

THANKFUL FOR FIRE (WITHOUT HAVING TO BE A  
CHARISMATIC!): THE APPLICATION OF HEBREWS 12:29

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A Research Paper

Presented to

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for NT5150

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by

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May 16, 2024

## THANKFUL FOR FIRE (WITHOUT HAVING TO BE A CHARISMATIC!): THE APPLICATION OF HEBREWS 12:29

In what is considered his final warning, the author of Hebrews concludes, “for our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).<sup>1</sup> What reaction was that meant to evoke? Without question, that believers would persevere in their faith. But what about the motivation for the perseverance? There are two answers: (1) fear of judgment;<sup>2</sup> or (2) gratitude for God’s redemption in light of his holiness.<sup>3</sup> Most certainly, the answer involves both reactions considering the immediate and larger contexts. But in terms of identifying which application is more *primary*, then it must be latter.<sup>4</sup> This will be the view presented and defended in this paper.

To establish the context of the question, an exegesis of Hebrews 12:25–27 will be provided. Exegetical insights of vv. 28–29 will be reserved for the latter portion of this paper which will deal with the thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> NASB 1995 quoted throughout unless specified otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 338; Craig Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 562; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 383; John Owen, *An Exposition to the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, vol. 24 of *Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1854), 376; James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1924), 223; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, WBC 47B (Dallas: Word, 1991), 487; Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023), 662.

<sup>3</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 366; Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 673; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, EBTC (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 407; Robert J. Cara, *Hebrews*, A Mentor Commentary (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2024), 519–520; Patrick Gray, *Godly Fear: The Epistle to the Hebrews and Greco-Roman Critiques of Superstition*, AcBib 16 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 209–14.

<sup>4</sup> To reframe the question in Cara terms, “What is closer to the center of the circle (of meaning).”

## I. Exegesis: Hebrews 12:25–27

### A. Context

Throughout, the author of Hebrews interweaves two themes: (1) the superiority of Christ over OT figures and institutions; and (2) warnings of apostasy and the need to persevere. Based off the argument itself, it is clear that the church addressed in this letter was tempted to go back to the ways of the old covenant system.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, the circumstances surrounding the church were such that total abandonment of one's Christian profession proved convenient in this life (cf. 10:32–34). But to do such was to commit apostasy.<sup>6</sup> Apostasy under the old covenant was punished by a merciless death (Deut 17:2–6; Heb 10:28), but the author reveals that apostates under the new covenant have a worse fate (2:3; 10:29; 12:29). That is because, the sin is more heinous.<sup>7</sup> Nothing was worse than to reject the significance of the Levitical cult and the Mosaic law. These were what foreshadowed the hope of Christ, the reality. So, to reject Christ—not the shadow but the reality—was to commit a greater crime than disbelieving “the word spoken through angels” (2:2), and “setting aside the law of Moses” (10:28). The greater sin receives greater punishment. Thus, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31).

However, the warnings do not serve only to describe the horrific end of apostates. The primary thrust is pastoral. Meaning to evoke godly fear for believers to hold firm in their conviction

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<sup>5</sup> Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 325–25; Kenneth L. Schenk, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews: The Settings of the Sacrifice*, SNTSMS 143 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24–47.

<sup>6</sup> Carson gives a helpful NT definition of apostasy, “The word *ἀποστασία*, for instance, occurs only twice in the NT, once to refer to turning away from Moses on the part of Jews (Acts 21:21), the other to refer to the great rebellion that takes place when the man of lawlessness is revealed (2 Thess. 2:3).” The key here is to understand that apostasy entails a *turning away* from a former conviction, in this case, it is from the new covenant. See page 13 of D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” *WTJ* 54 (1992), 1–29.

<sup>7</sup> For a helpful exposition of degrees of heinousness, see WLC 150 and 151.

to the end (3:14).<sup>8</sup> Like the exemplars of the OT (see ch. 11), the church must persevere in faith and look to Christ who will perfect it (12:2).

Moving into the final warning, the author's reason for the church to continue their fight of faith is because they have come to Mount Zion (12:22). That is, as opposed to Mount Sinai (12:18–21). The Sinai episode was horrifying. The presence of God filled the mountain and like Isaiah the prophet (Isa 6:5), the people were ruined. What Sinai demonstrated was the gap between a holy God and a sinful people. The covenant given in this context of fear and trembling, rightly communicated the severe stakes of the covenant relationship. However, it is more so for those who have come to Zion. But rather than fear, the emotion associated with Zion is that of incredible joy. Zion is identified here to be the heavenly Jerusalem where there are a joyful assembly of angels and God's people gathered in worship (12:22–23). The confidence of dwelling in God's presence is grounded in the blood of Jesus Christ which speaks a better word than Abel as it cries for mercy rather than judgment, and is effectual (12:24).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This is similar to what Progressive Covenantalists (PC) argue for about the warnings in Hebrews, as a *means of salvation*. But in arguing so, they deny the warnings are legitimate in that they describe a potential reality. Thus, apostasy for new covenant members is a hypothetical category. However, this is an unnecessary conclusion. A better explanation is that apostasy in the warnings are descriptive of *phenomenological believers*. For the PC view see Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker, eds., *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 198–203; and Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 327; for the phenomenological believer view, see Buist M. Fanning, “A Classical Reformed View,” in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 172–256; Wayne Grudem, “Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study from the Warning Passages in Hebrews,” in *Still Sovereign*, ed. T. R. Schreiner and B. A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000): 133–82; what Cara calls the *Traditional Reformed* view, see *Hebrews*, 192; Scot McKnight calls this the *phenomenological-false believer view*, see “The Warning Passages in Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions,” *TrinJ* 13NS (1992): 23–24.

<sup>9</sup> Grindheim, *Hebrews*, 653–54; Cara, *Hebrews*, 509.

## B. *The Warning (12:25–27)*

Hebrews 12:25–29 is the last of five warning passages in Hebrews (2:1–4; 3:7–19; 6:4–8; 10:26–31; 12:25–29).<sup>10</sup> There are two parts to 12:25–29: (1) the warning (vv. 25–27); and (2) the exhortation (vv. 28–29).<sup>11</sup>

25. Βλέπετε (“see to it”) begins this word of warning like 3:12 which also shares the wilderness generation example as background of the exhortation.<sup>12</sup> The force of the command is carried along by the negative particle μή combined with the aorist subjunctive παραιτήσησθε (“you do not refuse”).<sup>13</sup> The direct object of the prohibition is the substantive participle τὸν λαλοῦντα (“the one speaking”).<sup>14</sup> In the prior verse, the speaker was Christ’s blood. But the speaker’s identity here is not explicitly stated and therefore has caused some questioning whether it is God or Jesus who is speaking.<sup>15</sup> The verse prior gives weight to Christ, though this section concludes with God who is owed gratitude and also the one who judges (vv. 28–29). But when considering how the author has spoken of the mediatorial nature of Christ’s speaking (cf. 1:2), the answer is both: *God speaks through his Son*.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Scholars define the borders of the warnings differently, but this one is provided by Dana Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT (Nashville: B & H, 2019), xi–xvii.

<sup>11</sup> Cara, *Hebrews*, 511–12.

<sup>12</sup> Harris, *Hebrews*, 393.

<sup>13</sup> Known as a *prohibitive subjunctive* which the formula is μή + aorist subjunctive. The force is equivalent to an imperative. See Daniel B. Wallace, *The Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 204–05.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, *Hebrews*, 393–394.

<sup>15</sup> Most take God to be the speaker. For an extensive list of where commentators land, see Cara, *Hebrews*, 512; Cynthia Westfall sees the subject still as the blood of Christ, see *A Discourse Analysis of the Letter to the Hebrews: The Relationship Between Form and Meaning* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 268.

<sup>16</sup> Peter O’Brien wonderfully covers this dynamic in the first chapter of his book *God has Spoken through His Son: A Biblical Theology of Hebrews*, NSBT (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 21–43.

The pervasive theme of contrast is once again enforced in the latter half of v. 25, “much less” (cf. 2:2–3; 9:14; 10:29; 12:9).<sup>17</sup> The lesser-to-greater argument first includes the consequence of inescapable judgment faced by the wilderness generation who failed to heed the warning from on earth. Famine, war, failure of crops, disease, and exile were all examples of curses which Israel faced when they refused God’s word.<sup>18</sup> They did not escape (οὐκ ἐξέφυγον).<sup>19</sup> The speaking—in the case of the wilderness generation, through Moses<sup>20</sup>—and the curses were mediated through earthly means.<sup>21</sup> But now, the speaking is from heaven through Jesus (τὸν ἀπ’ οὐρανῶν),<sup>22</sup> and by implication the punishment for rejection will be escalated likewise (cf. 10:29).

**26.** Here three periods of time are alluded to: Sinai (τότε), the present time (νῦν δὲ), and the eschaton (ἔτι ἅπαξ ἐγὼ σείσω).<sup>23</sup> The antecedent of οὗ is τὸν χρηματίζοντα (v. 25), referencing the same event at Sinai.<sup>24</sup> The voice of God having shaken the earth (οὗ ἡ φωνὴ τὴν γῆν ἐσάλευσεν τότε) is a call back to Exodus 19:18 MT “the whole mountain quaked violently.” But since the

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<sup>17</sup> Cara helpfully speaks of redemptive-historical contrasts of in terms of *contrast within continuity* and in this case is a *graded* contrast (as opposed to antithetical). See page 249 of Robert J. Cara, “Covenant in Hebrews,” in *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Perspectives*, ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, and John R. Muether (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 247–66.

<sup>18</sup> Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Fulfilment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology* (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2020), 94.

<sup>19</sup> Two significant textual witnesses  $\mathfrak{P}^{46}$   $\kappa^2$  show the variant ἐφυγον, however, since the words still render the same meaning it makes no practical difference. Other witnesses include D K L  $\Psi$  0243. 0285. 104. 365. 630<sup>vid19</sup>. Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle, *Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus*, ed. Barbara Aland et al., 28. revidierte Auflage. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012), 681.

<sup>20</sup> Idea of God speaking through Moses as God “now” speaks through his Son. Cara, *Hebrews*, 512.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 405.

<sup>22</sup> A verb for warning/speaking is not provided though it is clearly implied by the contrast (cf. NASB, ESV, NIV, KJV).

<sup>23</sup> “I will shake” (σεισω: fut. act. ind. 1st. sing.).

<sup>24</sup> Harris, *Hebrews*, 395.

LXX omits this detail, it is likely the author of Hebrews was alluding to Judges 5:4–5 LXX (cf. Ps 68:8).<sup>25</sup>

“But now” (νῦν δὲ) then introduces the *greater* of the *a fortiori* argument, that God has promised (ἐπηγγέλται: perf. mid/pas. ind. 3rd. sing.) an eschatological shaking.<sup>26</sup> The introduced speech is a prophecy from Haggai 2:6. See table below for comparison,<sup>27</sup>

Haggai 2:6 (LXX)	Hebrews 12:26 (NA28)
Ἔτι ἅπαξ ἐγὼ σείσω τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ τὴν ξηράν	ἔτι ἅπαξ ἐγὼ σείσω οὐ μόνον τὴν γῆν <sup>28</sup> ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν οὐρανόν.

The picture of cosmic upheaval was to say that God would act powerfully to restore the temple through judging the nations.<sup>29</sup> Certainly, this prophecy saw a near fulfilment in the second temple, however, such fulfilment was partial.<sup>30</sup> The postexilic temple began in disappointment (cf. Hag 2:3) and ended in devastation (AD 70). The author of Hebrews understood that such glory could not have been attributed to the temple which was likely still erect when the letter was written.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Assuming the author of Hebrews was utilizing the LXX as his source for OT quotations and allusions. See Lane, *Hebrews* 9–13, 478.

<sup>26</sup> “Has promised” (ἐπηγγέλται) as a perfect, indicates ongoing validity. See Cockerill, *Hebrews*, 664.

<sup>27</sup> Black = same wording; green = same wording in shifted order; red = addition to original quote; purple = words not quoted from original.

<sup>28</sup> Kistemaker takes the transposition of “heaven and earth” as referencing the sequence of Christ’s work of “shaking” (i.e. first and second coming; cf. Matt 27:51; 28:2; Matt 24:29; 2 Pet 3:10). Simon Kistemaker, *New Testament Comm : V.15 : Hebrews*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 398–99.

<sup>29</sup> George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 989; Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 102.

<sup>30</sup> Cara, *Hebrews*, 514.

<sup>31</sup> Notable scholars who hold to a pre AD 70 date of Hebrews are as follows: Bruce, *Hebrews*, 21–22; D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament—Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 607; David A. DeSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 20–21; Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 5–6; Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Jewish Christians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Hebrews, James, and Jude* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 27; Mary Healy, *Hebrews*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 22–23.

Thus, the prophecy was understood eschatologically.<sup>32</sup> As opposed to the prior shaking at Sinai, this coming event involves both earth and heaven, a clear Hebraism which encompasses the entire created order (cf. Mark 13:31).<sup>33</sup> Though “shaking” is a clear reference to a literal seismic event (e.g. Sinai), it also indicates judgment (cf. Hag 2:6), and here the judgment aspect is more central and further intensified than previously experienced.<sup>34</sup>

27. The argument from v. 26 is continued, indicated by the postpositive δέ (“now” EVV), and the Haggai quotation is reintroduced by the neuter article τό (“the words” NIV).<sup>35</sup> Yet the quotation is narrowed to “ἔτι ἅπαξ” (“once more”). With this shorthand repetition, the author of Hebrews clarifies (δηλοῖ: pres. act. ind. 3rd sing.) the meaning of the quote. Thus, the intent is not so much to be hyper focused on merely two words (i.e. ἔτι ἅπαξ), but to direct attention back to the whole prophecy (cf. 8:13).<sup>36</sup>

The grand upheaval at the eschaton will serve the purpose to discontinue all things which “can be shaken” (σαλευομένων: pres. pas. ptc. pl. gen. neut.) so the things which “cannot be shaken” (μὴ σαλευόμενα: pres. pas. ptc. pl. nom. neut.) would remain. What is meant by “removing” (μετάθεσις) is at least a change (cf. 7:12) or a taking away (cf. 11:5).<sup>37</sup> Complete annihilation

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<sup>32</sup> It was also the case that apocalyptic Jewish literature understood Hag 2:6 as eschatological. See Jub. 1:29; 1 En. 45:1; Sib. Or. 3.675–80; Ps.-Philo, Bib. Ant. 19.5; 2 Bar. 32:1; 59:3. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 479.

<sup>33</sup> The Hebraism is expressed with extra emphasis by a *disjunctive negative* formula οὐ μόνον . . . ἀλλὰ καὶ (“not only . . . but also”). See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Logos Bible Software, 2006), 1166; TDOT, “גָּרַם,” 389.

<sup>34</sup> Edgar McKnight and Christopher Church, *Hebrews–James*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2004), 302.

<sup>35</sup> Harris, *Hebrews*, 396.

<sup>36</sup> Such technique is a clear nod to the author’s knack for rhetoric. This would have been common also for sermon oratory, which scholars believe Hebrews to have been a sermon in its original form. See Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 10; Lane also identifies this technique as “parenthetic midrash,” where the hortatory aspect of the text is at the front and center of concern. Such a condensed statement of the quote is thus, not intended to be explanatory but provocative. See Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 481.

<sup>37</sup> BDAG, “μετάθεσις,” 639.



however, is not a necessary interpretation.<sup>38</sup> The “created things” (πεποιημένων: perf. pas. ptc. pl. gen. neut.) —mentioned as the direct object of the eliminating action—could be better understood as “all that is corruptible and defiling in the present creation.”<sup>39</sup> Believers ought not to place their hope in this transient world, which is destined to fade away. Rather, they should set their sights on the promised rest found in the new heavens and new earth, where the resplendent glory of God will be fully and magnificently revealed.

## II. Appreciation or Apprehension?

### A. *Unshakable Kingdom (12:28)*

Once the warning concludes in v. 27, the author moves to exhortation (vv. 28–29).<sup>40</sup> Demonstrating that the coming judgment for the world is in turn a comforting promise to believers. Διό draws an inference from the previous verse (v. 27), since what is unshaken will remain from this judgment act, believers ought to be grateful as what they will inherit is God’s kingdom, that which is unshakable (βασιλείαν ἀσάλευτον).<sup>41</sup> Whilst even believers are to fear the judgment of God, the author desires that the believer’s response be marked by gratitude (χάρις: “thankful” NIV; “grace” KJV). With thanksgiving, believers would live their lives in worthy service to God.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the coming judgment is the grounds for the believer’s perseverance. Not that they are to be horrified and have hell scared out of them, but to have firm confidence that what they will be given

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<sup>38</sup> Some scholars who take the annihilation view are Moffatt, *Hebrews*, 221; Attridge, *Hebrews*, 381; Schenk, *Cosmology and Eschatology in Hebrews*, 125–32; McKnight and Church, *Hebrews–James*, 302.

<sup>39</sup> Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 406.

<sup>40</sup> Note the order of warning followed by exhortation has been the pattern for all the warning passages (cf. 2:1–4ff; 3:7–19ff; 6:4–8ff; 10:26–31ff).

<sup>41</sup> βασιλείαν ἀσάλευτον are both acc. sing. fem. Harris, *Hebrews*, 397.

<sup>42</sup> Δι’ ἧς indicates means (“by which”) and the antecedent of ἧς is χάρις. Harris, *Hebrews*, 398.

by God is imperishable and everlasting. Yet, such an attitude is not carefree, and is always needed to be modified by “reverence and awe” (εὐλαβείας καὶ δέους).<sup>43</sup>

### **B. Consuming Fire (12:29)**

In the warning previous (10:26–31), the author concludes with the ominous remark, “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31).<sup>44</sup> Seemingly, he has done so again here in v. 29. But rather than an explanation, he gives imagery of God as fire (πῦρ).

The picture of God as a fire is from Deuteronomy 4:24 (LXX) where the exact wording is found πῦρ καταναλίσκον (“consuming fire”).<sup>45</sup> The context of the Deuteronomy quotation is a warning against idolatry, and Deuteronomy 4:24 is an explanatory clause which shows the severe nature of YHWH as judge.<sup>46</sup> The overtone is the threat of judgment.<sup>47</sup> As God was a consuming fire to Israel’s enemies (cf. Deut 9:3), he will also be to his people if they apostatize. This idea is explicitly seen in Hebrews 10:26–31. Where God’s “adversaries” (ὕπεναντίους) who in context are apostates (cf. 10:26, 30), will be consumed by “the fury of a fire” (10:27).<sup>48</sup> One other place

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<sup>43</sup> Both words have been utilized in Hellenistic literature to describe attitudes of reverent caution concerning deities. BDAG, δέος, 218; εὐλάβεια, 407

<sup>44</sup> For a minority report that sees 10:31 as a positive statement (contra negative judgment), see James Swetnam, “Hebrews 10:30–31: A Suggestion,” *Biblica* 75(3) (1994): 388–94.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 691; the verb καταναλίσκον is a NT *hapax*. Attridge, *Hebrews*, 383.

<sup>46</sup> James E. Robson, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 154.

<sup>47</sup> Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, NAC 4 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 125; interestingly, Craigie takes Deuteronomy 4:24 to make the point of God’s love being expressed in jealousy, and therefore, the fire imagery is to primarily to express God’s awesomeness (contra judgment), see Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 138.

<sup>48</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 293; a minority view holds the fire mentioned in 10:27 is that of cultic purification fire, and not a reference to eschatological judgment, see J. Michael McKay Jr., 2022, “God’s Holy Temple Fire as Possible Background to Heb 10:27: ‘fury of fire,’” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (San Antonio, TX: November 15).

conceptually similar is the warning in Hebrews 6:4–8. Though πῦρ (“fire”) is not mentioned, the imagery of burning (καῦσιν) as a result of judgment is employed (6:8).<sup>49</sup>

So, it seems that when fire is mentioned in context of apostasy passages in Hebrews, the indication is negative judgment, an intent of producing trepidation amongst hearers. More so, the use of the “consuming fire” imagery from Deuteronomy 4:24 and its understanding in its original setting, easily transfers to the theme of judgment in Hebrews. Calvin even comments on the transition to 12:29, “As he had before kindly set before us the grace of God, so he now makes known his severity.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite acknowledging that there was a tone of grace preceding v. 29, Calvin asserts the tone has shifted to severity in v. 29.

Although, the imagery from Deuteronomy makes a fierce push for a negative understanding of v. 29, there is one crucial detail which does not allow such a reading. That is, the conjunction γάρ. Runge explains, “Γάρ introduces explanatory material that strengthens or supports what precedes.”<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the conjunction forces the reader to presuppose that v. 29 is in support of v. 28, rather than seeing them independently or even disjunctively. Consider the Deuteronomy allusion, “*For* the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut 4:24).<sup>52</sup> Supporting what? Here is the previous verse, “So watch yourselves, that you do not forget the covenant of the Lord your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a graven image

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<sup>49</sup> Other places where “fire” (πῦρ) is mentioned are 1:7, 11:34, and 12:18. These mentions of fire are somewhat related to judgment, but not as closely as the other instances mentioned. Cara, *Hebrews*, 518.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, *Hebrews*, 338.

<sup>51</sup> Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 54.

<sup>52</sup> Emphasis mine. The LXX uses ὅτι as the conjunction which is meant to be in translation of the Hebrew conjunction וְ which can function to provide “the grounds for a preceding expression or expressions by marking with וְ the motivation.” Thus, serving the same purpose as γάρ. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2017), 434.

in the form of anything against which the Lord your God has commanded you” (Deut 4:23). Moses is giving a warning against idolatry, and then provides the motivation grounded in God’s judgment.

What about in the case of Hebrews? Verse 28 says, “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.” Yes, fear plays a role in this verse, but the primary point which sings from this exhortation is *gratitude*. The “shaking” (i.e. judgment) which God will bring about will preserve God’s people. In other words, there will be *salvation through judgment*. That is why the point of gratitude is made. Believers can now serve God confidently knowing that God, despite the severity of his nature as a judge, a consuming fire, that this same God will keep them. In light of this, consider the motivation, “for our God is a consuming fire” (v. 29).

So, is it really the case that after an exhortation of confidence in the midst of God’s judgment, that the author of Hebrews makes a last effort to ominously warn the people about God’s judgment? This could be the case, yet, the grammar does not support such a view. Yes, “consuming fire” definitely presupposes judgment, not just on unbelievers, but also to apostates from the covenant community. This is certainly *a* point, however, not *the* point.<sup>53</sup> But the conjunction “for” (γάρ) combined with the intensive “indeed” (καί) with its connection to the gratitude exhortation (ἔχωμεν χάριν) in v. 28, along with the personal “our God” (ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν) makes to bolster confidence in the believer to serve God with thanks.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cara comments, “I view this as the secondary background point here,” *Hebrews*, 519.

<sup>54</sup> Cara, *Hebrews*, 519; also a quote from Barth, “And in Heb. 12:29 the exhortation to thankfulness for the received “kingdom which cannot be moved” is based on the statement that “our God is a consuming fire.” Karl Barth, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God, Part 1* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 219.

### Conclusion: Calvin or Cara?

This paper explored the application of Hebrews 12:29, “for our God is a consuming fire.” Primarily, scholars land on two positions: either (1) this verse is meant to drive the fear of God’s judgment for believers to persevere; or (2) it is meant to bolster the point made in v. 28 that believers are to have gratitude in worship knowing that God is a judge, yet preserves us. Again, it should be acknowledged that this is arguing which point is more *primary* since both are valid from the context.<sup>55</sup>

So, two sides, which can be represented by esteemed reformed scholars John Calvin (fear view) and Robert Cara (gratitude view). Which is it, Calvin or Cara? Verdict: although Calvin should always be considered a worthy name for one’s own progeny, the weight of evidence on this interpretive issue upholds Cara’s view. *Gratitude*. Therefore, Christians can give thanks in their worship because “our God is a consuming fire.”

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<sup>55</sup> In Cara’s terms, this is a “Moises Silva-like hyper-technical point.”

## Appendix – Hebrews 12:25–29 Logical Progression with NA28 Apparatus

### 25 Βλέπετε

μη παραιτήσησθε τὸν λαλοῦντα·

εἰ γὰρ ἐκεῖνοι οὐκ ἔξέφυγον<sup>56</sup> ὅτι ἐπὶ γῆς παραιτησάμενοι τὸν<sup>257</sup> χρηματίζοντα,

πολὺν μᾶλλον ἡμεῖς οἱ τὸν ἀπ' οὐρανῶν<sup>58</sup> ἀποστρεφόμενοι,

### 26 οὗ ἢ φωνὴ τὴν γῆν ἐσάλευσεν τότε,

νῦν δὲ ἐπήγγελται λέγων·

*ἔτι ἄπαξ ἐγὼ σείσω<sup>59</sup>*

οὐ μόνον τὴν γῆν

ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸν οὐρανόν.

### 27 τὸ δὲ ἔτι ἄπαξ δηλοῖ ὅτι [τὴν] τῶν σαλευομένων<sup>60</sup> μετάθεσιν

ὥς πεποιημένων,

ἵνα μείνη τὰ μὴ σαλευόμενα.

### 28 Διὸ βασιλείαν ἀσάλευτον παραλαμβάνοντες

ἔχωμεν<sup>61</sup> χάριν,

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<sup>56</sup> Ἦ εφυγον P<sup>46</sup> K<sup>2</sup> D K L Ψ 0243. 0285. 104. 365. 630<sup>vid</sup>. 1505. 1739. 1881 m z<sup>c</sup> | txt K\* A C I P 048. 33. 81. 326. 1175. 1241 lat

<sup>57</sup> ὅτι 4 I-3 P<sup>46</sup>\* K<sup>2</sup> L P Ψ 0285. 365. 630. 1505 m | 3 4 I 2 104. 629 lat | txt P<sup>46c</sup> K\* A C D I 048. 0243. 33. 81. (της γης 1175). 1241. 1739. 1881 co

<sup>58</sup> οουρανου 0243. 0285. 6. 614. 630. 1241. 1739. 1881 t

<sup>59</sup> Ἦ σειω D K L P Ψ 81. 104. 365. 630. 1505 m | txt P<sup>46</sup> K A C I 048. 0243. 0285. 6. 33. 1175. 1241. 1739. 1881 lat co

<sup>60</sup> ὅτι τῶν σαλευομενων την D<sup>2</sup> K P Ψ 81. 104. 365. 630. 1505. 1881 m | τῶν σαλευομενων P<sup>46</sup> D\* L 0243. 323. 1739 | txt K\*(2) A C 0285. 33. 326. 1175. 1241

<sup>61</sup> Ἦ εχομεν P<sup>46</sup>\* K P 6. 33. 104. 326. 365. 629. 1505. 1881 lat | txt P<sup>46c</sup> A C D L Ψ 0243. 81. 630. 1175. 1241. 1739 m ar bvg<sup>mss</sup> co

δι' ἧς <sup>62</sup> λατρεύωμεν εὐαρέστως τῷ θεῷ

μετὰ <sup>63</sup> εὐλαβείας καὶ δέους.

**29** <sup>64</sup> καὶ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν πᾶρ καταναλίσκον.

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<sup>62</sup> <sup>62</sup> λατρευωμεν <sup>46</sup> bo | λατρευομεν <sup>8</sup> (Ψ) 0243. 0285<sup>vid.</sup> 1739. 1881 m | txt A D L 048. 33. 326 latt sa bo<sup>ms</sup>

<sup>63</sup> <sup>63</sup> δεους και ευλαβειας 365 | αιδους και ευλαβειας K L Ψ 104. 630. 1505 m | ευλαβειας και αιδους <sup>2a</sup> D<sup>1</sup>  
P 0243. 614. 945. 1739. 1881 d | txt <sup>46</sup> <sup>8</sup>\*.2b A C D\* 048. 33. 81. 1175. 1241 sa<sup>mss</sup> bo

<sup>64</sup> <sup>64</sup> κυριος D\*