

4

The Clouds of Glory

Nephology is a branch of meteorology that deals with clouds. The nephoscope is an instrument used for the observation of clouds and nephometry is the measurement of cloud dimensions. All these terms have been derived from the Greek word '*nephos*' meaning a cloud. However, they are not very much in vogue these days and cloud physics, cloud dynamics and cloud chemistry are fast evolving as separate domains of scientific research and observation. For the purpose of describing and classifying clouds, latin names like cirrus (thin and feathery), stratus (spread out like sheets), cumulus (like heaps of cotton) or cumulonimbus (tall thunderclouds) have found common usage.

In the New Testament Greek, the word '*nephos*' occurs only once but its variant '*nephele*' occurs in many other places. These words have been interpreted in English translations of the Bible in most places as 'cloud' but in rare instances as 'mist'. In the Old Testament Hebrew, different words like '*anan*', '*Anan*', '*ananah*' and '*Ananiy*' are used but they all mean 'cloud', 'cloudiness' or 'cloud cover'.

In the New Testament, the word 'cloud' has been used in the literal or meteorological sense in several references. Jesus himself admonished the people around him that they knew how to interpret the appearance of the sky, such as a cloud building up on the west meant that it would rain, but they could not see the signs of the times¹.

¹ Luke 12:54-56

The author of the Letter to Hebrews has devoted three chapters² to recount the deeds of people from Abel to Rahab who stood firm in their faith, lived by faith and died in faith. But he was aware that besides those whose names he specifically mentioned, there were other people about whom he did not write. In fact they were so many of them that he calls this assembly of innumerable, anonymous, faithful men and women as a 'cloud of witnesses' around us³, just as a real cloud in the sky is formed out of millions of water droplets and ice particles.

An analogy with real clouds is also drawn in two other places in the New Testament, in the context of the nature of ungodly people. They are said to be like mists driven by a storm⁴ or like clouds carried away by the wind without giving rain⁵. In the Old Testament book of Proverbs there is a similar analogy: *Like clouds and wind without rain is a man who boasts of gifts he does not give.*⁶ These comparisons vividly bring out the dry, empty and purposeless existence of such people.

Apart from the few literal usages mentioned above, all other references to clouds, particularly in the Old Testament, and more so in the Psalms and the book of Job, evoke a sense of God's glory and majesty and they try to show God's ownership of nature. God rides on the clouds in his majesty, the clouds are his chariot, he makes the clouds rise from the ends of the earth, he covers the sky with clouds.⁷

² Hebrews 11-13

³ Hebrews 12:1

⁴ 2 Peter 2:17

⁵ Jude 1:12

⁶ Proverbs 25:14

⁷ Deuteronomy 33:26, Psalm 68:4, 104:3, 135:7, 147:8

It is important to note that the transfiguration of Christ, his ascension into heaven after his resurrection, and his second coming or return to earth, all have an association with clouds.

As per the three accounts of the transfiguration of Jesus Christ⁸, Jesus was standing on a mountain with Peter, James and John, when a bright cloud suddenly overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said: *This is my Son, whom I love, with him I am well pleased, listen to him.* Jesus' disciples were terrified when they entered the cloud, such was the glory of its presence.

Forty days after Jesus' resurrection, he was lifted up and a cloud removed him from the sight of people watching him.⁹

When his life on earth was coming to an end, Jesus had told his disciples that that the Son of Man will return on the clouds of heaven with great power and glory.¹⁰ Even in the course of his trial prior to his death, Jesus had claimed before the high priest that the Son of Man would be seen seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.¹¹ In the book of Revelation, John reasserts: *Look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him.*¹² At that time the celestial bodies will be shaken and the sun will be darkened.

In the Old Testament, the prophets who had foreseen these events, call the day of the Lord as the 'day of clouds'.¹³ These are obviously not the clouds of precipitation formed out of normal atmospheric processes as we now know

⁸ Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36

⁹ Acts 1:1-9

¹⁰ Matthew 24:30, Mark 13:26

¹¹ Matthew 26:64, Mark 14:62

¹² Revelation 1:7

¹³ Ezekiel 30:3, Joel 2:2, Zephaniah 1:15

them to be, but heavenly spectacles of awe and splendour that would exude the glory of God.

Paul envisioned that it will be a time when the dead and the living will be caught up in the clouds to meet their Lord and be with him forever.¹⁴ Revelation has more vivid imagery of this event. It pictures the likeness of a son of man riding a white cloud, wearing a crown of gold and holding a sickle to be put to the earth that is ready for harvest including the grapes of God's wrath.¹⁵



¹⁴ **1 Thessalonians 4:17**

¹⁵ **Revelation 14:14-20**