

Meek's Cut (2010)

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V -3; L -1 ; S/N -1. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

*Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.
When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God..
Psalm 145:4-5*

Director Kelly Reichardt's film, *It is Emily Tetherow*, not set in 1845, is about a wagon train of three families traveling along the Oregon Trail. The central character in this tale is Solomon Meek, who is the central character in this tale traveling along the Oregon Trail of a westward trek.

Trail to start a new life in the Pacific Northwest. However, this tale is no Wagon Train filled with fast-paced action and thrills. © 2010 Oscilloscope
The director at first uses so many long and medium shots of the travelers trudging along the dusty trail that it is almost 15 minutes into the film before we see their faces. The film portrays the misery and boredom of the long trek, rather than its thrills. For those opening minutes and indeed, for much of the film, the group, rather than the individual, is the focus.

Mountain man Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood) is their leader, and he has made a fateful decision to attempt an untried short

cut over the mountains. As the days pass and their water supply runs short, the traveler's trust in him wavers. Are they lost? Meek replies, "We're not lost, we're finding our way." Hardly reassuring. Emily (Michele Williams), married to Solomon Tetherow (Will Patton) grows especially suspicious that their leader does not really know the country. One day while she is gathering wood, she is startled to look up and see a Native American standing over her. He runs away without harming her, but she and the others grow frightened of an Indian attack.

Later the men capture "The Indian" (as he is called in the credits—played by Rod Rondeaux). Meek wants to shoot him, but the settlers are divided. We have seen that some of them are devout, one frequently reading his Bible. Emily is the strongest in objecting to such brutal treatment, partly because of the possibility of his leading them to water. Meek grudgingly goes along with the majority, but warns them of the Indians' treachery and cruelty, which he claims to have witnessed personally. Two other travelers Thomas (Paul Dano) and his wife (Zoe Kazan) also fear that the Indian might be leading them into an ambush.

The trek continues, day after hot day, the Indian now leading the way, followed by the two wagons (the third is lost during a difficult trip down a steep incline), the women trudging behind the men, and still no sight of water. Meek knows nothing of the Indian's Cayuse tribe, nor apparently of the wide spread sign language, so they are unable to communicate with him. By words and gestures they try to get him to understand their desire for water.

This is a minimalist film, the dialogue probably requiring no more than two or three pages, and the actors' delivery is such that it is often difficult to comprehend it. We never learn anything about "the Indian," and very little about the travelers. What Kelly Reichardt seems to be showing is the slow shift of power in the group. At first it is Meek who is

in total control, with the travelers accepting his decisions without question. Next in the chain of command are the women, who always walk behind the men. When camp is made at night and the men rest, it is the women who gather the firewood, prepare the meals, and work far into the night mending clothes. Then, when their confidence in Meek has lessened, it is Emily who tips the scale during the argument over what to do with the captured Indian. We see her innate kindness when she notices his torn moccasin and stitches it up. Her husband is as surprised as the others by her quiet assertion of leadership. By the end of the film it is not Meek who is out in front of the wagons, but the Indian striding toward the distant horizon.

This film accepts with a vengeance the old adage about "it's not about arriving, but it's the journey that is important." The ending reminds me of a short film called *The Pump* (still available from Vision Video), also set in a parched land. A man lost in the desert comes to an old shack and a pump. There is a bottle of water with a note attached. A previous traveler warns the finder not to drink the water, that the bottle contains just enough to prime the pump. The little film concludes with the parched finder of the note torn between satisfying immediately his thirst and using the water as a means to gain more. *Meek's Cut* also ends on a note of ambiguity concerning the placement of trust. To what is the Indian leading them? Into an ambush, or a stream or spring of life-giving water? This question of trust is an important issue to people of faith, so I commend this obscure film to those willing to seek it out.