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High-Relief Epiphanies

1 Introduction

A religious epiphany is the appearance or manifestation of God, a god or goddess, or the divine or religious reality, as received in human experience. An epiphany may be presented as a visual apparition or as the hearing of God or a god, or in the experience of the felt presence of the divine or religious reality, directly manifested or manifested through angels, spirits, embodiments, or in other ways. High-relief epiphanies stand out against the background of ordinary experience more than other epiphanies we will discuss. They are awe-filled events so disruptive of the natural course of things and discontinuous with it as to overwhelm any human who experiences them. By definition, all epiphanies are supernatural, but in their visual presentation high-relief epiphanies may be pyrotechnic, psychedelic, and frightening in their display of the supernatural. Especially when they are revelatory of the inner nature of God or the divine, they are experienced as a miraculous, wonder-filled and wrenching encounter that causes those experiencing it to bow to the ground in awe. Such epiphanies may be sought and granted or they may descend upon one, and they are found in various religious traditions.

In the next section, we will consider three examples of high-relief epiphanies from the Jewish and Christian traditions, one from the Torah and two from the New Testament.

In Sect. 3, turning to the Hindu tradition, we will present and discuss the epiphany granted to Arjuna by Krishna in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*.

Epiphanies can also occur in polytheistic traditions, and in the fourth section we will consider several that are presented by Homer in the *Iliad*.

In this chapter's Sect. 5, we will discuss a literary evocation of a native American epiphany as found in a work by William Faulkner.

2 High-Relief Epiphanies in the Jewish and Christian Traditions

Various high-relief epiphanies may be found in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and in other books of the Tanakh, the Jewish Bible, which corresponds to the Christian Old Testament. Further examples may be found in the New Testament. In this section, we consider three representative high-relief epiphanies from these sources.

In the book of Genesis, the Lord appears to Abraham, Noah, and others; some of these epiphanies will be discussed in the next chapter. Here we consider the first of the many epiphanies experienced by Moses that are recounted in the last four of the five books of the Torah. In Chap. 3 of Exodus we are told how Moses flees from Egypt to Midian. There he gets married and becomes a shepherd for his father-in-law. One day as he is tending the flock he sees something extraordinary: a bush that is burning, but though burning it is not consumed. Moses says to himself, "I will turn aside and see this great sight." Perhaps he does so with curiosity, perhaps with wonder. In any case when Moses approaches the Lord calls to him from out of the burning bush, "Moses, Moses!" Moses answers, "Here am I." God tells Moses not to come near and to take off his shoes, for he is on holy ground. God then says, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and

the God of Jacob.” When he heard this “Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Ex. 3.2–6).¹

Moses does not see God, for with fear of the Lord—awe and reverence—he averts his eyes. But he hears what God says and the instruction God gives him to return to Egypt, to confront Pharaoh, and to bring the oppressed people of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 3.7–10). There is more to Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, to which we will turn in Chap. 4. Moreover, there are other examples of high-relief epiphanies in the Torah that might be considered, such as the epiphany Abraham experiences when he is 99 (Gen. 17.1–3) and, in the book of Ezekiel, that prophet’s vision and epiphany (Ezek. 1.4–28). What we have seen of Moses’ epiphany at the burning bush, though, is enough to show that Moses experienced a high-relief epiphany.

The second high-relief epiphany we will discuss occurs in the Christian tradition. On the night that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, we are told in the Gospel according to Luke, there were shepherds watching their flocks in the fields nearby. An angel of the Lord appears to them so that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” and they are “filled with fear.” The angel says, “Be not afraid,” and tells them “news of a great joy,” that “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” has been born. Then there is a multitude of angels praising God, saying, “Glory to God in the highest.” Following this epiphany and after the angels have gone “away from them into heaven” the shepherds confer among themselves and decide to go to Bethlehem and “see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us” (Lk. 2.8–15).

In this case, it is not God who appears and speaks, but an angel. However, an angel’s appearance is sufficient for an epiphany, and in this instance the epiphany is a high-relief one by virtue of the dramatic supernatural light that shines around them, the multitude of angels that appear, and the depth of the shepherds’ fearful reaction. The appearance of the angel and the light that shines around them astounds the

¹All biblical quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the Revised Standard Version.

shepherds and makes them afraid—starkly afraid; like the burning bush that is not consumed by the flames, it is discontinuous with the natural events of their lives, frighteningly so.

One of the most noteworthy encounters with God in the Christian tradition is the epiphanic conversion experience of Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul, before he became the Apostle Paul, was Saul of Tarsus, a dedicated opponent of the people of “the Way,” as the early Christians were called. In Jerusalem, he is given letters to the synagogues of Damascus that authorize him to take as captives anyone belonging to the Way that he discovers. As he approaches the city “suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him.” He falls to the ground and hears a voice saying, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” Saul, or Paul as he would come to be called, replies, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice says, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting, but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” Those with Paul “stood speechless, hearing the voice but seeing no one” (Acts 9.7).² Paul gets up from the ground and opens his eyes, but he cannot see. His companions lead him into Damascus. In Damascus, a disciple who is instructed by the Lord—here explicitly the Lord Jesus (Acts 9.17)—goes to Paul and when he lays his hands on him Paul regains his sight and is “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9.1–18).

That Paul’s encounter with God in the person of Jesus Christ is a high-relief epiphany is evident. Beyond the appearance of God, or Paul hearing God, the epiphany is supernatural in the phenomenal content of the “light from heaven,” which literally makes him fall to the ground. As Moses in his encounter with God in Midian is instructed to return to Egypt, Paul here is given instructions. Similarly, as Moses’ life was given a new direction by his epiphanic encounter so too was Paul’s.

²This is the account in Acts 9.7; later in the book of Acts, Paul recounts his experience on the road to Damascus and says that “those who were with me saw the light and did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me” (Acts 22.9).

3 A High-Relief Epiphany in the Hindu Tradition

The *Mahābhārata* is an epic poem, said to be the longest ever written, that contains the story of the great (*mahā*) struggle between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, descendants of King Bharata, for the great kingdom. (Bharata is a name for India). The *Mahābhārata* is not canonical. Though it is not regarded as “heard” (revealed) but as “remembered” (thus having human authorship), it has high religious significance in the Hindu tradition. A comparatively short section of the vast *Mahābhārata* is the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, held by Hindus to be one of the holiest books of the Hindu religion. It was revered by Mohandas K. Gandhi (Mahatma Gandhi) and is also esteemed by many who are not Hindu.

In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* Arjuna, one of the five Pāṇḍava brothers, who is a great warrior, has severe reservations about going into battle against those on the Kaurava side, for they are his relatives. As he surveys the field where the battle will occur he confesses his concerns to his friend and charioteer and discusses with him what he should do. His charioteer is none other than Lord Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu in human form, and Krishna advises Arjuna regarding his duty (*dharma*) and teaches him the way of devotion by which all his action will become selfless and devoted to him, Krishna.

In the eleventh chapter of the *Gītā*, Arjuna asks Krishna to show himself in his true, divine form. Krishna grants Arjuna’s request and, giving Arjuna divine sight, reveals himself in an epiphany of his transcendent form,

speaking from innumerable mouths, seeing with myriad eyes, of many marvelous aspects, adorned with countless divine ornaments, brandishing all kinds of heavenly weapons, wearing celestial garlands and the raiment of paradise, anointed with perfumes of heavenly fragrance, full of revelations, resplendent, boundless of ubiquitous regard.

Suppose a thousand suns should rise together into the sky: such is the glory of the Shape of the Infinite God.

Then the son of Pandu [Arjuna] beheld the entire universe in all its multitudinous diversity, lodged as one being within the body of the God of gods.

Then was Arjuna, that lord of mighty riches, overcome with wonder. His hair stood erect. He bowed low before God in adoration and clasped his hands and spoke.

Arjuna says:

Ah, my God, I see all gods within your body;
Each in his degree, the multitude of creatures ...

Universal Form, I see you without limit,
Infinite of arms, eyes, mouths and bellies –
See, and find no end, midst, or beginning ...

Fill the sky's four corners, span the chasm
Sundering heaven from earth. Superb and awful
Is your Form that makes the three worlds tremble.

At the sight of this your Shape stupendous
Full of mouths and eyes, feet, thighs and bellies,
Terrible with fangs, O mighty master,
All the worlds are fear-struck, even as I am.

Trembling, Arjuna falls to the ground, prostrating himself.³

The phantasmagoric epiphany experienced by Arjuna, being of the full divine nature of Vishnu, overwhelms him and he prostrates himself before Krishna's awe-inspiring form. That form is presented through the symbolism of Hindu iconography; Krishna's many eyes and arms signify understanding and power, as his many mouths, feet, and bellies signify his infinite capacities.

³*Bhagavad-Gītā: The Song of God*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood (New York: Penguin Books, 1944), Chap. 11, pp. 91–94.

4 High-Relief Polytheistic Epiphanies

There are many gods in the Hindu pantheon, and different gods are celebrated, invoked, and worshiped at different moments and for different purposes. At the same time, in devotional Hinduism a supreme God may be recognized above the others, as Krishna is in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, so that such a strain of Hinduism is not purely polytheistic but henotheistic (the recognition of several or many gods, one of which is supreme and absolute). Devotional Hindus may have an *ishtha-deva*, a preferred or beloved divinity through which the one God is worshiped. Although Krishna may be worshiped in his own right, Vishnu may also be worshiped as the one God through his avatar Krishna or through Rama, another avatar of Vishnu; likewise, an *ishtha-deva* could be the goddess Parvati or another Hindu god or goddess.

Epiphanies, however, can also occur in traditions that are distinctly polytheistic, as was the case in the religious tradition of ancient Greece. In this section, we will consider several polytheistic epiphanies as recounted by Homer in the *Iliad*. The action of the *Iliad* takes place within the setting of the Trojan War between Greece and Troy, although it neither begins with the origin of the conflict nor ends with its outcome. Before the *Iliad* begins, the Greek forces, led by Agamemnon, have sailed to Troy and are encamped outside the city. Helen, the beautiful wife of Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, ran off with or was abducted by Paris, a son of Priam, the King of Troy; the Greeks have come to avenge this insult. For 9 years, though they have pillaged Trojan villages, they have been unable to take Troy. It is at this point that the *Iliad* commences.

In the cast of characters are heroic warriors on both sides, as well as gods aligned with one side or the other. Among the Trojan heroes are Aeneas and, most notably, Hector, the brother of Paris. For the Greeks the greatest hero is Achilles, the best warrior on either side. The gods Ares and Phoebus Apollo, and the goddess Aphrodite, are on Troy's side, while Poseidon, Hera, and Pallas Athene support the Greeks.

In the mythological background of the *Iliad* there has been much activity by the gods—for instance, Paris was able to abduct Helen

because Aphrodite made Helen fall in love with him. The epiphanies we will present here, though, are ones described by Homer as occurring within the main narrative as the Greeks and Trojans engage in battle. The Achaeans, or Greeks, generally prevail, especially after Achilles relents from his sulk and re-enters the fray on the side of the Greeks. When various gods assist the human warriors on the two sides, matters become more complicated.

The first epiphany we will note is a somewhat devious godly intervention by Apollo. After breathing courage into Aeneas, Apollo uses the voice of Lycaon, one of the sons of King Priam and brother to Paris and Hector, to move him by his words to take on Achilles in personal combat. Apollo's intervention is an epiphany, but though the god's intervention causes Aeneas to seek out Achilles and do battle with him, Aeneas is unaware that it is Apollo who has spoken to him. Though an epiphany, this is not a high-relief epiphany. However, other Homeric interventions by the gods do qualify as high-relief epiphanies.

Aeneas is eager to fight Achilles, but Achilles is the greater warrior and in the natural course of events will kill Aeneas. The god Poseidon, however, though on the side of the Greeks, has sympathy for Aeneas and intervenes to save him. As Achilles is rushing toward Aeneas with his sword, Poseidon covers Achilles' eyes with a mist. He then sweeps Aeneas off the ground and propels him to the edge of the battlefield, far from Achilles. Catching up to Aeneas, Poseidon rebukes him for his recklessness in engaging Achilles and tells him, "If ever you come against that man [Achilles], withdraw at once, or you will find yourself in Hades' Halls before your time." Poseidon then returns to Achilles and removes the mist from his eyes. Achilles suspects an intervention by the gods, but Aeneas has actually experienced Poseidon's supernatural intervention and heard the god's words.

Homer's epic is replete with epiphanic interventions. Another high-relief epiphany occurs when Apollo—this time speaking with his god's voice—deters Hector from his wish to meet Achilles in face-to-face combat. Achilles has urged on the Greeks, and Hector on his side has encouraged the Trojans, even coming to think that he might take on Achilles as the two sides renew their battle. It is at this point that Apollo speaks sternly to Hector: "Stay with the rest, and let him [Achilles] find

you in the crowd.” When Hector heard this warning, Homer tells us, he retreated from the forefront back into the ranks, for his heart changed “when he heard the god’s voice.”⁴

In these Homeric high-relief epiphanies we find elements that we have encountered before: God, or a god, speaks and instructs; the epiphany may involve a supernatural event, such as a bush burning without being consumed or a person being taken up into the air, or, less dramatically, a person temporarily losing his sight or having his eyes misted over. What we do not find in the *Iliad*’s high-relief epiphanies is an extreme reaction of fear or awe when the gods make their presence known. This may be in part because the Greek gods are anthropomorphic. They have a male or female human form. They may have an ideal human form (although Hephaestus is lame), but still it is an essentially human form, as opposed to Krishna’s true form revealed to Arjuna or the transcendent form of God in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Even so, in the *Iliad* when someone becomes aware that he has heard “a god’s voice” there may be a significant change of heart or aim of action.

5 A High-Relief Epiphany in the Native American Tradition

In Chap. 14, we will discuss visions in Native American traditions, which are a fecund source of epiphanic encounters. Here, drawing upon William Faulkner’s novel *Go Down, Moses*, we consider an epiphanic encounter with the mysterious transcendent that is not experienced within a vision, although it partakes of elements shared by Native American visions.

Faulkner’s novel is set in the fictional Yoknapatawpha County in rural Mississippi, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Faulkner tells the story of a boy’s initiation into traditional wisdom that honors nature

⁴Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. E.V. Rieu (Melbourne, London, Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1950), pp. 367–368, 373, and 374–376.

and the wilderness.⁵ The boy is Isaac “Ike” McCaslin, and his guide and mentor is Sam Fathers, a Chickasaw of mixed blood, the descendent of a warrior and chief—although in the 1870s, the time of his interaction with Ike, he is a worker on a plantation and a hunting guide. In teaching Ike how to hunt and be a hunter, Fathers helps him find “his place in the hierarchy of being as a hunter who is worthy, who has earned his position by proving his respect and love for the other living beings in the forest, even those he must kill.”⁶ Fathers has taught Ike how to hunt rabbits since he was 8 years old. Only when Ike turns ten is he allowed to join his elders on the yearly 2-week deer hunting trip to the deep forest. When he is 12 or 13, on such a November hunting trip Ike kills a deer and in this way is initiated. Fathers smears the blood of the deer he has shot on Ike’s face, but the boy also experiences a deeper initiation, which occurs in another episode in the novel. On the last day of the hunting trip on which he kills a deer for the first time, Ike and the others are hunting a large buck that one of them has seen. Fathers is with Ike, separated from the others. A shot is heard, and then the horn that announces a kill. Ike assumes the buck has been shot, but Fathers says, “Wait.” He has seen the large buck coming down the slope walking, not hurrying. Then Ike too sees it. In an instant the buck spies them. He pauses and then continues majestically on, not running. Fathers raises an arm in a salute. “Grandfather,” he says. Ike does not forget this epiphany, which is echoed years later in his own experience when he encounters an “old one”—not a deer but a large and dangerous rattlesnake in the wilderness that raises itself up out of the grass close to his foot. Ike, like Sam Fathers, raises his arm and recalls Fathers’ salute: “Grandfather.” The recognition of Sam Fathers, which Ike comes to share, is the Native American awareness of the presence of the sacred or wonderful in natural living things, experienced as *wakan* or *manitou* in different Native American traditions.

The designation of this presence may be “Grandfather” or “Father” or “Grandmother” (or “Great-Grandfather” and “Great-Grandmother”);

⁵This understanding, which seems justified, is offered by Thomas Merton. Thomas Merton, “Baptism in the Forest’: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 98–106. William Faulkner (1887–1962) published *Go Down, Moses* in 1940.

⁶Merton, “Baptism in the Forest’: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner,” p. 107.

moreover, these designations may be used for different aspects of this presence. In the Mesoamerican creation story in the *Popol Vuh* (The Book of Counsel), dating from colonial times, a dual nature of the supreme God is recognized. “Shelterer” and “Protector,” “Great-Grandmother” and “Great-Grandfather,” “Former” and “Shaper,” and “Mother” and “Father” are referred to.⁷ Though the “Former and Shaper, the Mother and Father” are spoken of using the plural and presented in dialogue in a dyadic relationship, the singular is also used to refer to the Dual God.⁸ In the same way, in the Christian tradition the Triune God is one and spoken of in the singular, while the Persons of the Trinity are three and spoken of in the plural.

Sam Fathers encounters the sacred and mysterious presence of his tradition and salutes it as “Grandfather.” He thus experiences an epiphany. But was it a high-relief epiphany? There is no psychedelic visual content. There is no supernatural event, aside from the manifestation of a mysterious presence. Fathers does not prostrate himself as Arjuna does. Yet his epiphany is a high-relief epiphany by virtue of the depth of his reverence for the sacred and mysterious presence he encounters and his affecting awe before it.

⁷*Popol Vuh*, in *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quich-Maya and Other Sacred Traditions*, ed. Miguel León-Portilla (New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 102–103.

⁸*Popol Vuh*, in *Native Mesoamerican Spirituality*, pp. 105 and 109.



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