Theophanies

Oxford English Dictionary definition of theophany: “A manifestation of God or a god to man.”

Many theophanies present in the Hebrew Bible.

God appears as: an angel, a burning bush, a cloud.

People to whom theophanies happen: Abraham, Hagar, Jacob, Moses, the Israelites

Reasons for theophanies:

1. God identifies himself to people, “I AM” (Exod. 3.14).

2. God reveals his plans to people, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

3. God gives promises to people “To your offspring I will give this land” (Gen. 12.7)

4. God comforts his people; he tells Hagar, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is” (Gen. 22.17).

5. God strives with mankind, for example, he listens to Abraham when he contends with God on the number or people who will be lost in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. He answers Moses when he asks him his name. He wrestles with Jacob until the break of day and relents when Jacob insists on a blessing.

Symbols and tropes associated with theophanies:

imagery of kingship: trumpets, a recapitulation of past benefactions for the people

trees: the oaks of Mamre; the oak of Moreh

sacred locations: burning bush at the foot of Mount Horeb, the future location of the “big theophany” of God imparting to the people his commandments, thereby entering into a covenantal relationship with the Israelites

Just a handful of the attributes of God that can be gleaned from a theophanic event:

1. He can assume any form: angel, fire, cloud
2. He is not bound by physics: fire that does not consume
3. He listens to people: gives Jacob a blessing after wrestling with him (Gen. 32.26), hears Abraham out on sparing Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen.18.23)
4. He is sovereign (symbols of sovereignty are the trumpets at the theophany of Mt. Sinai, a reminder of God’s past actions for the Israelites, as preface to the covenant, is typical of Near Eastern treaties in which an overlord states past benefactions (NRSV).
5. He has boundaries (“remove your sandals, for this is holy ground” (Exod. 3.5) “consecrate yourselves by bathing and not engaging in sexual relations” (Exod. 19.10)
6. He resides in a heavenly abode (“The Lord descended upon it [Mt. Sinai]” (Exod. 19.20)