

"The clouds and Christianity have always gone hand in hand. Biblical references are plentiful." Gavin Pretor-Pinney, Founder of the Cloud Appreciation Society

On July 6, 2011, I became a member of the Cloud Appreciation Society. Why? Well, because I love the sights that clouds make up in the Heavens. The majestic portraits that appear on that oft times blue canvas I stand in amazement at the beauty of water droplets. As a member I agreed with the Manifesto of our Society, which begins as follows: "We believe that clouds are unjustly maligned." Mr. Pretor-Pinney is correct concerning Biblical references, as the word "cloud" occurs 107 times in 94 verses. The word "clouds" occurs some 49 times in 49 verses and finally the word "cloudy" is found 6 times in 6 verses in the Bible. That gives us 162 references in 149 verses. Showing me that clouds make up ½ of 1% of the King James Bible.

As I go about my life as a Pastor, in the course of one year at the Church I will teach and/or preach about 312 lessons and or sermons. Before each of those 156 sermons will be preached, hymns will be sung by the congregation and oft times specials will be sung, from a choir, soloist, duet or trio. Over the course of my years in the ministry I have heard it said that music primes for the preaching. The late Henry Marvin Wharton (a Clergyman and Confederate Solider) in his 1906 work *War Songs and Poems of the Southern Confederacy* stated: "If you wish to find the hearts of the people you will hear it in their songs." iii

I soon discovered that while clouds and the Bible went hand in hand, there was an apparent bias within Christianity **against** our beloved clouds – especially within hymns. Ah distinctly I remember it was on one beautiful Sunday morning, I was singing *When the Roll is Called Up Yonder* – one of my favourite hymns – in a trio, and suddenly out of my mouth came: "On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Christ shall rise," I heard and read those words and shook my head and thought to myself: Cloud-less? But I like clouds!

Hermeneutics is the theory in which one attempts to understand the meaning of a particular Bible verse or passage, and in so doing can gain a proper interpretation. One rule that has been taught to many a seminary student is called the "Law of First Mention." This can be defined as follows: "the principle that requires one to go to that portion of the Scriptures where a doctrine is mentioned for the first time and to study the first occurrence of the same in order to get the fundamental inherent meaning of that doctrine." The same in order to get the fundamental inherent meaning of that doctrine.

So it is that the first mention of the topic of clouds in the Bible is found in Genesis 9:13 which states: "I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth." The bow here is the Rainbow which appears after the rain or storm clouds and it is here that God designates

the rainbow as a token or sign of His covenant that He would never again flood the entire world as He did in the Flood. But, it is in the next three verses that the Lord states that the rainbow would be "seen in the cloud" evidently by Him. While we don't always see a rainbow, we do see clouds and according to these verses there is a bow that can be seen by God in each of those clouds. So clouds then could be symbolically seen as carriers of the sign or token of the Noahic Covenant.

As one moves into Exodus the symbolic meaning changes as God guides His people in Exodus 13:21-22 in a "pillar of cloud" by day during the Exodus from Egypt. By the time the reader reaches the Book of Job, he finds scientific (Job 26:8) and poetic (Job 30:15) statements about clouds therein.

In the New Testament, clouds appear around Jesus Christ and His ministry. In Matthew 17:5 (the first reference to clouds in the New Testament) we find that God the Father speaks out of a cloud saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." Luke 9:34 recounts this same event and tells us that the disciples "entered into the cloud."

Jesus spoke of his return in connection with clouds in Luke 21:27 "And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory." Mark 13:26 says He will come "in the clouds of heaven." In Acts 1:9 the text says that when Jesus ascended into Heaven, that: "a cloud received him out of their sight." Immediately following – in verse 11 - two angels stood there telling the disciples that Jesus would: "come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven." Which means with clouds!

Indeed the first reference to clouds in the last Book of the Bible – Revelation – speaks of Jesus returning in the clouds in Revelation 1:7 "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen."

So it is, that as I pondered over the many positive cloud references in the Bible, I also pondered the many hymns that we sing in Church and supposedly show our heart. That would infer that we are "anticloud" and I wondered if we really know what we're singing about? As a member of the Cloud Appreciation Society I knew that someone in the Church had to stand up not only for Christ but also.....for the Clouds.

The hymn I have mentioned is one of nearly 40 that I have surveyed out of almost 1,000 hymns dating all the way back from the 3rd Century A.D. to the 20th Century. In almost all references, I find that the hymns are pessimistic or untoward in the mentions of clouds.

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder was written in 1893 by James M. Black one Sunday after he called the name of a young girl during Sunday School and she did not answer. After the services were concluded, he went to the girl's home and found she was sick with pneumonia. After calling his own physician to care for her, he went home and wrote that hymn. Some days later he told the crowd gathered for her funeral that he had written this hymn about her because he said "... what a sad thing it would be when our names are called from the Lamb's Book of Life, if one of us should be absent." So in this composer's mind brightness and a cloudless sky both equaled happiness.

But in view of the words of Scripture, this verse of prose in this hymn is Biblically wrong. Why? Because when "the dead in Christ shall rise" during an event many of us Christians call the Rapture, they will rise to meet Christ in the clouds. Notice the wording in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 "Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the

air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord."

The cliches we hear so many times today concerning how "bad" or "gloomy" clouds are, have not "clouded our judgment" but rather have superimposed themselves upon our interpretation of Scripture in a process called eisegesis. Thus the Bible tells us Christ will return in and with the clouds yet hymn after hymn bellows out that the clouds of: "sorrow" (as quoted in: *As Above the Darkest Storm Cloud*) and "doubt" (as quoted in *Just a Little Talk With Jesus*) will be vanquished and rolled back forever more.

Now please understand some hymn-writers got it right when composing hymns about the Lord's Return. But do not apply this proper mix of hermeneutic and hymnody as being the course of action for each composer's hymns (when clouds are mentioned) sometimes they just got the Biblical notion right in that particular hymn. Once done, these would then fall back into the old way of maligning our dear clouds. At other times the process could be reversed.

For example, when the noted hymnist, Fanny Crosby wrote *Meet Me There* in 1885 she correlated clouds with storms and how all such would be gone upon the Golden Shore. Note her words: "On the happy, golden shore, where the faithful part no more, When the storms of life are over, meet me there; Where the night dissolves away into pure and perfect day, I am going home to stay—meet me there." Five years later she would write He Hideth My Soul and therein she got her hermeneutics right and left the cloud-bashing out: "When clothed in His brightness, transported I rise, to meet Him in clouds of the sky," Perhaps one can say she changed her ways, but having been blind since she was 6 weeks old she never truly experienced the lovely sights of clouds. All she could do was hear what came from the Cumulonimbus – the storm cloud and await the blessed day when she would see for the first time, Jesus her Lord and Saviour and the clouds in which He would come.

Fanny wasn't the only composer who got the hymn to match the Scriptures. The great Methodist Charles Wesley in 1758 took Lo, He Comes With Clouds Descending, a 6 year old hymn originally published by John Cennick, and turned this stanza: "Lo! He cometh, countless Trumpets, Blow before his bloody Sign!" into the well known: "Lo! He comes with clouds descending, Once for favored sinners slain;" So effective was Wesley's pen that he turned this hymn into one of the Great Four Anglican Hymns.

Much like a Kelvin-Helmholtz Cloud would be to us, so these "pro-cloud" hymns are the rare delights to Christian cloudspotters. Once I saw these rare glimpses, I found many of the others were quite "anticloud." Again before I really took notice of the beautiful clouds, I recall singing a former favourite hymn: The Unclouded Day. This hymn came out in 1885 from the pen of a circuit-riding United Brethren in Christ preacher named Josiah Alwood and I must say that it must be the **most** anti-cloud hymn in all of Christendom. The Chorus is nothing but an anti-cloud diatribe: "Oh, the land of cloudless day, Oh, the land of an unclouded day, Oh, they tell me of a home where no storm clouds rise, Oh, they tell me of an unclouded day." Now this strikes me as strange, for one of the most often imagined scenes about Heaven is that there is a super abundance of clouds there. Yet here the hymn chortles that there will be absolutely no clouds there. Many fellow cloudspotters may thus wonder why such a strong bias against clouds? If Scripture by and large speaks favourably and Christian artists have (as shown to us by Mr. Pretor-Pinney) been pro-cloud, why then are our hymnists who are purportedly "showing the world our heart" so anti-cloud?



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Perhaps the answer lies in another type of symbolism in the pages of the Scriptures: The Sun. Most times in the Old and New Testaments the Sun is symbolic of the S-O-N or Jesus Christ. Fellow Geocentrist, Dr. Gerardus Bouw gives an overview of many Christological passages (Isaiah 13:10; Judges 5:31; Leviticus 22:7; Psalm 19:4; Malachi 4:2 and 2 Peter 1:19 to name a few) that show forth the symbolism connecting Christ with the Sun. Dr. Bouw says: "The Scripture presents the sun as a type of Christ Jesus, the life sustainer and Messiah. If so, the earth types mankind." vii

Thus therein lies one answer to the many "anti-cloud" hymns. If the Sun represents Jesus Christ and the Earth represents Mankind then the clouds must represent a myriad of enemies: Sin, Doubt, Depression, Fear (as in Judgment) and the ultimate evil, Satan himself. Gavin Pretor-Pinney reminds us of this in his short review of *The Cloud of Unknowing* which was written by a Monk around the 1370s: "The cloud is a sufferance for the Christian – an impediment, and obstruction – which, like a real cloud blocking out the sun, keeps him away from his God." "viii

Thus this is the reasoning behind some of the stanzas seen below. The one that seems most evident, in this interpretation of our much maligned clouds, is the Hymn *We Shall See the King Some Day* from which this article is named:

- Ye Clouds and Darkness, Hosts of Night (Aurelius C. Prudentius 348-413, translated from Latin to English by R. Martin Pope, published 1905) "Ye clouds and darkness, hosts of night, That breed confusion and affright,"
- The Clouds of Judgment Gather (Bernard of Morlaix, 12th Century) "The clouds of judgment gather, the time is growing late"
- See the Gloomy Gathering Cloud (John Newton 1779) "See the gloomy gathering cloud Hanging o'er a sinful land! Sure the Lord proclaims aloud, Times of trouble are at hand:"
- Twixt gleams of joy and clouds of doubt (John C. Shairp, 1871) "'Twixt gleams of joy and clouds of doubt our feelings come and go;"
- The Cloudless Land (Charles Walker Ray 1883) "O cloudless land beyond life's sea, Where ransomed spirits dwell; No pilgrim weeps in shadow'd vales, by storm-clouds overcast."
- Trust and Obey (John H. Sammis 1887) "Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies, But His smile quickly drives it away;"
- Clap All Together (Charles Walker Ray 1895) "Tis a dark and gloomy day"
- When We All Get To Heaven (Eliza Hewitt, 1898) "While we walk the pilgrim pathway, Clouds will overspread the sky; But when traveling days are over, Not a shadow, not a sigh."
- If Christ Be Truly Mine (Charles Walker Ray 1899) "Tho' clouds my way obscure, I shall rest secure, and to the end endure, If Christ be truly mine!; Tho' storms break over head, And fill my soul with dread, My path I'll safely tread, If Christ Be Truly mine!"
- We Shall See The King Some Day (Lewis E. Jones 1906) "Tho' the way we journey may be often drear, We shall see the King some day; On that blessèd morning clouds will disappear; We shall see the King some day."
- Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee (Henry Van Dyke 1907) "Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; Drive the dark of doubt away."
- Zion's Hill (James A. Crutchfield 1923) "Someday the dark clouds will be rifted, and all the night of gloom will be past;"
- In His Care (Olive D. Thomas 1941) "Meeting rays of hope out reaching thru the dark gathering clouds, Looking up the light's apparent, Dawn a shadow shrouds."

I am not sure if Charles Walker Ray just plain out hated clouds or if his symbolic interpretations just readily spoke to him but in my brief survey of hymns I found 3 that contained "anti-cloud" stanzas. They are: *The Cloudless Land, Clap All Together, If Christ Be Truly Mine*. The Hymn *The Cloudless Land* is the runner up to *The Unclouded Day* as the most "anti-cloud" I've encountered in my survey.

I was rather surprised that John Newton, the famed slave-trader turned hymnist, who is known world wide for his beloved hymn *Amazing Grace*, also ranks as one of our "anti-cloud" hymnists. In 1775 he wrote the hymn: *The Gathering Clouds, With Aspect Dark*. This hymn was published in 1779 along with his other cloud-bashing hymn: *See the Gloomy Gathering Cloud*. The former hymn was written when our American War for Independence was beginning and thus the symbolism of "war-clouds" (another derogatory phrase heaped upon the poor clouds) crept into this hymn in which he likened this war to the Great Flood of Noah's Day and sought refuge in a modern-day "ark."

Thus with Newton's gloomy, dire and fearful look at the lowering storm clouds, we see the second symbolism of clouds – Terror and the Fear of God's Judgment. The great American Humorist Mark Twain, "...was given to terrifying nightmares and sleep-walking and occasional fears that a late-night thunderstorm was God's warning to him to mend his ways." viii Indeed it is true that even today, astraphobia – the fear of storms is the 3rd most prevalent phobia in the US. ix So a young Twain, would not have been alone in today's America. But the way Christian hymn-writers word some of the hymns it

casts a dread and possible fear of the storm cloud into a dread or fear and pall over **all** clouds not merely the storm king of the clouds, the Cumulonimbus. Thankfully there are not many who suffer from nephophobia (the fear of clouds) and many who have such a fear or dread connect all clouds into monsters that will shortly mutate into a Cumulonimbus storm cloud.

This dread of storm clouds can be seen evidenced in Insurance policies under "Acts of God." While the clouds may not make an entrance officially, they remain the backdrop to the story as floods and tornadoes come from (many times) the cumulonimbus.

So it is that God is blamed at times and the clouds in general are blamed for storms. The astraphobia inherent in America both now and years ago can be seen in the hymn-writers' possible fear of storms. Or in their tiring of weathering the storms of life, hoping for the day when no more storms would come their way, or clouds would gather and obscure their sight of Jesus.

Such are some reasons for a small "anti-cloud" spirit in many of the Church's hymns. I will not ban them but I seek to inform others that yes, even in Christendom, the clouds have but unfairly maligned.

Even the "slap-in-the-face" phrase: "a cloud on the horizon" indicating a problem in the near future stems from the Bible. But it was the other way around. In 1 Kings 18:44 the cloud on the horizon is the cloud that the Prophet Elijah informs his servant that is going to bring the first rain the land's had in 3 years. This gave rise to a great shower. Thus the phrase "sound of abundance of rain" in the hymn There Shall Be Showers of Blessing comes from this incident in which the rain abundantly came upon the drought stricken land. Not all storm-clouds were maligned by hymn-writers.

If our Christian hymns speak "the heart" of the Church, we should go back to the various Scriptural references where clouds are mentioned and see how we treat this subject matter then in our hymns. Job's friend Elihu even told him to be a cloudspotter (even as Elijah's servant was) in Job 35:5 "Look unto the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds which are higher than thou."

In conclusion, I must say that while many may peg Christians as those who may be a little out of touch or to use the cloud bashing language to be with our head in the clouds. I will say that if Jesus is coming for His own in and with the clouds, then I cannot wait for my head....and the rest of my body, to be in the clouds also. For on that blessed morning, the clouds and Christ will appear. Till then I'll do like Elijah's servant and keep on being a cloudspotter, sing "pro-cloud" hymns while I look for the return of my Saviour and show truthfully that "clouds and Christianity" **do** go hand in hand.



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- ii Ibid.
- iii Rumburg, H. Rondel. *The Songs os Southern Zion: Confederate Hymnology.* Spout Spring: Society for Biblical and Southern Studies (SBSS), 2011. Print.
- iv Cooper, David L. "Rules of Interpretation." *Biblical Research Monthly*. n.d., 1947. *Biblical Research Studies Group*. Web. 30 June 2014.
- v Graves, Dan. "James Milton Black Wanted His Name on God's Roll." Christianity.com. July, 2007. Web. 30 June 2014.
- vi Bouw, Gerardus. *Geocentricity: Christianity in the Woodshed*. Cleveland: Association for Biblical Astronomy. 2013. Print.
- vii Pretor-Pinney, Gavin. The Cloudspotter's Guide. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- viii Mark Twain. Writ. Dayton Duncan and Geoffrey C. Ward. Dir. Ken Burns. PBS. 2004. DVD.
- ix "Astraphobia" Wikipedia. 2014. Web. 30 June 2014.