

The Function of Paronomasia in Hebrews 10:5–7¹

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The use of the Psalms in Hebrews has enjoyed considerable study in recent years. One aspect of this study has focused on why certain quotations of the OT found in Hebrews (and more generally throughout the NT) do not exactly match their OT source. Several kinds of explanations are invoked, such as the intervening influence of the LXX, the conflation of verses used to produce the quotation, the problems inherent in translating idioms from one language to another and from one culture to another, the possibility of a Hebrew text of the OT source that differs from the MT, and the simple lapse of memory of the NT author when quoting a familiar verse.

The quotation of Ps 40:6–8 (English versification) in Heb 10:5–7 is one such instance where the quotation does not match the OT verse. This instance is particularly interesting, because it exhibits features of first-century rhetorical achievement that have been overlooked in previous treatments of this passage. The passage reads as follows, starting at Heb 10:5:

UBS ³	NIV
Διὸ εἰσερχόμενος εἰς τὸν κόσμον λέγει, Θυσίαν καὶ προσφορὰν οὐκ ἠθέλησας, σῶμα δὲ κατηρτίσω μοι	Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;
ὄλοκαυτώματα καὶ περὶ ἁμαρτίας οὐκ εὐδόκησας. τότε εἶπον, Ἴδου ἦκω, ἐν κεφαλίδι βιβλίου γέγραπται περὶ ἐμοῦ, τοῦ ποιῆσαι, ὁ θεός, τὸ θέλημά σου.	with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am— it is written about me in the scroll— I have come to do your will, O God.’”

This quotation of Ps 40:6–8 in Heb 10:5–7 includes four variations from the Masoretic text of the psalm and its extant Greek version which introduce formal semantic differences. These four variations have usually been explained one by one to show that the semantic differences are merely formal, and in no way deviate from the original meaning of the psalm. However, any explanation of these four variations which attempts to explain them individually overlooks the fact that these four variations are phonetically related.

I have argued elsewhere that what is typically perceived in Heb 10:5–7 as a “misquote” of the psalm from which the writer of Hebrews must somehow be absolved,

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is instead his deliberate use of a phonetically based rhetorical technique called paronomasia which was highly valued in the first century. First I will summarize that thesis and then show how the use of paronomasia embellishes the argument made by the author of Hebrews 10.

The LXX Greek translation closely follows the Hebrew MT of Ps 40:6–8. However, the quotation in Hebrews 10 differs from the LXX rendering of Ps 40:6–8. Consider the four variations from Psalm 40 which comprise the “misquote” in Hebrews 10:

- 1) σώμα (“body”) is found in v. 5c instead of ὠτία (“ears”);
- 2) ὀλοκαυτώματα (“burnt offerings,” plural) is substituted in v. 6 for the singular form ὀλοκαύτωμα in the LXX;
- 3) εὐδόκησας (“you were pleased”) is substituted for ἤτησας (“you demanded”) in v. 6;
- 4) ὁ θεός and τὸ θελημα σου are transposed in v. 7c and the remainder of the verse as it appears in the LXX is omitted. This final omission in v. 7 makes the infinitive ποιῆσαι the purpose for the coming (“I have come to do ...”) in contrast to its function in the LXX as the object of ἐβουλήθην (“I desire to do ...”).

These particular discrepancies have been individually explained in various ways: some as textual variants already present in the first-century Greek text of Psalm 40, or as evidence of a Hebrew exemplar different from the MT, or as merely semantically insignificant variations inadvertently introduced by the author of Hebrews. Explanations along these lines, however, have failed to notice that these four variations are phonetically related.

A syllabic representation of the quotation of Ps 40:6–8 as it stands in Heb 10:5–7 will aid our discussion:

5b: θυ- σί- αν- καὶ- πρὸς- φο- ρὰν- οὐκ- ἦ- θέ- λη- σας
 5c: σῶ- μα- δὲ- κα- τηρ- τί- σω- μου
 6: ὁ- λο- καυ- τῶ- μα- τα- καὶ- πε- ρί-
 ἄ- μαρ- τί- ασ- οὐκ- εὐ- δό- κη- σας
 7a: τότε εἶπον·
 7b: ἰδοὺ ἦκω,
 7c: ἐν- κε- φα- λί- δι- βιβ- λί- ου- γέ- γραπ- ται- πε- ρὶ- ἐ- μοῦ
 τοῦ- ποι- ἦ- σαι- ὁ- θε- ὸς- τὸ- θέ- λη- μά- σου

The alignment of the above syllabic representation shows that three of the four variations achieve phonetic assonance.

In the two variations σώμα δέ and ὀλοκαυτώματα, a long-o accented syllable is followed by two short syllables (cf. -τώματα, σώμα δέ). This creates a pairing of phonetically similar syllables. The long-o syllables (σῶ-/τῶ-) are followed by the identical syllables μα/μα, then by the phonetically similar δέ/τα. (δ and τ are both alveolar stops, voiced and unvoiced, respectively.) If only one of these variations had been effected, that is, if either ὠτία or ὀλοκαύτωμα had been allowed to stand, no phonetic assonance would have been produced.

The variation which substitutes εὐδόκησας for ἤτησας forms assonance with ἠθέλησας in the final clause of Heb 10:5b by phonetically pairing syllables: οὐκ/οὐκ, followed by a long unstressed syllable pair (ἦ-/εὐ-), then a pair of short stressed syllables (θέ-/δό), followed by λη-/κη and σας/σας. This variation effects a phonetic “inclusio,” so to speak, that sets off verses 5b–6 as one unit of thought. This effect would not be achieved if οὐκ ἤτησας were allowed to stand, since ἤτησας, though ending in -τησας, is too short to create a match in syllables with ἠθέλησας.

In Heb 10:7c the author achieves phonetic correspondence by matching μου and σου (another assonance). The transposition of ὁ θεός and τὸ θελημα σου and the truncation of the verse cannot be explained by phonetic manipulation.

Therefore, it is observed that with each variation the author of Hebrews has achieved a phonetic assonance between the variant word and another element of the quotation. Furthermore, in five other “misquotes” of the OT in Hebrews, similar phonetic manipulation is observed.

In *The Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian, a first-century teacher of rhetoric, cites many rhetorical techniques of rhythmic arrangement and ornamentation of style. Most relevant to the phenomena found in the “misquote” of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10 is paronomasia, which Quintilian describes as “some [phonetic] resemblance, equality or contrast of words” (*Inst.* 9.3.66). There are, according to Quintilian, different forms of this kind of play upon phonetic resemblance. One form is when “the words selected will be of equal length and will have similar terminations” (*Inst.* 9.3.75). This describes the nature of the assonance which is achieved by substituting σῶμα for ὠτία in Heb 10:5a–6a. Another form of phonetic play described by Quintilian is “when clauses conclude alike, the same syllables being placed at the end of each” (*Inst.* 9.3.77), as in variations found in Heb 10:5b and 6b. When two or more sentences end in this way it is called homoeoteleuton (*Inst.* 9.3.77). Quintilian teaches that the best form of this phonetic play is “that in which the beginnings and ends of the clauses correspond ... in such a way that there is close resemblance between the words, while cadence and termination are virtually identical” (*Inst.* 9.3.79). From Quintilian’s textbook on first-century rhetoric it is evident that the variations observed in the Hebrews 10 “misquote” of Psalm 40 achieve various forms of paronomasia.

This involvement with oral techniques of rhetoric is fitting regardless of whether Hebrews was written to be delivered as a sermon or as an epistle, because both genres were presented orally in the first century. According to Quintilian, the art of the first-century orator influenced the written style of language (*Inst.* 10.3.5). What is found in the Hebrews 10 quote of Psalm 40 is therefore consistent with a rhetorical style which was highly valued in the first century.

This “misquote” of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10 should caution modern readers not to impose twentieth-century standards of precision and accuracy on first-century quotations of the OT. First-century authors apparently were not motivated by the precision and accuracy demanded in quoting sources today but were conforming to different standards which may seem strange to the modern reader.

If the writer of Hebrews deliberately employed these rhetorical techniques in his quotation of Psalm 40, what does it contribute to his purpose? Do these rhetorical techniques have any exegetical value for the modern interpreter? Fortunately, Quintilian also addresses the purpose of these techniques.

According to Quintilian, one of the functions of paronomasia is to attract the ear of the audience and thereby to draw their attention to that element of the argument (*Inst.* 9.3.66). To put it in modern linguistic terms, the phonetic assonance of paronomasia effects marked prominence of certain elements of the paragraph, highlighting and emphasizing those particular thoughts. In ancient Greek, marked prominence was achieved by unusual word order, repetition, use of particles, intensifying verbs, and shift in verbal tense. Based on Quintilian's description of the function of paronomasia, I suggest that phonetic assonance was another highly stylized, rhetorical method of marking semantic prominence. The elements highlighted by phonetic assonance would cause them to stand out in the argument being put forth. Therefore, how do these variations of the Psalm 40 quote contribute to the argument being made in Hebrews 10?

The most striking feature of this quotation from Psalm 40 is that it is attributed (improperly some would say) to the incarnate Jesus Christ: "Therefore, when Christ came into the world, *he* said ..." It is as if Psalm 40 had never previously existed; as if these words originated in Christ's mouth and not in the psalmist's, some thousand years before.

The belief that all scripture is unified by divine inspiration could be used to explain this attribution. For whatever David said in Psalms was really being said by God. And because of the triune relationship of the God-head, whatever God says, Christ says. Therefore, the author of Hebrews may be referring to the ultimate, divine source of the psalm instead of the immediate, human source. But this cannot be what the author of Hebrews had foremost in mind, for he explicitly says, "*when Christ came into the world*"—that is, a thousand years after David spoke, Christ spoke. The two speakings were not simultaneous. The writer of Hebrews therefore has something different in mind than the dual authorship of scripture that results from divine inspiration.

This idea of two speakings, one far past and one recent, is, in fact, the basis on which the author of Hebrews introduces his epistle: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son ..." (Heb 1:1).

Much of the rest of the epistle is taken up in explaining and contrasting the continuity and the discontinuity between the past-speaking of God through the prophets, like David in the psalms, and the present-speaking of God by the Son, Jesus Christ. The continuity and discontinuity is made by drawing a comparison between Moses and Jesus (chap. 3), between the Aaronic high priest and Jesus (chaps. 4–5), between Melchizedek and Jesus (chap. 7), between the blood of the old covenant and the blood of Jesus (chap. 9) and finally, in the chapter in which Psalm 40 is quoted, between the efficacy of the old sacrificial system and the atonement of Jesus Christ.

I suggest that the identification of the words of Ps 40:6–8 with Christ is to be construed as an expression of the dynastic continuity of Jesus with Israel's King David. The seemingly minor variations between David's speech in Psalm 40 and Christ's speech in the Hebrews 10 quotation of Psalm 40 express the discontinuity.

In chapter 10 the author of Hebrews wishes to show that the many sacrificial offerings of animals, repeated endlessly year after year, were insufficient to deal once-for-all with sin. The connecting particle *διό* ("therefore") in 10:5 indicates that this deficiency is the reason that, coming into the world, Christ says, "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased."

This present-speaking of Christ stands in contrast to the past-speaking of David: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but ears were dug for me; burnt offering and sin offering you did not demand.” The interpretive crux of the use of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10 consists in discerning the discontinuity and the continuity in what Christ says compared to what David said. The unique rendering of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10 points to how the words of this quotation, though standing in continuity with David are specifically appropriate to Christ in ways that cannot be applied to David.

Since the variations from the psalm are formed by the rhetorical use of paronomasia, it is reasonable to ask how paronomasia contributes to the contrast between the past-speaking of God through David and the present-speaking of God by Christ.

Marked prominence, such as achieved by paronomasia, links the surface structure of the text to the semantic structure. Therefore, if the paronomasia of Hebrews 10 is intentional, it points to exegetically significant elements of the argument. By effecting paronomasia between elements of his thought, the author of Hebrews was pairing those elements phonetically and also, I suggest, semantically.

Recall that the variations under consideration phonetically pair σώμα δέ with ὀλοκαυτώματα and οὐκ ἠθέλησας with οὐκ εὐδόκησας (see the diagram earlier in the article). The substitution of εὐδόκησας for ἤτησας, which achieves a phonetic inclusio, moves from the more general “sacrifice and offering” in the first colon to the more specific “burnt offerings and sin offerings” in the second. The substitution of εὐδόκησας for ἤτησας not only achieves phonetic assonance but also puts the ending word of both clauses into the same semantic domain of “wish, desire.” εὐδοκέω occurs only twice in Hebrews, both times in chap. 10, but frequently elsewhere in the NT. When εὐδοκέω is used of God, it is always in reference to the person or redemptive work of Christ. For instance, at Jesus’ baptism, which inaugurated his public ministry, God says, “This is my beloved son in whom I am *well pleased*” (Matt 3:17/Mark 1:11/Luke 3:22). Again at the transfiguration of Christ, God is *well-pleased* with his son (Matt 17:5). God was *well-pleased* to have his fullness dwell in Christ (Col 1:19). He is *well-pleased* to give believers the kingdom (Luke 12:37) and to save those who believe (1 Cor 1:21).

Three times elsewhere in the NT, εὐδοκέω, or its cognate noun εὐδοκία, and θέλω, or its cognate noun θέλημα, occur together, as they do in Hebrews 10. In Eph 1:5 God “predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his *pleasure* [εὐδοκίαν] and *will* [θελήματος].” Again in Eph 1:9, “He [God] made known to us his *will* [θελήματος] according to his *good pleasure* [εὐδοκίαν], which he purposed in Christ ...” And finally in Phil 2:13, “it is God who works in you *to will* [θέλειν] and to act according to his *good purpose* [εὐδοκία].”

The strong association between God’s will and good pleasure and the redemptive work of Christ suggests that the verb εὐδοκέω when used with God as subject had taken on a specific, almost technical, sense, referring to the outworking of God’s redemptive plan in Christ.

In Hebrews 10, then, the author’s lexical choice in substituting εὐδόκησας for ἤτησας not only achieves phonetic assonance, but also fits well with the argument made in that chapter. Sacrifice and offering were not God’s will, burnt offering and sin offering were not God’s good pleasure. Though God had commanded them when in the past he “spoke to our forefathers through the prophets,” these were *not* the means through which God

would redeem his people from sin. The past-speaking of the old sacrificial system is superseded when God’s redemptive plan is revealed in Christ.

The clause containing substitutions of σώμα for ὠτία and the plural ὀλοκαυτώματα for the singular form is sandwiched between the inclusio formed by ἠθέλησας and εὐδόκησας in an a-b-b’-a’ pattern. Verses 5c–6a are thereby highlighted by standing in the center of the phonetic and semantic inclusio. The center colon b-b’ is set in contrast to a-a’:

θυ- σί- αν- καὶ- πρὸς- φο- ρὰν- οὐκ- ἦ-	a
θέ- λη- σας	
σώ- μα- δέ- κα- τηρ- τί- σω- μου	b
ὁ- λο- καυ- τώ- μα- τα- καὶ- πε- ρί-	b’
ἀ- μαρ- τί- ας- οὐκ- εὐ- δό- κη- σας	a’

What is the point of these contrasted clauses? According to the MT, David had “ears” to hear the word of the Lord. The midrash of Ps 40:7 understands this verse in light of 1 Sam 15:22, “Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in *obeying* the voice of the Lord?” (the verb is *שמע*, “hearing”). The reference to David’s ears, which heard the voice of the Lord, is therefore to be understood as referring to David’s obedience to God.

W. C. Kaiser follows this midrashic understanding and also construes this idiom as referring to David’s—somewhat faltering—obedience. Kaiser sees the substitution of σώμα for ὠτία as simply the whole being substituted for the part by the Greek translator in order to produce a culturally dynamic equivalent. This would then mean that David and Christ were saying essentially the same thing. But Christ’s obedience to God that abolished the old cultic sacrifices was not the same as David’s obedience to God as theocratic king. It was not that Jesus lived his life in perfect obedience to God, but more specifically, it was the obedient sacrifice of his body in death that brought an end to animal sacrifice. As the king of Israel, David could only imperfectly obey God, and his body could never be the once-for-all sacrifice for sin. Therefore, it was uniquely appropriate for the author of Hebrews to substitute σώμα for ὠτία when he also put the words of Ps 40:6–8 in Christ’s mouth.

The displeasure of God with cultic offerings is contrasted with, “But a body you prepared for me.” The argument of Hebrews 10 is that it was Jesus Christ’s body which was the sacrifice well-pleasing to God, not the many animal sacrifices endlessly repeated. The lexical choice of σώμα δέ concurrently with the substitution of the plural form of ὀλοκαυτώματα achieves phonetic assonance and by this marked prominence the *one* body of Christ is contrasted with the *many* burnt offerings with which God was not pleased. The rhetorical construction of paronomasia therefore reinforces the point of the argument made in Hebrews 10.

The author’s argument, of course, is not hanging on the fine nuance of phonetic assonance. Rhetorical ornamentation is just that: linguistic ornamentation to an argument. The argument that Christ’s body was the full and final sacrifice is made explicitly and unmistakably in vv. 1–4 and 8–18. The author’s use of rhetorical ornamentation in his quotation of Psalm 40 eloquently embellishes the argument in an aesthetically pleasing

way (by first-century standards) and thereby provides psychological reinforcement for it. His audience would remember the catchy rendering of Psalm 40 (even if they were not familiar with the original psalm), which would bring the point of his entire argument into their minds. This function might have been more important when Christians did not have a personal copy of the Bible to which they could refer at any time. They had to rely on remembering the word as it was read to them in the church assembly.

The fourth and final variation of Hebrews 10 in its rendering of Psalm 40 involves a transposition and a truncation. David says, “to do your will, my God, I desire” (LXX Ps 39:8b). David desired to do God’s will as king of Israel, but his iniquities overtook him (v.12). David’s desire exceeded David’s ability. When the words are put in Christ’s mouth, the transposition and truncation locates the accomplishment of God’s will as the purpose for the preceding “I have come,” instead of as the object of “I desire.” This variation renders the text “I have come to do, O God, your will.” When Christ came, it was not merely to desire to do God’s will but to accomplish God’s good pleasure, God’s redemptive will, once-for-all. What David desired, Christ accomplished. The variation comprised of transposition and truncation introduces an efficacy and finality to Christ’s words that is appropriately lacking in David’s.

The explanation of the variations in the Hebrews 10 quotation of Psalm 40 thus reached by a rhetorical analysis contradicts those reached by most commentators. Some are content with the general explanation that variations found when the NT quotes the OT are due to a lapse of the author’s memory of the OT verse. Others are convinced that $\sigma\hat{\omega}\mu\alpha$ was already in the Greek translation of the text being quoted by the author of Hebrews. These explanations, and others, share the same methodological assumption—the variations were introduced one by one at different times and for different reasons. The teaching of Quintilian suggests that modern interpreters must also consider such variations as possibly related to one another and deliberately introduced for rhetorical effect.

Almost all commentators have decided that the variations found in Heb 10:5–7 introduce no semantically significant deviation from the psalmist’s intent and that the author of Hebrews is therefore justified in using this rendering instead of the MT. Based on these observations of Heb 10:5–7, I would now argue that modern interpreters should not feel compelled to empty the variations found in NT quotations of their semantic content in an attempt to make the NT quotation mean exactly the same thing as the OT original. These differences may be deliberately introduced by the NT author to indicate discontinuity with the OT and may therefore be exegetically significant.

Those who would insist that the author of Hebrews uses the “misquotation” of Psalm 40 to mean exactly what David meant imply that David and Christ were saying exactly the same thing. By dismissing the variations as semantically insignificant, they include the sense contributed by the variations as part of the continuity between David and Christ instead of part of the discontinuity. The distinctiveness of Christ’s words is thereby dissolved into the background of David’s. Typology then becomes the sole hermeneutical principle on which to understand the use of Psalm 40 in Hebrews 10. If the variations are allowed the semantic significance they deserve, then they highlight the distinctive voice of Christ against the background of David’s words.

Rhetorical analysis has demonstrated how the “misquoting” of Psalm 40 achieves marked prominence in a way that precisely highlights the discontinuity between Christ

and David. This phenomenon must be attributed, not to transmission error, but to the author's rhetorical skill. We can appreciate how appropriate this variant rendering of the words of Psalm 40 is in the mouth of Christ and how inappropriate it would be in the mouth of David.

The author of Hebrews 10 was expressing the line of dynastic continuity between David and Jesus by putting David's words in Christ's mouth. But in so doing, the author also expressed the profound discontinuity by crafting four seemingly minor changes that made the quotation uniquely appropriate for Christ. The author of Hebrews eloquently uses rhetorical technique to persuade his audience that "in the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets ... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his son."