YHWH has heard the psalmist’s cry from the depths, and is moved to anger and action against his enemies. The theophany is framed by the disruption to the foundations of the earth caused by YHWH’s angry presence in vv. 8 and 16. The quaking and shaking of the earth in v. 8 appears as “the first echo” of the psalmist’s cry to YHWH in v. 7. What follows is a dazzling array of images, depicting YHWH’s wrath, descent and attack as the ultimate warrior-king: a terrifying, fire-breathing, storm-god warrior. Finally, in v. 16, we see a picture of the waters of the sea being swept away in a crushing defeat, just as YHWH defeats the king’s enemies. In the short section that follows (vv. 17–20), we reach the culmination of the narrative of rescue and YHWH’s direct response to the king’s cry for help. The psalmist paints word-pictures that correspond spatially to the distress of vv. 5–6 in terms of rescue as movement upwards from deep water (v. 17), and the movement from narrowness to width (v. 20). The plainer narrative style of vv. 4–7 is resumed in vv. 18–19, filling in further conceptual ‘gaps’ about the military attack and the identity of the king’s enemies, and introducing a reflection on the reason for this divine deliverance, which will be developed in the section that follows.

The language of the theophany in Psalm 18 has been described in various ways, including “Theophanieschilderung”, “theophany-metonymy” and “soteriological myth”. Each of these struggles to describe the slightly unusual form and content of the language that is used here. As will be seen below, in the context of the whole psalm, the theophany uses mythological imagery and concepts not only to express the psalmist’s experience of YHWH’s presence in battle, but also to communicate a range of observations about YHWH, and his relationship to the king and the cosmos. The interpretation of its language therefore needs to be understood within this context. Without this framework, one can arrive at some rather

1 Köckert 2001: 213.
odd conclusions, for example, Nielsen’s assertion that the theophany in Psalm 18 “bears the stamp of metonymical relations” between YHWH and natural phenomena.\(^3\) She describes natural phenomena as a consequence of Yahweh’s lordship over nature, in order to argue that the smoke, fire, coals, thunder, etc. in the theophany passage are not in fact metaphors (assuming a substitutionary view of metaphor, according to which individual words are isolated as ‘non-literal’), but metonyms. However, her argument that darkness is a metonym is based on the false assumption that the sentence is usually read as a simple ‘A is a B’ metaphor of darkness describing Yahweh: “the darkness is an element that Yahweh makes use of; it cannot therefore be a metaphor for him, but indicates a metonymical relation.”\(^4\) While Nielsen is right to suggest that the theophany is not a string of metaphors, she misrepresents both the nature and function of metaphor and metonymy and ignores the significance of the theophany’s mythical dimension.\(^5\)

In Ortlund’s description of theophany in Hebrew poetry, he observes the frequent conjunction of theophany with Chaoskampf motifs: “one could legitimately describe theophany in the Psalms and Prophets as the visible and direct appearance of YHWH as he defeats the powers of chaos.”\(^6\) However, this study diverges from Ortlund’s position in maintaining the existence of metaphorical transference and metaphorical models within the mythical depiction of the theophany. What is distinctive about theophanic language in Ps 18, then, is that it is a mythical expression of an experience, which draws on a number of different but related metaphorical models, and contains a number of interlocking images within it, which relate to other images elsewhere in the psalm.\(^7\) Rather than metaphors, or ‘analogical word-pictures’, one might therefore refer to the imagery as ‘mythical word-pictures’.

\(^3\) Nielsen 2010: 204.
\(^4\) Nielsen 2010: 203.
\(^5\) Ortlund (2010: 1–94) makes a convincing case for rejecting metaphorical interpretations of theophanic imagery in favour of mythical ones.
\(^6\) Ortlund 2010: 3.
\(^7\) This point is developed further in Chapter 9.