

Review of Esther Meek, *Longing to Know*

John M. Frame

In this volume, Esther Meek wrestles with a paradox that has troubled the theory of knowledge since the pre-Socratics. When I say “I know there is gas in my car,” I imply that in fact there is gas in my car. Knowledge, classically defined, is “justified, true belief.” So for a belief to count as knowledge, it must be true. And if I have any doubt about the truth of that belief, I must doubt that it’s really knowledge. So in the history of philosophy, knowledge has come in most circles to imply total certainty and exclude any doubt. Some have thought that through difficult rational exertions we can attain such total certainty (Plato, Descartes); others have thought that since total certainty is not possible, skepticism is our only option (Protagoras, Hume, some postmoderns). In the main traditions of epistemology, then, knowledge is either a rare, difficult achievement, or it is nonexistent.

Nevertheless (and this is the other side of the paradox), in ordinary life we continue to claim knowledge of all sorts of things, such as facts, numbers, people, skills, language, scientific laws, and God. And we claim knowledge even when we do not claim total certainty, even when we admit we could be wrong.

Meek believes that there is an epistemology implicit in these ordinary claims to knowledge, one significantly different from the rationalist and skeptical options of the philosophical traditions. This epistemology, she believes, saves us both from skepticism and from the fear of falling into skepticism.

As a Christian, Meek sees this skepticism as a source of temptation for people seeking God. So her book has a pastoral function: removing that barrier to faith. She argues that we can know God the same way we come to know other people. Knowing God, she says, is like knowing Jeff, her auto mechanic.

Her epistemology follows that of Michael Polanyi pretty closely, but her book is not a study of his work. She doesn't quote him or analyze his writings. Rather, she applies his basic perspective to a study of how we get to know ourselves, the world, and God in daily life. And her application, I would say, greatly enriches the Polanyian approach.

Meek starts, not with "knowledge" as an abstraction, but with concrete acts of knowing, "epistemic acts" that we perform every day. (She hints, but doesn't quite say, that we should jettison the traditional definition of knowledge as "justified, true belief.") She defines "knowing" as "the responsible human struggle to rely on clues to focus on a coherent pattern and submit to its reality." The book takes up each clause of that definition consecutively.

A good example of knowing, she says, is looking at a newspaper puzzle in such a way as to see a three-dimensional picture. On the surface it appears just to be a blur of shapes and colors. But if you follow the directions, such as by moving the newspaper gradually away from your face, something shifts and the blur becomes a 3-D picture, say, of dolphins. Not everybody sees the pattern right away. For many, the process is a struggle. The surface features give you clues, but many of them serve in the end only as background to the main picture, rather than as parts of that picture. You need to learn to look *through* the clues to

see the overall pattern. Then you must submit to that pattern, affirming it, treating it as real.

Similarly for knowing auto mechanics and God. We begin with what data we have, and we seek to make responsible judgments about persons. As we see indications of various qualities, such as trustworthiness, those become a pattern that illumines further experience, and ultimately a pattern to which we must submit in our thoughts and behavior. (Here she has some great things to say about the biblical integration of knowledge and obedience in our relationship to God.)

In these acts of knowing, she says, we should not expect to achieve complete certainty without any doubt. Meek would like to replace the concept of certainty (which she thinks connotes exhaustive, inerrant knowledge) with that of confidence, the continued reassurance that our acts of knowing are getting us somewhere, leading us in the right direction. Similarly, she thinks, in our knowing we should seek “contact” between our mind and reality, not “correspondence,” which she understands as an exhaustive image of reality.

In my own book *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* I describe several perspectives on knowledge, or knowing. Meek’s book operates mainly within what I called there the “existential perspective,” knowledge as a subjective process. Other perspectives are the normative (knowledge as following norms or rules) and the situational (knowledge as seeking conformity with facts). But since these are perspectives, each involves the other two. As a subjective process, knowing seeks to follow authoritative norms and to bring itself into conformity

with the real world. So Meek recognizes normative and situational dimensions as well. The norms are like the newspaper's rules for solving the 3-D puzzle, and the situational facts are both the clues and the patterns we see through the clues. So in the case of knowing God she makes illuminating comments about the authority of Scripture and God's revelation of himself in the created world.

This is a terrific book. I can't begin in a short review to illustrate adequately the beauty of its writing and the cogency of its reasoning. But let me just say that I have never read a serious philosophical work (and this surely is one) that is as eloquently and delightfully expressed. Meek has a wonderful gift of illustration. Analogies and pictures fly from her mind like drops of water from a great fountain. Every page contains two or three of them, so there must be hundreds in this book. You'll read about kitchen tables, golf games, copperhead snakes, children, weddings, on and on, as Meek seeks to show us how knowing happens in all the ordinary experiences of life.

I have a few reservations about her critique of certainty and tolerance of doubt. I suppose that, given her definition of certainty as exhaustive knowledge, I can go along with her rejection of it. But Scripture says some negative things about doubt (Matt. 14:31, 21:21, 28:17, Acts 10:20, 11:12, Rom. 14:23, Jas. 1:6). In Matt. 14:31 and Rom. 14:23, it is the opposite of faith and therefore a sin. Further, knowing God in Scripture often seems to have a sureness about it that may be less than Meek's definition of certainty, but is, I think, more than her definition of confidence. Note especially the "certainty" of Luke 1:4, the "proofs" of Acts 1:3, and the centurion's words of Luke 23:47. More needs to be said,

perhaps, about the nature of submission, the final step in Meek's definition of knowledge. If the revelation of God to which we submit is *infallible*, then it must serve as the criterion of all other knowledge. As such it is the standard of certitude and must be regarded as itself in some sense maximally certain.

I agree with Meek that even the certainty of God's Word is not an exhaustive transcript of his mind. And I agree with her that doubt, as an honest admission of our fallibility, is not only tolerable, but even a virtue (James 4:13-16; and note Paul's admission in Rom. 11:33-36 concerning our knowledge of God). But *Longing to Know* doesn't help me to distinguish between sinful and justifiable doubt, or to understand fully the sense in which God's revelation leaves us without excuse. Perhaps, in the end, there are differences between knowing God and knowing one's auto mechanic that need to be more fully explored.

But these problems, if they are problems (and not merely my misunderstandings) are errors of omission. And this book includes so much that a few omissions can hardly be ground for complaint. All in all, this is the best book on epistemology (let alone Christian epistemology) to come along in many, many years. It is a must for any serious student of the discipline and, indeed, for ordinary people who are trying to get clear on how to know God.