Chapter 5

“Is that You?” Hearing God’s Voice in the Words of a Stranger (Judges 6:11–24)

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The story of Gideon’s encounter with a messenger of YHWH possesses one highly startling feature: a single stranger comes to Gideon, but two voices are heard in this one body.¹ A messenger of YHWH initiates a conversation with Gideon (Judg. 6:12), but YHWH voices the stranger’s second and third speeches (6:14, 16).² Another speech is ascribed only to a masculine pronoun (6:18), but as the narrated action resumes, it is clearly the messenger who moves and mobilizes the action.³ In the final conversation of this encounter, Gideon prays directly to YHWH and receives direct answer (6:23), which raises the question of why a mediating figure was necessary. Perhaps the confusion over who is speaking, and how many voices are present, arises from an attempt to represent the experience of recognizing the divine word in the voice of another.

In this paper, I use discourse analysis tools developed by Mikhail Bakhtin to show that Gideon’s initial encounter with God is mediated by Gideon’s experience as a user of language. Gideon is a skilled speaker, and adeptly employs double-voiced speech to its full effect.⁴ I suggest, however, that Gideon’s preference for double-directed words causes him to seek double-meaning in the stranger’s words, and it is this hermeneutic of suspicion which creates the narrative crisis of this encounter – could Gideon fail to recognize the divine when directly and intimately addressed?

¹ In Hebrew one cannot distinguish whether מלאך יהוה is ‘the’ or ‘a’ messenger of the LORD. As one should not assume that all instances of malak YHWH have a single referent, I prefer the indeterminate construction.
² I use ‘the stranger’ to signal both Gideon’s confusion and the instability of referent in the narrative frame.
³ However he is called both messenger of God (6:20) and messenger of YHWH (6:21, 22).
⁴ Bakhtin distinguishes two major categories of double-voiced speeches. The first is the use of a character’s speech by an author to convey authorial perspectives, whilst the second is an individual speaker’s use of language to create polysemous utterances. Mikhail M. Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 185–186; 191–199. In this article I will exclusively focus upon the latter form of double-voiced speech.
As the encounter begins Gideon suspects that Israel has been abandoned by its God. I will read Gideon's perception of divine disinterest and his dawning awareness of immediate divine presence in relation to Bakhtin's image of the 'superaddressee', a hypothetical and necessary third party in all discourse, who is always presumed to be present and whose absence instills terror. As we will see, the primary role of the superaddressee is to hear and adjudge every utterance in discourse, but Bakhtin also explores scenes in which the words of the superaddressee are heard in an utterance spoken by another, human interlocutor. Perhaps, then, the superaddressee provides a critical model for hearing two voices in a single speaker.

Bakhtin's value to the literary critic is his careful consideration of the role and function of dialogue within a text. In Judges 6:11–24 dialogue is the primary evidence available to Gideon as he attempts to establish the identity of the stranger, his intentions, trustworthiness, status, and so on. Dialogue is also the reader's primary means of discerning Gideon's interpretation of the encounter. I will read Gideon's evolving perception of the divine in relation to Bakhtin's distinction of the self-account, the “accounting rendered to oneself for one's own life,” and the confessional self-account. In a confessional self-account the author, i.e. the one accounting for herself, comes to realize that “my own word about myself is in principle incapable of being the last word, the word that consummates me.” Thus an awareness of the divine emerges in the need for consummation, in the forms of “forgiveness and redemption.” My analysis will show that the stranger provokes Gideon to

6 Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, 255–256.
9 Ibid., 143.
10 Ibid.