

## Exodus 40:34-38

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Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, before the eyes of all the house of Israel at each stage of their journey.

(NRSV)

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**A:** *What is the subject of the text?*

The subject here is YHWH, more specifically his tangible glory as is manifested by a cloud and a pillar of fire.

**B:** *What is said about the subject?*

The cloud descended on (or perhaps simply materialized around) the tent of meeting. This signified God's glory filling the entirety of the tabernacle.

**C:** *What is the purpose of what is said?*

Despite whether Exodus was singularly authored or edited together, this passage concludes the book. It indicates the completion of a chapter in Israel's history. They have been delivered, and now their deliverer comes to dwell among them, but only after the requisite preparations have been made to meet his exact specifications. Via cloud and flame, God quite literally leads by example. When he moves, they move.

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In verse 40:34, it is interesting the word **וַיִּכְסֶה** *to cover* can be used in the sense of being clothed, as well as the covering of transgressions. In a way, God has made himself more intimately known to the people of Israel, particularly Moses, than ever before. In Exodus 6:3 God reveals his personal name **יהוה** *YHWH*, not previously known to any human being (Though undocumented, it would not be too great of a stretch to imagine

that Adam and Eve may have known him by this name). God now makes himself even more real by manifesting his presence in the visible form of a cloud and pillar of fire. This is also the first time that the people of Israel are able to see the presence of God manifested. While they had been witness to his mighty works of plagues and the parting of the Red Sea, those could be described as the *effects* of God. What they now bear witness to is his presence. As the cloud envelops the tent of presence, it is as if God is reassuring Israel that he embraces them as the chosen people, despite previous ups and downs in the relationship as a result of their wandering allegiances. They have met with God's approval, and thereby are clothed in his righteousness.

I also found it interesting that the word translated *glory, abundance* וְכְבוֹד carries with it a sense of three dimensional volume. Here, God's abundance fills the tabernacle. If the plague in Egypt depicted in Exodus 10:21 was a "darkness that could be felt" then surely 40:34 must have been the complete opposite – luminous glory suspended so thickly in the air that even Moses was unable to enter the tent of presence. In Exodus 20:18 God had also shrouded himself in dense cloud, causing the people to cower, prodding Moses to speak to this frightening deity in their stead. Juxtaposed here is a gentler side of God.

Verse 40:35 reemphasizes the fact that "the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." In a literary sense, through the repetition of this phrase, the text too is made doubly full of the notion. One cannot help but get the point: God's glory completely filled the tabernacle, his *place of dwelling*. This verse also notes that Moses was unsuccessful in his attempts to get inside the tent of meeting, and was *not* able to *endure, prevail* יִכָּלֵל against the cloud. Ironically, Moses is unable to prevail against God in order to get

closer to God. Moses had no doubt become accustomed to his one-on-one meetings with YHWH, and so it must have been a bit disconcerting to be shut out. While there was more than enough glory to fill the tabernacle, so much so it was reiterated, for whatever reason Moses was kept outside of the tent of meeting. Clearly, an attempt to enter the tent was made, but it was unsuccessful. In a way, this signifies that God is now taking a more active role in leading Israel directly, rather than by proxy of Moses. God has saturated the tabernacle with his glory, approaching and leading his people in a new way.

This is alluded to in 40:36, in that when the cloud moves, and implicitly now Moses would be able to enter the tent of meeting unrestrained, the entire people of Israel too must move. Likewise, when the cloud remains sedentary as described in 40:37, Israel does not travel, but neither is Moses able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud blockades the tent of meeting. This is not a shutting out of Moses, but rather God fully enjoying the dwelling place which has been established, filling it with his majesty.

I found it worth noting that the Hebrew word translated *house* of Israel בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל is used in verse 40:39. The previous chapters had been entirely about construction of a mobile tabernacle, and in chapter 40 we see that even YHWH himself resided in the tent of meeting. Yet, the text calls out the *house* of Israel, as opposed to using the phrasing *sons* of Israel as in earlier verses. Perhaps I am reading into it a bit, but the word “house” seems to carry with it so much more permanence than “tent.” This change in language could be the silver lining of foreshadowing, so to speak, that not always will they be following a cloud, constantly setting up and breaking camp. There will eventually be a temple, at which point their nationhood will be further established. At this point, their once far-off deliverer is close at hand, and for now that is enough.

This passage is a beautiful representation of God's tenderness extended to a nation who had just recently turned their backs on him. By showing their obedience of labor and generosity in giving towards the construction of the tabernacle, the sons of Israel have proven themselves to be rededicated to following YHWH. To solidify his approval, God both envelops the tent of meeting in cloud and fills the space which has been constructed for his glory, ratifying the efforts of the people as a reflection of repentance and reconciliation. In turn, the people dote on God's accompaniment, breaking camp when the Lord moves the cloud. This passage, and the book of Exodus, end with the epilogue of travel, describing how Israel continues to follow God.