"Shared Purpose" and "Surprising/Annoying Unpredictability" in Calvin's Reading on the New Testament's Uses of the Old Testament

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Abstrak

Ada pertanyaan berulang tentang bagaimana menyikapi relasi antara Perjanjian Baru dan Kitab Ibrani (Perjanjian Lama) dan bagaimana PB menggunakan teks dari PL. Di sini saya menunjukkan bahwa walaupun Calvin bekerja dengan suatu kerangka "tujuan/arti bersama" (kontinuitas) dalam interpretasi PL-PB, tetapi Calvin juga memperhatikan "ketakterdugaan yang mengejutkan/mengganggu" dalam relasi PL-PB. Saya juga akan menunjukkan, dengan menggunakan Teori Informasi, bahwa kombinasi antara "pengertian bersama" dan "ketakterdugaan" adalah bagian dari semua komunikasi yang berarti. Akibatnya, usaha interpretasi yang baik bukan hanya harus menyadari suatu kerangka pola pengertian bersama antara PL-PB, melainkan juga memperhatikan ketakterdugaan yang mengejutkan—bahkan mengganggu di dalamnya, yang dalam kasus Calvin justru menuntun pada kunci untuk mengerti teks PB.

Kata-Kata Kunci: tujuan/arti bersama, ketakterdugaan yang mengejutkan/mengganggu, Calvin, PB, PL, Shannon, teori informasi

Abstract

There is a perennial question on how to perceive the relation of the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and how the NT writers use OT texts. Here, I argue that although John Calvin operates with a framework of "shared purpose" (continuity) in the OT-NT interpretation, Calvin also notices "surprising/annoying unpredictability" (discontinuity) in the OT-NT relation. I will further argue, with the aid of Information Theory, that this combination of "shared purpose" and "unpredictability" are the basic ingredients of any meaningful communication. Thus, proper interpretation efforts should not only be aware of a shared pattern/purpose of OT-NT relation, but also paying attention to the surprising—and sometimes annoying—unpredictability therein, which in Calvin case, led him to the key to unpack the meaning of NT texts.

Keywords: shared purpose, surprising/annoying unpredictability, Calvin, New Testament, Old Testament, Shannon, information theory

Sujin Pak shows in her careful analysis that Calvin interprets the New Testament (NT) writers' uses of the Hebrew Bible's (Old Testament) writings as guided by a "shared purpose."[1] So, according to Calvin, the NT writers are not quoting OT texts arbitrarily,

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[1] Sujin Pak uses both terms ("design" and "purpose") in her paper for Calvin's Latin word *consilium*. I prefer the word "purpose" here to emphasize Calvin's view on God's

but rather using them according to the OT contexts and in line with the OT authors' intentions. This view of a "shared purpose" is also tied to Calvin's emphasis on God's providence and the continuity of the Old and the New Covenant as ultimately culminating in Jesus. However, although it is true that Calvin sees a strong OT and NT continuity, I will argue here that Calvin is also acutely aware of the quirks and unpredictability of NT writers' use of OT texts. I will argue here that the "shared purpose" reflects only one side of the dynamic in Calvin's interpretation. I will call the other side "surprising unpredictability," in which Calvin seems surprised—even annoyed—and aware of how the NT writers seem to misuse the OT texts. I will also show with Information Theory, a branch in communication engineering, that both "shared symbols" and "unpredictable uses" of the shared symbols are the key dynamics in any meaningful communication. Therefore, Calvin's balanced analysis of "shared purpose" and "unpredictability" might represent a better interpretation strategy than the common allegorical interpretation of the OT texts used by medieval authors and even by some of Calvin's reformed contemporary interpreters.

Pak shows how Calvin handles Matthew seemingly misquoting Micah 5:2 by saying "You, Bethlehem of Ephratah, are *by no means the least*."[2] Micah actually wrote the opposite, "Bethlehem of Ephratah, who are one of the little clans of Judah." Calvin argues that the evangelist did not aim to copy the exact expression of the prophet, but rather to express Bethlehem's esteemed condition at the birth of Christ in the city. Calvin sees Matthew's use of the prophecy for Christ's birth in Betlehem as retaining Micah's original purpose as a reference to David. Pak

explains what Calvin thinks is the "shared purpose" of Matthew's allusion to Micah, which is a message of comfort because of God's work in his chosen ruler:

> Micah's purpose was to provide a message of comfort by reminding the people that though no one expected a great king such as David to come from such a small, humble place as Bethlehem and yet God "drew light out of darkness," so God can now again bring restoration through just as seemingly humble conditions.[3]

Pak also quotes Calvin to show that Calvin clearly sees a shared purpose between Matthew and Micah. I present the quotation below with Pak's emphasis (in italics), which highlights Calvin's explanation of the "shared purpose" between the NT and OT texts. At the same time, I also include my own emphasis (with underlining), which shows that Calvin is acutely aware of the fact that the NT writer is changing the wording of the OT text. Calvin writes:

> We must always observe the rule that as often as the Apostles quote a testimony from Scripture, although *they do not render it word for word, in fact may move quite far away from it*, they *adapt it suitably and appropriately* to the case in hand. So readers should always take care to note the object of the passages of Scripture that the Evangelists use, not to press single words too exactly, but to be content with the one message that they never take from Scripture to distort into a foreign sense, but suit correctly to its genuine sense.[4]

Here, Pak emphasizes the continuous "shared purpose" observed in Calvin's thought between the NT and OT writers. Pak argues that although Calvin notices the change of wording, Calvin still sees Matthew using the text the same way as Micah does, that is, to praise God because an obscure little town may observe the birth of a supreme

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purposeful providence in the OT and NT scripture. G. Sujin Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors: The Case of the Minor Prophets," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, no. 2 (2011): 256.

[2] Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors," 262.

[3] Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors," 262.

[4] John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 1-3, *A Harmony of the Godspels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994-1995), 1:85-86.

King. [5] Calvin denounces false or arbitrary allegories in reading NT quotes of OT, but rather insists on maintaining the OT author's original purpose in reading the texts.

However, the "shared purpose" is not the only process happening in Calvin's thought. In the precisely same quotation, it is also clear that Calvin is aware of the surprise factor in Matthew's use of Micah. It is *not rendering word for word*, it is even *moving to the opposite meaning* in wording, while *adapting to the new context*. So, although Calvin strongly argues for a contextual "shared purpose" between the NT and OT writers, he also freely acknowledges the quirks in the NT writer's use of OT texts.

Pak successfully shows Calvin's rather consistent result in maintaining the "shared purpose" in NT writers' use of OT texts from the Minor Prophets. A part of Pak's success is due to the common theme of Minor Prophets' concern, which generally offers hope and comfort in God's promises and future dealings with his people. This overarching theme provides a certain congruity for the uses by NT authors.

However, there are other places where this notion of "shared purpose" between NT and OT writers is more difficult to maintain consistently. One of the most difficult text is where Hebrews 2:8 quotes Psalms 8:4-5, where human beings are said to be made a little lower than God (*elohim* can also mean divine beings or angels). The Psalm clearly refers to human beings, yet the Hebrews uses the text to point to Jesus. Calvin is clearly surprised/annoyed by this unpredictable use; he explains it as a move of the apostle accommodating the OT text:

> What the apostle therefore says in that passage concerning the abasement of Christ for a short time, is *not intended* by him *as an explanation* of this text; but for the purpose of *enriching and illustrating* the subject on which he is discoursing,

he introduces and *accommodates* to it what had been spoken in a different sense. [6]

There is indeed an annoying difference in the logic of argument between Hebrews 2:8 and the corresponding verses in the Psalm, which goes beyond mere wording. The Psalm marvels at how *high* the degree of dignity that God has rendered to mortal human beings, whereas the Hebrews text is perplexed on how *low* this Jesus, as a human being, has been made. Calvin astutely notices this difficult difference between the Psalms and the Hebrews, Calvin writes:

> There is another question which it is more difficult to solve. While the Psalmist here discourses concerning the excellency of men, and describes them, in respect of this, as coming near to God, the apostle applies the passage to the humiliation of Christ. [7]

But Calvin does not stop only at commenting on the "surprising/annoying unpredictable" use of the Psalms, he also moves on to provide the key to interpret Hebrews, which is to see Jesus Christ as the head and restorer of mankind. Calvin argues that this is a *different*, yet a *suitable* and *appropriate* way of quoting the Psalms. On such use in Hebrews 2:8, Calvin writes:

> In the first place, we must consider the *propriety of applying* to the person of Christ what is here spoken concerning all mankind; and, secondly, how we may explain it as referring to Christ's being humbled in his death, . . . What some say, that what is true of the members may be *properly* and *suitably* transferred to the head, might be a sufficient answer to the first question; but I go a step farther, *for Christ is not only the first begotten of every creature, but also the restorer of mankind.* [8]

Thus Calvin not only argues strongly for a "shared purpose" between NT writers and OT authors, as Pak suggests, but Calvin also notices the "surprising/annoying unpredict-

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[5] Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors," 262n37.

[6] Comments on Psalm 8 in Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 105. Emphasis mine.

[7] Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, comments on Psalm 8, 103.

[8] Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms*, 103-04. Emphasis mine.

ability" in NT uses of OT texts. Moreover, in solving the "surprising/annoying unpredictability" Calvin also arrives on an important interpretive conclusion in seeing Christ as the restorer of mankind. Calvin thus uses this surprising/annoying difference in an important way in constructing his interpretation. Thus, both "shared purpose" and "surprising/annoying unpredictability" are important in Calvin's analysis.

Calvin's interpretive strategy in reading the OT texts was actually not the mainstream approach in the 16th century. David Puckett points out that there was a chronic problem of how Christians should read the OT that began from the birth of the Christian church and became acute with the rise of humanism in the Renaissance, which demanded careful literary and historical interpretation of ancient texts.[9] Pak shows that there was a strong medieval and late-medieval tradition of interpreting the eight *messianic* Psalms (Psalms 2, 8, 16, 22, 45, 72, 110, and 118) as speaking literally about Christ.[10] Luther follows this antecedent medieval tradition in his interpretation of messianic Psalms in regarding these Psalms not as a reference to the historical life of David, but rather he interprets David as a prophet who foresees Christ.[11] With this approach, Luther consistently finds teachings concerning the Trinity and the two natures of Christ in the Psalms. In Psalm 8, for example, Luther argues for the two natures of Christ from two different Hebrew words of Psalm 8:1 "Lord" and "Ruler,"[12] and he interprets "the work of your fingers" of Psalm 8:3 as referring to the Holy Spirit.[13] Luther also

unhesitatingly interprets "the enemies" of David in Psalm 8:2 allegorically as referring to the enemies of Christ, which can include: the Jews, the Roman Empire, the Mohammedan and the Turkish Empire.[14]

Calvin breaks away from this allegorical interpretation and from certain forms of Christological interpretation of the OT. David Puckett locates Calvin's approach as a middle way between the Jewish interpretation—which takes the Jewish historical context seriously—and the Christological allegory.[15] De Greef argues that in interpreting the Psalms, Calvin seeks to rise above the antithesis between Jewish and Christian exegetes, by paying much attention to the Israel's historical context of the OT texts.[16] Pak argues that authorial intention and retaining the simple and natural sense of the text are the keys in understanding Calvin's approach in reading OT.[17] Pak then expands this idea in her recent paper analyzing Calvin's reading of the Minor Prophets, and argues that the "shared purpose" is the guiding principle for Calvin to see the relation of NT and OT texts.[18]

So, it is clear that Calvin attempts to maintain the historical integrity of the OT texts, and to avoid allegorical readings as much as possible.[19] By doing this Calvin accentuates the "shared purpose" of the OT and NT texts. However, David Puckett also points out that Calvin is acutely aware of some difficult passages where NT writers seem not to follow the context of OT texts. Puckett says that

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[9] David L. Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 2-4.

[10] Sujin Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 28.

[11] Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 33.

[12] Martin Luther, Luther's Works, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, *Sermon on Psalm 8* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1900-1986), 12:100; Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 34.

[13] Luther, *Sermon on Psalm 8,* 12:119; Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 34.

[14] Luther, *Sermon on Psalm 8*, 12:109.

[15] Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 105-13.

[16] Wulfert De Greef, "Calvin as Commentator on the Psalms," in *Calvin and the Bible*, ed. Donald K. Mckim, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (New Zork, Cambridge University Press, 2006), 105.

[17] Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin*, 138.

[18] Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors," 255-57.

[19] Despite the usual impression of Calvin as a harsh critic of allegorical interpretation, David Puckett notes that Calvin sometimes approves allegorical understanding as a continued metaphor (*continua metaphora*). Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 110.

there are two principles how Calvin solves this seeming misuse of the OT: (1) The NT writers may change the wording but not the meaning of OT texts, or (2) the NT writers may use OT texts in a different sense as long as it is not his purpose to interpret the passage.[20] I will argue that Calvin's way of emphasizing the "shared purpose" of OT and NT texts as well as noticing the "surprising/annoying unpredictable" use of OT texts by the NT writers strikes closer to the information theoretical dynamic in OT-NT intertextuality. A discussion of Information Theory, a field in communication engineering may help us understand this phenomenon.

Claude E. Shannon, an engineer at Bell Labs, developed a mathematical analysis of information in a communication channel.[21] Shannon came up with a mathematical formula to quantify information contained in symbolic data. The main idea involves the recognition that the actual amount of "information" in a data string has to do with the probability for a certain symbol to appear in that data string. Every data string has some redundancy, for example, we can still understand the following string of data even when some alphabets are missing:

CLVIN RE DS TH OL TSTAMNT IN GENVA

We can even cut the number of alphabets roughly in half and change some alphabets while maintaining the roughly same possibility to understand the information contained in the data string, such as:

CLVN RD OT @ GENV

So, any data string in a certain language displays some redundancy. The same information can be contained in different numbers of symbols. Moreover, some combinations of string such as "TH" highly determine the possibility of the symbol following it. If the appearance of one symbol is highly probable,

the symbol becomes redundant and we can remove it without significant loss of information. Shannon argues that the redundancy of ordinary English is about 50%.[22] The removal of redundancy is one of the very basic ideas that make data compression possible (zip, mp3, or mpeg files).

So, the actual information in a string of symbols depends not on the number of symbols (the size of data), but rather on the probability for the appearance of each independent symbol. This probability may be determined by the history of symbols that precede or follow it within the structure of a certain language. The higher the *certainty* for a symbol to appear, the more redundant the symbol, and the less information the symbol contains. The opposite is also true. The higher the *unpredictability* for a symbol to appear, the more information the symbol contains, because we cannot reliably guess what symbol could appear in that location in the data string. So, the information is *in* the *unpredictability*! Information *is* unpredictability!

Another way to look at the phenomenon is to consider the following strings: (1) AAAAAAAAAAAA, (2) ABCABCABCABC, and (3) CLVN RD OT @ GENV. The first string of symbols contains no uncertainty, because there is 100% certainty that the alphabet A will be used. The second example, although using 3 symbols A, B, and C, also contains no uncertainty, since every A will be followed by a B, every B by a C, and every C by an A. With 100% certainty, there is *no* unpredictability, and there is thus *no* information. The third string does not show a perfect predictable pattern of symbol appearance, thus every symbol seems unpredictable and contains valuable information. Again we see that the information is *in* the unpredictability!

Shannon moves on to formulate a mathematical definition of information based

[20] Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 94.

[21] C. E. Shannon "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (1948): 379–423, 623–656.

[22] Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," 14.

on the known probability of each symbol in a data string.[23] According to this formula, the higher the unpredictability of a symbol, the higher the information it contains. This technical information phenomenon can also be observed in how the NT writers work with OT narratives.

It is clear that the NT writers honor the authority of OT narratives and symbols, and they work with the assumption that their audience is familiar with these OT narratives. So, there is a sense of "shared purpose" assumed here. Any information system will work within a certain structure of language and a certain set of assumed alphabets or symbols. However, as Calvin has sharply noticed, the NT writers are not writing a commentary or trying merely to interpret OT texts. If they were merely repeating OT texts, their message would become highly predictable, and thus there would be no fresh information being delivered. However, the NT writers are struggling to make sense of the coming of Jesus within the history of Israel. They are trying to make sense of this incredible unpredictable way God has chosen to act within Israel and its implications for Israel and for the world. Such stories are full of exciting unpredictability; they are pregnant of fresh information.

It is thus very appropriate that as soon as Calvin confirms the "shared purpose" between the OT and NT, he is surprised by the unpredictable ways in which the NT writers use OT texts. Jesus has made incredible news, and the apostles are simply trying to communicate this new unpredictable revelation of God with the OT language and narratives.

I will now point to two more examples where Calvin confirms the "shared purpose" and the "annoying unpredictability" in NT's usage of OT texts. We find the first example in Romans 10:6, where Paul uses Deuteronomy 30:12, and seems to twist the original meaning:

> Who will ascend into heaven (that is to bring Christ down) or who will descend into the abyss? (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

Calvin writes:

> Moses uses the words *heaven* and *the abyss*, to suggest places which are fairly remote and difficult for man to reach. Paul applies these words to the death and resurrection of Christ, as if some spiritual mystery lay beneath them. If it is alleged that this interpretation is *too forced* and *subtle*, we should understand that the object of the Apostle *was not to explain this passage exactly*, but *only to apply it to his treatment* of the subject in hand. He *does not therefore repeat* what Moses has said syllable by syllable, but employs a gloss, by which he *adapts* the testimony of *Moses more closely to his own purpose.*[24]

Calvin is fully aware that Paul's interpretation seems to be *too forced* and *subtle*.[25] Calvin thus emphasizes the fact that Paul is *not explaining* or merely *repeating* the OT text, but *adapting* it to *his own purpose*. Later, Calvin explains that Paul is teaching about the righteousness of faith that will remove the doubts regarding the eternal life (heaven) and everlasting destruction (abyss).

Here, Calvin is again annoyed but at the same time aware of Paul twisting the OT text for his own purpose. Note, however, that Calvin's awareness of Paul's "unpredictable" use of the OT stems exactly from his emphasis of the "shared purpose" between NT and OT texts. In other words, Calvin expects Paul to

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[23] Shannon uses the term "entropy" to denote the amount of information, and it is mathematically calculated as:

$$H = K \sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i \log p_i$$

Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," 11. The term "entropy" itself is already known in physics as referring to the amount of disorder, randomness or unpredictability in a system.

[24] John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 225 (comments on Romans 10). Emphasis mine.

[25] Calvin will prefer a simple exposition than allegories, which he will regard as subtle. David Puckett notes Calvin's thought: "A simple exposition of the true sense of scripture (*simplex veri sensus*) will dispose of all the subtle triflings (*futile omnes orgutias*) of those who delight in allegory." Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 108.

pay attention to the context and exact meaning of the OT text, thus Calvin becomes aware when Paul twists it. An interpreter who comes with the intention to read every difficult passage allegorically will not be hit by this "unpredictability" of Paul's use of the word.

Another place where Calvin sees Paul twisting the OT text is Ephesians 4:8: "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." Calvin writes:

> There is rather more difficulty in this clause; for the words of the Psalm are, "thou hast *received gifts for men*," while the apostle *changes this expression* into *gave gifts*, and thus *appears to exhibit an opposite meaning*. Still there is no absurdity here; for Paul *does not always quote the exact words* of Scripture, but, after referring to the passage, satisfies himself with *conveying the substance* of it *in his own language*. . . . At the same time, I am inclined to a different opinion, that Paul *purposely changed the word*, and employed it, not as taken out of the Psalm, but *as an expression of his own, adapted to the present occasion*.[26]

Here, Calvin comments that Paul is changing the word of the Psalms, using the opposite meaning, not quoting the exact words, but rather conveying the substance in his own language, and purposely adapting the word to the present occasion. Again, Calvin is very well aware of the "annoying unpredictable" twisting of word by Paul.

Pak is correct in saying that Calvin begins with the presumption of harmony between OT and NT.[27] Calvin's intention is very clear. He argues towards a "shared purpose" between the NT and OT texts. Even Calvin's use of the accommodation and typology principle is really aimed to confirm this. David Pukett notes that some scholars charge Calvin as "often in danger of letting in allegory by the back-door of typology," and

that Calvin avoids allegory only by "falling into typology."[28] However, Puckett also confirms that Calvin is strongly arguing for the unity of scripture. Puckett writes: "It should not be surprising that one who stresses the unity of scripture as strongly as Calvin does would use typology extensively."

However, as I have shown here, it is also equally true that Calvin is aware of the "surprising/annoying unpredictability" of the NT writers' use of OT texts. Even though Calvin argues strongly towards the unity of scripture, his extensive use of typology and accommodation principle only testifies to the difficulty of straightforward simple exposition. And a good Bible expositor as Calvin is, he readily admits where he sees the NT writers twisting the wording or even using the OT texts out of context. Calvin even nails the phenomenon precisely by saying in many places that the NT writers are not simply repeating or interpreting the OT texts. Yes, Calvin says this to argue that all the apparent misuse of OT texts is only seemingly so. But it is also undeniable that Calvin notices these "unpredictable" uses of OT scripture.

The Information Theory helps us to see that some "shared purpose" is crucial in any meaningful communication. We simply have to assume to work with the same alphabets and the same language structure for any real communication to happen. It is thus appropriate to assume some workable contextual unity between OT and NT texts. However, Information Theory also tells us that the "information" is really in the "unpredictable" use of the shared symbols. The NT writers are telling a new story about Jesus, and not merely repeating the Old Testament stories. They are telling a new story with the well-known alphabets of ancient narratives. Because of the incredible newness of the gospel stories, it is expected that the telling of these stories requires a new unpredictable arrangement of the old

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[26] Calvin, *Commentary on Ephesians*, comments on Ephesians 4 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 273. Emphasis mine.

[27] Pak, "Calvin on the 'Shared Design' of the Old and New Testament Authors," 270.

[28] Puckett, *John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament*, 114.

narratives. Although surprised—even maybe annoyed—Calvin nevertheless catches this "unpredictability" of the wonderful good news around Jesus in his many commentaries. The intertextuality of OT and NT texts and their connection to the coming of Christ seem to require both the "shared purpose" and the "unpredictability" to make sense. By highlighting both features in his commentaries, Calvin provides a better exposition of scripture than his preceding medieval or reformed contemporary exegetes, who operate with Christological allegorical reading.

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