

WORLD AND WORD IN THEOPHANY

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In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help.
From His temple He heard my voice, my cry came to His ears.
Then the earth quivered and quaked, the foundations of the mountains
trembled...
From His nostrils a smoke ascended, and from His mouth a fire that
consumed...
He bent the heavens and came down, a dark cloud under His feet...
He came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness His covering around Him, His canopy thick clouds
dark with water.
Before Him a flash enkindled hail and fiery embers.
The Lord thundered in the heavens, and the Most High made His voice
heard.
And He sent out His arrows, and scattered them,
He flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
The bed of the seas was revealed, the foundations of the world were
laid bare,
At Thy rebuke, O Lord, at the blast of Your nostrils' breath.
He reached from on high, He took me, He drew me from deep waters.
He delivered me from my powerful enemy, from a foe too strong for me.

Psalm 18, vv. 6-17¹

To many of us today the theophanies of the *Psalter* may seem comfortably remote, familiar but irrelevant. We may even read or hear them with a twinge of embarrassment. Our God has better manners nowadays; he's kept up with the general refinement in taste and comportment. And so, sadly or gladly, we may decide that theophanies are not for us, not of our time, this time which has other matters with which to busy itself.

Or so I might have thought, had I not been present some years ago at a gathering of Christians to whom a Rabbi spoke. He told us how, during the 1930's, he had been part of the recurrent experience of Jewish Enlightenment, of how he had accepted the progressive secularization of life, by which a relatively closed rational system of scientific laws and natural processes had drawn a tight impenetrable



seemed able to penetrate it, and very little of human life could break free of it, could even reach beyond it. But after the foundation of the secular state of Israel—and here he paused, quite conscious of the dramatic effect—there came yet another threat to the very existence of the Jewish people. All about seemed at risk, dark with danger and doom. But then, unexpectedly, it came: the six days of deliverance dawned, with swift sword strokes that cut away the threat and freed the people. The Rabbi speaks: “At that moment the tight shell of the secular world cracked and fell away, and for a moment in that gap we *saw* Him, the Holy One of Israel, our deliverer and our joy.”

His story was greeted with murmur; some in the audience were offended. “How dare he say such a thing, and in the middle of the twentieth century, too.” And others were ruminating: “How can he put such an interpretation upon events, after the tireless efforts to provide a rational exegesis, to give naturalization papers to alien events.” And surely, it is more credible to offer to “modern man” a study of wind and tide in the Sea of Reeds than a parting of the waves? Or to replace the miracles in Egypt with the pathology of recurrent plagues? Or again, manna from heaven with dewy desert phenomena? Instead, the Rabbi’s claim brought back the whole embarrassing atmosphere of Biblical religion, the claim to a special experience of the divine.

Later, over coffee, I asked the Rabbi: “By what right did you say such a shocking thing?” His reply—but then, how can one reply to such a question?—puzzled me. For he answered by simply giving his credentials: “I am,” he said, “one of only three Rabbis whose determinations are acceptable to all the major groups in North American Judaism.” Now, what sort of a reply is that? It was almost as impenetrable to me as the replies of Zen practitioners. It seems to leave the question wide open, if not entirely untouched. It is obviously an argument from authority, and so, from another. But who or what is that other? Is it the people to whom he ministered? But that might be more Durkheimian than the Rabbis would have wished. Was it sanctioned by the Holy One Himself? But even Moses had trouble with such a warrant.

At that time, of course, both he and I had as yet been spared the need of reading the more recent popular psychology to find out that it was one side of the brain talking to the other. Indeed, even then, I pride myself, I did not expect philosophy or sociology or psychology or politics or even meteorology to definitively answer the question, if it were to be answered at all. Nevertheless, I also recognized that religious language and theological discourse had themselves to be monitored by a rational reflection and to be required to meet intelligible standards. If religion and philosophy could each keep their integrity, both might benefit by such reciprocity in the interests of a richer intelligibility, as they have often enough in the past. It was the old tension between reason and faith. With that realization I found myself *in peto* a philosopher of religion. But now, what can a philosopher say that might

shed additional light upon the nature of such a claim to theophany?

What is, perhaps, most disturbing in the Rabbi's claim is not that it has been made in the twentieth century, but rather, its immediacy. It is, so to speak, a fresh claim. Of course, it is not without associations. After all, it was a Rabbi who spoke; that is, he spoke out of a religious community, conscious of a specific religious tradition and its sub-traditions, with a fully developed language at its call. Indeed, he spoke by means of and through the whole texture and context, the space and time, of Jewish memory and experience. And so, we are not dealing with *bare* immediacy, a firstness that arises without association. Indeed, only a misplaced romanticism will insist that we can ever encounter bare immediacy; for wherever we are, there too is our complex structure: if it is an idea, it is mediated by our sensibility; if it is a sensation, by our organs; if an alteration in our organs, then by a medium which comes to us in our situation as we interact with other beings in the world. Now, if in ordinary matters we cannot claim bare immediacy, so much the less is it likely in sacred things. Indeed, Biblical religion warns against the pretension of seeing God face to face: "Do not reveal the fulness of thy face to us, O Lord, lest we perish. Yet reveal thyself in some measure, lest we die from want." We ought to resist the temptation, then, of imagining some unreflective mythical period in which a people is fused in immediate union with the sacred and with one another. The presence of the sacred among a people is always a manifestation in determinate form through a finite medium. The hierophany—in Biblical religion, the theophany—is realized in a storm, through a figure, on a mountain height, during an event, in the giving of new life, in the quiet movements of the heart, or in some other limited and definite way.

If the Rabbi has spoken truly, it is a fresh theophany, but not a bare immediacy. For it is also one of many in a long series, a theophany of that same *theos* around whom communities of Biblical faith have centered throughout the generations, a theophany addressed to a community in historical continuity with Biblical Israel. Moreover, the historical background and context is not a mere frame surrounding the event after the manner by which we sometimes border a painting. It is not something external to the event. Rather, the historical context is ingredient in the event itself. It is the God of Israel who is manifested, that God whose theophanies have been set down in the *Psalms* and other Scriptures. And the speaker is a Rabbi, reared in a faith-community which is continuous with Biblical Israel. So that the mediation that dresses the element of immediacy is not simply extrinsic: the mediation is itself constitutive of the experienced event in its totality. That is, the event itself is mediated immediacy. I propose, then, to explore the sense of that mediated immediacy by retreating to a series of past theophanies, explicitly described and alluded to in the context of Biblical religion. I will have in mind chiefly three texts from the *Psalms*: 18, vv. 6-17; 29, vv. 3-9; and 114, vv. 3-8. The analysis will not pretend to draw secure conclusions about the nature of theophany in general, and

much less about hierophany, even though analogies may suggest themselves. The focus will be upon Biblical religion, since this is appropriate to the present purpose, and quite difficult enough.

I

The career of a Biblical text is remarkably like a series of *rites de passage*. Without undue simplification for our purpose, we might distinguish five such stages in which a text passes from one state to another. There is, first of all, the *articulation* of the experience of some primary event; for example, the manifestation of God in a storm or in a battle. The account may draw upon a series of similar past events; so that in the articulation, the initial and primary event acquires a certain narrative resonance with other events, and an “expressive thickness” is built up in the text by allusions to earlier narratives. This accumulation of sense is for the most part lost to our sight, except insofar as historical exegesis can reconstruct it. At least some of this condensation will have occurred in the form of prior oral traditions, passing from one generation and situation to another. We arrive at a second stage in the career of a Biblical text, then, when the text receives a certain fixity of form by passing from its oral traditions to written ones: it becomes *scripture*. Here, too, however, it may undergo development, diverging into several written traditions and taking final shape under one or more editorial hands. At some point, and in a long drawn out third stage, the text receives *canonical* status: it becomes *Sacred Scripture*, and is recognized as a sanctioned, authoritative text, normative for worship and teaching, for morality and spirituality. It is as though it has now entered upon its official life, its seniority. Subsequently, in a fourth stage of its career, it is called upon to respond to different situations—changes of generation, differences of social institution, custom and linguistic style—even while it retains its essential, normative character. Interpreted and re-interpreted, applied in a variety of ways, it acquires a host of camp-followers in the form of *commentaries*. It is thereby brought into relation with other texts, both canonical and extra-canonical, secular as well as sacred; yet it keeps its sanctioned, normative character for religious purposes. It may take up its dwelling in other cultural households, be diffused by translation into other linguistic matrices, and be adapted to the alien heritages implicit in other tongues.

In quite recent times, and in what constitutes a distinctive fifth stage, the methods and techniques of *critical historiography and literary hermeneutics* have been used to interpret the text, its setting and its antecedents. Biblical texts have been subjected to a more or less scientific research, which has yielded an abundant harvest of information and a more complex understanding of the texts. It is undoubtedly true that the intensive research into Biblical texts is due in part at least to the interest which individual researchers have in them because they are religious

texts. Still, for the most part and in principle, these investigators approach Biblical texts as special objects of ordinary historical research and seek to bring an understanding of their significance to the level of rigorous scientific discourse.

It is the chief argument of this paper, however, that, *in addition* to such modern scholarship, we need to arrive at an explicit understanding of these texts in the form of a discourse that continues to recognize them precisely as *religious* documents, a mode of discourse that can develop their specifically religious character in a thematic way. In order to attempt this we first need a clearer conception of what I have just now called “discourse”.

I have found it helpful in other contexts to distinguish between the manifold ordinary uses of language and its use in the form of discourse.² Religious *usage* in a natural language puts that language at the service of a believing community in order to express a whole range of religious possibilities for life, action and thought: for worship in prayer and cult, for instruction through story and commandment, for the experience, commemoration and anticipation of communal and individual association with the sacred. *Discourse*, on the other hand, is a modification of language that seeks to articulate an understanding of a subject-matter in a *methodical, conceptual and systematic* fashion. Unlike religious usage with its manifold interests, practical as well as theoretical, discourse is language placed at the service of thought insofar as thought is interested in determining the *truth* of some thing or state of affairs within the demands of its conceptual, methodical and systematic aims.

Discourse is applied in various ways to the understanding of religious subject-matters. Thus, for example, systematic theology is a mode of discourse, but it articulates its understanding of a specific religion on the basis of and within a community of faith. But discourse about religion can also be attempted in the name of a philosophy of religion, i.e., on the basis of a conception of reason and within its canons. And so, whereas theology takes the sacred texts as *principles or sources* from which it elaborates its systematic understanding, a philosophy of religion (conceived in the above manner) will take these same texts in their religious character as the *subject-matter* to be investigated on the basis of reason and its canons and principles, i.e., within an understanding of philosophical rationality. Such a philosophy of religion is not quite the same as the prevalent philosophical theology that usually goes by the name “Philosophy of Religion”, but which would be more properly called “Philosophy of God.” To be sure, both are legitimate philosophical enquiries. But the former will address the religious character of its subject-matter more directly and explicitly in order to try to gain a *philosophical* understanding of *religion*, whereas the latter is in fact an epistemological (and sometimes a metaphysical) enquiry that seeks to test the idea and reality of *God* with probing questions about the probability of God’s existence, the predication of divine attributes and the manifest fact of evil.

II

Over the years, in reading through even a part of the vast scholarly and religious literature upon the *Psalms*, I have found it helpful to distinguish three broad sets of comments; the discursive, the moral and the aesthetic.³

The categories of discourse (in the sense in which I have just outlined the term) may vary in generality, and may be more or less appropriately adapted to the study of religion. Thus, very general explanatory categories, drawn more or less unaltered from modes of discourse such as sociology, psychology and political theory, can indeed throw a pale and distant light upon the significance of a religious text. But, although their light is generally informative, it is still a refracted light, a light that only indirectly, if at all, throws the *religious* bearing of the text into relief. When these modes of discourse are taken in themselves as complete accounts of religion, they are simply reductive. On the other hand, as in the fifth stage, when their categories are adapted to use in the archaeology of the Bible and in its cultural and social history, they are able to shed a more focussed light upon the text. They provide a host of details, many of them cross-cultural and cross-religious. They set forth both the background and the development of a particular text, and they show forth its institutional setting, along with the implicit customs and values that may underly it: in a word, they recover the *Sitz im Leben* of the text. This is true of the older literary and historical studies, as well as of the more recent form-critical method. Exclusive reliance upon these approaches, however, runs the continual risk of dissolving the religious significance of the text into the rational texture of the methodology of the discourse itself. It seems to me, therefore, that it is one of the tasks of a philosophy of religion to articulate a context in which the results of these historiographical studies may be brought to bear upon the properly religious character of the text. It is to this task that I will shortly return, with whatever modest results the reader must decide.

The second broad type of comment draws its categories from morality. Certainly, morality is no mere by-product in Biblical religion, but is rather an indispensable partial ascesis. Nevertheless, both religious life and the history of religions has helped to make clear that moral categories in themselves do not exhaust or even determine the specifically religious significance of theophanies such as those recounted in the *Psalms*. The ampler categories of the history of religions and of the older descriptive phenomenology preserve the specifically religious character of their phenomena better, and they can serve as a sort of fore-court to the temple into which the understanding seeks to pass; but they do this just insofar as they resist the reduction of the religious elements in their descriptions to the moral.

The third broad type of comment expresses itself in poetic and aesthetic terms, and seems to gain widest approval today. This may be illustrated by a random

selection of comments made upon a passage from *Psalms* 114 (vv. 3-4):

The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. (RSV)

The great Cardinal Bellarmine wrote in his *Commentary*⁴ that “wonderful things” had happened, and that the Psalmist relates them

in a most beautiful and figurative manner, addressing nature *as if* it had sense [emphasis added].

Another writer⁵ “explains” the aberrant behaviour of fleeing sea and leaping mountains as a literary device, that of personification. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes an early sense of this term: “faying a person.” And it gives this account:

A rhetorical figure by which an imaginary or absent person is represented as speaking or acting; the introduction of a pretended speaker....
A rhetorical figure by which an inanimate or abstract thing is represented as a person, or with personal characteristics.

The connotation is redolent with fiction (as if), dubiety (pretense), and absence. No doubt, when the Lord God shows himself he does not disclose his full presence, face to face; but it is at least a question whether his muted presence in a theophany is best interpreted by such literary devices as personification, in which the notion of a certain impropriety and artificiality is present. Such a classification of the sense of the text may domesticate it too quickly, assimilating it to a ready-made static catalogue of rhetorical figures drawn up from non-religious materials.⁶ No one is more unimaginative than an interpreter who speaks so neatly and readily of the imagination. We learn from still others that the passage is “poetic,” “highly poetic,” “a poetic description,” cast “in poetic fancy.”⁷ After excusing the Psalmist for “poetic license,” another writer⁸ suggests that

the quaking of the mountain is poetically exaggerated into a motion that might be likened to the frisking of lambs

Another⁹ finds that

the poetic figure of the ‘sympathy of nature’ runs through the Psalm.

The phrase “sympathy of nature” may provide more than is needed to elucidate the text, since the aroma of magic clings to the phrase; nor does the writer explain how nature is able to possess such fellow-feeling with man. The *Liber Psalmorum*¹⁰ finds the manner of expression to be “so to speak, in the dramatic mode, as it were” (*modo quasi ‘dramatico’*). The inverted commas around the word “dramatic” and the use of the deprecatory “*quasi*” show a certain hesitation and reserve. Indeed there may be a double-edged wisdom in such a reserve. It may signify a hesitation

lest the “vulgar” (i.e., the uneducated) identify the natural elements too directly with the divine presence in the theophany, and lest the educated condemn the text as literal and fatuous. But, however prudent this double-edged wisdom might be, it does not carry us into the religious significance of the text, and if it is taken as decisive in determining the sense of the text, then it diminishes that significance. It is, to adapt Bishop Berkeley’s phrase, as though a pinch of dust is thrown into our eyes so that we cannot see. No doubt, too, there is wisdom in talking to and about the sacred with reserve and hesitation, but the question remains: What manner of reservation and hesitation?

A brief consideration of the term “hyperbole” may point up the issue. Some writers¹¹ remark upon the “hyperbolic” character of this passage. Now, *hyperbola* in geometry is the excess of the length of the curved line over the straight line that joins any two of its points in two dimensional or plane space. The word fits a context in which two-dimensionality is normative, whereas a line that is curvilinear in two-dimensional space is actually the shortest and most direct in the fuller three-dimensional or solid space. By analogy, then, God and His “movements” will only be made obscurer still if we use the unaltered conceptions of ordinary understanding (corresponding in the analogy to plane space) as the definitive measure of theophany (corresponding to solid space). And so, it makes a difference whether we are trying to construe a third dimension from two or whether we are situating our understanding of two dimensions within the context of solid (i.e. three-dimensional) space.

If we are to render the distinctively religious character of a Biblical theophany into discourse, however inadequately, we need more than these categories—historiographic, moral or aesthetic,—whose explanatory power has been drawn from and remains proportioned to forms of discourse that have not been designed to cope with the extraordinary character of religious language and the life that it expresses. What is needed is *conversion*.

It is most important at this point that I not be misunderstood. I do not here call for a conversion in the religious sense, i.e., for acceptance in faith of the truth of the Lord as He has revealed Himself. Nonetheless, I do not mean something less than a religious conversion, a kind of mild religiosity. I mean, rather, a shift of mind that operates at a different level and for a different purpose from that of religious faith. I mean a change of direction in interpretation. For the call here is not to a conversion in faith but to a shift in the standpoint and flow of the interpretation. What is required is a *methodological conversion*. Such a conversion is open to all interpreters, whether they are believers or not. It is required, moreover, for the sake of the adequacy of the interpretation, and as a first step towards understanding the text in its religious significance. And so, it is not a question of how near one must come to a religious conversion, any more than Descartes had to suffer a real doubt rather than a methodical one. His doubt was taken seriously for the sake of advan-

tages he hoped it would bring to his enquiry. So, too, here the conversion is neither more nor less religious, because it is not a religious conversion at all. The enquirer need not be religious.¹² Almost certainly, he or she must have a certain interest, fascination or even sympathy for the subject-matter under investigation, but that is a quite general requirement for any investigation. Such sympathy is not approval. Rather, it is in this instance an ability to imaginatively recreate the experience of what it means to be religious in a specific way. And that requires, in turn, a high degree of interest and some sense of the importance of the enquiry. This attention to the subject-matter is such a general requirement that it may not be noticed in other fields of enquiry, but religion is such an extra-ordinary affair that the enquirer must be quite clear about the nature and necessity for a methodological conversion, and must keep that requirement as distinct from his religious convictions as a doctor keeps his enquiry into health and disease from his own physical condition.

We must distinguish, then, between the position, on the one hand, and the grounds for and manner of taking it, on the other. If the position is taken in faith, and out of genuine religious conviction, we have a religious conversion. If, on the other hand, the position is taken out of a theoretical interest in understanding in some measure at least what is being claimed, then we have a methodological conversion, taken in the interests of a discursive understanding. In both cases, however, once that shift is taken, there can be no talk of “hyperbole”; for from the centre of a Biblical theophany itself no language can be excessive enough. What, after all, has the Lord to do with earthquake and thunderstorm? These phenomena of nature pale beside His glory. No language can be original enough to be excessive, once it is interpreted from out of the eye of the storm itself. In the spirit of faith, someone has written that “the *Psalms* are realistic with God’s own realism.”¹³ And, indeed, religious writers on spirituality take up the transposition from the human to the divine into the context of actual faith.¹⁴ But, in a quite different manner and from a quite different concern, it is just such a vantage-point that the text demands of us if we are to recover its religious character, even though we recover it for discourse rather than for faith. It goes without saying that such a discursive recovery can be of use to a faith which takes it up, “faith seeking understanding”; but its own integrity and its own responsibility as discourse is not thereby impugned. Nowhere is the rigour of a phenomenological suspension (*epoche*) more appropriate.

Let us adopt that vantage-point now for the sake of our enquiry into what the text might mean in its properly religious significance. From the vantage-point of the eye of the storm the Psalmist cries out to nature:

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord. [RSV]
 Quake, earth, at the coming of your Master. [JB]

And, on the combined grounds of its religious character and the interests of discourse, the theophany calls upon the very methodology of discourse itself to tremble and to quake.

To sum up, then, the philosopher of religion is not expected to pronounce either for or against the truth of the religious claim that is explicit or implicit in the theophany. Nevertheless, in accordance with quite general requirements of enquiry, he is bound to let the religious claim be made in its own appropriate way; just as, for example, the philosopher of art is bound to let an artistic tradition develop in accordance with its own possibilities. What makes the analogy suspect between the relation of art and philosophy, on the one hand, and of religion and philosophy, on the other, is that most if not all major religions do make belief claims of some sort. Certainly, Biblical religions do; whereas many artistic traditions do not. Nevertheless, if we broaden the conception of expression to include more than cognitive and belief claims, much of art does lay claim to a kind of significance. And so, I would argue that the analogy does hold in a weak sense, and that that sense is enough to purchase a certain directive for our purposes: *viz.*, that, just as the philosopher of art does not decide upon the significance of art (critical *aficionados*—artists, critics and public—do that), so too, the philosopher of religion does not decide upon the ultimate truth of the claims made by a religion. This does not mean that art, religion and philosophy are hermetically sealed from one another, but rather that in their vital interchange with one another, each retains its own integrity and assimilates aspects of the others in accordance with its own nature.

The conversion to which the philosopher of religion is called, then, is to change his situation because of considerations of method, and to hold open his basic categories of reality, meaning, place, time, causality and the like, in order to see whether they can bear the new weight put upon them. If we ask: How open? We can only reply that *that* is just what is yet to be determined. And if it is asked: What weight? We must reply: Only so much as can be rationally measured. There is no doubt that these conceptions have already undergone development in philosophy, and not through philosophical reflection alone, but also through the impact of other dimensions of thought and life. It is too easy for us to forget, for example, the radical development in the concepts of matter, form, causality and law that occurred in the sixteenth century scientific revolution, and that released new conceptual and methodological possibilities for philosophy itself. Or the developments in the concepts of person, freedom and divinity that were involved in the theological debates of the fourth century, and that later entered the philosophical stream. Now, a similar revolution has been going on since the middle of the last century in the historical-cultural sciences, and one of its results is a new, more reflective understanding of religion. Indeed, the initial motivating force of that revolution has been the his-

toriographical investigation of Biblical religion. This newly won understanding is available to the philosopher of religion, and calls upon him to approach his subject-matter with a new openness. If the rational categories of his philosophy can bear the new weight put upon them, they may not remain entirely unaltered, just as philosophical categories did not survive the sixteenth century revolution unaltered, or that of the fourth. But their development will contribute to ontology and epistemology, and also to a better philosophical understanding of theophany itself.

All of this must be done without deciding the issue of the truth or falsity of religious claims in general and theophany in particular. What such a philosopher of religion will have decided—inasmuch as anything is decided in philosophy—is the issue of the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of those claims from the point of view of the canons of rationality. Moreover, he will have practised a methodological conversion which will permit him to relate the theophany to more general categories of being and meaning. The enterprise is not without its perils, but no worthy task is free of them. Nor is this a call to an indiscriminate openness, which would be nothing short of an abandonment of the carefully elaborated discipline of reason. Rather, it simply sets forth the possibility of a development of our understanding of philosophy and of religion, a development that is continuous with the known canons of rational discourse.

III

In carrying out the present methodological conversion, we must look more closely at the texture of the accounts of theophany in the *Psalms*. In remarking previously upon the mediated immediacy that is characteristic of theophany, I drew attention to a certain “expressive thickness” that is built into the accounts of theophany in the *Psalms*. Echoes from earlier theophanies resonate within them. Some interpreters of *Psalm 29* consider it to be the account of an actual experience of a storm as it swept across the land. But they also recognize that the theophany is dressed in part in the language of earlier theophanies and previous accounts. Contrary to the crude strictures of earlier rationalist historians, such repetition does not discredit the authenticity of the experience, since prior experiences and previous descriptions of theophanies might well be drawn upon without imputing inauthenticity to the present account. Indeed, the repetition may be a key to a deeper significance.¹⁵ Thus, the restatement in *2 Samuel 22* of the same theophany set forth in *Psalm 18* reinforces the original sense of the theophany by providing it with an external correlate in a new context.

The texture of a Psalm is thickened internally, moreover, when a theophany is associated with one or more other theophanies within the text of a single Psalm. This may happen in two basic ways. First, by way of recollection. An intrinsic and constitutive recollection of an earlier theophany often occurs within the very Psalm

that sets forth a later theophany. Thus, in Psalm 114 the earlier saving deeds of God are remembered in the opening lines:

When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from
 a people of strange language,
 Judah became his sanctuary, Israel his dominion.
 The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back.
 The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. [RSV]

Here the Psalmist has brought the great theophany of the *Exodus*, the parting of the Red Sea, together with the theophany of the crossing of the Jordan. There is within the Psalm, then, a double recollection: The Psalmist himself recalls the crossing of the Jordan, and within that recall finds echoes of the earlier Exodus. Examples of similar recollection can be easily multiplied. Such recollection is the transmutation of immediacy,—either one's own or another's—into that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" of which the poet speaks. The narrative account of the theophany takes form as a recollection. So that, in singing about theophany, the poet does not seize upon the moment of bare immediacy: that is an abstraction posited by thought, and is not accessible as a separate experience, even for the Psalmist who may have experienced the theophany directly. Immediacy is there, but not separately and in itself. It is always clothed with the context in which it appears, the medium through which it is manifest and the subject that undergoes it. We may separate these constituents of experience in thought as I have just done, but they do not thereby become experiences in their own right. Experience is always a complex affair, and one which consists of temporal complexity as well, i. e. in which past and future play a role as well as the present.¹⁶

Recollection of a past theophany is a paramount way in which religious narrative enconces the event that inspires it. It is characteristic of religious revelation that it is received as something which has already been disclosed. To gain access to such a truth, then, requires a recollection. It is not incidental, therefore, that philosophers who arise within a religious milieu often formulate their understanding of truth in terms of the recollection of a kind of pastness. Mention need only be made of Plato's *anamnesis* or reminiscence, Augustine's *memoria*, Hegel's *Erinnerung* or interior recall, Heidegger's *Wiederholen* or retrieval, and Marcel's *re-connaissance* or recognition.¹⁷

In addition to the deliberate recall of other theophanies, however, the *Psalter* holds obscurer depths. Many Biblical manuscripts are actual *palimpsests*. The Biblical text is written over a surface beneath which earlier writings have been rubbed away to make place for the text of the Bible; not, however, without leaving faint traces of the earlier writings, obscure but sometimes still legible to the trained eye of the paleographer, so that one may speak of the physical presence of graphic layers in the manuscripts. In addition to this physical palimpsest, however, there is

what I might call a *second-order palimpsest*, which is discoverable—not by the paleographer—but by the exegete of the text. In the *Psalms* this palimpsest is a rich texture of images and conceptions, which are more or less obscure to us and which are either explicitly alluded to by the Psalmist or carried more or less unwittingly into the Psalm from the traditional materials that then lay to hand. In most cases, the process of assimilation has itself been rubbed away by forgetfulness and silence, and by the slow or sudden change of situation. Over the past hundred and fifty years, Biblical scholarship has recovered some of this second-order palimpsest and shown in detail how it is inseparable from the religious significance of the text (even though we must not forget that earlier generations did well enough with the Scriptures in their own time and in their own way, i.e., largely without the knowledge of that second-order palimpsest).

In what I have already called the fifth stage in the career of a Biblical text, viz., that of critical historiography, possibilities of a further understanding of the religious significance of the *Psalms* are offered by the methods and techniques of discourse insofar as they have been brought to bear upon the recovery of the second-order palimpsest upon which a Psalm itself may rest. The Psalm itself does not issue from that second-order palimpsest or underlay as from its source or ground (*Grund*), but rests upon it rather as upon its foundation (*Grundlage*). Thus, in addition to the conscious recollection of the great theophanies at Sinai and the Red Sea, the Psalm may contain imagery and language used previously to extol the Canaanite storm-god Baal (*Ps.* 29). Or it may claim for the Biblical Lord a series of titles drawn from a Ugaritic poem to the Lord-god Iskur (*Ps.* 18). Or again (*Ps.* 114), the undercurrent of a mythical struggle may flow beneath the surface of the Biblical text itself, the representation of creation as a victory of a creator-god over rebellious primeval waters.

The palimpsest of imagery is undeniable; but equally undeniable is the profound transformation which these non-Biblical materials usually undergo as they find their way into the texture, into the narrative thickness, of a Biblical Psalm. For instance, the sea does not retreat defiantly (as it is depicted in the non-Biblical documents); rather, it acknowledges its Lord, and obeys without a struggle:

The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back.

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. (*RSV*)

Hans Joachim Kraus sees in this transformation, not only the overcoming of a particular myth, but the victory of Jahweh over myth itself. He remarks that, in showing forth God's Lordship as the fundamental event of the theophany, the theophany bursts open and dissolves the whole mythical complex of the alleged time of chaos.¹⁸ What we have here, then, is the sublimation of a "whole mythical complex" into the narrative depth of the text, a new magnitude that achieves unity under the transforming power of a distinctive disclosure about the Lordship of God.

IV

The manifestation of God's Lordship is celebrated in the nature-theophanies as a "great and wonderful thing." *Psalm 29* reads in part:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters,
 the God of glory thunders...
 The voice of the Lord is [full of power]...
 The voice of the Lord [shatters] the cedars,
 breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
 He makes [Mt.] Lebanon to skip like a calf,
 and [Mt.] Sirion like a young wild ox.
 The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness...
 The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl [or:
 the hinds to calve], and strips the forests bare;
 And in His temple all cry, "Glory." [RSV, slightly amended]

It may prove helpful to carry a bit further the preceding analysis of the texture of a theophanic Psalm, whose primary theme—the Lordship of God—is reinforced by recollection and palimpsest, and to do so by taking up a specific sub-theme for analysis. What is the appropriate measure of the "greatness" that is manifest in such a theophany and celebrated in such a Psalm? Especially with regard to the role that nature is called upon to play in the theophany? *What can philosophical discourse say about the magnitude of a nature-theophany as it is expressed in such a Psalm?*

In setting out to determine the magnitude appropriate to a Biblical nature-theophany, we have only to put the question in order to realize the radical character of the conversion of discourse that is needed if we are to give a discursive account of the religious significance of such a nature-theophany. For the category of magnitude must be kept open, since it will be found to include such diverse "quantities" as physical mass, textual scope and divine power, so that the ordinary concept of magnitude will not prove adequate to determine the "greatness" of the "great and wonderful" things that the text claims to have been done by God.

To begin with, in many Biblical nature-theophanies there are elements of the miraculous, of that which is unusual, even contrary to the expected movements of nature: the waters part, the river turns back. Over the past two centuries or more, discourse has often sought to find natural explanations for many Biblical phenomena: an uncommon but not unique shift in wind direction in the region of the Red Sea is brought forward to account for the rare and sudden withdrawal of the waters; or again, landslides are said to have temporarily dammed the Jordan from time to time, making a crossing possible. In this method of interpretation, miracul-

ous events are assimilated to already well-defined categories of rational explanation, and the events thereby shed their miraculous character; or rather, the miracle is now found to reside in the marvellous timing of the natural event; and, if that fails, then, in the collective belief and trust among the people that something “God-like” has happened. These attempts are not without their value: negatively and critically, they work against undue credulity; and positively, they recover information about the natural and historical elements of the situation that aids our understanding. Still, they do not come to grips with the religious significance of the theophany in terms of discourse, just because they do not proceed on the basis of a methodological conversion.

To say a little about that religious significance, then, I should like to look elsewhere than at these naturalizing explanations, or rather, to look differently at the theophany and the text which expresses it. For the religious significance of the nature-theophanies in the *Psalms* does not consist in a sudden and rare increase of natural forces, as though the earthquake, when it is a theophany, is greater than other earthquakes. It is not the violence of the natural commotion that makes up its religious significance. Its religious character is not to be sought for in the *natural* magnitude of the effect, as though God’s storms are bigger than others, more terrible than nature’s. That would suggest that the wind, rain and lightning of a theophany must be of superhurricane force, and that we could tell a theophany by the points added to the Richter scale. It is this that is unsatisfactory about talking of the Psalmist’s “poetic exaggeration,” as though he adds points to an imaginary Richter scale. We should forget in that case, then, what Elijah learned: that Jahweh is manifest even in the gentle breeze.¹⁹ But, if we ought not to expect a quantitative hint from nature, no more should we look for a qualitative one, for a distinctive configuration of events peculiar to God, as though he were to leave a species-specific tell-tale trail to show that he has passed by, in the way in which some animals leave traces along their path, or as an artist signs a piece of work that he thinks might be wrongly attributed to another.

The magnitude appropriate to a theophany must be sought for in a different way and in different terms. The religious believer seizes upon it in faith, by a kind of apprehension; and this faith is the primary apprehension of the theophany and its “greatness.” By means of discourse, however, we might also try to understand its magnitude by measuring it in terms—not of a natural space and time—but of a distinctive depth and an appropriate duration. To suggest how that might be done, I propose to lay hands upon Kant, for it is Kant who gave us the first modern exploration of the constitution of the sensible appearance of nature as phenomenon. Perhaps they are violent hands, for they reach beyond the bounds he set for religion. Still, undaunted, they turn towards his “Analytic of Principles” (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A130/B169ff.) to find there a source of hints that may point the way into this obscure domain.

First of all, the texture of the theophanic Psalms shows them to be *extensive magnitudes*. In the “Axioms of Intuition” (A162/B202) Kant argued that every possible object of human experience must be an extensive magnitude. Now, an extensive magnitude is that quantum whose measure is determined by units externally related to one another, and which in sum make up a determinate measure. But, according to Kant, an extensive magnitude is a schematized category, and so it is a magnitude whose externally related parts are gathered up in accordance with a determination of time. Now, it is just this that one encounters in an analogous way in the Psalmist’s conscious recollection of past Biblical theophanies, as well as in the second-order palimpsest of non-Biblical theophanies that often underlies the sacred text. For Kant, the distinct units of extensive magnitude are determinate sensations received in definite space-time co-ordinates. In the *Psalms*, on the other hand, the units or elements that enter into their composition may differ more radically, because they are events, images, beliefs or customs that may differ in era, or even in religion and culture. The externality of some of the elements that make up the texture of many of the Psalms is due to their being different theophanies of the same Biblical God, e.g. on Sinai and at Bethel. But in other Psalms, the externality is due also to their belonging to different cultures and to different religions, e.g. to the cult of Baal or of Iskur.

In the “Anticipations of Perception” (A166/B207) Kant turned to the consideration of quality as *intensive magnitude*, i.e., as a definite degree of sensation. In formulating the Anticipations, he thought that he had come as close as one might to a critical determination of the qualitative conditions for actual experience; and he thought that he had thereby incorporated the moment of immediacy into his account of human experience. He thought that he had determined, in a general fashion and *a priori*, the limits of the intensive magnitude of any object of possible experience when he concluded that all experienced objects would necessarily fall at some point or degree along a scale of intensity of sensation from 0 to 1, i.e. from the wholly empty to the entirely full. In other words, that every object would have some determinate degree of sensation. An intensive magnitude or quality, then, is the same series of units that we have already considered insofar as they are already linked together externally into an extensive magnitude. In degree, however, they are brought together into a single experiential unit; they comprise an object insofar as it is a unique, qualitatively determinate appearance. In a word, the phenomenal object has real intensive magnitude or quality as well as extensive magnitude or quantity. A quality is an implicit manifold of potentially distinct units, of course, which can be rendered explicitly distinct by analysis. But beyond that, it is an explicit and singular unity of sensory experience. For example, in temperature, the 77th degree enters into the 78th as one of the latter’s constituents; yet, along with the 76th, 75th and other degrees, it is fused into the one single determinate quality: the intensive magnitude = 78 degrees.

If we turn to a Psalm that expresses a nature-theophany, we find a theophanic presence or quality (*kabod, doxa*) which informs the complex texture of the Biblical account. The believer apprehends in faith an intensive magnitude: the greatness of the Lord manifest in nature. But discursive analysis also yields an implicit manifold, formed by recollection and palimpsest, which builds up the full force of the religious significance of the text. It is in intensive magnitude that Kant speaks of "reality," and he hopes to anticipate the novelty inherent in human experience: it is to be found in the empirical character of sensation. In the Psalm, too, the primary determinant of the qualitative intensity of the text is the theophanic glory which provides the theme of the Psalm, and which radically transforms the palimpsestic elements of the manifold. Commenting upon *Psalm* 114, Kraus remarks²⁰ that

the poet points to the basic event of the theophany as that which encloses all other happenings within itself.

It is here, however, that we must also part company with Kant. He looked to sensation to provide the element of novelty or immediacy; but sensation provides only the initial content, its contribution is material. The theophany, on the other hand, is the determining presence, the source of what is supremely actual in the experience and in the account given of it in the *Psalm*. That immediacy does not merely provide material for the formation of an appearance; it is the original source of what is supremely actual in the theophany. Rather than being subsumed by the *a priori* formal functions, as sensation is, the theophany commands both nature and the Psalmist. That presence is the source of the radically transformative power of the manifestation, and the key to the distinctive temporal and spatial magnitude of the theophany. And in that magnitude is to be found the appropriate measure and an important aspect of the religious significance of the text.

We must not forget that we are not dealing directly with the question of God, but with the question of the *appearance* of God: with theophany. We are examining the factors of such an appearance and the texture of its expression in the *Psalms*.

The distinctive character of the intensive magnitude is the source of the religious significance of the Biblical text, and the ground of the methodological conversion. The scope of the present paper does not permit us to follow out a further hint suggested by Kant's schematized category of permanence, i.e., durational magnitude in the order of appearance. The career sketch of a Biblical text was meant to remind us that its future does not stop with its canonicity, though its status as canonical determines that future. But the later interpretations also belong to the temporal magnitude of the theophanic event embedded in the text:—even the misinterpretations belong (in the sense in which at least some "interesting" mistakes contribute to scientific understanding). From the point of view of the Biblical intent, the text deliberately expresses a word not simply for its own time, but for all times. The Psalmist's "new song" embeds the theophany in the order of duration

that is proper to God's own presence and expressive of his fidelity. The continuing presence of the event is normative for interpretation and points to the measure of the theophany: it is an event for all times. Commenting upon *Psalms* 18, an interpreter²¹ sums up the point:

Manifestly, the poem abounds in the permanently contemporaneous.

The durational magnitude of the theophanic event made manifest in and through the Biblical text is that mode of duration we call eternal. So that a claim to theophany today may be seen as living within the temporal magnitude of one or more Biblical theophanies. There is no doubt that the Rabbi's claim needs to be led back to them as to its measure. But there is no doubt, too, that further discussion of temporal magnitude is both required and not possible in the present article.

Finally, then, what of the spatial magnitude of a nature-theophany? It is often and rightly said that Biblical religion presents us with a certain interiority, even with a sense of intimacy with the divine. The inwardness appropriate to the religious significance of a Biblical nature-theophany, however, is not that of the human psyche alone, neither that of the human individual nor of the social collectivity. A nature-theophany is a summons that calls the Psalmist out into nature in a distinctive way, in order to find *there* the fundamental creative presence and purpose of God within nature itself, to find *there* the Lord and Master of *all* creation.

It is a misreading of a nature-theophany, then, to place the interiority in the human psyche alone; for there is interiority in the cosmos as well. A nature-theophany recovers a distinctive depth in nature, penetrating beyond nature as mere fact into nature as creature. But if acceptable discourse withdraws all depth from nature, neither will nature be permitted to have its own interiority. It will follow, then, that all interiority will have to be placed within the human psyche; and it is this deprivation of nature that drives commentators to "explain" the religious significance of theophanic texts by appealing to psychological privacy or collective agreement. This, too, is one of the pressures that tend to reduce religion to morality and purely human concern. The *Psalms* simply contradict this reduction, as do (among others) the Eastern and Western forms of Catholic Christianity. The theophanic depth is a certain interior causality welling up in the things of nature, breaking beyond their bonds to disclose their ordination to spiritual reality. Spirit is here not individual and collective human subjectivity alone,—neither the Psalmist nor the people alone—but is "God's own realism."²²

A nature-theophany professes to speak reliably of an interior depth shared by man and nature, their joint submission by which nature and history together acknowledge their inner ground. That ground professes to disclose the fundamental meaning and the ultimate purpose of God in the world; so that what is met with in the theophany is original and originating. Time is there in its creative upsurge, with a presence that is unconditional. Place is there, too; not hemmed in by other

places and on the same footing with them, not a space already constituted, but a *constituting* space. We meet with a spatiality that is that “broad place” to which God leads the Psalmist (*Ps.* 18: 19-20). Such a broad and lasting place professes to be a place of spiritual power; not simply the power of kings and armies, of storms and quakes and seas, but the power of power, the very origin and seal of power. This is no secret, private place, but that large domain in which man and nature meet the purposes of God.

In terms of a methodologically converted discourse, then, I have traced out a sort of *a priori* that is ingredient in Biblical nature-theophany. To be sure, it is not the Kantian *a priori* that informs all possible human experience of objects as appearances. Moreover, it is in part an historical *a priori*. Nevertheless, a philosophical palimpsest, written in Kant’s hand, has been over-written by the religious schemata of extensive and intensive magnitude, as I have articulated them in this paper. We might ask: What has happened to “God’s realism” with all of this talk about Kant? It is important to remember, therefore, that the present analysis takes as its theme, neither theology revealed nor theology philosophical, but—in precise if unpardonable terminology—it attempts a *theophanology*: it is discourse about the manifestation of God. That appearance is neither the work of man nor of nature; it is taken by the believer to be the work of God.

These factors have been at play in the analysis: God (*theos*), his appearance (*phaenomenon*), to man in nature, told in a religious narrative (the *Psalms*); and finally, through the present analysis, articulated in terms of discourse (*logos*). The analysis has meant to distinguish but not to separate these factors: God, nature, man, appearance and discourse. It has tried to shed some light upon that obscure but broad land and that enduring covenant in which the religious believer is convinced that God, man and nature meet and hold their conversation.²³

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NOTES

1. The translation is a blend drawn from *The Revised Standard Version* and *The Jerusalem Bible*.
2. For a more extended treatment of the conception of *discourse* as I use it here, see “Restitution of Meaning in Religious Speech,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, vol. V, no. 3 (Fall, 1974), pp. 131-51, esp. 134-36, and “Natural Imagery as a Discriminatory Element in Religious Language,” *Experience, Reason and God*, ed. E. T. Long, *Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy*, vol. 8 (Washington: Catholic University, 1980), pp. 159-76, esp. 159-64.
3. Along with the scholarly literature consulted, including numerous commentaries, I have found most helpful the commentaries of H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen*, 2 vols., *Biblischer Kommentar. Altes Testament* (Neukirchen, 1961); M. Dahood, *Psalms*, 3 vols., *Anchor Bible*, vols. 16, 17, 17a (New York:

Doubleday, 1965-70); *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955); and *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

4. *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. from the Latin of Cardinal Bellarmine by Ven. J. O'Sullivan (Dublin: Duffy, 1866), pp. 362ff.

5. F. P. Kenrich, *The Psalms* (Baltimore: J. Murphy, n.d.), p. 240: "prosopopoeic."

6. Or more accurately, shaped originally in the late Latin schools of grammar and rhetoric with materials that were residually religious, but from which the spirit of religion had departed.

7. A random reading of recent and not so recent comment upon this Psalm yields many examples of classification of the passage as "poetic," as "a poetic description," or as "highly poetic." Too many, indeed, to cite. Kenrich, *op. cit.* speaks of it as "highly poetic." The Confraternity translation (Paterson, N. J., 1950), p. 209, has recourse to "poetic description" for similar passages throughout the Old Testament. F. Noetscher, *Die Heilige Schrift in Deutsche Uebersetzung: Die Psalmen*, p. 232-33 finds the passage to have been framed "in der dichterischen Phantasie."

8. V. R. Patrick Canon Boylan, *The Psalms* (Dublin: Gill, 1931), p. 240.

9. Rev. Cuthbert Lattey, S. J., ed., *The Psalter in the Westminster Version of the Sacred Scriptures* (London: Sands, 1944) p. 19.

10. *Liber Psalmorum*, Pont. Institutii Biblici (New York: Benzinger, 1945), p. 240. nn. 3, 4.

11. F. Noetscher, *ibid.*: "hyperbolisch." cf. J. M. Powis Smith, trans., *The Psalms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), p. 253, in reference to a similar passage in *Psalm 42* (v. 7).

12. For a believer, of course, this shift is already taken in the process of religious conversion, but it may then be worked out discursively as he or she seeks further understanding of the faith. Nevertheless, a religious conversion is not entailed by a methodological conversion and is not an inevitable consequence of it.

13. Mary Perkins Ryan, "Introduction" to *The Psalms* (Chicago: Fides, 1955), p. ix.

14. See, for example, the "Expositions" in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, or J. Cales, *Le Livre des Psaumes* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1936), vol. 2, pp. 374-75: "Il convenait donc que toute la nature fetât par des phénomènes inusités commotions la majesté et la toute-puissance du Dieu de Jacob, auteur d'un si grand oeuvre."

15. I have traced out the role of repetition, especially in non-religious rituals, in "Ritual Elements of Community," *Religious Studies*, vol. 17 (Fall, 1981), pp. 163-77.

16. See "A Moment of Truth: Present Actuality," *Review of Metaphysics*, vol. XXXIII, no. 4 (June, 1980), pp. 673-88, especially p. 682. Cf. Aristotle on memory as a condition for experience, and experience as a condition for art and reasoning: *Metaphysics*, Bk. A, c. 1, 980a21ff.

17. See "A Religious and Philosophical Use of the Past," *A Filosofia e as Ciências: IV Semana Internacional de Filosofia* (Rio de Janeiro, 1978), pp. 54-56.

18. *Psalmen*, vol. II, pp. 782-83.

19. I *Kings* 19:11-12.

20. *Psalmen*, vol. II, p. 783. Cf. also E. Ceaucamp, *Le Psautier* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1979), pp. 205-207: "Sans doute voit-on reapparaître, ici, les images familières de nos vieilles théophanies, la retraite précipitée des eaux (*Ps.* 18:16; 104:7; *Is.* 17:13), la fuite éperdue des montagnes (*Ps.* 29:6), à la vue du Dieu ménaçant (*Ps.* 48:6; 77L11; *Ha.* 3:10). Mais ces représentations s'inscrivent dans un contexte nouveau, fort différent. L'univers tressaille...mers et montagnes ont trouvé un Maître (*Ps.* 97:5)...un Dieu capable de renverser partout l'ordre établi, qu'il soit politique ou cosmique...elle illustre une loi

générale de l'agir du Dieu de l'Alliance" (Ps. 107:35).

21. *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4, p. 93.

22. See n. 13 above.

23. The initial version of this paper was read to the Society of Christian Philosophers meeting in conjunction with the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association in Baltimore, December 27, 1982. The present version reflects the fair yet trenchant criticisms made at the time by Frederick Ferré, as well as comments made from the floor.