

**THE STORM-THEOPHANY:  
A THEOLOGY  
OF THE  
STORM**

John Roskoski, PhD

St. Peter's College, Middlesex County College

**INTRODUCTION**

The thunderstorm, with dramatic claps of thunder and bolts of lightning, is a display of the awesome power of nature. It also holds a unique place in the spectrum of Biblical theology. To the people of the Old Testament the storm was connected to the presence of YHWH. While thunderstorms have always been, and still are, used as a metaphor for life's struggles, to the people of ancient Israel the thunderstorm was the visible appearance of YHWH. The thunderstorm was a vital element in the "Theophany".

## The Theophany

Derived from the Greek term, *theophania*, the word "theophany" means the "appearance of God". Hebrew does not have a corresponding word. The concrete imaged construction of Hebrew simply describes clusters of natural occurrences, from which we have to derive the Greek-based word. According to J.L. McKenzie,

"The theophany is an appearance or manifestation of YHWH in character and attributes which reveal His divinity and power, and is thereby distinguished from other appearances in which He is known as the revealer."<sup>1</sup>

McKenzie points out that the violent thunderstorms, sometimes accompanied by earthquakes, are a common trait in the Biblical descriptions of theophanies. Thunderstorms, with their displays of lightning, were of longer duration than earthquakes and, perhaps, were more palpable to all the senses. However, the people of Israel do not identify or personify YHWH with the storm, but see the storms as a sign of the presence and power of YHWH

McKenzie, following most scholars, argues that the theophany is distinctively Israelite and cannot be seen as being derived from ancient near eastern storm mythologies. YHWH was not seen as a "storm god", as those in the polytheistic mythologies. Furthermore, he was not seen to be in the storm, as panentheistic religions would believe. Rather, the storm was indicative of the manifestation, the result, of His presence. It is most likely rooted in the Exodus-Sinai traditions, the first and classic Israelite theophany, wherein the "convulsions of nature" were identified with His presence and power.<sup>2</sup>

T. Hiebert defines "theophany" as the "self-disclosure of God". Although God is apart from the world, "the distinctive places and forms within the world which become modes of divine manifestation in Israel are to be found in the realms of nature and human society. Natural and social images of divine appearances are, in fact, closely integrated in most theophanies."<sup>3</sup>

Tiehart makes the following observation;

"The most common natural form of divine appearance in Israelite literature is the thunderstorm. . . The thunderstorm is the predominant form of theophany in Israel's older literature, the early poetry and epic (J/E) sources, and in the psalms. While not as frequent or explicit, it also lies behind the

---

<sup>1</sup> J.L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Chicago: Bruce 1966), 884.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 885.

<sup>3</sup> T. Hiebert, "Theophany" *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (NY: Doubleday, 1992), 6:505.

major theophanies in the literature of Israel's later historians, prophets, and apocalyptic writers."<sup>4</sup>

Tiehart conjectures that the reason the thunderstorm became the dominant form of Divine presence is that the thunderstorm was the "most powerful and essential phenomenon in the life of the people." With its power to destroy and sustain life, the thunderstorm was seen to have to frightening and beneficial qualities, paralleling those of YHWH. The thunderstorm was seen to contain the "awful power" and "benevolent care" of the Divine power working in the universe.<sup>5</sup>

Overall, the theophany was not something sent by YHWH or represented him, in some metaphorical or allegorical way. It must be understood that the theophany, whose dominant form was the thunderstorm, was an event which signified the actual presence of YHWH.

## **THE THUNDERSTORM IN ANCIENT ISRAEL**

Each component of the thunderstorm was connected to the presence of YHWH in a specific way. There were three prominent features of the thunderstorm; dark clouds, sound of thunder, and the lightning.

### **Clouds**

Clouds, according to McKenzie, are "an almost universal element of the theophany".<sup>6</sup> The occurrences of clouds indicating the Divine presence are heavily distributed throughout both Testaments. The cloud is, perhaps, the earliest element that was connected to the Divine presence by Israel. Most probably, the connection can be traced to the Exodus-Sinai Event. The "Pillar of Cloud" guided and protected the Israelites during their escape (Exodus 13:21, 14:19, and 16:10, among others). The Israelites first met YHWH, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, when the mountain was covered in a cloud (Exodus 19:16).

Tiebert suggests that the image of the cloud is connected to the Hebrew term for "glory" (כבוד). While this image is directly connected to Priestly writings and, often, associated with the Temple, Tiebert argues that it "may more narrowly also derive from the aura of the fiery storm cloud."<sup>7</sup>

The Hebrew term for cloud that is associated with the theophany is "*anan*" (ענן). This term denotes a cloud mass, or fog. The term can also connote a collection of clouds. The term is theological and was distinguished from the term denoting the individual contoured storm cloud, a meteorological event which brings rain, "*ab*"

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.,4:509.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.4: 509.

<sup>6</sup> McKenzie, "Dictionary", 145.

<sup>7</sup> Hiebert, ABD, 6:509.

(עב). It is theologically significant to recognize that the cloud mass or collection is complete. It fully hides YHWH from the view of the people. This is in keeping with the ancient Israelite mentality that thought that to see God meant death (Judges 13:22, etc.).<sup>8</sup> In other words, as YHWH approaches the heavy clouds collect and shield the people from seeing his glory. His presence is signified by the heavy cloud mass or deck which reflects His all-encompassing and, possibly, overwhelming power.

## Thunder

Thunder is, perhaps, the most fearsome aspect of the storm because it was seen as having a personal connection with God. There are two Hebrew words which are translated as "thunder"; *ra'am* ( רעם ) and *kol* ( קול ). Both have powerful connections to the theophany and the presence of God.

The term *ra'am* is connected to the word *ra'ma*, meaning "vibration" or "trembling". It seems likely that the shaking felt with heavy thunder claps bolstered the association with earthquakes in theophanies. The term *ra'am* is an "attribute of God's presence" (Isaiah 29:6). It signifies the "reaction of the cosmos at God's presence" (Psalm 77: 18).<sup>9</sup>

The other term, *kol*, seems to have a more personal connection to YHWH. This is the term used for "voice" and, subsequently, thunder is often referred to as the "voice of God" (Exodus 9:23, Psalm 46:7). It contains the connotation of "sound" or "noise" of inanimate things, such as thunder.<sup>10</sup> This further illustrates that YHWH was not seen to be in the storm or personified by it, but the "thunder symbolized God's absolute sovereignty".<sup>11</sup> One may draw a comparison to the term *ruach* ( רוח ), which is translated "breath", "spirit", or "wind". In the concrete worldview of the Israelites, the wind was seen as the breath of YHWH. Therefore, the anthropomorphic image of the thunder being thought of as the voice of YHWH seems to reflect a similar imagery.

In both terms, the fearsome power that is connected with thunder is represented. The mere presence or voice of YHWH is powerful enough to shake the heavens and earth. We see the power of the word of YHWH in the first Creation narrative (Genesis 1), wherein all came into being by the spoken word of God. Moreover, in the ancient world, the spoken word represented the power of the speaker.

---

<sup>8</sup> The idea of God or Heaven being just beyond the heavy storm clouds is illustrated in the dramatic meteorological event of Crepuscular Rays. This is the event when rays of sunlight break through the cloud deck in a powerful contrast. Alternate names of this event are Jacob's Ladder, God Rays, Fingers of God, Jesus Beams or Rays, and Divine light. It is a beloved, and ancient, image to envision God just beyond the clouds.

<sup>9</sup> W. White, "רעם" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 854.

<sup>10</sup> Gesenius, "קול", *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton, 1885), 918.

<sup>11</sup> L. Coppes, "קול", *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 792.

Therefore, thunder, with its dramatic power, reflects the awesome might of YHWH. The voice of YHWH does not send thunder, thunder results from the voice of YHWH

## **Lightning**

The Biblical concept of lightning, more so than the other elements of the storm, seems to share elements with the pagan or mythological religions of the ancient near east. According to McKenzie, lightning is "conceived in the Bible as a sign of the active presence of God." It was also seen as His weapon and instrument of judgment. McKenzie points out that "the Syrian and Mesopotamian and Anatolian storm gods are often represented in art brandishing the thunderbolt as an arrow or a lance".<sup>12</sup>

The Hebrew term for "lightning" is *baraq* (ברק). There are fourteen occurrences of this term and they are "theologically significant because in all of these instances lightning is associated with the Lord."<sup>13</sup> Waltke argues that lightning being depicted as an indication of the presence of YHWH serves as a polemic against Baal, the principle Canaanite nature deity and, according to many artifacts, the god of lightning, fire, and rain. In inscriptions, Baal is depicted as brandishing a club in one hand and a "stylized thunderbolt" in the other.<sup>14</sup>

This forms a powerful theological polemic against the pagan gods. The gods of the pagan world were understood to have used the natural elements to do their, sometimes, capricious and arbitrary wills. The natural elements did not respond to their mere presence, they were tools of the gods. In Israel, the elements of the storm reacted to the presence of their creator. Admittedly, YHWH used nature, and lightning, as His weapons and instruments of His will. Lightning was a powerful sign of the presence of YHWH among His people. However, He was not removed to some mountaintop, as were many mythological pantheons. The presence of YHWH, and his interactions with and among His people, was clearly expressed in the phenomenon of lightning. Lightning bridged the gap between the heavens and earth in a tangible way. It indicated the judgment, anger, and will of YHWH in awesomely powerful bolts that had deadly, as well as renewing, power.

## **THE STORM EVENT**

The people of ancient Israel were familiar with storms and there are several Hebrew terms which denote various types of storm events. The storm associated with the Theophany was a singular type of event and was often described instead of named. This is, perhaps, because the storm is a manifold phenomenon that displays the force of nature in various, and awe-inspiring, ways.

---

<sup>12</sup> McKenzie, "Dictionary", 511.

<sup>13</sup> B. Waltke, "ברק" *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1980),133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

McKenzie states;

“The one natural phenomenon with which YHWH is most frequently associated is *the storm*. . . the connection between YHWH and the storm is too common to be merely coincidental. . . The presentation of YHWH in *the theophany* of the storm is striking (Pss 18:8-16; Hab 3:3-15; Jgs 5:4-5; Ex 19: 16,19; Ez 1). . . The theophany is an Israelite confession of the power of YHWH in nature; but this power is not a blind, irrational force.”<sup>15</sup>

Once again, in McKenzie’s comments, we see how nature is not relegated to blunt instruments to be used by the deity. Rather, the movements and reactions of the natural elements reveal a purpose that is connected to the presence of YHWH and, therefore, is a response to His will and power. In other words, the created world responds to and gives testimony to the power of the Creator.

### Habakkuk 3:3-7

The description of a theophany found in Habakkuk 3:3-7 is, perhaps, the best illustration of the created world responding to the presence of God. According to F. Andersen, the pericope is “readily identifiable by the change to detailed narrative description and the change from second person to third person.”<sup>16</sup> In this text, nature is doing the acting. This is in contrast to vs 8-15, “in which YHWH is more active, or rather, he acts more directly on things.” The text of verses 3-7 illustrate the reaction to the sight, or presence, of YHWH, whereas in the following verses YHWH uses weapons to bring about the fearsome results of His presence. This “literary effect is achieved, in part, by the way the verbs are used, passive, at first, and active later.”<sup>17</sup>

This theophany is significant in that although mythic-type images are employed and the language is so “shrouded in mythological imagery that historical statements are hard to nail down in it”, YHWH is not depicted as a “slightly demythologized sun-god”.<sup>18</sup> The imagery and “its historical memories are closer to the Exodus than to any other known event.” The march of YHWH in Habakkuk parallels the march from “the desert into Egypt via Sinai to rescue His people.”<sup>19</sup>

Habakkuk 3:3-7 illustrates the power of the theophany, the presence of God. The text of verses 8-15 shifts back to a historical recital, characterized by the second person, “you”. The text of 3:8-15 is exhortational. It serves to “stimulate God to

---

<sup>15</sup> J.L. McKenzie, “Aspects of Old Testament Thought” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs:Prentice-Hall, 1968), 2:746.

<sup>16</sup> F. Andersen *Habakkuk* (NY: Doubleday, 2001), 284.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 292.

new feats of the same kind."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the purpose of the theophany is depicted in bold relief. The purpose of narrating the theophany is to illustrate the awesome power of God and how the elements respond to His presence. It is a display of God's sovereignty over nature, with little need of language to explain its significance. The purpose of the following text, 8-15, is persuasion. Words, filled with confidence generated from past saving deeds, are needed to prompt God into action. The fearsome power of God and the dramatic response of nature do not need words to explain them, but the event of the theophany prompts man to recognize the authority of God.

### **The Storm Phenomena**

The elements of the Storm-Theophany are fearsome to experience, as there is an impending and heightening dramatic tension produced. J. Niehaus proposes the description that the "storm-wind is the advancing of presence of YHWH. He advances in terrible theophany."<sup>21</sup> The clouds begin to collect. These would be billowing cumulus clouds that from a distance would appear white and puffy and then turn darker as the storm begins to form. A cloud deck is formed, the sky turns completely overcast, and the individual clouds can no longer be distinguished. Thunder can be heard from a distance or as the storm is forming. Cumulonimbus clouds would be in the heart of the storm. If rain occurs, as in Judges 5:4-5, the lower clouds would be nimbostratus.<sup>22</sup> In the classic theophany model, the Exodus-Sinai Event, there is no mention of rain. This seems to be indicative of a meteorological phenomenon known as a "low precipitation" (LP) Thunderstorm. It is a storm with little or no rain, but it is an event which displays and entails all the other thunderstorm characteristics.<sup>23</sup>

The LP Storm-Theophany would be a fearsome display of nature to the ancient peoples. As W. Propp comments;

"the storm theophany . . . situates the divine in meteorological phenomena. The thunderstorm has both beneficent and frightening aspects. Even at a physiological level, intense, subsonic sound waves provoke terror in all animals, ourselves included."<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>21</sup> J. Niehaus "In the Wind of the Storm: Another Look at Genesis III 8" *Vetus Testamentum* (April 1, 1994), 264.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. [http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/\(Gh\)/guides/mtr/cld/cldtyp/vrt/cb.xml](http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/(Gh)/guides/mtr/cld/cldtyp/vrt/cb.xml)  
[http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/\(Gh\)/guides/mtr/cld/cldtyp/lw/nbstr.xml](http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/(Gh)/guides/mtr/cld/cldtyp/lw/nbstr.xml)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. [http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/\(Gh\)/guides/mtr/svr/type/spr/lp/chr.xml](http://ww2010.atmos.uiuc.edu/(Gh)/guides/mtr/svr/type/spr/lp/chr.xml)

<sup>24</sup> W. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (NY: Doubleday, 2006), 164.

However, the LP Storm-Theophany is devoid of the mitigating beneficent aspects that are attendant to the life-giving rains. Instead, the people witness the violent and convulsive response of nature to the presence of YHWH. Thunder roars and vibrates the ground. Lightning strikes with deadly power and speed. The wind, seen as the breath of YHWH, blows unseen but mightily. Such a violent response heralds and signifies a momentous moment; the time and place where YHWH is focusing His presence to meet his people.

## CONCLUSIONS

The significance of the Storm-Theophany, typified in Exodus 19, Judges 5, and Habakkuk 3, should not be underestimated. As many scholars, including F.M. Cross and J.L. McKenzie, point out, the connection between storms and deities is very common in the ancient near east. However, the Storm-Theophany generated a powerful theology which was unique to ancient Israel.

McKenzie comments that YHWH was often associated with the storm.<sup>25</sup> The Storm-Theophany was "not a simple thunderstorm. . . but a manifestation of YHWH in a convulsion of nature. As a literary device, it is an expression of the Hebrew idea of the Divine power in nature. The power there manifested is not blind . . . This idea is, of its very nature, primitive. . . in the earliest forms of the theophany, the deity of the theophany was in a special way the God of Israel, and, in particular, the helper of Israel."<sup>26</sup>

McKenzie's comments suggest that the Storm-Theophany represented a development in theological thought in the Ancient Near East. The polytheistic, panentheistic, religions of the region saw the gods either in the individual elements of nature or manifesting their powers through acts of nature. The Storm-Theophany sees the power of God *in nature*, as McKenzie points out, as it reveals Divine power and might. YHWH Himself was not physically contained in specific objects of nature. YHWH is, ultimately, apart from nature. Nature reacts and responds to his presence because he is *apart from it*, not *part of it*. Nature and natural elements are contained in His power, He is not contained in nature and the elements. Herein we see part of the beginning, a foundational aspect, monotheism.

The tableau of the Storm-Theophany is dramatic and awesome. At the meeting place the people of Israel see the billowing clouds collect. As they draw closer, they become dark. Crepuscular rays shine between the breaks in the rapidly forming cloud deck, creating a stark contrast between light and darkness. As the clouds collide there are peals of thunder and bolts of lightning. The cloud deck is complete,

---

<sup>25</sup> J.L. McKenzie "God and Nature in the Old Testament" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Jan 1, 1952), 34.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38

impenetrable by the human eye. The wind gusts and the thunder vibrates the ground. YHWH is now present, among his people.

The theological significance of the Storm-Theophany moves beyond just a fearsome display of power. It shows the sovereignty of YHWH over nature. The Storm-Theophany was the prelude to the Sinai Covenant. It illustrated the power which would protect the people of Israel if they kept the Covenant which was about to be bestowed. This same power is seen in the mission of Jesus. Jesus calms the storm (Mt 8:23-27, Mk 4:35-40, Lk 8:22-25). At the death of Jesus, darkness came over the land (Mt 27:45, Mk 15:33, Lk 23:44). At the Ascension, a cloud took Jesus from their sight, as Jesus reunites with His Father (Acts 1:9). Sovereignty over nature is a recurring theme, one of which that binds the Biblical testaments together. YHWH controlled nature from above, transcendentally, while Jesus showed mastery over nature while among the people, imminently- as Immanuel, the sign that "God is with us". Finally, the transcendent and the imminent, the givers of the two Covenants, the Father and Son are united by the ever-present, ubiquitous, cloud; the ultimate indication of the presence of God.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Andersen, F. *Habbakkuk*. NY: Doubleday, 2001.

Freedman, D.N., ed *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 volumes, NY: Doubleday, 1992.

Gesenius, W. *Gesenius' Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Boston: Houghton, 1885.

Harris, R. L., ed. *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. 2 vols. Chicago: Moody

Press, 1980.

McKenzie, J.L. "Aspects of Old Testament Thought," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*.

Brown, Fitzmyer, Murphy, eds. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Dictionary of the Bible*. Chicago: Bruce, 1965.

\_\_\_\_\_. "God and Nature in the Old Testament" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (Jan 1, 1952), 18-39.

Niehaus, J. "In the wind of the Storm; Another look at Genesis III 8" *Vetus Testamentum*  
(April 1, 1994), 263-264.

Propp, W. *Exodus*. NY: Doubleday, 2006.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT;** I wish to thank Meteorologist Michele Powers (NWA), premier forecaster of News 12 New Jersey for her contributions to this study. Her deep understanding of weather systems and accessible professionalism were invaluable aspects in guiding me through the technical aspects of the meteorological aspects of the work. She made our consultations very pleasurable; it was truly an honor to work with this wonderful lady.