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The Pillar of Cloud

Clouds have different shapes and sizes. The most common ones are of the 'cumulus' type which look like a piled up heap of cotton. These are the low or middle level clouds, that appear bright white against the blue background of the sky. Then there are the 'stratus' type of clouds, which appear to be spread out like a thin white sheet across the sky. Such clouds can form at various levels and fog is an example of a stratus cloud hovering just above the ground. The 'cirrus' clouds are high level clouds with a light, thin, feathery appearance. There is only one type of cloud, 'cumulonimbus', that has a great vertical extent. This is the thunderstorm cloud and it is associated with thunder, lightning, heavy downpours, squally winds and occasionally hail. The cumulonimbus can grow to heights of even 16 to 18 km above the ground. For an observer just below the cloud, the sky looks ominously dark and threatening and the vertical extent is not apparent. But if seen from a great distance away, the cumulonimbus would look like a column or a tall white pillar of cloud.

The Bible makes a special mention of 'the pillar of cloud', which God had specially arranged to guide the Israelites through the wilderness during their journey to the promised land. The pillar of cloud always went ahead of them so that they would not lose their way. They could see it even at night, as it would then become a pillar of fire.

The book of Exodus tells us: *By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor*

*the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*¹
It was only once, during the crossing of the Red Sea, that the pillar of cloud moved to the back and stood between the Israelites and the Egyptians. However, It looked bright to the Israelites and dark to the Egyptians.²

It is difficult to say whether the pillar of cloud by day was a real cloud or to explain how it would transform itself into the pillar of fire by night. The cumulonimbus is the most gigantic and awesome among all forms of clouds. It indeed looks like a pillar from a distance and it is associated with lightning which is clearly visible at night and can cause fires on ground. If God's pillar of cloud was a real cloud, then there is a fair probability that it was a cumulonimbus cloud. But as there is no mention in the Bible of any thunder or lightning, it is difficult to conclude that it was indeed so.

What we can say with certainty, however, is that the pillar of cloud, was a symbol of God's presence among his people and a sign of his continuing protection and guidance. God uses many different ways to give directions to people. For example, the three wise men who came to meet the boy Jesus, travelling all the way from the east, were guided by a star.³

Today we may not have a pillar of cloud to guide us, but we still have God as our pillar of strength. God continues to give directions to those who feel lost: *In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*⁴ Psalm 23 makes it absolutely clear that God is leading us all the time: *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me*

¹ Exodus 13:21-22

² Exodus 14:19-20

³ Matthew 2:2

⁴ Proverbs 3:6 (King James Bible)

*beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul, he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*⁵

'Abide with me' is a famous hymn written by Henry F. Lyte (1793-1847) with music composed by W. H. Monk (1823-1889). This verse from the hymn is my personal favourite:

*Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.*



⁵ Psalm 23:3-4