oh, I would not name him.

PL: Why not?

S: Because, in all honesty, I did not know who he was. He was unknown to me.

That was why I was a philosopher – a “seeker of wisdom.” You see, I was neither a dogmatist or a skeptic. For it is the business of the philosopher to *inquire*, and to inquire we must believe that truth exists, and that it *can* be known, and that we don’t already know it perfectly. The skeptic does not believe in truth, or does not believe that we can know it, while the dogmatist does not doubt that he already understands it perfectly. Neither of these, it seems to me, can be philosophers. But of the two, I was closer to being a skeptic than a dogmatist when it came to the knowledge of God.

PL: That’s interesting. What else?

PP: That’s so cool. Socrates rocks!

TK: Well, at least I’m glad to know that you’re closer to my way of thinking than to Chris.

SN: I hate dogmatism! Dogmatists are so judgmental! They are such bores! Yuck!

PP: Yes, they are. I feel the same way.

PL: Please continue. I agree that if God exists, we cannot know anything about him – or her, or it.

S: Oh, let us not be *too* hasty in assuming that. Perhaps the nature of God is not *totally* unknown. After all, we *do* have *some* data from which we might derive some knowledge of God – I’m referring to ourselves and our world. It seemed reasonable to me, as to most people, to think that God had something to do with designing and shaping the world. If there is a divine providence, if things in the world are governed by God, then we might reasonably expect to find some characteristics of God manifest in this world – just as an artist can be known in part from his art and the writer from his writings.

PL: Oh, really? And what characteristics do you find in the world that seem to shed insight into the nature of God?

S: It was not what most people concluded. They saw this world as a mixture of good and evil, and that is why they concluded that the gods were a mixture of good and evil. But my conviction, which Plato included in his *Republic*, was that God had to be wholly good and the source of all good things.

TK: So you think that most people were polytheists because of the problem of evil – that they couldn’t believe in one, all-powerful and all-good God because of the reality of evil?

S: Yes. It certainly seems reasonable to think that if there were a single God who was both all-good and all-powerful, it would follow that there would be no evil in the world. As the philosopher Epicurus wrote:

God either wishes to take away evil, and is unable; or he is able and unwilling; or he is neither willing nor able; or he is both willing and able.

If he is willing and unable, he is impotent, which is not in accordance with the character of God. If he is able and unwilling, he is uncaring, which is equally at variance with God. If he is neither willing nor able, he is both impotent and uncaring, and therefore not God. If he is both willing and able, which alone is suitable to God, then what is the source of evil, and why does God not remove it?

PL: Socrates, how do *you* know what Epicurus wrote? He lived a hundred years after your time.

S: Do you not think that the first thing I would do after reappearing here on earth would be to catch up on the current status of my passion, philosophy? I have spent much time in your university library researching the field. After all, I *am* Socrates, you know!

PP: Yeah, he *is* that – I mean, he is *him*!

PL: All right. That makes sense.

TK: Well, I agree with Epicurus. That’s why I don’t believe there *is* a God – or at least, that’s *one* reason why I don’t believe in God.

PL: Socrates, theologians call the problem of God and evil a theodicy. It’s a fascinating issue and a perplexing problem, but let’s get back to the main subject that we’re dealing with here: What else did you think about God?

S: I thought God had to have great wisdom and beauty, since we see both of these qualities mirrored so impressively in nature.

SN: Absolutely! That’s what I think, too. Far out!

PL: Okay. What else?

S: I also pondered not only what God was *like*, but what we as human beings *owe* him. The pious people of my day usually believed that we owed the deities sacrifices and ceremonies. I, on the other hand, believed that the *true* sacrifice was to live according to the moral law. My society tended to separate what you would call religion and ethics, the God and the good. I tried to unite them. In fact, Plato called the one true God simply “the Good.” I always thought that the offering God wanted was not a perfect lamb but a perfect soul – so I identified true piety with justice, goodness, and charity.

Chris Christian: That’s amazing that you, a pagan living in a pagan society, would come up with those insights. Are you sure you didn’t read the Torah or the Jewish prophets?

S: No, I did not know of them. By the way, what is a “pagan”? Is that anything like a “fundamentalist”?

SN: Oh, no. To call someone a “pagan” is politically incorrect. But it’s okay to call someone a “fundamentalist.”

PL: Don't worry about it, Socrates. "Pagans" are what later Christians called those who practiced traditional Greco/Roman religions.

But anyway, your insights sound quite compatible with those of Jewish religion. How did you come to these conclusions?

S: By reason, of course. Certainly not by accepting uncritically the dominant traditions, values and beliefs of my "pagan" society and culture.

PL: Okay. So what specifically did you find out about God in the Jewish Scriptures?

S: Some of the things I found confirmed what I had already believed. For instance, that there is only one God, and that he is perfectly good. I was quite surprised that God was so insistent that he alone be acknowledged and worshiped. What I supposed to be mere ignorance and innocence in recognizing multiple gods was taken to be the worship of false gods, or even evil spirits. What I took to be confused groping toward the true God, these books interpreted as a conscious rebellion against him. I also found that this one God was the God of all humanity – not just the "chosen people," the Jews.

I had always thought of the Good as an abstraction, but the Jewish Scriptures speak of God as personal and the source of all goodness. Furthermore, the Scriptures explain how God is infinite and the creator of all that exists. This explains how God could be all-powerful. No god who is only a part of the cosmos can have power over the whole. But the One who created the whole cosmos *ex nihilo* – out of nothing – would have power over the whole, just as the teller of a story has power over the whole story.

PL: Good. What else did you find?

S: That this God is the source of all righteousness, and that he demands perfection from those he created: "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." Unlike my conception of the Good, this God is the personal Lord of the cosmos and the author of its moral and ethical laws.

TK: But only if you believe the Scriptures. You speak as if they are the source of ultimate authority!

S: Yes, Thomas, we discussed that last week. But there has to be some final, ultimate authority above and beyond our own subjective opinions.

TK: Oh, I don't think so. I believe in the power of the almighty human mind.

S: Then Paula can tutor you. She and I discussed the problems of subjectivism and relativism several days ago. She even wrote a paper on it for a Philosophy 101 exam.

PP: Yes, I can definitely set you straight on that. He destroyed all my arguments for relativism.

TK: Oh, so you think you can set me straight, do you?

PL: Please – we're running short on time, and we need to move on.

S: Yes. Well, another attribute of the Jewish God is found in the idea of creation. I am referring to his omniscience – his all-knowing wisdom. The gods of my culture, remember, were only products of the cosmos themselves, and as such, they were only somewhat wiser than we.

But the greatest revelation to me was the extent to which this God loves his creation, including all humanity. That is why he has given us laws – including moral laws – and has revealed his will and purpose to us with such clarity.

SN: Yes, love! *I love* love! Love is the energy force that drives the world, you know!

CC: The Bible teaches that love is the very essence of God. I'm sure you remember the commandment



Sunshine Newage: "I *love* love!"

to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength – and to love your neighbor as yourself.

S: Yes, and it is a great puzzle to me how we can possibly do that. How can we love unselfishly? How can creatures like us "be holy as I the Lord your God am holy"? It strikes me as impossible.

SN: Through creative imaging and mind over matter! We create our own reality. We *are* what we *think* we are. "As a man (or woman) thinketh in his (or her) heart, so he (or she) is" – that's from the Bible, you know!

PL: (*Ignoring Sunshine.*) Well, you understand, don't you, that the traditional Christian understanding is found in the New Testament? In the New Testament, God loves humanity so much that he sends his incarnate Son, Jesus Christ.

S: I understand that if this God became incarnate as a man, he would be able to fulfill this commandment regarding selfless love and perfect holiness. But what I don't understand is how mere mortals can do it. It's incompatible with our basic nature to love sacrificially.

PL: Well, that is a question you can ponder as you read through the New Testament.

A HINT OF TRANSCENDENCE

S: Before we go on, I have to say that I had the strangest feeling when I read these Scriptures. I can't define it, but the spiritual truths in these Scriptures resonated with my soul.

SN: Wo! This is very cool! I totally know what you mean! You know what I mean? We're like, *simpatico!*

S: (*Blinking uncomprehendingly.*) Thank you, Sunshine. Let me put it another way: I had always instinctively sought after God, and I thought that if and when I found him, I would recognize him as something familiar. In a sense this happened to me as I discovered the God of the Jews, yet in another sense the opposite happened. I was shocked and surprised, and my expectations were not fulfilled. And yet, in another and deeper sense, I think they were. It felt as if something in myself that was wiser than I – my inner spirit, I think – which had always directed my search and had always known where to direct me to go and not to go – as if this spirit had found its home.

This confirmed something that I had always believed and taught – the doctrine of *anamnesis*: that all spiritual knowledge is actually a remembering – a kind of unconscious knowledge that becomes conscious. It's like waking from a dream, a kind of *deja vu* experience, or coming home to a place you left so long ago that you had forgotten it.

PL: And this is how you felt about the Old Testament?

S: No, about encountering the God of it.

CC: Just wait 'til you read the *New Testament!*

SN: Embrace your experience, Socrates! Trust your heart!

TK: I can't relate to this at all! You didn't smoke something funky before you started reading the Bible, did you?

PP: I have to say that I'm impressed. Socrates is the last person I know who would be swept away by emotions. If he found that reading the Bible – even the Old Testament – was a spiritual experience, then I think there must be something truly mystical and transcendent about it.

PL: Well, Socrates, you surprise me. You were obviously very moved and very impressed.

S: Yes. As I said, I was most impressed by God's love for humanity, which is qualitatively different from human love. Human love is temporal and conditional; it is based on our needs and our desires to satisfy those needs. But divine love is eternal, and furthermore, it is *not* based on need or desire. The God of the Bible has absolutely no need of us, or of our worship, or of our obedience, or even of the very existence of the universe he created. His love is pure love – *agape* love, as we Greeks termed it. But to us, *agape* was only an ideal; with the God of the Bible, it is a reality.

A UNIQUE FAITH

S: Oh, but I have not yet told you of my greatest surprise in reading the Scriptures.

CC: What's that?

TK: There's more? Oh great.

PP: You know, Thomas, you just need to chill out!

TK: I'm already frigid.

PP: Yeah – spiritually!

S: God's name.

PL: Pardon me? What did you say?

S: God's name. That was my greatest surprise.

PL: What did you find so remarkable about that?

S: I was not surprised by the names given *to* God by devout Jews – we had similar names for the gods in my own culture – and they all related to what God – or the gods – are in relation to *us*: But I was surprised by the name God gave to *himself*.

PL: What do you mean – names *we* give to God?

S: We refer to God as our Lord, our Creator, our Divine Judge, our Savior, etc. But of course he is not his *own* God, or creator, or savior, but ours.

PL: Okay.

S: As I was saying, I found in the Bible something I found nowhere else and never even conceived: the true name of God – YHWH. This is the name that expresses God’s own essential being – what he is to himself. At least that seems to be what God was implying when Moses asked him his name and he replied, “I AM” – or “I AM WHO I AM.”

PL: Yes, YHWH – the sacred Tetragrammaton – the name so holy that no Jew would say it audibly.

PP: Why is that so special?

PL: Theologians believe that “I AM” expresses God’s self-identity and his infinite and eternal nature. He alone is not bound by time and space. He is the uncreated Creator of all that is, the uncaused Cause of all that exists.

S: Yes, that’s the meaning I derived from the name, too. By calling himself, “I AM,” he is declaring himself to be the infinite and eternal *I*.

PP: Well, *I* don’t get it.

SN: Oh, I totally do!

TK: I don’t think there’s anything to get.

CC: Socrates, can you elaborate on that?

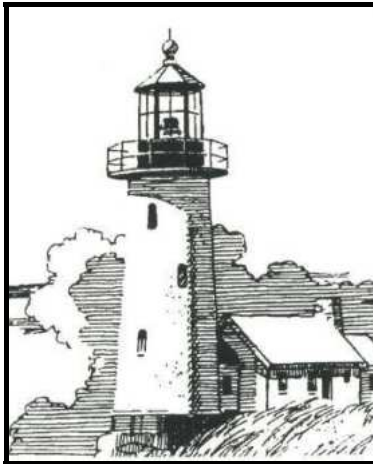
S: Certainly. “I” is the name for a subject of thinking or a subject of willing, is it not?

CC: Yes.

S: And this is how God defines himself – as the ultimate Subject or Knower or Doer. God is not an object, but the eternal and infinite Subject.

PP: Sorry – you’ve lost me.

CC: Doesn’t it have something to do with the fact that everything emanates from God? In other words, God as the proactive partner in his relationship with his creation? He is the One who spoke everything into existence, and we are the objects of his beneficence. He is the Divine Revelator, and we are the recipients. Do you think that’s what his name symbolizes?



S: I think that is well-stated. All other religions that I am aware of have been *man’s* search for God. But the Bible is different – it is the story of *God’s* search for man.

PP: But that implies that there’s something unique and truer about biblical religions such as Judaism and Christianity. I don’t believe that for a moment.

SN: No, I’m not comfortable with that, either. I believe all religions lead to God. There’s nothing special about biblical religions, and the Bible’s not superior to any other ancient holy book. They all have good and bad stuff in them.

TK: Yeah, I agree that they’re all more-or-less equal – equally *worthless*! They’re all based on pre-modern superstitions. None is substantially better than another.

S: Oh, for Zeus sake! Did we not address these issues last week? Did we not dispel the myth of religious pluralism? Did you not learn anything from our discussion – or is your mind closed to learning?

SN: You know, Socrates, you’re sounding like a dogmatic, Bible-thumping fundamentalist. I’m so disappointed in you!

S: Oh, no! There’s that word again! Can you all not debate the issues instead of resorting to labels and name-calling?

PL: Okay, class, let’s get back on track. I agree with you, Socrates, that the God of the Bible is depicted in a unique way. That was quite ingenious of Moses, or whoever wrote the Torah, to conceive of God like that. It clearly separates ancient Hebrew religion from all the rival cults and religions of the surrounding cultures.

S: Oh, no. I think you're wrong – or, at least, I think you've totally missed the point.

PL: Oh really! Socrates, you need to remember who's the student here and who's the professor! Must I remind you that I have a doctorate in theology? You're not addressing one of your neophyte disciples. I was studying theology while you were... well, dead, or something. By the way: what *have* you been doing for the past 2,400 years?

S: But remember, professor: I was studying philosophy, which is foundational to theology, long before you were born. But may I continue?

PL: Certainly. But show the proper respect. I'm a tenured professor, you know.

S: You're what?

PL: Tenured!

S: Oh, I'm sorry. Is it terminal?

PL: No, tenured means that my colleagues and our university officials have granted me a lifetime position and lifetime security based on my past accomplishments. I'm highly respected in my field, if I do say so myself.

S: Oh, I see... So you're no longer accountable for what you teach and what you do?

PL: Pardon me?

S: So you can teach any thing and any way you please, and still retain your job? You're not accountable to anyone?

PL: I'm accountable to myself.

S: You're your own ultimate authority?

PL: In a sense, I guess you could say that.

S: I see. Is that true for Professor Toleranto, too?

PL: It's true for all of us senior faculty. And by the way, if you're going to continue as a student here at the university, I would suggest that you learn how modern universities are structured and governed. You seem to be a bit clueless about such things.

S: Oh, I'm not a bit clueless – I'm *totally* clueless.

PL: Yes. Well, I suppose it's perfectly understandable, given the fact that you've been dead for 2,400 years. Things have changed a bit since your day, old boy!

S: Yes, they have. And yes, I will consider your advice. Furthermore, I think I am beginning to understand more all the time where Desperate State University got its name.

PL: Very good. So at least you've done some reading up on our history, have you?

So, you were saying....?

S: Oh, yes. I was simply saying – with all due respect – that when it comes to the religion of the Bible, I think you've totally missed the point. According to the text, Moses did not *invent* this idea of God; he merely *received* it. It was God's *revelation* to Moses – not Moses' bright idea.

PL: Socrates, that's putting a lot of faith and confidence in the Bible, isn't it? You need to keep in mind that the Bible is just another ancient religious text, written by men and full of errors and contradictions. As I mentioned last week, I'd recommend that you sign up for Dr. Reviso's course. He's quite an expert on the Bible, and well respected among his peers here.

S: You mean the course on “Deconstructing the Bible”?

PL: Yes, that's it. That's our basic introductory course in biblical studies here at Desperate State.

S: Does this Dr. Reviso also have... what did you call it... tenure?

PL: Oh yes. He's a colleague.

S: I see....

Professor Liberalis, as we were discussing last week, I have not made a thorough study of the Bible, so I cannot speak to some of these issues. As I read through the Old Testament, I noticed no apparent errors or contradictions in the basic message or philosophy, but I would indeed like to make a more systematic study of it. But I would want it to be an objective study starting with proper exegesis of the text, followed by contextual hermeneutics, as we discussed last week. In fact, I thought that was what we were going to do today.

At this point, all I know about the Bible is what I said earlier – that when I read it, it resonated with my spirit. I believe it speaks the truth.

PL: Well, let's leave that an open issue. Now where do we go from here? Time's nearly up for this session.

S: I now think I understand what Jesus meant when he claimed to be God. He was making, to be sure, the most exalted claim a human being could possibly make.

I should very much like to continue reading in the Bible. I would like to know more about this God who, according to Christian theology, became incarnate in Jesus Christ. That is such a phenomenal concept – the God who created the whole universe becoming man and entering into human history! It is, to tell the truth, quite hard for me to believe. But I consider it worth my time to investigate. And of course, I consider the search particularly relevant to this course on Christology.

PL: All right. Now class, let's *all* read at least the four Gospels for next week. I've published several scholarly articles critiquing the Gospels, if anyone is interested in doing some additional reading.

I'm sorry we didn't get to hear more from the rest of you. But when you happen to have one of the inventors of philosophy in your class, it would be rather foolish not to take advantage of the opportunity, don't you agree?

S: Oh, I didn't invent philosophy.

PL: Oh, I know. There were others who proceeded you – Thales, Pythagoras, Democritus, and others. But you *are* one of the most famous of the early philosophers in history. You're the one who directly influenced and inspired Plato and Aristotle.

S: Yes, but please keep in mind that my predecessors – Thales, Pythagoras, and the rest – didn't invent philosophy, either. They merely *discovered* it. It had always existed because it is based on natural law.

PP: Yeah, just like rock 'n' roll wasn't *invented* in the Fifties, it was only *discovered*. It had always existed in the metaphysical realm. God created it – it just took thousands of years for someone to discover it.

CC: (*Half-joking.*) That's rather unfair to blame God for rock music, isn't it?

S: (*Blinking uncomprehendingly.*) I have to say, Paula, that I would never have thought of using *that* example. But perhaps so. I suppose the principle is valid even if the application is suspect.

But please let me finish my thought. Philosophy had always existed because it is based on natural law. It is simply the methodical search for truth

using the rules of logic and sound reasoning. But remember: truth exists whether we realize it or not, or whether we accept it or not.

TK: (*Scoffing.*) Truth! What is truth?

PL: Interesting that you should ask, Thomas. In fact, someone in the Gospel story asked Jesus that very question. You'll have a chance to read about it this week.

CC: But Socrates, truth does us no good unless we personally encounter it, right? For it to be real to us, it has to be existentially real, doesn't it?

S: That is true on an existential level, yes. Unless we are open to truth, unless we personally engage and receive it, and unless we allow it to shape and form our thoughts, our behavior, our lifestyle, and our worldview, the fact that objective truth exists does us, as you say, no practical good – at least, not on an individual and subjective level.

What I learned from reading the Old Testament is that a God made this universe – and mankind – who loves us so passionately that he has revealed specific truths of his character and nature and will to us. If this is in fact true, it would be the ultimate folly to ignore or reject his revelation.

PL: Well said – *if* true. All right, class. You have your assignment. See you next week.