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The Divine Presence within the Cloud

Walter A. Maier III

During the biblical era God manifested his presence to people in various ways. One such method was by the use of a cloud, in which would be the special presence of the invisible Lord. The cloud thus proclaimed to the people, “Here is God,” without their actually seeing the Deity. Further, a cloud is mentioned with regard to the presence of the Lord in poetical and figurative passages of Scripture and in passages recounting visions. A cloud was prominent at the transfiguration of Christ. Finally, biblical passages foretelling the coming of the Lord in judgment, including the ultimate reckoning on the Last Day, associate these manifestations of God with a cloud or clouds.¹

I. The Pillar of Cloud That Accompanied Israel

During the exodus from Egypt and the wilderness wanderings, God was with the Israelites in a striking, continually visible manner—in a pillar of cloud by day, that turned into a pillar of, or that produced, fire at night.²

¹ The following passages cited from the Hebrew Bible all have the Hebrew word *אָבֶקֶת*, “cloud,” except where otherwise noted.

² See C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1, *The Pentateuch Three Volumes in One*, trans. James Martin et al. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 41. Note Exod 14:24; their understanding is that this one pillar or column was simultaneously of both cloud *and* fire and that even when shining in the dark, it is still called the pillar of cloud (Exod 14:19) or the cloud (Num 9:21). Their conclusion is that “it was a cloud with a dark side and a bright one, causing darkness and also lighting the night [Exod 14:20] . . . or ‘a cloud, and fire in it by night’ [Exod 40:38] . . . Consequently we have to imagine the cloud as the covering of the fire, so that by day it appeared as a dark cloud in contrast with the light of the sun, but by night as a fiery splendor, ‘a fire-look’ [Num 9:15, 16].” They are also of the opinion that, while this cloud assumed the form of a column as it went before Israel, when it stood still above the tabernacle or came down upon the tent, “it most probably took the form of a round globe of cloud, and when it separated the Israelites from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, we have to imagine it spread out like a bank of cloud, forming, as it were, a dividing wall.” For these latter two assumptions (concerning the round-globe shape and the spreading out as a wall), however, there is no decisive evidence in Scripture.

Several verses make this clear. The supernatural pillar was usually above the people, and it also led them (at night lighting the way for them).

Exodus 13:21–22

²¹ Now Yahweh was going before them by day in a pillar [בְּעַמֻּדָה, or “column”] of cloud to lead them on the way, and at night in a pillar [בְּעַמֻּדָה] of fire to give light to them, that they might travel by day or [or “and”] by night. ²² The pillar of cloud did not depart [imperfect; some, “He did not remove”] by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.³

Note the two-fold use of the preposition בְּ. Yahweh was “in” the pillar, or column. Specifically, it was the Divine Angel, the Second Person of the Trinity, who was in the cloud and fire, as Exodus 14:19 indicates.

Exodus 14:19

¹⁹ The Angel of God, the one going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them [the Israelites]; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them.

This and the previous passage show that Yahweh, or the Divine Angel, and the pillar were closely associated because Yahweh’s presence is directly linked to the pillar of cloud. Exodus 23:20, 21, and 23 also lead to the conclusion that the Divine Angel, or the Second Person, led the people.

Exodus 23:20, 21, and 23a

²⁰ “Behold, I am sending an Angel⁴ before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place which I have prepared. ²¹ Be on guard before him, and listen to his voice. Do not rebel against him, because he will not forgive your transgression, for my name is in him ²³ For my Angel will go before you”

This description of the Angel indicates his divinity, especially the matter of his not forgiving, and by implication, forgiving, sins. Thus, the Hebrew Bible exhibits flexibility when speaking of the divine presence within the pillar of cloud, making reference to Yahweh or to the Angel.

³ All translations are the author’s, except where otherwise noted. Keil and Delitzsch observe that most later passages (e.g., Exod 40:34; Num 9:15; 10:11–12) refer to *the* cloud, with the definite article, as something already known, so that all these passages refer back to Exod 13:21. *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:40n1.

⁴ Although several Hebrew manuscripts, the LXX, and the Vulgate have “my Angel,” this could be an intentional harmonization with Exod 23:23.

Exodus 14:24

²⁴ Now it was at the morning watch that Yahweh, in a pillar of fire and cloud, looked down at the army of Egypt and threw into confusion the army of Egypt.

After Moses wrote in Exodus 14:19-20 about the Angel of God and the cloud moving from before the camp of Israel to a location behind the Israelites, in between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel, he then uses the name "Yahweh" in Exodus 14:24 in connection with the pillar.

Exodus 40:36-38

³⁶ Now when the cloud was taken up [Niphal of אָרָץ; or "arose"⁵] from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel would set out on all their journeys. ³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, they would not set out until the day when it was taken up. ³⁸ For the cloud of Yahweh was over the tabernacle by day, and fire would be in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel in all their journeys.

When the tabernacle was constructed, the pillar stood above that sanctuary. When the pillar moved, the people of Israel also moved and followed the pillar until it stood still over another place, which would be their new camping site.

Numbers 9:15-17, 21b-23

¹⁵ Now on the day the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony, and in the evening it was over the tabernacle, as the appearance of fire, until morning. ¹⁶ So it would be continually; the cloud would cover it, and [have] the appearance of fire by night. ¹⁷ And whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tent, then after this the children of Israel would set out, and at the place where the cloud would settle, there the children of Israel would camp ^{21b} Whether during the day or the night, when the cloud

⁵ Ludwig Köhler et al., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:829.

⁶ Concerning v. 16, Ronald B. Allen writes: "The cloud and fire were both reversals of the expected phenomena of the time. Both the cloud and the fire were striking, unusual, and unexpected. These were symbols one would not, could not ignore. They were awesome and eerie, unnatural and unexpected, comforting and protective. To relieve the heat of the desert sun, there was a cloud by day. To reverse the cold darkness of the desert night, there was the comforting fire overhead. Everything about this paragraph [Num 9:15-23] is wrapped in mystery, a mystic sense of the Divine Presence. The passage shimmers with awe and delight." Ronald B. Allen, "Numbers," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:776.

was taken up, they would set out.²² Whether two days or a month or days [“an indefinitely long period”⁷; some, “a year”], when the cloud lingered over the tabernacle to stay over it, the children of Israel remained encamped and they would not set out, and when it was taken up they would set out.²³ At the command [literally, “mouth”] of Yahweh they would camp, and at the command of Yahweh they would set out. The charge of Yahweh [first, before the verb, for emphasis] they kept, at the command of Yahweh through [literally, “by the hand of”] Moses.

Similar to the Exodus 40 passage is Numbers 9:15–23, which describes in a fuller manner what had briefly been reported in Exodus 40:36–38. That the cloud covered the tabernacle could mean that the pillar covered all of the sanctuary or part of it. The people knew that they were to remain encamped in an area when the cloud stayed over the tabernacle and that when the cloud lifted and moved, they were to follow it to a new location, because God had indicated this to them—had so commanded them—through Moses (Num 9:23). Note that the cloud arising and moving, and lingering—signs to the Israelites—are both referred to as “the command [lit., mouth] of Yahweh.” This could be regarded as an indication of the special presence of Yahweh within the cloud. While the Deity did not actually speak to the people, he was still making clear to them his will.⁸

Related passages in the Pentateuch are Numbers 10:11, 12, 34; 14:14; and Deuteronomy 1:33; related passages in the Hebrew Bible outside of the Pentateuch include Psalm 78:14 and Nehemiah 9:12.⁹

⁷ Francis Brown et al., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with an Appendix, Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 399, abbreviated BDB.

⁸ Allen notes that “the movement of the cloud and its presence were unpredictable, with no discernable pattern,” and explains, “This was to impress on the people the sense that it was God who was leading them, not some pattern of creation nor some whim from above The variation from a night’s rest, to a camp of a couple of days, to a month-long rest, to a lengthy period . . . was all dependent on the work and will of God. In no case was there an explanation given or needed from God” (Allen, “Numbers,” 777–778). George Bush comments that the people’s movements “were constantly regulated by the divine direction, and this again was undoubtedly governed by reasons of infinite wisdom, though not expressly made known.” George Bush, *Notes on Numbers* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1858; Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), 132. Citations are to the James & Klock edition.

⁹ Cf. Neh 9:19, “‘And you [Yahweh], in your abundant mercies, did not abandon them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud did not turn aside from above them by day, to lead them in the way, nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they should go.’” For the use of the sign of the definite direct object, *תָּנָח*, to introduce a

Numbers 14:14

¹⁴“They [the inhabitants of Canaan] have heard that You, Yahweh, are in the midst of this people; that you, Yahweh, are seen eye to eye, and your cloud is standing over them, and in a pillar of cloud you are going before them by day, and in a pillar of fire by night.”

With the phrase “you, Yahweh, are seen eye to eye,” Moses possibly is describing in a dramatic way, with some hyperbole, how near (so to speak) the people were to Yahweh, whose special presence was close to them in the cloud that stood above them and that led them by day and by night.¹⁰

In the pillar of cloud, God at times manifested his glory. The glory of God can be defined as the sum total of God’s attributes, or some of them, or one of them, becoming evident for people to behold. In the context of the cloud passages, the glory of God perhaps should be understood as a dazzling display of his majestic splendor, which display nevertheless was muted for the sake of sinful mortals. Following are relevant passages.

Exodus 16:10

And it happened, as Aaron spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, that they turned toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory [כְּבוֹד] of Yahweh appeared in the cloud.

This event occurred shortly after the miracle at the sea, right before Yahweh miraculously provided food for the Israelites and before the tabernacle had been constructed. Also in Numbers 17:7 the congregation of Israel turns to look at the cloud.

Numbers 17:7 (ET 16:42)

Now it happened, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting [the tabernacle], and behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of Yahweh appeared.

When the tabernacle had been built and set up for the first time, the cloud covered it, and the glory of Yahweh proceeded, apparently, from the cloud into the tent.

subject, see Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 527.

¹⁰ For an alternative way of understanding this passage, see the discussion of Exod 33:7–11a below.

Exodus 40:34–35

³⁴ Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle. ³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud stayed over it, and the glory of Yahweh filled the tabernacle.

On this special occasion the glory of Yahweh clearly was connected with the cloud. At the dedication of the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem something similar occurred, as related by 1 Kings 8:10–12 (cf. 2 Chr 5:13c–14).

1 Kings 8:10–12

¹⁰ And it happened, when the priests came out from the Holy Place, that the cloud filled the temple of Yahweh. ¹¹ And the priests were not able to stand to minister because of the cloud, because the glory of Yahweh filled the temple of Yahweh. ¹² Then Solomon said, “Yahweh said that he would abide in the heavy cloud [עֲרַפֵּל].”

This cloud suddenly appeared and is referred to as “the cloud,” because this was the reappearance of the well-known cloud from the time of Moses, the exodus, and the wilderness wandering. Once again, Yahweh’s special presence was in this cloud, in which Yahweh now manifested his glory. 1 Kings 8:10 states specifically that the cloud, and so also the revealed glory of God, “filled” the temple. Thus, the cloud did not stay over the building but entered it. Whether this is to be perceived as a new and different development from when the tabernacle was first set up, and if so, how this difference should be understood, remains uncertain. In the Hebrew text of 1 Kings 8:10, that the subject, “the cloud,” precedes the verb is noteworthy, especially if the verb is a perfect (it could be an active participle); this word order signifies that emphasis is being put on “the cloud.” The last word of 1 Kings 8:12 (עֲרַפֵּל) could also be rendered “thick darkness.” “Heavy [or thick] cloud” was chosen for the translation,¹¹ because this seemed to fit better with the immediate context, namely, the reference in v. 10 to the theophanic cloud of the Mosaic era. That this cloud entered and filled the temple showed Yahweh’s approval and acceptance of the temple and his taking up “residence” there. The cloud filling the whole temple and this display of God’s glory were temporary (only for the dedication).

¹¹ Only in Exod 20:21; Deut 5:22; and 1 Kgs 8:12 (cf. 2 Chr 6:1) does עֲרַפֵּל have the definite article. See M.J. Mulder, “*’ārāpel*,” in G. Johannes Botzweck et al., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 11:371–375; see also C.F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 109.

As passages discussed below will indicate (Ps 97:2; Lev 16:2), Yahweh would continue to dwell in a cloud in heaven and in a cloud over the ark of the covenant that had just been placed in the Most Holy Place of the Jerusalem temple. These clouds, as well as the pillar of cloud of Moses' time and the cloud that descended on Mount Sinai, are all related—they were all connected with the divine presence.

Ezekiel 10 reflects the imagery from the scenes in Exodus 40 and 1 Kings 8 of the sanctuary, the cloud, and the glory of Yahweh. In Ezekiel 8–11, Ezekiel relates a vision granted to him by God, in which the prophet, an exile in Babylonia, is transported back to Jerusalem. In the vision he finds himself at the Solomonic temple. Ezekiel 10:3–4 reports part of what he sees there.

Ezekiel 10:3–4

³Now the cherubim were standing on the south [literally, “right”] side of the temple . . . and the cloud filled the inner court. ⁴The glory of Yahweh went up from above the cherubim [understanding the singular noun as a collective] to the threshold of the temple, and the temple was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of Yahweh.

The definite article with “cloud”—“*the* cloud”—means that the cloud of Ezekiel’s vision is to be associated with the pillar of cloud of the exodus and wilderness wanderings that was seen above the tabernacle and that then filled the Jerusalem temple at its dedication.¹² Given the background passages from the Torah and 1 Kings, a natural interpretation of Ezekiel 10:3–4 is that the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud, and when the cloud filled the temple, the “brightness of the glory” spilled out into the temple court. That Ezekiel sees the cloud and the glory at the temple indicates that the presence of Yahweh was still a reality at the Jerusalem temple. However, in the vision the glory of Yahweh, and presumably also the cloud, leave the immediate temple area and eventually go outside of Jerusalem—a sign that Yahweh would abandon his house and chosen city because of the wickedness of the inhabitants of Judah. Both the sanctuary and Jerusalem would undergo judgment from the Lord, namely, destruction by the Babylonians.

Hummel makes a convincing case for viewing the references to the glory of Yahweh in Ezekiel as a manifestation especially of the preincar-

¹² Horace Hummel reaches the same conclusion. See Horace Hummel, *Ezekiel 1–20*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2005), 296.

nate Christ.¹³ Hummel does so based in part on Ezekiel's inaugural vision when he was commissioned to be a prophet of Yahweh. In Ezekiel 1:26, the prophet reports that he saw "a likeness like the appearance of a man," a phrase that points to the incarnation of the Son of God, and in Ezekiel 1:28 the prophet realizes that what he is gazing upon is "the appearance of the likeness of the glory of Yahweh."¹⁴ Such an understanding of the glory of Yahweh mentioned in Ezekiel's visions parallels the reality of the Divine Angel being within the pillar of cloud that led Moses and the children of Israel.

This pillar of cloud accompanying the Israelites could, so to speak, come down from above and stand opposite a person or people. The first account of such an occurrence is in Exodus 33:7-11.

Exodus 33:7-11a

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent [a pre-tabernacle shrine] and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp. He called it the tent of meeting. It would be that anyone seeking Yahweh would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. ⁸ It would be, whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and watch Moses until he entered the tent. ⁹ It would be, when Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would come down and stand at the entrance of the tent, and he [Yahweh] spoke with Moses. ¹⁰ All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, and all the people arose and bowed down [or "worshipped"], each at the entrance of his tent. ¹¹ So Yahweh spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

Without question, "the pillar of cloud" mentioned is the same one that appeared at the start of the exodus, and Yahweh—that is, his special presence—was within the pillar. At the entrance to the tent the invisible God, to use anthropomorphic language, "stood" opposite Moses and spoke with him, as the text states, "face to face." This reading of Exodus 33:7-11a serves as the lens through which later and similar passages are to be viewed.

¹³ Note especially Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 64-67. See also Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Boston: Brill, 1998), 80-84.

¹⁴ Hummel, *Ezekiel 1-20*, 64-65.

Numbers 11:24–25a

²⁴ Moses went out and spoke to the people the words of Yahweh. He gathered seventy men from the elders of the people and caused them to stand around the tent [the tabernacle]. ²⁵ Yahweh came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and drew [?] from the Spirit which was on him [Moses], and put [it] upon the seventy elders.

Numbers 11:25 speaks simply of “the cloud,” but this is to be understood as the pillar of cloud mentioned in Exodus 33:9–10. The next passage occurs in the context of the account of Miriam and Aaron talking against Moses because of their jealousy of his leadership position, and Yahweh’s reaction to their opposition.

Numbers 12:5, 9–10a

⁵ Yahweh came down in a pillar of cloud and stood at the entrance of the tent and called Aaron and Miriam. Both of them came forward. ⁹ The anger of Yahweh burned against them, and he went away. ¹⁰ Now the cloud departed from over the tent, and behold, Miriam was leprous

Though the MT of Numbers 12:5 reads “a pillar of cloud,” a number of Hebrew manuscripts have instead “the pillar of cloud” with the definite article prefixed to “cloud,” the last word in the construct chain. Indeed, the definite article could have been accidentally omitted by a scribe (due to the similar appearance of the preceding *dalet* at the end of “pillar”), so the original text quite possibly read “the pillar of cloud.” In this pillar, the same one referenced in the preceding passages, Yahweh “came down” and “stood” at the entrance of the tabernacle. Though the text does not state this explicitly, the impression given is that he spoke also with Aaron and Miriam “face to face.” Then, apparently, Yahweh and the cloud went up from the entrance of the tent to the cloud’s usual position above the tabernacle, and from there the cloud, and Yahweh, “departed” (סִירָה), a dramatic demonstration of Yahweh’s intense displeasure with Miriam and Aaron. This seems to indicate that the cloud left the Israelite camp, but where it went to and how long it was gone remains uncertain. Perhaps it did not go far away and was not long gone, for Aaron, right after Miriam was struck with leprosy, confessed the sin of both of them to Moses and pleaded for the healing of his sister. Then Moses cried out to Yahweh to heal Miriam, and immediately Yahweh responded, saying that she should be shut out of the Israelite camp for seven days, after which she could be received again (the implication being, by that point in time she would be healed, if this in fact had not already happened soon after Moses’ petition). Another such

incident involving the pillar of cloud of cloud at the entrance of the tabernacle occurred shortly before the death of Moses, this time involving Moses and Joshua.

Deuteronomy 31:14b–15

¹⁴ So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting. ¹⁵ And Yahweh appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud and the pillar of cloud stood at [or “over”; Hebrew על] the entrance of the tent.

While the original text most likely had in Deuteronomy 31:15 the phrase, “Yahweh appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud,”¹⁵ this was the same pillar as in all the other passages previously examined. Psalm 99:6a–7 could be a summary of some of these passages, or perhaps presents new information regarding Aaron.

Psalm 99:6, 7

⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests . . . ⁷ In a pillar of cloud he used to speak to them. They kept his testimonies and statutes he gave to them.

Here the psalmist, recalling a portion of his nation’s history that took place long before his lifetime, referred to the pillar as “a pillar of cloud,” mainly because he had not previously mentioned it in the psalm. On the other hand, since the literary genre is poetry, the translation could read, “the pillar of cloud,” even though the definite article is absent.

1 Corinthians 10:1–2

¹ For I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers, that our fathers all were under the cloud, and all went through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in connection with [ἐν] the cloud and the sea.

Many versions translate 1 Corinthians 10:2 as “and all were baptized into Moses *in* the cloud and the sea,” but this can be misleading and is not the best choice. Moses and the Israelites were never *in* the pillar of cloud. Rather, Paul uses the Greek preposition ἐν here, as he often does, with the sense “in connection with.” The cloud—that is, Yahweh inside the cloud—had kept the Egyptians apart from the children of Israel, then led the Israelites through the sea—all of this making possible the “baptism”

¹⁵ Possibly the reading was “in the cloud”; see the apparatus of *BHS*. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), 343.

into Moses. The sea, or water, also made possible this “baptism.” Paul’s use of the verb “baptized” leads to the conclusion that the sea crossing should be regarded as a type, a foreshadowing of the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The experience with the cloud and the water in the end decisively separated the children of Israel from the wicked Egyptians, made the Israelites into a unified body, and united them with Moses in a way in which they had not previously been joined to him (cf. Exod 14:31). So also Christian Baptism separates the baptized person from the unbelieving world, brings about a unified body, the one, holy Christian church, and unites the baptized with Christ in a new, blessed relationship.

Isaiah 4:5

⁵ Yahweh will create over all the place of Mount Zion and over its assembly a cloud by day and smoke and brightness of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory will be a canopy.

The wording of this verse clearly borrows from the earlier history of Israel during the time of Moses and is similar to the poetic language of Psalm 105:38a, 39: “Egypt was glad when they departed . . . He spread a cloud for a covering [or “screen”] and fire to give light by night.”¹⁶ In the context of Isaiah 4:2–6, “Mount Zion” and “its assembly” is phraseology designating the Messiah’s spiritual kingdom. The people whom the Messiah rules, who are in this kingdom, have been cleansed by him and endowed with wonderful blessings of salvation. Thus, “Mount Zion” and “its assembly” can also be called “the glory”; the Church is indeed glorious since she is the radiant bride of Christ (Eph 5:25–27). The imagery of “a cloud by day and smoke and brightness of a flaming fire by night,” recalling the exodus and wilderness wandering, are terms of reassurance and comfort, portraying the fact that God will protect, lead, guide, and provide for those in spiritual Zion. At the end of Isaiah 4:5, “canopy” renders the Hebrew word *הֶסֶח*, which also occurs in wedding contexts (Ps 19:6 [ET 5]; Joel 2:16). “Canopy” is equal to the cloud mentioned earlier in this text. Whereas the pillar of cloud in Moses’ day was in one limited area at any given time and not over the whole Israelite camp, the cloud/canopy of Isaiah 4:5 covered all Mount Zion and its assembly. This portrays the spiritual union each believer has with Christ. In reality, the Old Testament-era believers had similar union with the preincarnate Messiah through faith in him.

¹⁶ See Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “Exodus,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:385. Kaiser thinks, on the basis of Ps 105:39, that the width of the pillar of cloud at the base was sufficiently large to provide cover for Israel from the intense heat.

II. The Cloud of Mount Sinai

In addition to the pillar of cloud mentioned in the preceding passages, the Israelites saw another cloud in which was the special presence of Yahweh. This was the cloud that descended on Mount Sinai, where God gave to the nation his covenant guidelines through Moses. God foretold the coming of this cloud, which then, of course, actually appeared.

Exodus 19:9, 16-17

⁹ Yahweh said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you in the thick cloud [בְּעֵב הָעָנָן], literally, “in the thickness of the cloud”¹⁷, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and also that they may believe in you forever.” ¹⁶ So it was on the third day, when it was the morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes, and a heavy [כָּבֵד] cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet sound. All the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Moses brought out the people from the camp to meet God. They stood at the lowest part [or “foot”] of the mountain.

Again, this cloud was distinct from the pillar of cloud. This new cloud is described in a different way—as “a thick cloud” (Exod 19:9a) or “a heavy cloud” (Exod 19:16). Furthermore, it was not over the people but over Mount Sinai. In addition, accompanying this mountain cloud were thunder and lightning and a very loud trumpet sound. This combination frightened the Israelites so that they trembled, a reaction not reported in connection with the pillar of cloud. But also within the mountain cloud was the divine presence.

Exodus 24:15-18

¹⁵ Moses went up to the mountain and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of Yahweh settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. He called to Moses on the seventh day from the midst of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of Yahweh to the eyes of the children of Israel was as a devouring fire on the top of the mountain. ¹⁸ Moses went into [בְּיֹאֵם] the midst of the cloud and ascended the mountain. Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.

Evidently, Moses initially went a certain distance up the mountain, stopped, and stayed there for six days. Then on the seventh day, at the call of Yahweh, Moses entered the cloud and went up higher on Mount Sinai.

¹⁷ See *BDB*, 716.

Also, in this cloud Yahweh manifested his glory, which now appeared as a devouring fire.

Exodus 34:4-6

⁴ So he [Moses] hewed out two stone tablets, like the first ones. Moses arose early in the morning and went up Mount Sinai, as Yahweh had commanded him. He took in his hand two stone tablets. ⁵ Yahweh came down in the cloud and stood there with him. He called on the name of Yahweh. ⁶ Yahweh crossed by in front of him and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God merciful and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in gracious faithfulness and truth."

After forty days and forty nights on the mountain, Moses came down from Sinai, saw the golden calf, and in his anger threw down the two stone tablets given to him by Yahweh, shattering them at the foot of the mountain. Therefore, Moses returned to the mountain with two new tablets. Exodus 34:5 could be interpreted as indicating that the mountain cloud had departed Sinai, but now returned, within which was the presence of the Deity. Moses was once more in this cloud, and Yahweh, as the text states, "stood there with him." This is reminiscent of the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent and of Yahweh speaking with Moses "face to face" from that pillar.

Deuteronomy 4:11-12

¹¹ [Moses said to the people,] "You drew near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire unto the heart of the heavens; darkness, and cloud, and thick darkness [or "heavy cloud"; עֲרֵפֶל]. ¹² Yahweh spoke to you from the midst of the fire. The sound of words you were hearing, but a form you were not seeing, only a voice."

Deuteronomy 5:19 (ET 22)

¹⁹ These words Yahweh spoke to all your assembly at the mountain from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness [עֲרֵפֶל], with a loud voice, and he added no more.

In Deuteronomy, Moses recalls the experience at Sinai, which included the people seeing the mountain cloud and their awareness of Yahweh being within that cloud.

Psalms 97:2

² A cloud and thick darkness [עֲרֵפֶל] are around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

God's coming down to Mount Sinai in a cloud likely is the background for, or at least partly related to, later passages in the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 97 describes Yahweh as Ruler.

Lamentations 3:44

⁴⁴ You have covered yourself with the cloud, preventing a prayer passing through.¹⁸

In Lamentations, the author grieves over Yahweh's allowing the destruction of Jerusalem and uses imagery from the Exodus.

Ezekiel 1:4

⁴ I looked and behold, a storm wind was coming from the north, a great cloud, and flashing fire, and brightness around it, and from its midst like the appearance of electrum from the midst of the fire.

Ezekiel's inaugural vision, in which he sees "a likeness like the appearance of a man" and "the appearance of the glory of Yahweh," begins with the approach of a storm wind and a great cloud.

Deuteronomy 33:2

² And he said, "Yahweh came from Sinai, he shone on them from Seir. He shone forth from Mount Paran and came from [some, "with," perhaps with textual emendation] ten thousands of holy ones.

Before leaving this discussion of the cloud of Sinai, there is one further consideration. When God descended on the mountain he was not alone; angels accompanied him. Deuteronomy 33:2, in the context of the poetic blessing given by Moses to the children of Israel just before his death, perhaps hints at this. One possible deduction from this verse is that thousands of angels had been with Yahweh at Sinai.¹⁹ A similar thought can be derived from Psalm 68:18 (ET 17).

¹⁸ With regard to Ps 97:2, Lam 3:44, and the Sinai cloud in which God's glory was manifested as a blazing fire, compare certain passages in the Hebrew Bible in which עָב, "cloud(s), dark cloud, cloud mass" appears: Job 22:14; Ps 18:12-13 (ET 11-12); similar are 2 Sam 22:12-13 and Ps 104:3.

¹⁹ Various translations have been proposed other than "ten thousands of holy ones." For example, Duane Christensen renders the phrase as a place name, Ribebboth-kodesh, which he thinks is to be interpreted as Kadesh-barnea (i.e., "Ribebboth at, or near, Kadesh"). Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 6B (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 832, 836, 838. See also J.A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 5 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 307-308. For the MT's וְאַתָּה מֵרִבְבֹת קֹדֶשׁ, the LXX gives witness to the

Psalm 68:18 (ET 17)

¹⁸ The chariots of God are twenty thousand, thousands of thousands. The Lord is among them, as at Sinai, in holiness [or, with textual emendation, “The Lord has come from Sinai in holiness”].

The phrase “the chariots of God” should be understood as a reference to God’s holy angels.²⁰ Some uncertainty remains regarding both the original reading and the translation of the second half of Psalm 68:18. The rendering “The Lord is among them, as at Sinai, in holiness” leads to the conclusion that myriads of angels were with God on Sinai when he gave the covenant guidelines to Moses.

Acts 7:53

⁵³ “. . . you who received the law by directions of angels [εἰς διαταγὰς ἀγγέλων²¹] and have not kept it.”

This line of thought, based on these two Old Testament verses, is reinforced by passages from the New Testament. Stephen, shortly before his martyrdom in his sermon before the Sanhedrin, alludes to the presence of angels at Sinai. The law that Moses had received at Sinai was passed down from generation to generation, and in that way had come to the religious leaders of Stephen’s day. The implication of Acts 7:53 is that Moses

reading אַתְּ רַבְּבַת קִדְשֵׁי, “with the ten thousands of Kadesh.” The Syriac, though, supports the reading אִתּוֹ רַבְּבַת קִדְשֵׁי, “and with him [were] ten thousands of holy ones.” The following phrase (the remainder of Deut 33:2), according to the MT, is מִיְמִינוֹ וְהָיָה שֶׁאֵשׁ מִן הַיְמִינִי, which is ambiguous and textually suspect. A frequent emendation is to separate שֶׁאֵשׁ and הָיָה, which results in the translation “from his right [“hand” or “side”] was the fire of law [= “fiery law”] for them.” However, for this portion of Deut 33:2 the LXX has instead ἐκ δεξιῶν αὐτοῦ ἄγγελοι μετ’ αὐτοῦ, “from his right angels were with him.” Richard Longenecker writes that “the first explicit association of angels with the giving of the law came about, it seems, with the LXX’s translation of this phrase.” Richard Longenecker, *Galatians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 41 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 139.

²⁰ Terrence Callan notes that in later rabbinic thought Ps 68:18 was a key verse for the association of angels with the giving of the law, for the chariots of God mentioned there were “regularly understood as a reference to a large number of angels accompanying God at Sinai.” Terrence Callan, “Pauline Midrash: The Exegetical Background of Gal 3:19b,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99, no. 4 (1980): 551. Marvin Tate, however, thinks that “Sinai” in this verse is a divine epithet, and renders the last portion as “Sinai is among the holy ones!” (the holy ones of the heavenly host). Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 20 (Dallas, Word Books, 1990), 161, 166, 181.

²¹ The translation is that of Bauer et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 237; abbreviated henceforth, BDAG.

acquired this “by directions of angels,” by angels under God’s direction to transmit it.²² These angels, then, were with God at Sinai. Both of the following statements are true: God gave the law to Moses on the mountain, and angels gave him the law under God’s direction.

Galatians 3:19

¹⁹ Why therefore the law? It was added on account of transgressions, ordered [διαταγείς, aorist passive participle of διατάσσω] through angels by the hand of a mediator until the Seed should come to whom the promise had been made.

In this passage Paul expresses a thought similar to that of Stephen. Instead of “ordered,”²³ other translations have, for example, “enacted,”²⁴ “put into effect” (NIV), “having been ordained” (NAS), “appointed” (NKJV), and “put in place” (ESV). Whichever translation is used, Paul seems to be saying that on Sinai God gave the law “through,” or “by means of,” or “through the mediation of” angels.²⁵ God also used Moses, the “mediator,” who received the law and then brought it to the Israelites.

Hebrews 2:2

² For if the word spoken through angels was firm [βέβαιος, which also can mean “reliable,” “abiding,” “in force”], and all transgression and disobedience received just recompense

²² BDAG, 237. Lenski notes that the translation and explanation of εἰς in the phrase is a crux. He thinks that the genitive “of angels” is subjective: they made “dispositions” or “arrangements.” R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 301–302. Nevertheless, Lenski comes basically to the same conclusion as BDAG, namely, that angels helped in the giving of the law.

²³ BDAG, 238.

²⁴ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, ed. Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976, 1980), 509.

²⁵ See R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Galatians, Ephesians and Philippians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 170. Lenski writes, “God used the angels in his communication of the ordinances to Moses Just how the angels functioned in the giving of the law to Moses we do not know.” See also R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 65. For this understanding of God giving the Mosaic law through angels, cf. *Jubilees* 1.27–29; Philo, *De Somniis*, 1.140–143; and Josephus, *Antiquities*, 15.136 (some hold that “angels” in this passage from Josephus may be a reference to human messengers [prophets]). For other references, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 65, and A. Andrew Das, *Galatians*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2014), 361–362.

This verse, too, provides the information that God spoke or delivered the law “through” or “by means of” angels, this law from the start being firm and in force and the basis for meeting out just recompense to all transgressions and disobedience.²⁶

Acts 7:38

³⁸ This [Moses] is the one who was in the assembly in the desert with the angel who was speaking to him at [or “on”] Mount Sinai, and who was with our fathers, the one who received living words to give to us.

Although God descended on Sinai with myriads of angels, one angel in particular was instrumental in the law coming to Moses. Based on the passages that have already been examined, a legitimate proposal is that this angel was preeminent among the others, and while he could have spoken to Moses directly, he made use of other angels, at least in part, to deliver his words to the prophet. Since it was the Divine Angel who spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3), a natural conclusion is that the angel of Acts 7:38 is also the Second Person of the Trinity (cf. Exod 34:5). Thus, God did not descend on Sinai by himself. He came in a cloud with thousands upon thousands of holy angels, including the Divine Angel.

III. The Cloud over the Ark of the Covenant

In Leviticus 16, God set forth instructions for the observance of the Day of Atonement. On that day, the most solemn in the Hebrew religious calendar, and on that day only, the high priest, and only the high priest, entered the Most Holy Place (or Holy of Holies) to make ritual atonement for all the people of Israel.

Leviticus 16:2

² Yahweh said to Moses, “Tell Aaron your brother that he should not go just at any time into the Holy Place, within the curtain, in front of the atonement cover which is on the ark, so he will not die. For in the cloud I appear over the atonement cover.”

²⁶ F.F. Bruce comments that “Stephen (Luke), Paul, and the writer to the Hebrews all seem to treat the angelic mediation of the law as a familiar and accepted idea.” F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 153n99. See also F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 67n3.

In this verse, the term “Holy Place” is used for the Most Holy Place.²⁷ The verb translated “I appear” is the Niphal imperfect, first common singular of the root רָאָה, “to see”; another rendering could be, “I will appear.”

One understanding of “the cloud” mentioned in Leviticus 16:2²⁸ is that this is the incense smoke that God, later in 16:12–13, will command the high priest to produce when he enters the Most Holy Place.²⁹ He does this by taking a pan full of glowing coals and two handfuls of incense and putting the incense on the fiery coals as soon as he enters the Most Holy Place. Leviticus 16:13 states that the cloud from the incense would cover the atonement cover with the result that the high priest would not die. The translation “I will appear” would lend support to this interpretation.

While such an understanding of the cloud of Leviticus 16:2 may indeed be correct, this paper takes a different position, namely, that the cloud was continually over the atonement cover.³⁰ Located there within the Most Holy Place, it was distinct from the pillar of cloud and the mountain cloud. The main reason for this interpretation is the phrase, “just at any time.” This can be understood as indicating that the high priest could not enter the Most Holy Place at any time he wanted, in any way he chose, because the cloud in which God manifested his presence was *all the time* over the ark of the covenant. The imperfect Niphal verb conveyed to Moses the present, ongoing, and *constant* reality. Yahweh, to use biblical phraseology, was the one “dwelling over the cherubim”³¹—an image of a cherub was at each end of the atonement cover—and he did so in a cloud.

²⁷ This is also the case elsewhere in Leviticus 16 (Lev 16:16, 17, 20, 23, 27, 33; see also 4:6; Ezek 41:21, 23). See John Kleinig, *Leviticus*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 329. However, as Kleinig notes, in Lev 16:3 the term also refers to the area in the courtyard around the altar for burnt offering (as in Lev 10:4, 17, 18b; 14:13).

²⁸ John Hartley notes that the phrase “in the cloud” appears before the verb (“I appear/will appear”) for emphasis. See John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 4 (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 222.

²⁹ See, for example, Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 329. Cf. Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, Anchor Bible Commentary, vol. 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 1014–1015; Milgrom suggests that “the cloud” was produced not by the incense but by a separate ingredient placed on the coals before the high priest entered the Most Holy Place.

³⁰ See David N. Freedman and B.E. Willoughby, “כָּנָפַי,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 11:256. They seem to take the same position, referring to “the cloud . . . that floats around and above the cover of the ark in the most holy place of the tent of meeting (Lev 16:2).”

³¹ 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; Ps 80:2 [ET 80:1]; 99:1; Isa 37:16; cf. Exod 25:22; 30:6, 36; Num 7:89; 17:19 (ET 17:4). Moses listened to God from the Holy Place, the first compartment of the tabernacle.

Two questions arise. First, why did the high priest need an incense cloud to screen him from the cloud over the ark, whereas no screening was necessary between the pillar of cloud and the mountain cloud on the one hand and the children of Israel on the other? Perhaps this was because Yahweh manifested himself in a different way in the atonement-cover cloud—in a manner that would have caused death if seen by mortal eyes.³² Second, why is this cloud not mentioned again? The answer might be that the atonement-cover cloud was never seen—not by the high priest who entered the Most Holy Place just one time each year, and certainly not by the other people of Israel.³³

IV. The Transfiguration Cloud

The three Synoptic Gospels each report that a cloud was present during the transfiguration of Christ.

Matthew 17:5–6

⁵ While he [Peter] was still speaking, behold, a bright [φωτεινῆ; or “shining,” “radiant”] cloud overshadowed³⁴ them, and behold, a voice from the cloud speaking, “This one is my beloved Son, in whom I am pleased. Hear him!” ⁶ And the disciples, hearing, fell on their face and were very afraid.

Mark 9:6–7

⁶ For he [Peter] did not know what he should answer, for they were terrified. ⁷ And a cloud formed, overshadowing them, and there was a voice from the cloud, “This one is my beloved Son, hear him!”

³² The Niphal verb “appear” is flexible and uncertain as to precise meaning so that definite, specific conclusions cannot be drawn from it. The Niphal of the same verbal root occurs in Deut 31:15, which states that Yahweh “appeared” in the pillar of cloud; see the prior discussion of this verse.

³³ This line of thought could be relevant with regard to a third question: When the ark was being moved, and was thus outside the Most Holy Place, was this cloud then visible? Perhaps the answer is “no” since the cloud might have been a reality only within the Most Holy Place.

³⁴ D.A. Carson writes that “it is uncertain whether *epeskiasen* means ‘enveloped’ . . . or ‘overshadowed.’” See D.A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: with the New International Version of the Holy Bible*, Vol. 8: *Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 386.

Luke 9:34–35

³⁴ And while he [Peter] was saying these things a cloud formed and was overshadowing them. And they were afraid when they went into the cloud. ³⁵ And there was a voice from the cloud saying, “This one is my chosen Son; hear him!”

This study proposes a link between the transfiguration event, which involved a cloud, a mountaintop, and Moses, and the descent of God in a cloud on Mount Sinai and his meeting with Moses. Besides those obvious similarities, there are further hints in the Gospel accounts that lead to this connection. Matthew describes the transfiguration cloud as “bright.” This reminds one that, although there was darkness at Sinai, the glory of the Lord was also evident through the thick cloud, appearing as a consuming fire (Exod 24:16–17; cf. Deut 4:11; 5:19 [ET 22]; Ezek 1:4; 10:4), which implies an aspect of brightness. Exodus 19:16 also refers to lightning flashes.

Luke is the only Gospel writer who uses the Greek word ἐξόδος (“exodus”) in his transfiguration narrative—Moses and Elijah were speaking about Christ’s “exodus” that he was about to fulfill in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31). As Arthur Just explains, the use of the word “exodus” by Luke embraced Christ’s suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension, as it “calls to mind the exodus of the Israelites, the greatest redemptive event in OT history.”³⁵

In Luke 9:34 there is another link with the time of Moses, and specifically with the event at Mount Sinai. Luke writes that “they [the disciples] were afraid when *they went into* [εἰσελθεῖν] *the cloud.*” This leads one to recall Exodus 24:18, where “Moses *went into the midst of the cloud*” on Sinai. Luke is reporting what actually took place. But his including in his account that the disciples entered the cloud and his choice of words to relate this, especially after he had used the word “exodus,” permits the suggestion that Luke (who, after all, was taught by the Apostle Paul) saw behind the transfiguration the event at Mount Sinai.

No doubt, Peter, James, and John, having heard the Torah throughout their lifetime in the synagogue, thought of this event as they went into the cloud on the mountain and saw the glorified Christ. It is no wonder they were afraid. What other manifestation of the awesome divine presence would they encounter? The Israelites were rightfully afraid at what they saw at the top of Sinai, and only the great Moses, God’s chosen leader of

³⁵ Arthur A. Just Jr., *Luke 1:1–9:50*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 1996), 403.

his people, could go into the cloud. How could they, fishermen from Galilee, also enter a supernatural cloud? They were not in the same category, the same class, as Moses.

However, in a sense they were, and this might be one truth conveyed by the transfiguration account. Peter, James, and John can be seen as representatives of the disciples, who (except for Judas) would be God's chosen leaders of the New Testament era. Christ used them to found his New Testament church. In a very real way they spoke face to face with the Lord and were taught by him. Like Moses, they performed miracles by God's power. Through them, God gave his word to the people, as he did through Moses.

There is one other suggestion for consideration, in the form of a question. The voice coming from the transfiguration cloud was that of God the Father (cf. 2 Pet 1:18). Thus, within that cloud, the divine presence involved the First and Second Persons of the Trinity. A voice also emanated from the Sinai cloud, which the Israelites heard (Deut 4:11-12; 5:19 [ET 22]; cf. Exod 19:9). The Gospel writers, especially Luke, lead us to connect the transfiguration event with the event at Mount Sinai, that is, to see a relationship between the two. This paper has taken the position that on Sinai, within the cloud, the Divine Angel, namely, the Son of God, spoke to Moses. If the linking of the Sinai and transfiguration events is correct, should we see the voice at Mount Sinai as that of God the Father?

V. The Cloud(s) of Judgment Day

In a number of Old Testament passages, clouds were associated with God and his judging during the course of this world's history. For example, in a context foretelling judgment on Egypt, Ezekiel wrote, "For near is a day; even the day of Yahweh is near. It will be a day of cloud, a time for nations" (Ezek 30:3).³⁶ Isaiah, in an oracle concerning Egypt, used the Hebrew word עָב, which also means "cloud": "Behold, Yahweh is riding on a swift cloud, and coming to Egypt. The idols of Egypt will tremble at his presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them" (Isa 19:1).

Joel 2:2, describing the final judgment at the end of world history, mentions clouds: "A day of darkness and gloom; a day of cloud and thick cloud [עָרָפֶל]." Zephaniah 1:14a-15 is similar: "Near is the great day of Yahweh A day of fury is that day, a day of trouble and distress, a day

³⁶ Cf. Ezek 30:18; 32:7; 34:12; Nah 1:3.

of devastation and desolation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of cloud and thick cloud [עֲרֵפֶל].”

In a context dealing with the Last Day, Daniel 7:13 prophesies that Jesus Christ will appear with clouds, “I kept looking in the visions of the night, and behold, with [עַם] the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming. He came to the Ancient of Days, and he was brought before him.”³⁷ The “one like a Son of Man” is Christ, who is human but also much more than a mere human being.

The theme of Christ and the clouds on Judgment Day continues in New Testament literature. This is seen in the Gospel accounts of the teaching of Christ about his second advent, which he spoke after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and before his sufferings began. For example, from Matthew 24:30, “And then will be revealed the sign of the Son of Man in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will strike their breast and will see the Son of Man coming on [ἐπι; Mark and Luke use ἐν] the clouds of heaven with power and much glory.”³⁸ Jesus used similar language in his trial before the high priest Caiaphas, “Jesus said to him, ‘You yourself said it. Moreover, I say to you, from now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the power and coming on [ἐπι; Mark 14:62 uses μετὰ] the clouds of heaven’” (Matt 26:64). And in Revelation 1:7 the apostle John wrote about the second coming of Jesus: “Behold, he is coming with [μετὰ] the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him.”³⁹

In these passages, we see flexibility with regard to the preposition, namely, that Jesus, in coming “in” clouds, at the same time will be coming “on” clouds and “with” clouds. Also, Jesus will be coming in a particular cloud along with other clouds. Once again Luke leads us to recall the Sinai event with his precise wording in Luke 21:27: “And then they will see the Son of Man coming *in a cloud* [singular] with power and much glory.” In Exodus 19:9a, Yahweh said to Moses, “Behold, I am coming to you *in the thick cloud* [singular],” and Exodus 34:5 reports that “Yahweh came down *in the cloud* [singular].” As we have seen, the other passages from the

³⁷ The translation is that of Andrew Steinmann, *Daniel*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008), 337.

³⁸ Lenski regards the clouds as the symbol of God’s heavenly majesty and of the divine judgment. See R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 949, 1065–1066.

³⁹ Concerning other New Testament passages, cf. 1 Thess 4:17; Rev 10:1; 14:14–16; also Acts 1:9, 11.

Pentateuch that relate what took place at Sinai, also used the singular of **עָנָן**, "cloud."

Furthermore, Jesus mentions a trumpet sounding at his second advent in Matthew 24:31, as does Paul in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, and Exodus 19:16 stated that there was "a very loud trumpet sound" at Sinai. In addition, speaking about Judgment Day, Jesus said, "And when the Son of Man comes in his *glory*, and *all the angels with him*, then he will sit down on his throne of glory" (Matt 25:31). One is reminded of the fact that God displayed his glory at Sinai⁴⁰ and that the Divine Angel came there with thousands upon thousands of his holy angels.

Thus, Scripture teaches that the Last Day, Judgment Day, will involve the divine presence within the cloud, or clouds. However, when this happens, this presence will be actually visible and not hidden by the cloud, because God became a man, Jesus Christ.

VI. Summary and Conclusions

The pillar of cloud, the Mount Sinai cloud, and, as it was known by the Israelites, the cloud above the ark of the covenant, both revealed and concealed God. The special presence of the Lord was within those clouds, but still, Yahweh was not actually seen by the people. Through the pillar and mountain clouds, God manifested his glory to them, yet this was a muted, indeed a veiled, revelation.

These three clouds conveyed the reality of the immanence and transcendence of God, that is, his nearness to, and distance from, the Israelites. God was right there with the people: in the pillar of cloud that led them, that entered the tabernacle, that stayed over the tabernacle, and that would come down to the entrance of the tent; in the mountain cloud that was relatively close to the Israelite camp; and in the cloud above the atonement cover, the ark being within the tabernacle, which was in the midst of the camp. However, there was also a space between the Israelites and the pillar of cloud, and only Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and Joshua had a closer encounter with this cloud. Only Moses entered the Sinai cloud. Only the high priest could go into the Holy of Holies once a year, and the incense cloud he produced upon his entrance screened him from the cloud above the ark of the covenant.

The pillar of cloud, the mountain cloud, and the atonement-cover cloud reminded the Israelites that God could be at different locations at the

⁴⁰ Regarding "glory," see also Matt 24:30; Mark 13:26; and Luke 21:27.

same time. They could speak of Yahweh's presence being localized but also confess that Yahweh was omnipresent.

Especially with the pillar of cloud, which was evidently with the Israelites until their entrance into the Promised Land, and in which was the Divine Angel of Yahweh, there is a foreshadowing of the incarnation of the Son of God. The Israelites saw God, so to speak, veiled within the cloud. With regard to the Second Person becoming man, the Christmas hymn states accurately, "veiled in flesh the Godhead see."⁴¹ When the people saw Jesus, they were seeing God in the form of, in the body of, a man.

The event at Mount Sinai foreshadowed the transfiguration of Christ on the mountain. In both a cloud was present, as well as the Son of God and Moses; also, the glory of God was manifested. This study has suggested that the voice coming from the cloud on Sinai was that of God the Father, as on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Furthermore, the event at Sinai foreshadowed the second coming of Christ. What took place at the desert mountain will occur once more on Judgment Day: the Son of God coming in a cloud in glory, proclaiming his word, with the myriads of holy angels and with the sound of a trumpet.

We see, then, a fundamental relationship among the clouds examined in this study; the pillar of cloud, the Sinai cloud, the atonement-cover cloud, the transfiguration cloud, and the cloud(s) of Christ's second advent. Within each was, or will be, the divine presence. That was a blessed reality for the Israelites and for the apostles, and it will be for us on the Last Day.

⁴¹ "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 380:2.