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Edited by Paul K. Moser

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Introduction: Jesus and Philosophy

Paul K. Moser

How are Jesus and philosophy related? How should they be related? Such questions about the relevance of Jesus to philosophy take us back and forth between philosophy and theology in a way suggesting that the two disciplines are importantly related, at least regarding various topics of interest to philosophers and theologians. Contemporary philosophers seldom tread on theological ground, perhaps owing to general uneasiness with things theological. In any case, inquirers about the relevance of Jesus to philosophy shouldn't hesitate to cross disciplinary boundaries when explanation, knowledge, and truth are served. We shall proceed accordingly.

1. FROM ATHENS TO JERUSALEM

We may begin, for the sake of adequate context, with a question broader than that of the relevance of Jesus himself to philosophy: what, if anything, does Jerusalem, as the center of the earliest Jewish-Christian movement of Jesus's disciples, have to do with Athens, as the center of Western philosophy in its inception? Do they share *intellectual goals*, and if so, do they share *means* to achieving their common intellectual goals? The two questions demand *yes* answers, because Jerusalem and Athens both aim to achieve *truth* (perhaps among other things), and they aim to achieve truth via *knowledge* of truth. These two factors play a significant role in what defines Jerusalem and Athens, and thus Jerusalem and Athens share something significant, however much they differ and even avoid or fear each other.

Of course, aiming for truth via knowledge of truth doesn't set Jerusalem and Athens apart from many other influential movements. The later natural and social sciences, for example, aim for truth via knowledge, but they aren't original citizens of either Jerusalem or Athens. The earliest philosophy characteristic of Athens seeks a kind of philosophical truth whose discovery

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didn't wait for the later empirical work of the natural and social sciences. Accordingly, Socrates and Plato pursued their philosophical work vigorously even though the natural and social sciences were at best immature, if they existed at all. Similarly, the theology characteristic of the earliest Christian movement in Jerusalem didn't wait for the empirical work of the later natural and social sciences. Its theology of the Good News of God's redemptive intervention in Jesus as God's self-giving Son for humans approached the wider world without relying on the natural and social sciences. So, the founding philosophers and theologians from Athens and Jerusalem didn't need to draw from the natural or social sciences to launch their respective traditions of seeking truth via knowledge.

What *distinguishes* Jerusalem from Athens? We may begin with the rough observation that Socrates and Plato started a *wisdom movement* that characterized humans as cognitive and moral agents in pursuit of the good life. The wisdom movement of Socrates and Plato focused on death as well as life: "... those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death" (*Phaedo* 64a). Death, according to Socrates and Plato, is the release of the soul from the body, and this release enables the soul to attain finally, without bodily interference, to unadulterated truth and clear thinking. Persons of wisdom (philosophers) welcome death as an opportunity for intellectual purification from the physical, sensory, and emotional pollution of the present transitory world. Plato's *Phaedo* promotes this philosophy of intellectual enlightenment characteristic of ancient Athens as the birthplace of Western philosophy.

In contrast to the philosophers of Athens, Jesus and his follower Paul of Tarsus promoted a *Good News power movement* that offered people the power of spiritual, moral, and even bodily redemption by God.¹ The heart of this redemption is offered as a gift of gracious reconciliation of humans to God, including fellowship with God, at God's expense (see, for example, Lk. 15:11–24, 24:1–35, 1 Cor. 1:9, 15:12–32, 2 Cor. 5:16–21). Jesus and Paul, as devout Jews, proceeded in the theological light of such ancient Hebrew prophets as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Hosea, and drew their general idea of divine Good News from the book of Isaiah (cf. Isa. 52:7, 61:1).² The promise of

¹ On the unifying idea of a Good News proclamation among the New Testament writers, see Eugene Lemcio, "The Unifying Kerygma of the New Testament," in Lemcio, *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 115–31. Cf. Lemcio, "The Gospels within the New Testament Canon," in C. G. Bartholomew, ed., *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (London: Paternoster, 2006), 123–45.

² On the contribution of the book of Isaiah to the Good News message in the New Testament, see Otto Betz, "Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom," in Peter Stuhlmacher, ed., *The Gospel and*

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divine redemption preached by Jesus and Paul included a promise of *bodily* resurrection that isn't to be confused either with resuscitation of a dead person or with immortality.

Socrates and Plato hoped for immortality for at least some humans, but they had no place for bodily resurrection in their hope. The human body, in their story, obstructs human purification as intellectual enlightenment and thus is an impediment to the kind of mental and moral goodness offered (at least in principle) by our impending death. In contrast, Jesus and Paul taught, in the tradition of Genesis 1–2, that God's creation of the physical world was initially good, and not a mere impediment to our intellectual purification. They embraced and extended the reported divine promise to some of the ancient Hebrew prophets that the people of God would be raised from the dead, even bodily. Without such resurrection, they assumed, human redemption would be gravely incomplete, because God intended humans to be embodied. Full resurrection, in their eyes, thus included embodiment; accordingly, Paul and various other early followers of Jesus preached the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus and, for the future, of his followers too (see 1 Cor. 15:1–15).³ Jerusalem thus contradicts Athens, and the two won't be united in their attitudes toward either the value of the physical world or what humans ultimately need.

According to the apostle Paul, the Good News movement stems from God's redemptive self-revelation in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. More specifically, this movement is founded on "the power of God for salvation for everyone who trusts [God]" (Rom. 1:16; cf. 1 Cor. 1:18), and this divine power is perfectly exemplified in the human Jesus (2 Cor. 4:4, 5:19; cf. Phil. 2:6). Paul thought of (a) the obedient death-by-crucifixion undergone by Jesus and (b) God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead as two decisively related moments in a single life-giving, redemptive movement by the one true God of authoritative righteous love (*agape*). The resurrection of Jesus was central to Paul's understanding of salvation as divine redemption from evil and death; he thus held: "... [I]f Christ has not been raised [from the dead by God], your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:17). In addition, Paul speaks of the kind of "knowing Christ" who is essential to

the Gospels (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 53–74, Rikki Watts, *New Exodus and Mark* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), chap. 4, and Graham Stanton, "Jesus and Gospel," in Stanton, *Jesus and Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9–62.

³ On the place of resurrection in the earliest Christian preaching, see Floyd V. Filson, *Jesus Christ the Risen Lord* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), Rowan Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, 1982), and Markus Bockmuehl, "Resurrection," in Bockmuehl, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 102–18.

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salvation as involving our knowing “the power of his resurrection” via our being conformed to Jesus’s death (Phil. 3:10). Paul thus proclaimed the death-by-crucifixion of Jesus *because* he also proclaimed the resurrection-by-God of Jesus for divine redemptive purposes. The two, according to Paul, must be portrayed together to capture God’s redemptive Good News movement (see, for example, Rom. 3–6).

The divine power central to the Good News movement of Jerusalem is, in Paul’s perspective, cognitively as well as morally and spiritually important. Many philosophers of religion have overlooked this perspective, and hence its distinctive underlying epistemology has rarely surfaced in philosophy. Paul holds that he knows the risen Jesus on the basis of his knowing firsthand the power of Jesus’s resurrection by God (cf. Phil. 3:8–11). Redemption, according to Paul, consists in knowing firsthand the divine power of Jesus’s divine resurrection in virtue of being transformed by it to conform to Jesus’s self-giving death, in volitional fellowship with the God who raised Jesus from death.

Joseph Fitzmyer has characterized the relevant power and corresponding knowledge, as follows:

This “power” is not limited to the influence of the risen Jesus on the Christian, but includes a reference to the origin of that influence in [God] the Father himself. The knowledge, then, that Paul seeks to attain, the knowledge that he regards as transforming the life of a Christian and his/her sufferings, must be understood as encompassing the full ambit of that power. It emanates from the Father, raises Jesus from the dead at his resurrection, endows him with a new vitality, and finally proceeds from him as the life-giving, vitalizing force of the “new creation” [cf. 2 Cor. 5:17] and of the new life that Christians in union with Christ experience and live . . . [T]he knowledge of [this power], emanating from Christian faith, is the transforming force that vitalizes Christian life and molds the suffering of the Christian to the pattern which is Christ.⁴

This characterization of resurrection power fits with Paul’s aforementioned view that the Good News of what God has done through Jesus is “the power of *God*” for human salvation (Rom. 1:16; cf. Eph. 1:19–20). As a result, the Good News Jesus movement advanced by Paul is no narrow Jesus cult, but is rather offered as a power movement of the one true God of the whole

⁴ Joseph Fitzmyer, “‘To Know Him and the Power of His Resurrection’ (Phil. 3:10),” in Fitzmyer, *To Advance the Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 208–9.

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world, including Gentiles as well as Jews (Rom. 3:29, 15:15–17).⁵ This fits with the focus on God in the ministry of Jesus himself (see, for example, Mk. 1:15, 12:29–30).

In Paul's perspective on the earliest Jesus movement, God's intervening Spirit supplies the needed *power* of resurrection, including the power that raised Jesus (Rom. 1:4). The same Spirit, according to Paul, supplies the needed firsthand authoritative *evidence* and *knowledge* of this power to willing recipients (see Rom. 5:5, 8:15–16, 1 Cor. 2:9–12). Such an approach to evidence and knowledge of divine reality acknowledges *purposively available* evidence of divine reality that is offered in accordance with divine redemptive purposes. This kind of cognitive perspective on knowledge of divine reality was evidently influenced by Jesus himself (see Mk. 4:2–12, Matt. 11:25–30). With regard to evidence of divine reality, philosophers of religion and theologians often leave inquirers, without an authoritative volitional challenge, at the level of merely theoretical assessment of propositional evidence, including historical propositional evidence. At this level, one can't make good sense of the revolutionary Good News movement launched by Jerusalem, particularly by Jesus and, in his wake, Paul. Such a life-transforming revolution needs an authoritative volitional anchor deeper than merely theoretical assessment of propositional evidence, including historical propositional evidence.⁶ Jesus and Paul (following Jesus) redirect religious epistemology accordingly, to authoritative divine evidence that offers the needed volitional challenge to humans and thus moves beyond merely theoretical assessment.

In contrast with the Jerusalem of Jesus, Athens yields an intellectual-enlightenment wisdom movement that holds out no hope or even desire of lasting life via bodily resurrection. Contemporary Western philosophy largely follows suit, particularly as a result of its widespread abandonment of robust theism. Following Jesus, Jerusalem offers a Good News power movement of redemption as fellowship with God and eventual deliverance by God from both evil and death into lasting life, including bodily resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus is thereby proclaimed, by Paul and other early disciples, as the victory inauguration of this revolutionary movement of God's intervening Spirit. The movement, as represented by Jesus, focuses on the

⁵ See Dunn, "Christology as an Aspect of Theology," in A. J. Malherbe and W. A. Meeks, eds., *The Future of Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 202–12.

⁶ On this point, in connection with theoretical historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, see Paul Minear, *The Bible and the Historian* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), chap. 5, Dale Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and its Interpreters* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), and Paul Moser, *The Elusive God: Reorienting Religious Epistemology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), chap. 3.

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gracious redemptive intervention of a divine Spirit that empowers lasting life in divine-human fellowship, including human freedom to love all people, even enemies. Life, according to this Good News movement, can offer, via divine empowerment, progressive moral and spiritual renewal toward God's character of unselfish love and, in the future, bodily resurrection.

The central question from Athens to Jerusalem is cognitive, if often skeptical: How can one *know* that the redemptive promise of the Good News movement is actually reliable rather than just wishful thinking? Jerusalem's answer, represented by Jesus and Paul, is widely neglected: by volitionally knowing firsthand the promise-*Giver*, via one's willing participation in the available power of God's life-giving and life-transforming Spirit. The question from Jerusalem to Athens is thus, as always, volitional: Are we humans sincerely *willing* to participate in the powerful life of a perfectly loving God, thereby giving up our selfish lives for the sake of lasting lives in God's unselfish love, even toward enemies? Jesus himself was not particularly optimistic about the answer to the latter question (see, for example, Lk. 18:8).

2. GOOD NEWS FOR PHILOSOPHY

The Good News movement underwent a striking shift, after the crucifixion of Jesus, that resulted in the preaching, by Paul and others, of the bodily resurrection of Jesus by God. Jesus as the preacher of the Good News about God's arriving kingdom, under formative influence from the book of Isaiah, became *an object of focus* in the preaching of the Good News by his earliest, Jewish disciples. The *preacher* thus became *a central part of the preached*; the *proclaimer* became integral to the *proclaimed*, as many New Testament scholars have noted.⁷

In one of the earliest statements of the Good News in the New Testament, Paul writes:

For I delivered to you of first importance what I have received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared also to me, as to one untimely born . . . If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is futile and your faith is futile too. We are

⁷ On this theme, see Filson, *Jesus Christ the Risen Lord*, and Klyne Snodgrass, "The Gospel of Jesus," in Markus Bockmuehl and Donald Hagner, eds., *The Written Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 31–44. Cf. Betz, "Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom."

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also then found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins If we have hope in Christ only for this life, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15:3–8, 14–15, 17, 19–20).

Paul had unmatched influence in clarifying the Good News movement after the death of Jesus. The Good News, according to Paul, includes that “Christ died for our sins” and was raised from the dead. Paul regards the Good News as false and futile in the absence of the resurrection of Jesus by God. In particular, he links the resurrection of Jesus by God to the divine forgiveness of human sins in such a way that if there is no resurrection of Jesus, “you are still in your sins.”

According to various New Testament writers, a central theme of the Good News movement is that God forgives human sins, and humans are thereby offered reconciliation and fellowship with God, in connection with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. What exactly this connection involves has been a topic of controversy among philosophers of religion and theologians. If we think of *atonement* as divine-human reconciliation that suitably deals with human sin as resistance to divine unselfish love and fellowship, we may understand the heart of this controversy about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as a debate about atonement. How exactly do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus figure in (the intended) divine-human atonement? How, in addition, is such atonement to be appropriated by humans? Furthermore, is such atonement actually needed by humans? If so, why is it needed? These are among many questions that emerge regarding the person and mission of Jesus, and they have generated controversy in philosophical theology and in philosophy of religion.

We do well not to portray Jesus as a typical teacher of Jewish wisdom. At the Last Supper, according to Matthew’s Gospel (26:28), Jesus announced that he will die “for the forgiveness of sins.” The atoning sacrifice of Jesus as God’s sinless offering for sinful humans is, at least according to Matthew’s Jesus, at the center of God’s redemptive work. Among other New Testament writings, John’s Gospel (cf. Jn. 1:36) and Paul’s undisputed epistles (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7, 2 Cor. 5:21, Rom. 3:24–26) concur on this lesson about atonement. This unique role attributed to Jesus in divine-human atonement sets him apart from Abraham, Moses, Paul, Confucius, Krishna, Gautama the Buddha, Muhammad, the Dalai Lama, and every other known religious leader. Only Jesus, as portrayed at least by Matthew, John, and Paul, offered himself as God’s atoning sacrifice to God for wayward humans. Only Jesus, therefore, emerged as the human center

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of the first-century Good News of God's intended redemption of wayward humans.

Many philosophers of religion and theologians share the apostle Peter's initial denial that the death of Jesus is central to the divine plan of reconciliation of humans to God (see Mk. 8:31–32). In fact, they doubt that the crucifixion of the obedient Son of God would be compatible with God's merciful love, at least toward Jesus. Paul faced similar doubts about the cross of Jesus among the earliest Christians in Corinth, and he responded straightforwardly: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ *and him crucified*" (1 Cor. 2:2, italics added). The obedient death of Jesus is, in Paul's portrait of the Good News, as important as his resurrection for divine-human reconciliation.

The Roman crucifixion of Jesus seems to seal his fate as a dismal failure, perhaps even as one "cursed" before God (see Gal. 3:13, Deut. 21:23). Even so, the cross of Jesus is announced by Paul, Matthew, and John, among other New Testament writers, as a central place of God's atoning sacrifice and turnaround redemptive victory on behalf of humans. Out of the evident defeat of Jesus, according to the Good News movement, God brought a unique manifestation of divine love and forgiveness toward humans, even toward God's enemies. The fatal cross of Jesus is proclaimed as a central part of God's intended grand reversal of the dark human tragedy of alienation from fellowship with God. This reversal, according to the proclamation of the Good News movement, aims at divine-human reconciliation, or atonement, by means of a stark but powerful manifestation of God's righteous and merciful character as exemplified in Jesus.

The Good News movement founded by Jesus offers a *divine manifest-offering* approach to divine-human atonement. According to its unique message, what is being made *manifest* is God's character of righteous and merciful love, and what is being *offered*, in agreement with that character, is lasting divine-human fellowship as a gracious divine gift on the basis of (a) the forgiveness manifested and offered via God's atoning sacrifice in Jesus and (b) God's resurrection of Jesus as Lord and as Giver of God's Spirit. The manifestation of God's self-giving character in Jesus reveals the kind of God who is thereby offering lasting divine-human forgiveness and fellowship to humans. Although the death of Jesus can't bring about divine-human reconciliation by itself, it is presented, by Jesus, Paul, and others, as supplying God's distinctive means of intended implementation of reconciliation via divine manifestation and offering. For the sake of actual divine-human reconciliation, according to Jesus and Paul, humans must *receive* the manifest-offering via grounded trust and obedience (cf. Matt. 7: 21–23, Rom. 5:1–2).

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Paul acknowledges that the message of the cross of Jesus as central to divine-human atonement appears to some people to be utter nonsense:

[T]he message of the cross is foolishness to those perishing, but to us being saved it is the power of God Jews request signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those called [by God], both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength (1 Cor. 1:18, 22–25).

The power and wisdom of God's morally righteous and merciful character are manifested, according to Paul, in the crucified Jesus, whom God approvingly raised as Lord from death by crucifixion. Such divine power and wisdom, in Paul's Good News message, overcome even death, thereby surpassing any human power or wisdom, including the human power of evil. According to the Good News offered by Jesus and Paul, God sent God's own beloved Son, Jesus, to live and to die and to be resurrected by God. The divine aim was to manifest God's forgiving and righteous love for all people, even God's enemies (Rom. 5:6–8), and thereby to offer people lasting divine-human fellowship under Jesus as Lord who offers God's empowering Spirit (1 Cor. 1:9, 1 Thess. 5:10). The Good News message of Jesus and Paul implies that Jesus came from God to identify with humans in their weakness and trouble, while he represented his divine Father in righteous and merciful self-giving love. As divinely appointed mediator, Jesus thus aims to serve as a personal bridge between God *and* humans by seeking to reconcile humans to his Father with the divine gift of fellowship anchored in merciful, forgiving love and God's own intervening Spirit.

A central theme of the Good News message is that Jesus's obedient death on the cross, commanded of him by God (see Rom. 3:25, 1 Cor. 5:7, Phil. 2:8; cf. Mk. 14:23–24, Jn. 18:11), aims to manifest how far he and his Father will go, even to gruesome death, to offer divine forgiveness and fellowship to alienated humans. According to this message, Jesus gives humans all he has, avowedly from his Father's love, to manifest that God mercifully and righteously loves humans to the fullest extent and offers humans the gracious gift of unearned fellowship and membership in God's everlasting family via reception of God's own empowering Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:8, Jn. 3:16–17). This is the heart of the Good News that emerges from the Jerusalem of Jesus and Paul and goes far beyond anything offered in the wisdom movement from Athens.

The Good News movement reports that God uses the crucifixion of the willingly obedient Jesus as the episode whereby selfish human rebellion against

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God is mercifully judged and forgiven by God. This claim does *not* imply that God punished Jesus, and no New Testament writer teaches otherwise, contrary to some subsequent, less careful theologians. (Some theologians might be inclined to counter with Mk. 14:27 or Gal. 3:13, but neither passage implies that God punished Jesus.) According to the Good News, God sent Jesus into the rebellious human world to undergo, willingly and obediently, suffering and death that God would deem adequate for dealing justly, under divine righteousness, with human rebellion against God and God's unselfish love. Jesus thus pays the price on behalf of selfish humans for righteous divine reconciliation of humans and thereby removes any need for selfish fear, condemnation, anxiety, guilt, and punishment among humans in relation to God (see Rom. 8:1).

In the writings of Paul, Matthew, and John, among other New Testament writers, the crucified Jesus is the manifest power and mirror image of a perfectly loving God. Specifically, according to Paul, the foundational motive for the crucifixion of Jesus is his Father's *righteous love* for humans:

Now apart from law, a righteousness of God has been manifested, to which the Law and the Prophets bear witness. This righteousness of God comes through trust in Jesus Christ to all who trust [in him]. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as an atoning sacrifice, through trust, in his blood. He did this to manifest his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed. He did this to manifest his righteousness in the current time, in order to be righteous and the one who justifies those who trust in Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26).

Paul identifies three times here the *manifestation* of God's righteousness as central to God's redemptive plan involving Jesus, including his death. In addition, Paul twice suggests that this divine manifestation is aimed at God's graciously justifying, or reconciling, humans before God via trust in Jesus. This passage thus repeatedly endorses a divine manifest-offering approach to atonement via Jesus. God's graciously forgiving offer of divine-human reconciliation, according to Paul, comes with a manifestation of God's righteousness in the crucified Jesus.

Unlike many later theologians, Paul decisively links divine righteousness, or justice, with God's love: "God manifests his own love (*agape*) for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath [of God] [W]hile we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled