

# God knows all: An intertextual study of Hebrews 4:12–13 and Deuteronomy 29:28



## Author:

Albert J. Coetsee<sup>1</sup>

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Albert Coetsee,  
albert.coetsee@nwu.ac.za

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While most scholars view Hebrews 4:12–13 as the author's own composition which contains various parallels with Old Testament language and thought, very few consider Deuteronomy 29:28 (29:29 ET) as one of the possible conceptual backgrounds of the passage. The current article argued that Hebrews 4:12–13 contains among others a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, which when noted, enhances the interpretation of the passage. The article started with a baseline interpretation of Hebrews 4:12–13, by discussing its content and message, and especially its proposed backgrounds. It found that of all the parallels between Hebrews 4:12–13 and the LXX, Wisdom 1:6 and 1 Enoch 9:5 forms the closest parallels, and that scholars do not view Hebrews 4:12–13 as containing an echo of Deuteronomy 29:28. Next, the article investigated Deuteronomy 29:28, particularly the meaning of the phrase 'the hidden things' known to God. The article argued that from the wider context of Deuteronomy 29:15–27 'the hidden things' refer to 'the hidden intentions' of the human heart, which is known to God. The next section of the article indicated that this interpretation of 'the hidden things' as the unknown intentions of the human heart, finds support in Philo's *De Cherubim* 16. Revisiting Hebrews 4:12–13, the article argued that based on the similarities of thought, structure and function, Deuteronomy 29:28 forms one of the conceptual backgrounds of Hebrews 4:12–13 and indicated how this enhances the interpretation of the passage. The article concluded by very briefly reflecting on the contribution of Hebrews 4:12–13 to the biblical concept of the knowledge of God.

**Contribution:** The article contributed to the investigation of the well-known and important Hebrews 4:12–13, as well as the investigation of the occurrence and use of Deuteronomy in the book of Hebrews.

**Keywords:** Hebrews 4:12–13; Deuteronomy 29:28 (29:29 ET); Philo *De Cherubim* 16; intertextual study; conceptual echo; knowledge of God.

## Introduction

Hebrews 4:12–13 is arguably one of the best-known passages in the book of Hebrews:

<sup>12</sup>Ζῶν γὰρ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐνεργῆς καὶ τομώτερος ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν μάχαιραν διστομον καὶ διεικνούμενος ἄχρι μερισμοῦ ψυχῆς καὶ πνεύματος, ἄρμῶν τε καὶ μυελῶν, καὶ κριτικὸς ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας. <sup>13</sup>καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν κτίσις ἀφανῆς ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, πάντα δὲ γυμνά καὶ τετραχηλισμένα τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ, πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος. (NA<sup>28</sup>)

<sup>12</sup>Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. <sup>13</sup>And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. (NRSV)<sup>1</sup>

Most scholars view Hebrews 4:12–13 as the author's own composition, which contains various parallels with Old Testament language and thought (cf. Ellingworth 1993:260). As the current article will indicate below, very few scholars consider Deuteronomy 29:28 (29:29 ET) as one of the possible conceptual backgrounds of the passage. This article argues that Hebrews 4:12–13 contains among others a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, which when noted, enhances the interpretation of the passage.

Within New Testament intertextual studies 'echoes' are defined as recollections or resonances of an Old Testament passage without any obvious reference to that passage (cf. Guthrie 2003:273; Hays 1989:21–33). Where quotations and allusions contain a number of consecutive words in the New Testament with a high degree of conformity with (1) specific Old Testament

1. Apart from this initial quotation, which is taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), all other translations from Scripture and Philo are my own.

**Note:** Special Collection: Biblical Theological investigations into the attribute of Gods wisdom.

verse(s), with quotations usually accompanied by an introductory formula, echoes recall Old Testament passages by means of key words and arguments. A conceptual echo, on the other hand, is remarkably like an echo, but without sharing the exact vocabulary of the source text. Conceptual echoes repeat the gist or thought of the source text.

The article starts in providing a baseline interpretation of Hebrews 4:12–13 by discussing its content and message, and especially the proposed backgrounds of the passage. Next, the article investigates Deuteronomy 29:28, particularly the meaning of the phrase ‘the hidden things’ (הַחַיְתוּבִים [MT] | τὰ κρυπτά [LXX]) known to God. The article argues that ‘the hidden things’ refer to the intentions of the human heart, and in the next section of the article, finds support for this view in Philo’s *De Cherubim* 16. The article then returns to Hebrews 4:12–13, arguing why the passage can be viewed as containing a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, and indicates how this modifies the interpretation of the passage. The article concludes by very briefly reflecting on the contribution of Hebrews 4:12–13 to the biblical concept of the knowledge of God.

## Hebrews 4:12–13

Hebrews 4:12–13 forms the conclusion of the larger Hebrews 3:7–4:13. The passage is exhortative from beginning to end and consists of a quotation of Psalm 95:7b–11 (LXX 94:7b–11), followed by its exposition and application. Psalm 95 refers in song to Israel’s disobedience at Kadesh as recorded in Numbers 14. The latter describes how Israel, based on the negative report of the ten spies, refused to take possession of the promised land, and how God declared that the current generation would not enter Canaan, but wander in the wilderness for 40 years. The author uses Israel as a tragic example of unbelief and disobedience, and by means of spelling out the dire consequences of their actions, urgently exhorts his addressees to faith and obedience. The author specifically argues that there is still opportunity for the addressees to enter God’s eschatological rest (cf. Heb 4:9), and that they should not miss this opportunity due to carelessness. All of this indicates that Hebrews 3:7–4:13 is a homiletical midrash on Psalm 95.

Hebrews 4:12–13 functions as the conclusion of this midrash, linked to the previous with the conjunction ‘for’ (γάρ). These verses form a long periodic sentence (Blass & Debrunner 1961:242 [§464]; cf. Heb 1:1–4; 2:2–4; 3:12–15). Hebrews 4:12 centres around the subject ‘the word of God’ (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ), one of the only two occurrences of the phrase in Hebrews (cf. Heb 13:7). Syntactically, Hebrews 4:12 describes ‘the word of God’ by means of five predicative complements,<sup>2</sup> which can be seen in Figure 1.

Taken as a whole, these complements focus on the performative nature of God’s word (cf. Treier 2009:337–350): it is ‘living and active’, able to achieve something; ‘sharper

<sup>2</sup>These complements are linked to one another with the use of the conjunction ‘and’ (καί). The copula ‘is’ (ἔστιν) is implied.

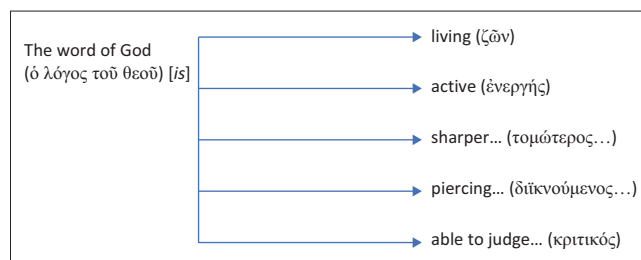


FIGURE 1: The syntax of Hebrews 4:12.

than any two-edged sword’,<sup>3</sup> it can ‘pierce’ what cannot be separated by human means or understanding, namely the division of ‘soul and spirit’ and ‘joints and marrow’;<sup>4</sup> it is ‘able to judge’, that is ‘discern’, even the subtle distinctions between ‘thoughts’ (ἐνθύμησις) and ‘intentions’ (ἔννοια) of the human heart (Smillie 2004:343).

Consequently, with Hebrews 4:12 the author concludes his midrash on Psalm 95 with reflection on the power of God’s word<sup>5</sup> to discern and to distinguish. His personified description indicates that God’s word has the ability to penetrate the deepest being of man, and then judge their subtlest thoughts and intentions. God’s word can distinguish between what is indistinguishable to human beings. Per implication, nothing can be hidden from the scrutiny of God’s word, and therefore the addressees cannot but respond with faith and obedience to God’s word.

In Hebrews 4:13, the author fluidly shifts from the scrutiny of God’s word to the scrutiny of God himself. Although there is no explicit reference to God, the context makes it clear that He is the implied antecedent of the pronouns of the verse (i.e. αὐτοῦ [2x]; ὄν). Hebrews 4:13 states that no creature is ‘hidden’ (ἀφανής) before him; rather, all are ‘naked’ (γυμνός) and ‘laid bare or prostrate’ (τραχηλίζω)<sup>6</sup> to his eyes. Consequently, the verse emphasises the transparency of all creatures before God as Creator and Judge (cf. Lane 1991:94).

Hebrews 4:13 ends with the somewhat enigmatic phrase πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος. While there are diverse ways in which syntax and consequently, the meaning of the phrase can be

<sup>3</sup>The noun μάχαιρα usually refers to a short dagger or knife (cf. Bauer et al. 2000:622). Smillie (2004:349) argues that the word of God is referred to here as a surgical knife.

<sup>4</sup>Various scholars indicate that the author is probably not speculating about the composition of humankind with the use of these phrases (cf. Hughes 1977:164–165). Rather, he emphasises that nothing can be hidden before God’s word – not even the distinction between soul and spirit, or joints and marrow.

<sup>5</sup>Swetnam (2016:126–138) argues that both occurrences of λόγος in Hebrews 4:12–13 refer to Christ. In Hebrews 4:12 λόγος refers to the person of Christ as high priest (by means of the imagery of the circumcision of the heart, i.e. baptism; cf. Rm 2:18–29; Swetnam 1981:214–224; Allen 2010:285–286), while in Hebrews 4:13 λόγος refers to Christ as sacrificial victim. All scholars find this unlikely. The searching and judging function of the ‘word’ rather ‘tends toward personification’ (Griffiths 2014:84). From the immediate context, ‘God’s word’ refers to ‘God’s voice’ in Psalm 95:7b (cf. Weiss 1991:284), or more broadly, the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. Peterson 2002:126), or the Christian message based on the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. Ellingworth 1993:37, 260).

<sup>6</sup>Τραχηλίζω in Hebrews 4:13 is a *hapax legomenon*. Originally, the verb was used to refer to the act where a victim’s neck was bent or twisted to expose it for slaughter (eds. Louw & Nida 1996:341). The word later also became a wrestling term, specifically for the act where a person grabs his opponent by the neck and throws him down (Liddell et al. 1996:811). From the immediate context, τραχηλίζω in Hebrews 4:13 has none of these traditional meanings. Rather, it appears that τραχηλίζω is used here figuratively for ‘to expose’ or ‘to be exposed’ (Bauer et al. 2000:1014). This interpretation is strengthened using ἀφανής and γυμνός in the verse.

understood,<sup>7</sup> within the context of God's judgement, the noun *λόγος* is probably used in relation to a commercial 'calculation' (eds. Louw & Nida 1996:582). The phrase can be translated as 'with whom we are dealing' or 'to whom we must give account' (Bauer et al. 2000:60; cf. Bruce 1990:114; Griffiths 2014:85–87).<sup>8</sup> The use of *λόγος* at the beginning of 4:12 and the end of 4:13 functions as an inclusion and a pun (Bloor 2023:56).

Overall, the main emphasis of Hebrews 4:12–13 is on the power of God and his word to examine and discern (Ellingworth 1993:261). The paragraph functions as a warning (cf. DeSilva 2000:170; Käsemann 1984:19), calling the addressees to an obedient response to God's word.

In the past, the high number of New Testament *hapax legomena*<sup>9</sup> and the unique word order of Hebrews 4:12–13 has led some scholars to the hypothesis that the passage is an (excerpt from an) early Christian poem or hymn. The absence of poetic devices found in other early Christian hymns (Attridge 1989:133), as well as the change of subject in Hebrews 4:13, convinces most scholars in the opposite direction, namely that the author himself composed Hebrews 4:12–13 as a creative and artistic conclusion to his quotation and application of Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3:7–4:11 (cf. Lane 1991:96).

Most scholars indicate that the language that the author employs in Hebrews 4:12–13 has various parallels with Old Testament language and thought. These parallels do not suggest that the author is quoting from or alluding to a specific source. Rather, the language 'recalls that of the LXX at several points' (Ellingworth 1993:260). Consequently, these parallels might be viewed as echoes.

The more striking LXX parallels include the following<sup>10</sup>: Wisdom 1:6, which describes God as witness to the inmost feelings and true observer of the hearts of sinners (Lane 1991:103); Wisdom 7:23, which reflects on the nature of wisdom, specifically her penetrating power; Wisdom 18:14–16, which personifies the word of God as a warrior carrying a sharp sword striking the firstborn of Egypt with the exodus (Attridge 1989:133; Cockerill 2012:216 n. 8); 1 Samuel 16:7, which indicates that God does not look at

7.The preposition *πρός* with the accusative, can express a hostile or friendly relationship, which can be translated as 'to whom' (cf. Blass & Debrunner 1961:125 [§239(5)]). The pronoun *ἡμῖν* can be viewed as an indirect object or a dative of manner.

8.Smellie (2005:21–25) argues that *λόγος* in 4:13 should be understood like *λόγος* in 4:12, namely as 'word', but this time as the hearer's 'word' in response to God's word to him or her. The phrase should then be translated as 'to whom the word is now our duty', or a little more freely, as 'to whom we now must return a word'. Similarly, Hughes (1979:11) summarises the meaning of the final words of the passage as follows: 'He to whom the Word has been given shall be required to give a word in return'. More recently, Eklund (2015:101–115) interpreted *λόγος* in Hebrews 4:13 as 'a multilayered reference' both to divine speech (Ps 95 in Heb 3:7–4:11) and the incarnate Logos (Christ in Heb 4:14 ff.).

9.The New Testament *hapax legomena* in the passage are *τομός*, *δῆκνέομαι*, *ἄρμος*, *μυελός*, *κριτικός*, *ἀφανής* and *τραχηλιζομαι*. Besides these, the following words are only used here in Hebrews: *ἐνεργής*, *δίστομος*, *ἐνθύμησις*, *ἔννοια*, *γυμνός* and *ὄφθαλμός*. All of this contributes to the artistic nature of Hebrews 4:12–13.

10.Apart from these suggestions, there are also smaller parallels with Targum Neofiti and Targum Pseudo-Jonathan (cf. Lane 1991:103) and various parallels with the works of Philo. For an overview of Philo's references to the Logos and biblical words (cf. Attridge 1989:133–134), Moffatt (1924:55) rightly indicates that 'our author is using *Philonic* language rather than *Philonic* ideas'.

TABLE 1: The parallels between Hebrews 4:12 and Wisdom 1:6.

	Heb 4:12	Wisdom 1:6
Greek text	κριτικός ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας	ὅτι τῶν νεφρῶν αὐτοῦ μάρτυς ὁ θεὸς καὶ τῆς καρδίας αὐτοῦ ἐπίσκοπος ἀληθής
Translation	'[the word of God] is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart'	'because God is a witness of his kidneys [i.e. the deepest thoughts] and a true overseer of his heart'
Keywords	ἐνθύμησις; ἔννοια; καρδία	νεφρός; καρδία

TABLE 2: The parallels between Hebrews 4:13 and 1 Enoch 9:5.

	Heb 4:13	1 Enoch 9:5
Greek text	καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν κτίσις ἀφανῆς ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, πάντα δὲ γυμνά καὶ τετραηλιζομένα τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ	καὶ πάντα ἐνώπιόν σου φανερά καὶ ἀκάλυπτα· καὶ πάντα ὄρας, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ κρυβῆναι σε δύναται <sup>11</sup>
Translation	'and there is no creature hidden before him, but all are naked and prostrate to his eyes'	'and all things are visible and uncovered before you; and you see all things, and nothing can hide itself from you'
Keywords	ἀφανής; γυμνός; τραχηλιζω	φανερός; ἀκάλυπτος

the outward appearance of human beings, but the heart (Hughes 1977:168); Isaiah 55:11, which describes the dynamic efficacy or the self-fulfilling character of the word of God, accomplishing God's purpose (Bruce 1990:112; cf. Philip 2011:130); Psalm 139, which depicts God as omnipresent and omniscient, discerning the poet's thoughts (Koester 2001:274); Judges 3, which refers to Ehud's 'double-edged sword' (*μάχαιραν δίστομον*; Jdg 3:16) and his 'message from God' (*λόγος θεοῦ*; Jdg 3:20) for Eglon (Griffiths 2014:81); and especially 1 Enoch 9:5, in which the chief angles declare in praise that all things are 'visible' (*φανερός*) and 'uncovered' (*ἀκάλυπτος*) before God's sight, that he 'sees' (from *ὄραω*) all things and that there is nothing that can be 'hidden' (from *κρύβω*, a late form of *κρύπτω*) from him (Cockerill 2012:217 n. 16; Koester 2001:274; Moffatt 1924:57).

In my view, by distinguishing between the motifs of (1) the scrutiny of God or his word to discern the thoughts or intentions of the human heart (Heb 4:12), and (2) the transparency of all things in God's sight (Heb 4:13), the greatest parallels that surface between Hebrews 4:12–13 and the Old Testament and its extant literature found in the LXX are Wisdom 1:6 and 1 Enoch 9:5. Hebrews 4:12 and Wisdom 1:6 contain the strongest parallel to the first motif, while Hebrews 4:13 and 1 Enoch 9:5 contain the strongest parallel to the second motif. An overview of these parallels can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2, respectively.

Up to date, scholars have not viewed Hebrews 4:12–13 as containing an echo of Deuteronomy 29:28. The scholar that comes the closest, is Moffatt (1924:57). A century ago, he indicated that he views Philo's *De Cherubim* 16 as explaining 'what the writer had in mind' in Hebrews 4:12–13. In *De*

11.The final sentence of 1 Enoch 9:5 (*καὶ πάντα ὄρας, καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ κρυβῆναι σε δύναται*) is contained in the Greek text of Georgius Syncellus, but not in the Gizeh Greek text (cf. ed. Black 1970:23). Charles (1912:21, 283) argues that it is probably omitted in the Gizeh Greek text due to *homoioteleuton* (verse 6 also starts with *ὄρας* ['you see']). For a discussion of the Greek text of 1 Enoch, see Bauch (2019:285–388). For a discussion of 1 Enoch 9:5, see Nickelsburg (2001:212).

*Cherubim* 16, Philo explains Deuteronomy 29:28. Building on Moffatt's argument, I argue that Hebrews 4:12–13 contains among others a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, to which the article now turns.

## Deuteronomy 29:28

It is universally accepted that the author of Hebrews makes use of a version of the LXX for his quotations from and allusions to the Old Testament (cf. Moffitt 2011:79 n. 78). For the purposes of this article, an investigation of Deuteronomy 29:28 LXX should consequently follow. Two factors suggest that it is prudent to start with an investigation of this verse in the MT before moving on to its investigation in the LXX: (1) The current investigation is tracing a conceptual parallel, and not a quotation or allusion. It is therefore sensible to endeavour to determine the meaning of the different concepts in Deuteronomy 29:28 as best as possible, and this can be done among others by investigating how these concepts are translated from Hebrew to Greek. This is even more important in the case of Deuteronomy 29:28, which as will be indicated below, contains two enigmatic concepts. (2) Deuteronomy 29:28 in the MT contains peculiar markings which may or may not be important to the current investigation. Consequently, in what follows, Deuteronomy 29:28 is firstly investigated in the MT, then the LXX, and finally in combination, to determine the meaning of its enigmatic concepts.

Deuteronomy 29:28 (MT | LXX; 29:29 ET) is part of Moses' third discourse in the book of Deuteronomy (Dt 28:69–31:29 [29:1–31:29 ET]). It primarily contains exhortations to observe the covenant renewed in Moab,<sup>12</sup> and an indication that Joshua will succeed Moses.

The structure of Deuteronomy 29 is clear: The passage starts with an introduction providing the context (Dt 28:69 [29:1 ET]), followed by historical reflection on the last 40 years, namely the time from the exodus to the current point in the narrative context, just prior to the entry of the promised land (Dt 29:1–8 [29:2–9 ET]). Next, Moses indicates that the covenant is binding to the present and future generations (Dt 29:9–14 [29:10–15 ET]), after which he provides warnings and indications of punishment, should Israel disobey the covenant, even in secret (Dt 29:15–27 [29:16–28 ET]). Like Deuteronomy 28 (cf. Dt 28:64–68), these warnings culminate in the exile. After this follows the 'enigmatic' (Merrill 1994:385) Deuteronomy 29:28 (29:29 ET), which is the focus of the current investigation. Structurally, the verse can be viewed as the conclusion of Deuteronomy 29 (Lundbom 2013:840), the introduction of Deuteronomy 30 (Block 2012:692–693), both (Harstad 2022:773), or a separate unit added at a later (post-exilic) stage (Lundbom 2013:804, 814; Otto 2016:2042, 2064–2065). In my view, Deuteronomy 29:28 fits best as the

12. There is a difference of opinion whether Deuteronomy 29 refers to a new covenant (Brueggemann 2001:259–260), the renewal of the existing covenant (Block 2012:672; Wright 1996:284), the ratifying of the terms of the second covenant (Tigay 1996:274), or whether it is a sermon with covenantal language and thought (McConville 2002:414). Together with others, I am of the opinion that the chapter refers to the renewal of the already existing covenant.

conclusion of Deuteronomy 29. Deuteronomy 29:28 in the MT states:<sup>13</sup>

הַנְּסֻתֹת לַיהוָה אֲלֵהֶנּוּ וְהַגְּלוֹת לָנוּ וְלִבְנֵינוּ עַד-עוֹלָם לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת:

[*'The hidden things (are) for the Lord our God, but the revealed things are for us and our sons for ever to do all the words of this law.'*] (Hebrew Transl. Deut 29:28)

The verse centres around the ambiguous terms 'hidden things' (הַנְּסֻתֹת) and 'revealed things' (הַגְּלוֹת). Both are *Niphal* participles. The first is from the root נָסָה, which has the basic meaning of *hide* or *conceal*. In the current context, the participle is best translated as *hidden* or *secret things* (Brown, Driver & Briggs 1977:711; Wehmeier 1997:815). The closest parallel is Psalm 19:13 (19:12 ET), where the identical *Niphal* participle refers to *hidden sins*. The exact referent of the *hidden things* in Deuteronomy 29:28 will be discussed below, but for now it is sufficient to note that these things are 'for the Lord our God', suggesting that He knows it. The second participle is from the root גָּלָה, which refers to the act of *uncovering* or *removing* (Brown et al. 1977:162–163). The participle הַגְּלוֹת is then best rendered as 'revealed things'. The referent of 'the revealed things' is much clearer: it refers to what the final clause of Deuteronomy 29:28 calls, 'all the words of this law', namely the Deuteronomic law (Block 2012:693). This, all of Israel (including Moses) is to *do* (from עָשָׂה), that is, *obey* (cf. Dt 4:1; 5:1; etc.). The use of הַגְּלוֹת might contain a play on the Hebrew word for *exile* (גֹּלוּת), which is from the same root (גָּלָה), but this is not clear.<sup>14</sup>

The words, 'for us and for our sons' are marked with special dots in the MT (לָנוּ וְלִבְנֵינוּ) and are referred to as *Nequdoth* or *puncta extraordinaria*. Only ten such occurrences are found in the Torah, and only fifteen in the Old Testament as a whole (cf. Butin 1969:1; Tov 2012:52).<sup>15</sup> Scholarly consensus views the *Nequdoth* as dots used by ancient scribes to indicate letters or words which are doubtful, and which should subsequently be erased or deleted (Butin 1969:6, 116–117; Tov 2012:52; cf. Harstad 2022:766). Some scholars provide other suggestions for the occurrence of the *Nequdoth* in Deuteronomy 29:28, namely that it is used to indicate *midrashic* commentary, limiting the application of these words (Tigay 1996:283), that the dots themselves are a form of commentary,<sup>16</sup> or that they emphasise the importance of the words for future generations (Otto 2016:2066).<sup>17</sup>

13. The text is taken from the BHQ (McCarthy 2007:86), although there are no differences between the BHQ and the BHS in this case.

14. Howard (1997:861) indicates that the two distinct meanings of the verb גָּלָה, namely 'to uncover' and 'to go away', 'are kept fairly well separated' by means of the different Hebrew verb stems, while Lundbom (2013:813) states that Deuteronomy does not use the Hebrew root גָּלָה with the meaning of *exile*.

15. These occurrences are Genesis 16:15; 18:9; 19:33; 33:4; 37:12; Numbers 3:39; 9:10; 21:30; 29:15; Deuteronomy 29:28; 2 Samuel 19:20; Isaiah 44:9; Ezekiel 41:20; 46:22 and Psalm 27:13.

16. Christensen (2001:730) indicates that the Aleppo Codex has twelve instead of ten dots at Deuteronomy 29:28. According to him, the ten dots may refer to the Ten Words of the Decalogue, while the twelve dots may refer to the twelve tribes of Israel. He also argues that the dots may highlight the numerical value of the words. According to him, the numerical value of the two words under the dots are multiples of 32, and the number 32, which is associated with *glory*, calls attention to 'the glory of YHWH'. Christensen comes close to viewing Deuteronomy 29:28 as containing a coded message.

17. For a detailed discussion of the *Nequdoth* in Deuteronomy 29:28 according to ancient Jewish sources, (cf. Butin 1969:100–107).

Deuteronomy 29:28 in the LXX reflects a literal translation of the Hebrew:<sup>18</sup>

τὰ κρυπτὰ κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν, τὰ δὲ φανερὰ ἡμῖν καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις ἡμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, ποιεῖν πάντα τὰ ῥήματα τοῦ νόμου τούτου.

[The hidden things (are) for the Lord our God, but the visible things are for us and our children until eternity to do all the words of this law.]

The Hebrew words כְּרֻפְתִּים and לְבָרָרִים are translated with τὰ κρυπτὰ and τὰ φανερὰ in the LXX. Both are neuter plural adjectives used substantively. The basic meaning of κρυπτός is something that is *hidden* or *secret* (Bauer et al. 2000:570–571), while the adjective φανερός usually refers to something that is *visible*, *manifest*, *clear*, *plain*, *evident*, or *[in] the open* (Liddell, Scott & Jones 1996:1915).

For the interpretation of Deuteronomy 29:28 the main question is what ‘the hidden things’ refer to. Various proposals have been made:

- *It refers to the unknown future, which God knows:* Deuteronomy 29:19–27 (29:20–28 ET) warns Israel that if they abandon the covenant, the anger of the Lord will burn against them, that the curses of Deuteronomy will descend on them, that the land will be devastated, and that they will be cast into another land. Directly on this follows the reference to ‘the hidden things’ in Deuteronomy 29:28. This could suggest that ‘the hidden things’ refer to the unknown future, either the answer to the question of whether Israel will indeed abandon the covenant, or more probably, the answer to the question of how God will be able to restore Israel as promised in Deuteronomy 30 in light of the terrible destruction promised in Deuteronomy 29. Deuteronomy 29:28 would then imply that God alone knows what will happen to his people in the future (Brueggemann 2001:264–265; Wright 1996:293 cf. Merrill 1994:385). The prerogative of the Israelites is not to fret in trying to answer this question, but to obey God’s laws, which is clear (Craigie 1976:360–361). The advantage of this interpretation is that it links Deuteronomy 29:28 directly with the context, both the verses that precede and follow.
- *It refers to the knowledge of God, which is not revealed to human beings in toto:* Deuteronomy 29–30 indicates that God has revealed much to Israel in his law, that his law is clear and accessible (cf. Dt 30:11–14), and that Israel’s mandate is to *do* (i.e. *obey*) his law. Considering this, Israel can easily assume that they have been given a total knowledge of God. Deuteronomy 29:28 then indicates that such thinking would be presumptuous (Craigie 1976:361). It has pleased God to conceal much from human understanding; many things are known only to Him (Harstad 2022:772). Put differently, God knows more than He has revealed to Israel; He is bigger than his revelation. He has revealed all that is needed for Israel to know and to obey him (Wright 1996:293). This leads scholars to the conclusion that Deuteronomy 29:28 is a wisdom maxim (Mayes 1979:368; cf. Hill 1997:301). Support for this is found in Job 28:21,

18. The critical text of the *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Göttingensis editum*, is used as the basis for the investigation of Deuteronomy 29:28 LXX (ed. Wevers 2006:324).

which states that wisdom is *hidden* (the *Niphal* perfect הִתְקַדְּשׁ [from the root הִתְקַדַּשׁ] in the MT || the aorist passive indicative ἐκρύβη [from the root κρύπτω] in the LXX) and concealed from all living things (McConville 2002:419). The advantage of this proposal is that it is a plain reading of the text (Christensen 2001:731).

- *It refers to hidden sins:* After referring to the idols of the surrounding nations (Dt 29:15–16 [29:16–17 ET]), Moses reflects that there might already be some among the people who are turning away from God to serve other gods, and that they falsely assume that they are safe to harbour such thoughts (Dt 29:17–18 [29:18–19 ET]). Moses explicitly warns that this is not the case; God’s anger will burn against them, and after the various curses of Deuteronomy has struck them, his wrath will culminate in the exile (Dt 29:19–27 [29:20–28 ET]). With this as the immediate background, ‘the hidden things’ can refer to the hidden sins of unfaithful Israelites who serve other gods. Deuteronomy 29:28 is then meant as a warning against those who think that they can sin secretly. Tigay indicates that Targum Pseudo-Jonathan interprets ‘the hidden things’ as concealed sins known to God, which He will punish, while it states that the punishment of public sins is the responsibility of the people. According to this view, Deuteronomy 29:28 assures the people that although the private scheme of one man (Dt 29:17–20 [29:18–21 ET]) may lead to the destruction of the entire land (Dt 29:21–27 [29:22–28 ET]), ‘God will punish those and will hold the people responsible only if they fail to punish sins of whose commission they are aware’ (Tigay 1996:283). Support for this interpretation is the broader context of Deuteronomy which refers to secret sins (Dt 27:15, 24), and as indicated above, Psalm 19:13 MT (19:12 ET), which uses the *Niphal* participle הִתְקַדְּשׁ to refer to ‘hidden sins’. The advantage of this proposal is that it reads Deuteronomy 29:28 within the context of Deuteronomy 29:19–27.
- *It refers to things still unknown within the law:* Another view, albeit somewhat dubious and not suggested by many, is that both ‘the hidden things’ and ‘the revealed things’ refer to ‘all the words of this law’. ‘The revealed things’ are things that Israel knew at the point in time when Deuteronomy 29 was directed to them, while ‘the hidden things’ are matters within the same law that will become clear as scholars ponder the meaning of these words, and as God reveals more of their meaning to them (Christensen 2001:730). In time, ‘the hidden things’ become ‘the revealed things’.<sup>19</sup>
- *It refers to the reasons for the commandments:* Tigay (1996:283) indicates that the 12th century Jewish philosopher Maimonides interpreted ‘the hidden things’ as the reasons for the commandments of God, which is known to Him, and ‘the revealed things’ as the performance of the commandments, which is Israel’s mandate. Deuteronomy 29:28 then teaches that Israel is not exempted from obeying the law even if they do not know why these commandments are given.

19. A possible New Testament parallel is Matthew 13:51–52, where the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven, is compared to the master of a house who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. The interpretations of this verse, however, are legion.

These proposals are not exhaustive. The first three suggestions, however, enjoy the most support from the immediate context and the scholarly community. Deciding which one fits the context the best, is a more challenging task. My own view is that the scale tips in favour of the third option, but in a slightly different sense. I do not view *hidden things* as a reference to *hidden sins* per se, but rather the *hidden intentions* of the human heart. This is supported by the wider context of Deuteronomy 29:15–27 (29:16–28 ET). After the initial reference to the detestable idols the people saw in Egypt (Dt 29:15–16 [29:16–17 ET]), Deuteronomy 29:17 (29:18 ET) explicitly refers to someone's *heart* (לִבָּ) or *mind* (διάνοια) that might be *turning away* (from the root פָּנָה || ἐκκλίνω) from God to serve the gods of the nations. Deuteronomy 29:18 (29:19 ET) subsequently states that such an individual may 'bless himself in his heart' (וְהִתְבָּרַךְ בְּלִבּוֹ || ἐπισημίσῃται ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ), thinking that he is safe to walk in the 'stubbornness of my heart' (בְּשִׁרְיוֹת לִבִּי || ἐν τῇ ἀποπλάνῃσει τῆς καρδίας μου). Deuteronomy 29:19–27 (29:20–28) then explains how God's anger and judgement will ensue after such idolatry (see especially Dt 29:25 [29:26 ET]). Consequently, these verses centre around a warning against idolatry, and this warning starts with reflecting on the hidden intentions of the human heart. This suggests that *hidden things* in Deuteronomy 29:28 should be understood in the same way. Nothing in the immediate context indicates that Israel has the responsibility to punish public sin (McConville 2002:419). Rather, it warns against the dire consequences when those who harbour hidden intentions of idolatry in their hearts, turn and serve other gods. It therefore seems best to interpret 'the hidden things' in Deuteronomy 29:28 as 'the hidden intentions' of the human heart, which Deuteronomy 29:28 states are 'for the Lord our God', indicating that it is known to and cannot be hidden from Him (cf. Wehmeier 1997:818).

Before moving on, it is important to keep the main message of Deuteronomy 29:28 in mind. At the end of the day, the emphasis does not fall on 'the hidden things', but 'the revealed things'. Deuteronomy 29:28 is an urgent call for Israel and its future generations to wholeheartedly obey God's revealed law.

The interpretation of 'the hidden things' in Deuteronomy 29:28 as 'hidden intentions' of the human heart finds support in Philo's *De Cherubim*, which the article subsequently investigates.

## Philo's *De Cherubim* 16

Philo's *De Cherubim* is an exegetical and allegorical treatise which consists of two parts: the first is a homily on Genesis 3:24 (*De Cherub.* 1–39), while the second part is a homily on the very next verse, Genesis 4:1 (*De Cherub.* 40–130; cf. Colson & Whitaker 1950:3). The first homily mainly consists of the discussion of various phrases and words from Genesis 3:24, which reads as follows:

And he [God] cast out the man, and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and a sword of flame that turned to guard the way to the tree of life.

Philo starts this homily by distinguishing between the verbs *sent out* and *cast out* (*De Cherub.* 1–2). He argues that the use

of *cast out* in Genesis 3:24 (שָׁרַף in the MT; ἐκβάλλω in the LXX) indicates that Adam could not return to the garden of Eden. To substantiate this view, he draws on the Hagar narrative (Gn 16–21). Philo indicates that Hagar left Sarah twice; she returned the first time, but was unable to do so the second time, since she was *cast out* (*De Cherub.* 3–10).

Next, Philo turns to discussing the preposition *in front of* or *over against* (ἐναντίον in the MT; ἀπέναντι in the LXX; ἀντικρύν in Philo) within Genesis 3:24's reference to the cherubim and the sword of flame that God placed *in front of* the garden of Eden (*De Cherub.* 11–20). While Philo points out that the phrase may indicate hostility (*De Cherub.* 12–13), or the position of an accused before a judge (*De Cherub.* 14–17), he interprets the preposition in Genesis 3:24 in the sense of intimacy or friendliness, for which he finds support in the example of Abraham in Genesis 28:22–23 (*De Cherub.* 18–20; cf. Colson & Whitaker 1950:3–4).<sup>20</sup>

Of importance for the current investigation is Philo's train of thought in *De Cherubim* 14–17, in which he discusses the preposition *over against* in terms of the second possible interpretation, namely that of an accused before a judge. To illustrate his point, Philo refers to the example of a woman who is suspected of adultery by her husband in Numbers 5. The law prescribes that the priest should place the woman 'in front of' or 'over against' (ἐναντίον) the Lord, and that he should uncover her head (*De Cherub.* 14). In his reflection of these words that follows (*De Cherub.* 15–16), Philo considers that words and deeds are *well-known* (γνώριμος; Liddell et al. 1996:355) to everyone, but that the *intention* or *purpose* (διάνοια) is not *well-known* (γνώριμος). In fact, it is *unknown* (ἄδηλος; Liddell et al. 1996:21) whether the intention is sound and healthy or unhealthy and polluted. On this follows the significant part:

γενητὸς δὲ οὐδεὶς ἰκανὸς γνώμης ἀφανοῦς κατιδεῖν ἐνθύμημα, μόνος δὲ ὁ θεός. (*De Cherub.* 16)

[And no created being is able to see distinctly the thought of the invisible intention, but God alone.]

The Scriptural proof Philo provides to substantiate his argument, is a quotation from Deuteronomy 29:28:

τὰ κρυπτά κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ, τὰ δὲ φανερά γενέσει γνώριμα

[The hidden things (are) for the Lord God, but the visible things are well-known to the creature.]

There are clear differences between the quoted words in Philo and the LXX. In the first clause Philo does not refer to the Lord as *our* (ἡμῶν) God. More strikingly, however, is the second clause which begins similarly to the LXX with 'the visible things' (τὰ δὲ φανερά) but is then replaced in its entirety by the phrase 'well-known to the creature' (γενέσει γνώριμα). This change in formulation leads to a juxtaposing of divine and human knowledge in Deuteronomy 29:28: visible things are well-known to human beings; hidden things, per implication, are well-known to God. This juxtaposing is illustrated in Table 3.

<sup>20</sup>Also see Philo's summary of these three interpretations in *De Cherubim* 11.

**TABLE 3:** The juxtaposition within Philo's adapted quotation of Deuteronomy 29:28 in *De Cherubim* 16.

First clause	Morphology	Second clause
'the hidden things'	<i>Subject</i>	'the visible things'
'to the Lord God'	<i>Indirect object</i>	'to the creature'
('well-known')	<i>Modifier</i>	'well-known'

Philo concludes this section by returning to reflection on Numbers 5, arguing that the procedure reveals the sentiments which the soul nourishes, to bring it before the examination and judgement of God (*De Cherub.* 17).

In sum, Philo interprets 'the hidden things' in Deuteronomy 29:28 as the unknown intentions of the human heart, which are known to God. While it should be noted that Philo's interpretation of passages from Scripture are often unique (especially some of his allegorical interpretations), Philo's use of Deuteronomy 29:28 supports the interpretation reached at the end of the previous section of this article, namely that 'the hidden things' in Deuteronomy 29:28 refers to the hidden intentions of the human heart, which cannot be hidden from God.

## Hebrews 4:12–13 revisited

Returning to Hebrews with the previous conclusions in mind, the argument can now be made that Deuteronomy 29:28 forms one of the conceptual backgrounds of Hebrews 4:12–13.

At first glance, Hebrews 4:12–13 does not contain any of the keywords of Deuteronomy 29:28, especially τὰ κρυπτά or τὰ φανερά. This is probably why Deuteronomy 29:28 has not received a great deal of scholarly investigation as one of the possible backgrounds of the passage. Closer investigation, however, reveals that Deuteronomy 29:28 and Hebrews 4:12 forms a conceptual parallel. In the discussion of Deuteronomy 29:28 above, it was argued that the wider context of Deuteronomy 29:15–27 supports the interpretation of 'the hidden things' (הַסְּתֵרִים || τὰ κρυπτά) as 'the hidden intentions' of the human heart, which are 'for the Lord our God', namely known to him. Philo supports this interpretation of Deuteronomy 29:28 in *De Cherubim* 16 by quoting this verse in such a way that τὰ κρυπτά, which he views as the unknown intentions of human beings, are said to be *well-known* (γνώριμος) to the Lord God.<sup>21</sup> In turn, the author of Hebrews concludes his midrash on Psalm 95:7–11 in Hebrews 4:12 by warning his addressees that the word of God is able to discern 'the thoughts and intentions of the heart' (ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοῶν καρδίας), indicating that these things are well-known to God's word. Consequently, the conceptual parallel between Deuteronomy 29:28 and Hebrews 4:12 is the ability of God (Dt 29:28) or his word (Heb 4:12) to know the hidden intentions of the human heart. In addition, although not as

21. Strikingly, the wider context of Philo's *De Confusione* 14–17, has several parallels with Hebrews 4:12–13. Compare the use of ἀφανής (Heb 4:13; *De Cherub.* 16), ἔννοια (Heb 4:12) vs διάνοια (*De Cherub.* 16), ἐνθύμησις (Heb 4:12) vs ἐνθύμημα (*De Cherub.* 16), and Philo's use of words of knowing (γνώμη [*De Cherub.* 15, 16, 17]; γνώριμος [*De Cherub.* 16<sup>39</sup>]). This does not, however, suggest that the author of Hebrews is alluding to or echoing Philo's *De Cherubim*, but rather confirms the interpretation that both passages deal with God's ability to know the hidden intentions of the human heart.

explicit as the motif of the ability of God or his word to know the hidden intentions of the human heart, the motif of the transparency of all things before God's sight, as found in Hebrews 4:13, is implied in Deuteronomy 29:28.

Apart from this conceptual parallel, Hebrews 4:12–13 and Deuteronomy 29:28 also share similarities in terms of structural function and message:

- *Structural function:* Hebrews 4:12–13 is the conclusion to the author's midrash on Psalm 95:7–11 in Hebrews 3:7–4:11; Deuteronomy 29:28 is the author's conclusion to Deuteronomy 29:1–27.
- *Message:* Deuteronomy 29:28 boils down to an urgent call for Israel and its future generations to wholeheartedly obey God's revealed law. The function of Hebrews 4:12–13 is remarkably similar: it is an urgent call for the addressees not to harden their hearts (Ps 95:7–11), but to respond to God's word with faith and obedience.

Based on the similarities of thought, structure, and function, it seems like Deuteronomy 29:28 forms one of the conceptual backgrounds of Hebrews 4:12–13. Without using its vocabulary, Hebrews 4:12–13 recalls and resonates Deuteronomy 29:28's thought. This possibility is strengthened by the confirmation that the author of Hebrews knew Deuteronomy 29. In Hebrews 12:15, the author alludes to Deuteronomy 29:17 (29:18 ET) in his exhortation that the addressees should ensure that 'no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble' (μή τις ῥίζα πικρίας ἄνω φύουσα ἐνοχλῆ).<sup>22</sup> The author's knowledge of the relatively obscure Deuteronomy 29:17, suggests that he would have known the climactic Deuteronomy 29:28 as well.

Noticing that Hebrews 4:12–13 contains a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, enhances the interpretation of the passage in the following ways:

- The author's argument in Hebrews 4:12–13 rests on scriptural proof, namely that of Deuteronomy 29:28. By making use of a conceptual echo, the author implies that Scripture teaches that the intentions of the human heart are known to God.
- The conceptual echo strengthens the view that Hebrews 4:12–13 is not solely meant as a warning against hardening the heart. Just like the emphasis in Deuteronomy 29:28 falls on the *revealed things*, namely the mandate to *do* the words of the law, Hebrews 4:12–13 is an exhortation to obey God's voice as revealed in his Son.
- Although not explicit, the conceptual echo enhances Hebrews' frequent exhortation that the addressees should look out for one another (cf. Heb 3:13; 4:1, 11; 10:24, 25; 12:14–16; Coetsee 2021:6, 9). Deuteronomy 29:28 reminds Israel that the words of the law are for 'us and our children forever' (ἡμῖν καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις ἡμῶν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα).

22. Though scholars agree that the words of Hebrews 12:15 allude to Deuteronomy 29:17 (29:18 ET), there is considerable debate about the author's *Vorlage* for this allusion. See, among others, Katz (1958:213–217) for discussion. Strikingly, as argued above, Deuteronomy 29:17 is one of the verses that suggest that 'the hidden things' in Deuteronomy 29:28 should be interpreted as 'the hidden intentions' of the human heart.

Based on the conceptual echo, the implied exhortation of Hebrews 4:12 to obey God's voice, includes the exhortation that the addressees should ensure that all members of their community do this.

- The interpretation of the enigmatic phrase 'to whom we must give an account' (πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος) as an implied exhortation to respond to God's words with obedience, is strengthened by the conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28 with its implied exhortation to *do* all the words of the law.

Unlike Deuteronomy 29:28, which refers to the ability of God to discern the intentions of the human heart, Hebrews 4:12 refers to the ability of God's word to do this. God's word is personified; it is assigned an ability that is limited to God himself. By formulating Hebrews 4:12 in this way, the author not only emphasises the authority of God's word, but the crucial importance that the addressees obey it.

## Conclusion

After arguing that Hebrews 4:12–13 contains a conceptual echo of Deuteronomy 29:28, emphasising that the hidden intentions of the human heart are known to God, it is fitting to conclude by very briefly reflecting on the contribution of Hebrews 4:12–13 to the biblical concept of the knowledge of God.

Hebrews 4:12–13 indicates that God has perfect knowledge of all things. Even things that cannot be separated by human means or understanding are known to Him – also the subtle thoughts and intentions of the human heart. A person might hide the true intentions of their heart from others. They might even hide it from themselves. But the deepest intentions of their hearts are not hidden from God. Before this God, human beings exist in total transparency, and to this God wholehearted obedience is required as the only correct response to his great revelation and redemption in his Son.

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