

DIALOGIC IMAGINATION IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

ROBERT POLZIN
Carleton University

I

Before we consider some of the more striking examples of dialogic imagination in the Book of Deuteronomy, it may be convenient to consider two introductory questions. First, what is the potential contribution that Bakhtin's work can make to the modern study of the Bible?¹ More precisely, how much do modern biblical studies need the type of literary insights and powerful literary critical tools that are found in Bakhtin's writings?² A second related question is this: do we have any indications, within the corpus of Bakhtin's writings, that studying the Bible from a literary point of view is an appropriate activity? The first question asks whether modern biblical studies need Bakhtin and his theories; the second asks whether Bakhtin's own theories would in principle allow the Bible to be studied from a purely literary point of view.

The modern study of the Hebrew Bible within its ancient Near-Eastern context is well into its second century. It has always prided itself on its historically grounded sensitivity to the ancient literatures that form its object of study. The Bakhtin school has succeeded in my opinion in unmasking the weaknesses of this ancient Near-Eastern discipline at precisely that point where it has supposed its greatest strength to reside. Bakhtin's immensely erudite researches into ancient and modern literatures show to an almost embarrassing degree the theoretical naïveté of the historiographic dimensions of modern biblical study. The majority of modern studies on biblical texts remains firmly fixed in a nineteenth-century mode of historical

investigation. As such, the historical perception of biblical texts remains today static and stagnant. We in biblical studies have been waiting a long time for new diachronically perceptive tools of analysis. The question that remains to be answered is whether we are ready to recognize the relevance and value of “the dialogic imagination” for our own object of study.

As for Bakhtin’s potential contributions to the *literary* study of the Bible, it has been pointed out many times that this latter project is still in its infancy within biblical studies. Apart from important beginnings such as Robert Alter’s *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, most of the literary forays into biblical texts have been of the French Structuralist variety. The challenges and potential of Mikhail Bakhtin’s insights into language and literature are of a profoundly different nature and promise to be, in my opinion, more far-reaching and long-lasting. I have no idea whether biblical studies of the next few decades will proceed in the direction I would hope. Nevertheless, the precariousness of the situation, and the high stakes that are involved in its clarification make the future of this discipline exciting to contemplate.

A second, related question asks whether Bakhtinian theory is internally appropriate to the literary study of the Bible. At first glance the answer would seem to be no. Central to this position is Bakhtin’s conception of the authoritative word:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent to any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is so to speak, the word of the fathers. (Holquist 342)

There could hardly be a more clear-cut example of the authoritative word than the Bible, and within the Bible the authoritative word reigns supreme in the Book of Deuteronomy. The superficial structure of Deuteronomy is simple: a narrator, reporting to us directly with only approximately 57 verses, gives us in direct quotations that cover almost 34 chapters the words of Moses and, rarely, those of God. The Book of Deuteronomy is composed almost entirely of the reported speech of the greatest prophet of them all, Moses, pictured as reporting to us the further words of Yahweh. The narrator tells us what

that great authority-figure, Moses, tells us God has said. But Bakhtin writes that "Authoritative discourse cannot be represented—it is only transmitted" (Holquist 344). It would appear therefore that the Book of Deuteronomy (like, indeed, the Bible as a whole) is ill-suited to illuminate for us what Bakhtin calls "the central problem in prose theory . . . the problem of the double voiced internally dialogized word in all its diverse types and variants" (Bakhtin 330). Nevertheless, I intend to illustrate in this paper how powerful Bakhtin's conception and analysis of the "internally dialogized word" is by applying his insights to what might be considered the most intractably monologic word of all, the "authoritative word" of the Bible as found, for example, in the Book of Deuteronomy. The lesson I wish to draw from this exercise is that the Book of Deuteronomy, as a supremely artful and artistic work of prose, struggles powerfully "against various kinds and degrees of authority" (Holquist 345). Bakhtin tells us that the artistic representation of truly authoritative discourse is impossible. "Authoritative discourse can not be represented—it is only transmitted." The choice is clear: if the Book of Deuteronomy is artful, it cannot represent truly authoritative discourse. The basic assumption of my remarks, therefore, is this: as an extremely sophisticated example of an artistic work that was written over twenty-seven hundred years ago, the Book of Deuteronomy paradoxically destroys the monologic tendencies of the authoritative word even as it appears on the surface simply to be transmitting it.

II

A central struggle in the Book of Deuteronomy is that between the supremely authoritative word of God and the apparently subordinate word of Moses. However it is clear phraseologically, compositionally and ideologically that the word of Moses does in fact win out in the end.³ In place of the word of God (which is theologically and literarily "only transmittable") we are given, in the Mosaic Lawcode of chapters 12-28, the deeply dialogic word of Moses, one that is truly representable. Here is the scene as outlined in the book. In chapter five, Moses recalls for us how he came to hear the further words of God that comprise the central lawcode he will shortly relate. The people, fearful of hearing once more the word of God directly and

dying as a result, send Moses up the mountain alone to hear God's authoritative word. Moses goes up, comes down, and proceeds to declare and teach what he heard. After having heretofore shown Moses as respecting the boundaries between the authoritative word of God and his own (Moses') word, the narrator now has Moses report God's further words in such a way as to make it impossible to distinguish which parts of the lawcode represent reported speech of God and which the reporting speech of Moses.⁴ The Mosaic Lawcode is a direct address by Moses to the people. Whereas Moses had quoted the ten commandments of the LORD in such a way that God was allowed to speak to the Israelites directly, here in the lawcode it is *Moses* who speaks in direct address to the Israelites concerning "the statutes and laws that you shall be careful to observe in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you to occupy as long as you live on earth" (12:1). The practical effect of this compositional device is that the direct voice of God is almost totally silenced in the central part of the book. Through Moses' reporting style, we have the promulgation of a lawcode in which a maximum amount of reporting response and commentary has been allowed to infuse openly the reported speech of God. What we normally would have expected, and up to this point indeed have found in the book, is now clearly avoided. That is, Moses' speech heretofore had been characterized by a reverence for the word of God that always made clear, on the surface of the text, when he (Moses) was reporting the speech of the LORD and when he was retorting or commenting upon it. This contrast between the subordinate style of Moses' first address and the supremely personal promulgation of the lawcode contained in his second address prompts us to ask a central question. What is the effect of such a shift on the reader's perception of Moses, the hero of the book? In terms of Bakhtin's claim that "in the history of literary language, there is a struggle to overcome the official line . . . a struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority" (Holquist 345), we can say that a central compositional move of the Book of Deuteronomy is to take the unrepresentable, solely transmittable, monologically authoritative word of God and replace it with the internally dialogized word of Moses. Not only can we contrast Moses' lawcode with his previous speeches in the book, but we can also contrast it with the other major lawcodes in the Bible found in the Books of Exodus and Leviticus. There, God continues to be quoted in direct discourse; his legal word is transmitted, not represented. There, its degree of authoritativeness is greater than here in Deuteronomy, and to this

extent these lawcodes are less dialogized, less obviously double-voiced, less internally vulnerable to any struggle against them as representatives of the official line. The main step in a struggle against the authoritative word is to dialogize it in various ways. A relatively weak way of making an authoritative word dialogic would be to report it in a direct discourse, that is, put it in quotation marks, but give it a framing context. Thus Moses in his first address quotes God in Deuteronomy 1:37 and 3:26-27 "The LORD said . . . 'You shall not go in there' " and "The LORD said to me . . . for you shall not go over this Jordan.' " A stronger means of dialogization would be to analyze the authoritative word by reporting it in indirect discourse. Moses in fact does this in Deuteronomy 4:21 "Furthermore the LORD swore that I should not cross the Jordan and that I should not enter the good land which your God gives you for an inheritance." The best way, however, of struggling against the authoritative word is that pictured in the Mosaic lawcode itself, where Moses "strives to break down the self-contained compactness of God's word, to resolve it, to obliterate its boundaries." In so doing, he transforms God's word by making it both externally and internally dialogized.

The process depicted here in the Book of Deuteronomy can be described in Bakhtin's terms as one in which Moses' inner speech transformed the externally authoritative word of God into internally persuasive discourse. As such, Moses has changed God's authoritative discourse, with all its attendant "inertia, semantic finiteness and calcification" (Holquist 344) into living language open to one's acceptance and response. What Bakhtin claims for internally persuasive discourse applies directly to this central compositional feature in the Book of Deuteronomy and to Moses' mode of representing God's word as depicted therein. Bakhtin writes:

. . . the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's [in the case of the Deuteronomic lawcode, half Moses' and half God's]. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. It is not so much interpreted by us as it is *further*, that is, freely developed, applied to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts . . . that dialogize it . . . to reveal ever new ways to mean. (Holquist 345-6)

Moses therefore is pictured in Deuteronomy as the supreme teacher in the sense that we are shown what to do with the authoritative word. He says to each of us who read his dialogized lawcode, "Go thou and do likewise."

We can find reflexes, in Moses' own words, of this struggle between on one hand the tendency of the authoritative word to overpower, to dominate from without, and on the other that of the internally persuasive word to win over from within. The authoritative word is represented by Moses' command in 13:1 "Everything that I command, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it." The basis however for Moses' lawcode to be freely developed, to be applied to new conditions, to enter into inter-animating relationships with new contexts, to reveal ever new *ways to mean* as Bakhtin puts it, that basis is reflected in chapter eighteen of the Book, also within the lawcode, where Moses says "The LORD your God will raise up for you from your midst from your brethren a prophet like me—him you shall heed" (18:15). As Moses takes God's word and internally dialogizes it, so too the lawcode provides for the subsequent necessity of making Moses' word internally dialogic. The Deuteronomic narrator takes center stage in the following six books of the Bible by strategically exalting Moses' word in Deuteronomy.

We come therefore to the second overt struggle between words within the book. This struggle is even more basic to narrative than the one we have just discussed. The tension between God's word and Moses' word is one between characters in a narrative; a more fundamental struggle for authority is between the narrator of the book and his principle character or hero, Moses.

The emphasis in Deuteronomy is on the legislative and judicial word of God, and the conveyors of this word are two: Moses and the narrator. In interpreting the book, do we understand Moses' word as subordinate to the narrator's or is the narrator's word subordinate to that of Moses? The narrator might be said to be the main carrier of the implied author's ideological stance since he alone conveys to us Moses' conveying of the words of God that constitute most of the book. But if so, one notices that the narrator, as vehicle for the book's ultimate semantic authority (that is, he alone can tell us what Moses says that God says to the reader of the book), seems at great pains to impress upon his readers that it is Moses, and Moses alone, who possesses the type of reliable authority to convey accurately and authoritatively the words of God that permeate most of the book. We find ourselves in a dilemma: we are asked by the narrator to accept his

assertion that “there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face . . .” (34:10), even though only the Deuteronomic narrator knows Moses face to face. If the path to God is through Moses, the path to Moses is through the narrator. Does the reader interpret the reported words of Moses by means of the reported context: “Moses was God’s greatest prophet, therefore believe *him* when he says . . .”? Or does one interpret the reporting words of the narrator by means of the reported words of Moses: “Since Moses said such and such; therefore believe *me*, as narrator when I say . . .”?

We can respond to this narrative dilemma with the following assumption: the ultimate semantic authority, the main ideological position or positions of the book, ought to be looked for both in the reporting words of the narrator and in the reported words of his hero, Moses.⁵ We may expect to find reflexes of the narrator’s speech in the hero’s speech and vice-versa on any or all compositional planes of the book. In the light of our remarks above about the nature of the lawcode itself, both words, that of the narrator and that of Moses, will be “double voiced.” To this extent, perhaps the most basic literary question to be raised about the Book of Deuteronomy is this: if it is clear that this book is, in Bakhtin’s terms, an overt monologue (that is, its narrator is clearly stating “As far as our main ideological stance is concerned, Moses and I are one”), to what extent may we characterize the book (in its compositional structure again in Bakhtin’s terms) as a hidden dialogue or even a hidden polemic? Are there competing and equally weighted points of view represented in Deuteronomy? Certainly concerning the question of ideology, it would be misguided to attribute dominant viewpoints solely to the narrator or solely to Moses. The implied author of this work will use the words of his narrator and those of Moses in various interlocking dialogic ways to help represent his own ideological viewpoint or viewpoints. A main task, therefore, of even a preliminary literary analysis of the Book of Deuteronomy is to examine both the words of the narrator and those of Moses to find, and then describe, the double-voiced, internally dialogized nature of each major speaker in the book. This task would involve drawing some conclusions about whether the Book of Deuteronomy is a strict dialogue in Bakhtin’s terms, that is, the representation of two equally weighted voices, or rather only the apparent dialogue of opposing voices, one of which is subordinated to the other by a monologic author.⁶

NOTES

¹ Throughout this paper, when I refer to "Bakhtin's work," "Bakhtin's writings," "Bakhtinian theory," etc., I will be following the convention utilized by I.R. Titunik, where he uses the name Bakhtin in both a collective as well as a singular sense to refer to a corpus of writings centering around a Bakhtin "circle." Titunik wisely avoids thereby the complicated historical question of which writers of this so-called circle, and to what degree, collaborated with Bakhtin in the production of a number of seminal literary studies beginning early in this century.

² I have discussed this first introductory question at greater length in the first chapter of my book, *Moses and the Deuteronomist*.

³ I use the terms "phraseological," "compositional," and "ideological" according to the specific meanings given them by B. Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (University of California Press, 1973). At the same time I would endorse I.R. Titunik's valuable insight [in: "Bakhtin and Soviet Semiotics (A case study: Boris Uspenskij's *Poetika Kompozicii*)" *Russian Literature* 10 (1981): 1-16] that Uspensky departs significantly from Bakhtin in typological orientation in this book, even though he, Uspensky, explicitly refers to Bakhtin's theory as fundamental to his point of view.

⁴ The basic work of the Bakhtin circle on reported and reporting speech is V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York and London: Seminar Press, 1973). Just as important is Bakhtin's essay, "Discourse in the Novel" (in Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 259-422). A shorter but still extremely valuable treatment of this and other central theoretical concepts is to be found in chapter five of Bakhtin's classic *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), 150-227.

⁵ Most of the technical terms coined by Bakhtin and used by me in this paragraph may be conveniently found described in chapter five of Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

⁶ For those readers who would like a balanced insightful account and critique of the Bakhtin circle, I highly recommend Gary Saul Morson's "The Heresiarch of Meta," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and Theory of Literature* 3 (1978): 407-27.

For those readers who would like to consider my attempt at answering the questions about Deuteronomy raised at the end of this paper, see my *Moses and the Deuteronomist*, chapter two.

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973.
- Holquist, Michael ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*.
Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press,
1981.
- Polzin, Robert. *Moses and the Deuteronomist*. New York: Seabury Press, 1980.
- Titunik, I.R. "M.M. Bakhtin (The Baxtin School) and Soviet Semiotics." *Dispositio* 3
(1976): 327-38.