

Clouds (Part Two): God's Cloud As His Chariot

by Charles Whitaker

Forerunner, "Prophecy Watch,"

“Where the LORD goes, there are whirlwinds and storms, and the clouds are the dust beneath His feet.” (Nahum 1:3, *New Century Version*)

In Part One, we saw that God possesses His own cloud; He enwraps Himself in it. “His cloud,” as David calls it in Psalm 18:12, is more than supernatural: It is positively spectacular, discharging not only rain but fire, not only hail but smoke. From His magnificent yet terrifyingⁱ cloud, God reveals His secrets to some according to His sovereign will, while hiding Himself from others according to the purposes of that same will. His cloud can facilitate revelation as easily as it can concealment.

God is present in His cloud. It is no wonder, then, that so many scriptures associate His cloud with His glory. Exodus 16:10 notifies us that “the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.”ⁱⁱ Exodus 24:16 reports that “the glory of the Lord rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days.” Not at all surprisingly, the glory of God, in His cloud, filled the Tabernacle:

Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34-35)

As a parallel scripture, consider the description of the dedication of Solomon’s Temple:

And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD. (I Kings 8:10-11; see also II Chronicles 5:13-14)

The cloud at once announces God's presence and obscures enough of His glory to protect humans from destruction. Whether we want to think of the God-cloud as a manifestation of the *shekinah* or not, it is apparent that He is there, present in His cloud.

The gospels also link God's glory to His cloud. A case in point is the Transfiguration:ⁱⁱⁱ

While He was still speaking, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!" And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their faces and were greatly afraid. (Matthew 17:5-6; see also Mark 9:7; Luke 9:34-35)

Here as elsewhere, the cloud *hides* God so people do not succumb, overcome by the brightness of His glory. But the same cloud also provides the opportunity for the Father to reveal a truth He deemed exceedingly important to the three disciples present on the occasion, namely, the opportunity to teach them that the words of His Son carried more weight than the words of Moses or the prophets (represented by Elijah). Just as God used His cloud (as we saw last time in Exodus 19:9) to facilitate the Israelites' hearing of Moses, so on this occasion the cloud facilitates the disciples' hearing of Jesus.

After Christ's resurrection, the apostle John, who was present at the Transfiguration, refers to this incident, connecting it with God's glory: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Years later, Peter, who was also present with the brothers James and John at the Transfiguration, likewise connected it with the glory of God: "For He received from God the Father honor and glory when such a voice came to Him from the Excellent Glory: 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (II Peter 1:17). Generally, God's cloud reflects His glory by virtue of the fact that He is present *in* it.

Riding the Portable Throne

Any discussion of God's cloud demands a look at Ezekiel 1 and 10, the prophet's description of God's "portable throne." In Psalm 104:3, the psalmist sees clouds as God's chariot. If we stop to reflect, even the garden-variety of clouds we know so well are generally on the move, sometimes rapidly so. This fact informs the image of clouds as a means of transport.^{iv} Ezekiel introduces his description of the throne with a reference to clouds:

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north
[remember, Isaiah 14:13 hints that God resides at "the farthest sides
of the north"^v] and a great cloud, with brightness around it, and fire
flashing forth continually, and in the midst of the fire, as it were
gleaming metal. (Ezekiel 1:4, *English Standard Version* [ESV])

The "gleaming metal" (many translations render it "glowing metal") may be a reference to Christ, the God riding the cloud. Compare the description of Christ's feet at Revelation 1:15: "His feet [were] like unto brilliant metal as if they burned in a furnace" (*Jubilee Bible 2000*). In Ezekiel 1:27-28, the prophet concludes his description with a reference to the Being who was riding the cloud, mentioning a stunning display of God's glory:

I looked at Him from His waist up. He looked like hot metal with
fire all around Him. I looked at Him from His waist down. It
looked like fire with a glow that was shining all around Him. The
light shining around Him was like a rainbow in a cloud. It was the
Glory of the Lord. (*Easy-to-Read Version*)

The *Good News Translation* describes the rainbow mentioned in verse 28 as "the dazzling light which shows the presence of the LORD." Again, in Ezekiel 10:4, the prophet cannot miss the glory of God radiating from His cloud:

Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub, and paused
over the threshold of the temple; and the house was filled with the
cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the LORD's glory.

A broad look at Ezekiel's description of the portable throne makes it clear that God revealed more about the "inner workings" of His cloud to Ezekiel than to anyone else. The passage is a good example of God's exercising His

sovereign prerogative to reveal knowledge according to His purposes. Interestingly, about the only element missing from the description of the portable throne in Ezekiel 1 and 10 is smoke. Clouds are there, as are fires of coal and lightning, but no smoke. It may be that God, choosing to reveal never-before-understood secrets about His cloud, purposefully removed the smoke to permit the prophet a better view.

Likely, Psalm 18:11 is a poetic description of God's riding His portable throne. Here, David alludes to the cloaking effect of the cloud: God "made darkness His secret place; His canopy around Him was dark waters and thick clouds of the skies."

Isaiah 19:1, where the prophet writes that "the LORD rides on a swift cloud and will come into Egypt," is another verse that apparently mentions God's transporting Himself wherever He wishes while cloaked in His brilliant cloud. A better-known example appears in Daniel 7:13, where the prophet Daniel

was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him.

Next time, we will look at the role God's cloud plays in the prophecies of Christ's return.

Inset: Smoke and God's Cloud

As we have seen, some descriptions of God's cloud include the presence of smoke, for example, the "smoking cloud" of Isaiah 4:5 (*Complete Jewish Bible*) and the enveloping smoke over Mount Sinai described in Exodus 19:18. While smoke has several meanings in God's Word, three stand out:

1. **Judgment.** Compare two far-apart scriptures, ones which really are not that distant, considering they both deal with the concept of God's *judgment*. In the first one, Abraham "looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain; and he saw, and behold,

the smoke of the land which went up like the smoke of a furnace”
(Genesis 19:28).

In the second passage, smoke attends the fall of another great city,
Babylon:

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a
great multitude in heaven, crying out, “Hallelujah!
Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for His
judgments are true and just; for He has judged the great
prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality,
and has avenged on her the blood of His servants.”

Once more they cried out, “Hallelujah! The smoke from
her goes up forever and ever.” (Revelation 19:1-3, ESV)

Judgment forms the backdrop of both passages, and, in both cases,
smoke is present. One of the underlying concepts behind smoke is
God’s judgment. In fact, one Hebrew noun for “smoke” is closely
associated with the noun “anger,” as illustrated in Psalm 74:1:
“Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?”

God also links judgment with smoke in Nahum 2:13: “‘Behold, I
am against you,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘I will burn your chariots in
smoke.’” It is only appropriate, then, that fully 22% of the
scriptural references to smoke appear in the book of Revelation,
since that book narrates the visions the apostle John saw regarding
the Lord’s Day—the Day of the Lord (Revelation 1:10)—a day of
judgment.

Smoke and judgment fit hand and glove for at least two reasons:

First, smoke is *evanescent*; it is short-lived, ascending, dispersing,
quickly becoming rarefied. In Psalm 102:3, the psalmist writes:
“For my days pass away like smoke . . .” God, speaking through
the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 51:6, assures us that “the heavens will
vanish away like smoke.” As smoke is short-lived, so is God’s
wrath. In Isaiah 10:25 (ESV), God tells us that “in a very little

while My fury will come to an end.” Like smoke, God’s judgment is intense but short-lived.^{vi}

Second, not only is smoke an apt image for the brevity of God’s judgment, but it is also a good image of the *fate* of those judged and found wanting. In Psalm 37:20, David assures us that the wicked shall perish “like the splendor of the meadows, [they] shall vanish, into smoke they shall vanish away.” In Hosea 13:3, the prophet, speaking of those who offer human sacrifices, concludes: “Therefore they shall be like the morning cloud and like the early dew that passes away, like chaff blown off from a threshing floor and like smoke from a chimney.” Poof! And they are gone.

2. **Protection.** We have already seen that, as recorded in Isaiah 4:5-6, God promises to create in Jerusalem a smoking cloud that will serve as a covering “for shade in the daytime from the heat, for a place of refuge, and for a shelter from storm and rain.” (In their wilderness wanderings, the children of Israel found protection from the sun under God’s cloud.)
3. **Fellowship.** An intriguing reference to smoke occurs in the narrative of God’s making His covenant with Abraham:

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces [of the sacrifices]. (Genesis 15:17)

The Hebrew noun accurately translated “oven” refers to a “baking oven” as distinct from a kiln or smelting furnace—both of which burn much hotter. (The Hebrew nouns for “kiln” or for “smelting furnace” are more likely to appear in contexts of God’s wrath or judgment.)

In this passage, God is not passing judgment on Abraham, as He did on the Egyptians in Exodus 14 or on Sodom in Genesis 19. Nor is He protecting Abraham from an enemy, as He promises to do in the case of His people in Isaiah 4. Rather, Genesis 15 links smoke

to the sort of oven in which people prepare food. The symbolic action indicates that God and Abraham were going to have a meal together. There was peace between them; they were in fellowship. In this context, smoke represents the fellowship of God and man in peace.

In all three cases—judgment, protection, or fellowship—smoke represents *the presence of God*. It is in this sense that smoke relates to God's cloud, which also indicates His presence. However, there is a decided difference in symbolic emphasis between God's cloud and the smoke that may be associated with it. The thrust of the passages about God's cloud is twofold:

1. His cloud hides Him to keep people from being consumed by the brightness of His glory.
2. Paradoxically, His cloud reveals Him, for when God's cloud is around, people definitely know it. He often teaches from His cloud.

However, the primary thrust behind the image of smoke is different: *Smoke highlights the intrinsic difference between God and man*. In Proverbs 10:26, God mentions the fact that smoke is not good for the eyes. Humans instinctively close their eyes around heavy smoke. Again, in Isaiah 65:5, God speaks of rebellious people (verse 2) using an anthropomorphism, saying they “are a smoke in My nostrils.” The image is informed by the fact that smoke gags humans, who need the “breath of life” (Genesis 2:7) to exist. Sputtering and coughing, we take quick action to avoid inhaling it, knowing that we are unable to live in a heavily smoky environment.

Conversely, God is at ease in His smoky cloud. In fact, Isaiah discovered that God's throne-room is “filled with smoke” (Isaiah 6:4). Revelation 15:8 notifies us that “the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power.” Some argue that this smoke refers to incense. However, it is noteworthy that the Hebrew and Greek nouns for “smoke” in these two passages, nouns appearing in aggregate 38 times in God's Word, refer unambiguously to incense only once (Revelation 8:4).

Smoke makes a good “buffer” between God and man because a smoky environment is inimical to man. God can use it to ensure His privacy. Smoke

is His way of saying, “Keep out.” By controlling the density of smoke, God can control exactly how much of Himself He wishes to reveal. The lesson is that humans can know of God only what He wants them to know.

End Notes

i For examples of God’s cloud generating terror, consider Exodus 19:16 (the giving of the law at Sinai), Ezekiel 1:28 (the prophet’s response to the vision of the portable throne), and Matthew 17:6 (the disciples’ response at the Transfiguration).

ii Unless otherwise noted, all scriptural citations are from the *New King James Version*.

iii The Greek verb rendered “overshadowed” in verse 5, its first use, is *episkiazo* (*Strong’s Concordance* #1982). *The New American Standard Bible* and the *King James Version* render *episkiazo* with the verb “overshadow” in all five of its New Testament appearances: Matthew 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 1:35; 9:34; and Acts 5:15. *Episkiazo* carries the idea of “enveloping.” Compare Psalm 97:2, where the psalmist writes that “clouds and darkness surround” God. They envelop Him.

iv See Jeremiah 4:13, where God describes Nebuchadnezzar with imagery involving quickly moving clouds: “Behold, he shall come up like clouds, and his chariots like a whirlwind. His horses are swifter than eagles. Woe to us, for we are plundered!”

v Here God is quoting Satan, the great deceiver, so we accept them at face value at our own risk. It is not appropriate to consider God’s quotation of Satan here as an example of “two witnesses” validating a charge, since the Devil does not have a sterling reputation as an honest witness.

vi For scriptures showing the brevity of God’s wrath, consider the following:

- Isaiah 54:7 (*Holman Christian Standard Bible* [HCSB]):

I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you
back with great compassion.

Note the conceptual opposites of “desertion” and “great compassion,”
separated by only “a brief moment.”

- Isaiah 26:20 (HCSB), where the “wrath” of God passes quickly:

Go, My people, enter your rooms and close your doors
behind you. Hide for a little while until the wrath has
passed.

- Isaiah 10:25 (*The Amplified Bible*):

For yet a very little while and My indignation against you
[Israel] will be fulfilled and My anger will be directed
toward the destruction of the Assyrian.

See also Malachi 4:1-3.