

What is Knowledge?
Biblical/Hebraic Epistemology

I. Definition of Epistemology:

Epistemology is one's view or theory of knowledge, and as a discipline, it seeks to respond to the following kinds of questions. What is the nature, or what are the features of knowledge? What can we know? Are there things we cannot know? What are the sources of knowledge? How is knowledge justified? What are the limits in attempting to justify knowledge? And so on.

What does the Bible have to say about the nature of knowledge? Its basic terms are the Hebrew *yada* and the Greek *ginosko*. Among its many traits, it emphasizes both its *existential and covenantal character*, that is, it implies both a relationship with and an obedience to the things that are known. Knowledge, experience and submission are all linked in biblical thought. These features stand in sharp contrast to the detached, informational character of modern epistemology.

I. Modern Scientific Epistemology

There is an external world which can in principle be exhaustively described in scientific language. The scientist, as both observer and language-user, can capture the external facts of the world in propositions that are true if they correspond to the facts and false if they do not. Science is ideally a linguistic system in which true propositions are in one-to-one relation to facts, including facts that are not directly observed because they involve hidden entities or properties, or past events or far distant events. These hidden events are described in theories, and theories can be inferred from observation, that is, the hidden explanatory mechanism of the world can be discovered from what is open to observation. Man as scientist is regarded as standing apart from the world and able to experiment and theorize about it objectively and dispassionately.

Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), vii.

Epistemologies have NO ethical implications. Ways of knowing are morally neutral and non-directive. It's all about specialization, rationalization, calculation, intellectualization. Knowledge, basically, is power, power for the technical mastery of the world, power that comes with the acquisition of marketable knowledge and skills. Teaching and learning (as well as research and publication) have to do primarily with the impartation of facts, of information, of data. There is no basic sense of moral obligation to what one knows. Knowledge is value free, and has no impact for good on the knower. A modern man or woman can have tremendous "knowledge," and yet still be a *bona fide* "urban blockhead" or "trouserer ape," a man without a chest (C. S. Lewis). As a matter of fact, modern epistemology generates this type of person regularly. What is the alternative?

II. Biblical/Hebraic Epistemology as Existential

The primary Hebrew term for knowledge, *yada*, means “to know by experience,” including such things as afflictions (1 Kings 8: 38), loss (Isa. 47: 8), disease/grief (Isa. 53: 3), and judgment (Ezek. 25: 14). Also, since both *yada* and *ginosko* also designate sexual intercourse on the part of the husband (Gen. 4: 1, 17, 25; Matt. 1: 25; Luke 1: 34) and the wife (Num. 31: 18, 25; Judg. 21; 12), it implies that “to know” does not simply mean to have theoretical knowledge of an object and its nature. Rather, it refers to a personal relationship between the knower and the object known, a relationship characterized by care, concern, and importance.

Furthermore, in accordance with the biblical view of humanity as a differentiated totality rather than as a being composed of body and soul, knowledge is an activity in which the whole person—intellect, emotion, will—participates. The heart and all its faculties as the defining element of a person are central to the knowing process as a totality (Psa. 49: 3; Prov. 2: 2; 10: 8; Isa. 6: 10).

Prov. 2:2 Make your ear attentive to wisdom,
Incline your **heart** to understanding.

Eph. 1:18 I pray that the **eyes of your heart** may be enlightened, so that you may **know** what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints.

Hence, to know God in the OT (par. faith or belief in the NT) does not have to do with abstract speculation or theorizing about the nature of God as a divine being. Rather it has to do with entering into to a personal relationship with Him as He has made Himself know by His mighty deeds (as seen, for example, in Hosea 13: 4, and in the frequent refrain following one of His activities, “And you shall know that I am God”).

Hos. 13:4 Yet I have been the Lord your God
Since the land of Egypt;
And you were not to **know** any god except Me,
For there is no savior besides Me.

Ex. 6:7 'Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God; and you shall **know** that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Also, God’s knowledge of people also partakes of this basic character as well, that is, as personal in nature. It implies an interest in and care for those whom God knows (Job 31: 6; Psa. 1: 6; 50: 11; 73: 11; 103: 13-14; 144: 3; Nahum 1: 7).

Ps. 1:6 For the Lord **knows** the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.

Ps. 50:11 "I **know** every bird of the mountains,
And everything that moves in the field is Mine.

Nah. 1:7 The \Lord\ is good,
A stronghold in the day of trouble,
And He **knows** those who take refuge in Him.

Hence, this knowledge that a man or woman has of God manifests itself in a way of life, that is, in covenant obedience. Out of the existential engagement between the knower and the know, a specific pattern of behavior is to result. Knowledge, therefore, has ethical implications (see also Jer. 22: 15-16)

Deut. 4:39 "**Know** therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.
Deut. 4:40 "So you shall **keep His statutes** and His commandments which I am giving you today, that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and that you may live long on the land which the Lord your God is giving you for all time."

2 Cor. 10:5 We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the **knowledge** of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the **obedience** of Christ.

III. Biblical/Hebraic Epistemology as Covenantal

Covenant epistemology may be defined as a way of knowing that connects truth with life, that is, it recognizes that the purpose of the acquisition of knowledge is to engender obedience to the covenant that binds God and His people. Covenant epistemology means knowledge for the sake of responsible action. It connects in a radical way knowing and doing, epistemology and ethics, belief and behavior, else the consequences be hypocrisy, guilt, and personal disintegration.

1. Matthew 7: 24-27

"Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, **and acts upon them**, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. "And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and {yet} it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. "And everyone who hears these words of Mine, **and does not act upon them**, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. "And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall."

2. Matthew 18: 19-20

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, **teaching them to observe all that I commanded you**; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. "

3. Luke 8:21

But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these **who hear the word of God and do it.**"

4. Luke 11:27-28

And it came about while He said these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice, and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed." Luke 11:28 But He said, "On the contrary, **blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it.**"

5. John 13:17

John 13:15 "For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. John 13:16 "Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master; neither is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. John 13:17 "If you **know** these things, **you are blessed if you do them.**

6. Philippians 4:9

The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, **practice these things**; and the God of peace shall be with you.

7. James 1: 22-25

But prove yourselves **doers of the word**, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for {once} he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the {law} of liberty, and abides by it, **not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man shall be blessed in what he does.**

Conclusion:

"If a person does not become what he understands, he does not really understand it." Søren Kierkegaard

"You only really know and believe that which activates you!" Anon.

"We only know what we act upon; we only believe what we obey." J. Sire

"Good thoughts are only good so far as they are taken as means to an exact obedience, or at least this is the chief part of their goodness." J. H. Newman

"Now whosoever supposes that he can know the truth, while he is still living iniquitously, is in error." St. Augustine

“Only he who believes is obedient and only he who is obedient believes.”
D. Bonhoeffer

“Knowing and doing, hearing and obeying are integrally connected for people whose convictions are truly and deeply Christian.” Steve Garber