Hebrews 12:9 revisited: The background of the phrase ‘and live’

In this article, the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 is investigated. Although most scholars are silent on the matter, the majority of those who venture to propose a possible background vaguely refer to Proverbs 6:23b. Only a handful of scholars propose other backgrounds. This article aims to fill this lacuna. The first part of the article gives an overview of the argument of Hebrews 12:9 in its context to determine a baseline for the interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’. This is followed by investigating eight possible backgrounds of the phrase and weighing arguments for and against each proposal. Next, the article integrates the findings and concludes that, of all the proposed backgrounds, Deuteronomy 8:1–5 fits the best. If this is correct, the writer uses the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 to positively exhort his hearers to live life as their heavenly Father intended it, now up to eternity, by wholeheartedly obeying his revelation in his Son.

Keywords: Hebrews; Hebrews 12:4–13; Hebrews 12:9; Deuteronomy 8:1–5; Proverbs 3:11–12; Proverbs 6:23; live; life.

Introduction

The conclusion of the a fortiori argument in Hebrews 12:9b asks:

… τὸ κόλπον [δὲ] ἰσοταγηθήσωμεν τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων καὶ ζήσομεν;
… [S]hall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? (ESV)

The majority of scholars agree that the reference to ‘the Father of spirits’ (τῷ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων) probably echoes Numbers 16:22 or 27:16,1 although other possibilities are given (e.g. 2 Mac 3:24; Jub 10:3; 1 Clem 59:3; 64:1; 1 En 37:2).² However, when it comes to the possible background of the phrase ‘and live’ (καὶ ζήσωμεν), most scholars are silent. The majority of those who venture to propose a background vaguely refer to Proverbs 6:23b.³ Only a handful of scholars propose other possibilities. Moreover, there is almost no scholarly discussion on the influence of the possible background of the phrase on the interpretation of the phrase itself or Hebrews 12:9 as a whole.

This article aims to fill this lacuna by investigating the possible background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, and how this possible background influences the interpretation of the phrase and the passage as a whole.

The first part of the article gives an overview of the argument of Hebrews 12:9 in its context to determine a baseline for the interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’. The second part of the article investigates eight possible backgrounds of the phrase, weighing arguments for and against each proposal. Proverbs 6:23 and Deuteronomy 8:1–5 enjoy special attention as possible backgrounds because, of all the proposed backgrounds, these two seem the most likely. The article concludes by integrating the findings to determine the most likely background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, and how this background influences the nuance of the phrase and the interpretation of the passage as a whole.

As a result, this article contributes to the small but growing number of studies on Deuteronomy in Hebrews, as well as the even smaller amount of studies on Hebrews 12:4–13.


A baseline for the interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9

The conclusion of the passage is in the form of an athletic metaphor and motivates the hearers to persevere in faith, reminding them of who Christ is and what he has accomplished.

Hebrews 12:4–13 forms part of the penultimate chapter of the book, which is viewed by various scholars as the climactic chapter of the sermon (especially Heb 12:18–29; cf. Cockerill 2012:64; Ellingworth 1993:669; Lane 1991:448; Westfall 2005:278).

The chapter starts with Hebrews 12:1–3, which forms the conclusion of the long list of heroes of faith discussed in Chapter 11. This conclusion is in the form of an athletic metaphor and motivates the hearers to persevere in faith by giving Jesus as the example of perseverance par excellence. Hebrews 12:4–13 continues the call to perseverance by inviting the hearers to consider the hardship they endured as discipline from God.

An overview of the argument of Hebrews 12:4–13

Hebrews 12:4, which forms a hinge between 12:1–3 and 12:5–13, gives a brief summary of the hearers’ situation and indirectly exhorts them to persevere. This is followed by the main complaint (and both the main encouragement and exhortation) of the passage, namely, that in their hardship the hearers have forgotten what Scripture teaches (12:5a), specifically about divine discipline. This is made clear by a quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12 (12:5b–6) followed by the application of the passage to the situation of the hearers (12:7–11). The application starts with a short summary of the hearers’ situation and indirectly exhorts them to persevere by inviting the hearers to consider the hardship they endured as discipline from God.

Hinge: Summary of the hearers’ situation and indirect exhortation to persevere (12:4)

Main complaint: The hearers have forgotten what Scripture teaches (12:5a)

The words of Scripture they have forgotten: quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12 (12:5b–6)

Application of the quotation to the situation of the hearers (12:7–11)

Main point: Endure for discipline (12:7a)

Argument #1: God’s discipline shows that he is treating them like true sons (12:7b–8)

Claim: God is treating them as sons (12:7b)

Rhetorical question arguing that every son is disciplined by his father (12:7c)

Argument: Unlike illegitimate children, true sons are disciplined (12:8)

Argument #2: God, when disciplining them, is worthy of even more subjection than their earthly fathers (12:9)

A fortiori argument proposition: Their earthly fathers disciplined them, and they respected them (12:9a)

A fortiori argument conclusion: Even more they should be subject to the heavenly father and live (12:9b)

Argument #3: God’s discipline, though unpleasant, is always for their best, and has long-term benefits (12:10–11)

A fortiori argument proposition: Their earthly fathers’ discipline is temporary and subjective (12:10a)

A fortiori argument conclusion: God’s discipline is always for the best, and has long-term benefit: holiness (12:10b)

Honest reflection: Discipline is always unpleasant (12:11a)

Future benefit: Later it yields its fruit, namely righteousness (12:11b)

Conclusion: Be strengthened and persevere (12:12–13)


(12:7b–8, 9, 10–11). The conclusion of the passage is in the form of explicit exhortation (again by means of athletic imagery [cf. 12:1–3], this time taken from Is 35:3 and Pr 4:26a LXX), calling the hearers to be strengthened and to persevere (12:12–13). The argument of Hebrews 12:4–13 is presented in Figure 1.

Proverbs 3:11–12 as the heart of Hebrews 12:4–13

The quotation from Proverbs 3:11–12 forms the heart of the passage. In its Old Testament context, Proverbs 3:11–12 forms part of the extensive discourses in which a father conveys wisdom to his son (Pr 1–9).

Although other delineations are possible, most scholars treat Proverbs 3:1–12 as a unit. The passage contains the instruction of a father to his son on the necessities for quality of life, focusing especially on the need for piety. The son is called to obey his father (3:1–4) and the Lord (3:5–12), or to...

http://www.hts.org.za
pursue ‘steadfast love’ (τῦφος) and ‘faithfulness’ (τῆς θεμελίους; 3:1–4), to trust, fear and honour the Lord (3:5–10), and to accept the Lord’s discipline (3:11–12).12

Proverbs 3:11–12 forms the conclusion of the passage, and states:

The discipline of the Lord, my son, do not reject [if] and do not loathe his reproof, for the one whom the Lord loves, he corrects, even as a father a son he delights in. [Author’s own translation]

For the purposes of this article, the following should be noted about Proverbs 3:11–12:

- The words ‘the discipline of the Lord’ (יוּסַר יְ֭הוָה) are emphasised by two facts: they are the very first words of verse 11 and are followed up by the vocative ‘my son’.
- Verse 12 states the reason or motivation for compliance to verse 11 (‘for’; θαυμάζω). Consequently, verse 11 can be seen as the exhortation and verse 12 as the rationale.
- ‘Reproof’ (γονατίζω; verse 11) and ‘to correct or rebuke’ (γονατίζω; verse 12) belong to the same semantic domain and sound similar (γονατίζω and -γονατίζω).
- The motivation for the Lord’s discipline is given as his ‘love’ (φιλία) and, by way of comparison, his ‘favour’ (χάρις). Consequently, although discipline and correction may be unpleasant and painful (leading to its rejection), it is a sign of grace (cf. Koptak 2003:121; Longman 2006:135).
- The final clause of verse 12 compares the Lord’s conduct towards the addresser with that of a loving father towards his son.14 Waltke (2004:238) indicates that this reference is unique because it is the only reference to God as Father in Proverbs.

For the purposes of this article, it is important to determine whether Proverbs 3:11–12 refers to educative or punitive discipline.15 References to ‘rejecting’ the Lord’s discipline or ‘loathing’ his reproof seem to indicate a type of discipline that is unpleasant. However, it does not necessarily refer to punitive discipline; educative discipline in various cases could be unpleasant as well. Moreover, nothing in the immediate context leads to the interpretation of ‘discipline’ as mere ‘punishment’. Rather, the reference to a father ‘delighting’ in his son supports the interpretation of ‘discipline’, ‘reproof’ and ‘correction’ in an instructive or edifying sense (cf. Croy 1998:196–197; DeSilva 2000:449; Garrett 1993:81; Koptak 2003:121; Thiessen 2009:369; Wilson 2018:85).16 Consequently, it seems best to view ‘discipline’ in Proverbs 3:11–12 MT as instructive or educative discipline.

Except for the more personal vocative,17 Hebrews quotes the words of Proverbs 3:11–12 verbatim from the LXX. It reads as follows:

Son, do not think lightly of the discipline of the Lord nor become weary when you are being reproved by him, for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines, and he chastises every son he accepts. [Author’s own translation]

The following should be noted about Proverbs 3:11–12 LXX:

- The vocative is moved to the beginning of the sentence, and the more personal ‘my son’ is shortened to ‘son’.
- The MT verb ‘reject’ (ἀποκαταλέγω) is translated with ‘think lightly of’ or ‘despise’ (ὁλογορέω) in the LXX, and the verb ‘loathe’ (ἀφίστομαι) with ‘become weary’ or ‘become discouraged’ (ἐκλύω). Although the scope is retained, there is a difference in nuance.
- Explicit reference (by way of comparison) to the Lord disciplining ‘as a father’ is dropped. The LXX translates ‘even as a father’ (ἐκλύομαι) with ‘and he chastises’ (μαστιγοῖ). One possible explanation for this is confusion between the γάτιον γάτιον and the yod, namely that the Hebrew פָּתַר was read as פָּתַר or פָּתַר, the hiphil form of the verb ‘afflict’ (פָּתַר), which is translated as μαστιγοῖ (cf. Fitzgerald 2008:310; Kleinig 2017:606–607; Murphy 1998:20).
- Most strikingly, ‘discipline’ in the LXX seems to have more of a punitive nuance than in the MT, as is suggested by the use of the verb ‘chastise’ (μαστιγοῖος), which can also be translated as ‘whip’, ‘scourge’ or ‘punish’, and the verb ‘reprove’ or ‘correct’ (διδασκάλω). The result is that the Greek text portrays God more severely than the Hebrew’ (Croy 1998:196).

The nuance and meaning of Proverbs 3:11–12 LXX are retained in the quotation found in Hebrews 12:5b–6.

The keyword of Hebrews 12:4–13: Discipline

Flowing from the quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12, the keyword of Hebrews 12:4–13 is ‘discipline’ (ταξίδια or ταξιδεῖα). The word group refers to ‘the act of providing guidance for responsible living’ (Bauer et al. 2000:748–749) or, more specifically, to:

The verb is usually translated as ‘educate’, ‘teach’ or ‘discipline’, and the noun as ‘training’, ‘instruction’,

12. For good overviews of the structure or build-up of Proverbs 3:1–12, see Fox (2005:153–154) and Waltke (2004:238–239). Both view 3:1–4, 5–10 and 3:11–12 as the sub-units of the passage. Waltke (2004:238–239) indicates how the passage is made up of six admonitions or conditions (all the odd verses), each followed with an argument or promise (all the even verses).


14. Along with Waltke (2004:237) and Longman (2006:129), it seems best to translate the Hebrew word בָּשֹׁמֶל with ‘even as or like a father’, not just ‘as or like a father’.

15. The noun ‘discipline’ (τῆς θεμελίους) is very common in the Wisdom Literature, especially the Book of Proverbs. The noun occurs roughly 50 times in the MT, of which 30 (60%) are found in the Book of Proverbs (Sebag 1977:2, 549). The verb יָסַר is found five times in the Book of Proverbs (of the 42 or 43 occurrences in the MT), which means that יָסַר is one of the most common verbs found in Proverbs’ (Branson & Botterweck TDOT 1990:6:129). Branson and Botterweck (1990) refer to the Wisdom Literature as the ‘natural Sitz im Leben’ of the word group.

16. Waltke (2004:248–249) interprets discipline in Proverbs 3:11–12 as punishment, albeit punishment with the aim ‘to restore the afflicted to proper conduct’.

17. Hebrews has ‘my son’ (Υἱέ μου; like the MT) in comparison with the LXX’s ‘son’ (Υἱός). Ellingworth (1993:648) is correct when he argues that the more personal vocative is a ‘natural expansion’, and not an indication that the writer is following the Hebrew text.
‘discipline’ or ‘correction’ (cf. Liddell, Scott & Jones 1996:1286–1287; Louw & Nida 1996:181). The word group links closely to the Hebrew word group ‘discipline’ (παιδεύω ἢ παιδεία) and, unsurprisingly, the majority of references to the root in the MT is translated with παιδεία or παιδεύω in the LXX (Bertram TDNT 1976:5:608; Branson & Botterweck TDOT 1990:6:129). Just like the Hebrew word group, παιδεία or παιδεύω mainly refers to instructive and edifying discipline, although a small number of cases refer to punitive discipline.


The main reasons are:

- The context does not refer to the hardships that the hearers endured as punishment for sin, but as persecution.
- In his application of the quotation of Proverbs 3 to the situation of the hearers, the writer avoids any reference to words from the quotation that may have a punitive nuance, especially ἐλέγχω and μαστιγόω.
- The passage as a whole has education as primary concern, convincing the hearers of their sonship to enable them to endure.
- The motivation of the passage is God’s paternal affection and love.
- The passage forms a parallel with Hebrews 5:8, which states that (the sinless) Jesus learned obedience through what he suffered.

The context, as always, determines the meaning of the word (cf. Croy 1998:197). Taking the above into account, it seems best to interpret ‘discipline’ in Hebrews 12:4–13 as non-punitive.19

The argument of Hebrews 12:9

All of the above form the background of Hebrews 12:9. Hebrews 12:9 is the second argument within 12:7–11 in which the author applies the quotation of Proverbs 3 to the situation of the hearers (12:7–8, 9, 10–11). The argument is in the form of an a fortiori argument. The verse states:

Furthermore, we have had fathers of our flesh as disciplinarians and we respected them; how much more should we be subject to the Father of spirits and live? [Author’s own translation]

The following should be noted:

- The adverb εἶτα indicates something ‘in addition’ to what has just been stated (Bauer et al. 2000:295) and supports the interpretation of Hebrews 12:9, introducing a new argument within the index of arguments found in 12:7–11 (cf. O’Brien 2010:466).
- Linking on to the previous, the verse is made up of a concessive clause (μὴν) followed by correlative clause ([εἰ]).20 The verse consists of an a fortiori argument in the form of a rhetorical question, indicated by the clause ‘how much more’ (οὐ πολύ … μάλλον).
- In this a fortiori argument, distinction is made between ‘fathers of our flesh’ (τούς … τῆς σαρκὸς ἡμῶν πατέρας), namely earthly fathers, and ‘the Father of spirits’ (τὸ πατρὶ τῶν πνευμάτων), namely the heavenly Father. As argued above, the reference to God as ‘the Father of spirits’ probably has Numbers 16:22 or 27:16 as background.21
- The earthly fathers are called ‘disciplinarians’ (or ‘instructors’, ‘teachers’; παιδεύτης, a noun derived from the verb ‘discipline’ (παιδεία)). Most translations translate the word as ‘one who disciplines’ (cf. ESV; NIV; KJV; NASB).
- The verb ‘to be subject’ (the passive form of ὑποτάσσω) is a deliberative future indicating volition (cf. Wallace 1996:570).
- The final words of the verse, namely ‘and live’ (καὶ ζήσομεν), indicate result (Ellingworth 1993:654; Lane 1991:402). The build-up of the verse indicates that the phrase is emphasised.22

The writer’s argument is the following: the hearers had earthly fathers who disciplined them. Despite the possible displeasure of being disciplined, the hearers respected their fathers. The question is then posed: if they accepted their earthly fathers’ discipline (the minor situation), how much more should they subject themselves to the discipline of their heavenly Father (the major situation)? The expected answer is ‘much more’. If they do this, concludes verse 9, they will ‘live’.

The phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9

Taking the phrase ‘and live’ as a result clause, Hebrews 12:9b could be translated as ‘how much more should we be subject to the Father of spirits in order to or so that we can live?’ But what exactly is meant by ‘life’? It could be interpreted to refer to:

- Survival: If the hearers subject themselves to God, they will continue to live. If they do not, per implication, they will die.

http://www.hts.org.za

20. Some manuscripts do not include δέ. For a discussion of its inclusion, see Ellingworth (1993:653).
21. For later (unwarranted) metaphysical interpretations of the phrase, see Hughes (1977:530–531).
22. Croy (1998:201) argues that the writer of Hebrews ‘probably altered the more traditional wording to provide a contrast to earthly fathers’ (cf. Cockerrill 2012:624).
23. O’Brien (2010:467) correctly indicates that the fact that the phrase ‘and live’ has no parallel in the first clause of Hebrews 12:9 indicates that it is ‘particularly emphatic’.

23. The reference to discipline as ‘punishment’ (κομέο) in Hebrews 12:11 need not refer to punitive discipline. It seems to be a generalisation used to motivate the hearers to persevere (cf. Allen 2007:88).

18. Spellman (2016:490) argues that ‘discipline’ in Hebrews 12:4–13 refers to both punitive and non-punitive discipline, with the writer ‘exploiting the multifaceted sense of the term’. Consequently, Spellman (2016:503–506) argues for a ‘dual conception of discipline’ in Hebrews 12. In a similar vein, Kliebe (2016:131) argues that ‘Israel’s wandering in the wilderness after Kadesh Barnea was clearly punitive for those who would die there. But for those who would survive and enter the land after Moses’ passing, it was instructional.

19. The reference to discipline as ‘painful’ (κομέο) in Hebrews 12:11 need not refer to punitive discipline. It seems to be a generalisation used to motivate the hearers to persevere (cf. Allen 2007:88).
Eight possible backgrounds of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9

With this baseline for the interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 within its context, the article now turns to the investigation of possible backgrounds of the phrase. Eight possible backgrounds are investigated, weighing arguments for and against each proposal. Special attention is given to Proverbs 6:23 and Deuteronomy 8:1–5 as possible backgrounds because, of all the proposed backgrounds, these two seem the most likely.

No background

The first possibility is the most obvious one: the phrase does not have a specific background. It is either the writer’s own composition, or he could have been drawing from a plethora of backgrounds without intending or knowing it.

This is indeed a possibility. The phrase ‘and live’ does not need to have a specific background, unless there are strong indications pointing towards one.

Numbers 16:22 or 27:16

The second possibility is that the background is Numbers 16:22 or 27:16. The primary reason for this is the writer’s use of the phrase ‘the Father of spirits’, which most probably has Numbers 16:22 or 27:16 as background. It would make sense if the words ‘the Father of spirits’ refer to God as ‘Father’ or the word group ‘discipline’. It therefore seems unlikely that Numbers 16:22 or 27:16 forms the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9.

Hebrews 10:38 = Habakkuk 2:4

A third possibility is that Hebrews 10:38, which consists of a quotation of Habakkuk 2:4, forms the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9. The primary reason for this is that the future form of the verb ζήσεται is found in 10:38 and 12:9, namely ζήσεται in the former and ζήσομεν in the latter (cf. DeSilva 2000:451–452; Mitchell 2007:273). Moreover, because 12:4 probably links on to the depiction of the hearers’ persecution described in 10:32–34, it would not be strange if 12:9 refers to the verses surrounding 10:32–34 as well. Moreover, the context of both 10:38 and 12:4–13 is very similar; both exhort the hearers to endure in the midst of hardship. Finally, the passages contain a parallel in the words δίκαιος (10:38) and δικαιοσύνη (12:11).

However, the following count against this possibility:

- Both Hebrews 10:38 and Habakkuk 2:4 refer to living by faith, not living in general or eternal life.
- Neither Hebrews 10:38 nor Habakkuk 2:4 refers to discipline.
- Apart from the analogies mentioned above, nothing else points to Habakkuk 2:4 or Hebrews 10:38.

Consequently, it seems like there is a parallel between Hebrews 10:38 and 12:9 in the sense that both are calls for endurance. However, to view Hebrews 10:38 as the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 would perhaps be going too far.

Proverbs 3:2

A fourth possibility is that Proverbs 3:2 forms the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9. Because the quotation of Proverbs 3:11–12 forms the heart of Hebrews 12:4–13, subsequent references to Proverbs 3 (especially 3:1–12, which has been identified as a unit) would be fitting.

In light of this, the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 could have Proverbs 3:2 as background, which refers to ‘length of days and years of life’ (μήκος … βίου καὶ ἔτη ζωῆς). This possibility is strengthened by the fact that the passages contain a parallel in the words εἰρήνη (Pr 3:2) and εἰρηνικός (Heb 12:10). Although it is a bit of a stretch, Proverbs 4:26 LXX is referred to in Hebrews 12:13, which strengthens the possibility of Proverbs as background.
What counts significantly against this proposal, however, is the referent of life; Proverbs 3:2 refers to longevity, although Hebrews 12:9 (as argued above) most probably refers to eternal life. Moreover, ‘life’ is a very common word in ancient literature, especially in the Book of Proverbs. Finally, although Proverbs 3:11 refers to discipline, Proverbs 3:2 does not. Consequently, the link between Hebrews 12:9 and Proverbs 3:2 seems to indicate a common parallel rather than literary dependence.

**Jewish tradition that refers to the premature death of illegitimate children**

A fifth possibility is that the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 has Jewish tradition as background, specifically Jewish tradition that refers to the premature death of illegitimate children.

This is the argument of Fitzgerald (2008:312). He suggests that the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 contrasts with illegitimate sons (vôloû), especially undisciplined ones, who often die prematurely according to Jewish tradition. He refers to various Jewish texts to substantiate his claim (see Fitzgerald [2008]). A closer investigation indicates that these texts indeed refer (both directly and indirectly) to the short lifespan of illegitimate children and the longevity of disciplined ones. Because Hebrews 12:8 refers to illegitimate children (vôloû), Fitzgerald consequently argues that the phrase ‘and live’ should be interpreted as referring to the longevity of disciplined sons.

A closer inspection, however, reveals that none of these texts refer to God as Father, or make any comparison between earthly fathers and the heavenly Father. Moreover, these texts do not refer to God as disciplining someone. Also, the interpretation of γάω in Hebrews 12:9 as ‘survival’ or ‘long-life’ – as in the Jewish texts referred to – does not fit the context of Hebrews as well as the interpretation of life as ‘eternal life’ does.

Finally, as argued above, there is a shift in argument in Hebrews 12:9; the use of ἐν in 12:9 indicates that a new argument is reached within 12:7–11. Although it will be a mistake to make a watertight division between 12:8 and 12:9, this shift in argument weakens the possibility that ‘illegitimate children’ in 12:8 and ‘live’ in 12:9 should be linked together.

Consequently, as with other possible backgrounds discussed above, the argument for Jewish tradition as the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 – although not impossible – seems unlikely.

**Exodus 20:12 or Deuteronomy 5:16**

A sixth possibility is one that is not referred to in many sources, with the notable exception of Phillips (2006:548). He argues that the reference in Hebrews 12:9 to ‘Father’ and ‘life’ echoes the fifth commandment of the Decalogue, namely the command to ‘Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you’ (Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16).

What counts for this proposal is the fact that both passages refer to ‘father’, and there is a semantic parallel between ‘honour’ (τιμάω; Ex 20:12; Dt 5:16) and ‘submission’ (ὑποτάσσω; Heb 12:9).

However, a couple of factors are noteworthy against this proposal:

- The fifth commandment makes no reference to ‘discipline’, the keyword of Hebrews 12.
- The fifth commandment makes no distinction between an earthly father and the heavenly Father. In fact, the Decalogue makes no reference to God as Father at all.
- Hebrews 12 contains no reference to ‘mother’.
- Hebrews 12 contains no reference to the Promised Land or life in the Promised Land.
- Hebrews 12 does not refer to a long life (μακροχρόνιος), but (eternal) life (ζάω).

Accordingly, the parallel between Hebrews 12 and the fifth commandment is quite general. However, the popularity of the Decalogue does not exclude the possibility that Hebrews 12:9 would have recalled the fifth commandment in the minds of the hearers.

**Proverbs 6:23**

Apart from scholars who remain silent on the possible background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, the most popular background amongst those who venture to propose one is Proverbs 6:23.

Proverbs 6 is part of the extensive discourses found in the book in which a father conveys wisdom to his son (Pr 1–9). Proverbs 6:23, more specifically, is part of Proverbs 6:20–35, which contains a warning against adultery with a married woman. The argument of the passage is shown in Figure 2.

Proverbs 6:23 is a parenthesis within the passage, reflecting on the nature and advantages of a father’s teaching. It states, ‘[f]or the commandment is a lamp, and the instruction is a light, and disciplinary reproofs are the way to life’ (author’s own translation).

---

26. Deuteronomy 5:16 extends Exodus 20:12 by inserting two clauses: (1) the commandment to honour parents is motivated by the clause ‘as the Lord your God commanded you’ and (2) the promise of prolonged days contains the secondary promise ‘that it may go well with you’. The LXX inserts the clause ‘that it may be well with you’ in Exodus 20:12, which reflects assimilation between Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16.

27. The LXX changes the MT words ‘that your days may be prolonged’ (ὅτα προσέχῃς ἀφίεσθαι ἡμέρας) to ‘that you may live long’ (ὅτα μακροχρόνιος γένῃ), which, though by no means identical, still convey the same idea.


29. The parenthesis does not interrupt the flow of the argument. It is unnecessary to change the order of the verses ‘for clarity’, as Fox (2000:227) does.
The context supports the interpretation of ‘disciplinary reproofs’ as the father’s correcting words that keep his son on the right path. Consequently, the passage most probably refers to educative, non-punitive discipline.

Within this context, ‘life’ should be understood as survival, or more specifically, the full or rich or meaningful life that is the result of heeding the father’s words.

The translation of Proverbs 6:23 in the LXX (which the writer of Hebrews would have alluded to if Pr 6:23 is the background of Heb 12:9) has a number of interesting differences:

- The LXX joins ‘commandment’ and ‘instruction’ by means of a genitive, namely ‘commandment of instruction’ (ἐλέγχος καὶ παιδεία).
- The LXX inserts the conjunction ‘and’ between ‘reproof’ and ‘discipline’, making it ‘reproof and discipline’ (ἔλεγχος καὶ παιδεία).
- The LXX has the singular ‘reproof’ instead of the plural.

Fox (2015:137), after weighing different arguments for the differences between the MT and the LXX, concludes that the reasons for the variations ‘remain unclear’.

Taking the above into consideration, the following can be said in favour of viewing Proverbs 6:23 as the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9:

- Both passages refer to the ‘discipline’ word group (παιδεία or παρενήγησις) and link it to ‘life’ (ζωή or ζωή).
- Both passages refer to educative, non-punitive discipline.
- Hebrews 12:9 refers to a father disciplining a son, although Proverbs 6:23 refers to a father instructing his son. Moreover, in both cases, the motivation for the father’s conduct is his love or compassion.
- The primary background of Hebrews 12:4–13 is Proverbs, although quoting Proverbs 3:11–12, refers to the discipline ‘that Israel experienced in the wilderness period’ as expressed in Deuteronomy 8:5 (Thiessen 2009:367, 369). Of these scholars, only one explicitly links the phrase ‘and live’ to Deuteronomy 8:9, and he does this in passing (Allen 2007:89). In the following, this possibility is investigated in more detail.

Deuteronomy 8:1–5

Throughout the scholarly discourse on the Book of Hebrews, a couple of scholars have noted the parallel between Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12:9. In recent years, a small group of scholars has suggested that Deuteronomy 8:1 or 2–5 (in some way related to Pr 3:11–12) forms the background of the whole of Hebrews 12:4–13 (Allen 2007:86–90; Spellman 2016:487–506; Thiessen 2009:366–379; cf. Kibbe 2016:131). More specifically, these scholars argue that the writer of Hebrews ‘exeges the quotation [of Proverbs 3:11–12] on the basis of Deuteronomy 8:2–5’ (Allen 2007:89), or that ‘discipline’ in Hebrews 12:4–13, although quoting Proverbs 3:11–12, refers to the discipline ‘that Israel experienced in the wilderness period’ as expressed in Deuteronomy 8:5 (Thiessen 2009:367, 369). Of these scholars, only one explicitly links the phrase ‘and live’ to Deuteronomy 8:9, and he does this in passing (Allen 2007:89). In the following, this possibility is investigated in more detail.

Within the Book of Deuteronomy, Chapter 8 forms part of Moses’ second speech (Dt 4:44–28:68) and, more specifically, the ‘basic commandments’ (Dt 5:1–11:32). As a whole, Deuteronomy 8 exhorts Israel to continued obedience to the Lord in the Promised Land they are about to enter. The

33. Hebrews 12:16 gives Esau as a negative example of someone who was ‘sexually immoral’ ( ESV). However, the word ‘immoral’ ( ἁμορφός) in the context of Hebrews 12:16 probably does not refer to sexual sin, but unfaithfulness to God (cf. Lane 1991:454–455).

34. The nuance of both passages, however, may be the same. With ‘way of life’ the writer of Proverbs 6:23 is probably saying that discipline and reproach ‘leads to life’ (Longman 2006:178; Waltke 2004:352; cf. the translations of the phrase by Fox [2000:227] and Koptak [2003:192]).


36. I noted this possibility the first time when investigating the possible occurrence of Deuteronomy’s concept of life in Hebrews (cf. Coetsee 2019a:7–8).
The references to the wilderness period as a humbling and test, strongly suggests that ‘discipline’ should be understood in the instructive and edifying sense (cf. Allen 2007:88; Merrill 1994:186; Thiessen 2009:369, 373; Tigay 1996:93). This is supported by the fact that Deuteronomy 8:5 suggests that God’s discipline shows his compassion (Craigie 1976:186; Merrill 1997:2, 480).

The translation of Deuteronomy 8:5 in the LXX is mostly true to the MT. The following should be noted:

- The qal perfect (τίνις) is translated with the future indicative (γνώσῃς), which could be interpreted as an imperatival future: ‘know!’ (cf. Wallace 1996:569).
- In the first part of the comparison in the LXX potentiality is on the foreground, as is clear from the use of the optative (ναυσίνοις) and the indefinite pronoun (τίς); ‘a certain man might discipline his son’.
- In the second part of the comparison, factuality is emphasised: ‘the Lord your God will discipline you’.
- The LXX broadens the reference to ‘the Lord’ ( יהוה) who disciplines Israel to ‘the Lord your God’ ( κύριος ὁ θεός) (8:5).

But for these smaller changes, the nuance and thrust of Deuteronomy 8:5 MT is kept in the LXX.39

Coming back to the question at hand, a number of arguments support Deuteronomy 8:5 as the possible background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9:

- Both Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12:5–11 refer to the discipline of the Lord: Deuteronomy 8:5 explicitly (‘the Lord your God will discipline you’) and Hebrews 12:9 indirectly by means of comparison between earthly fathers and the heavenly Father (‘we have had fathers of our flesh as disciplinarians’).
- Both Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12:9 refer indirectly to God as a Father disciplining his son. In fact, the combination of father and son imagery with divine ‘discipline’ is quite rare within Biblical literature, found only in Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12 (Allen 2007:86).
- Both Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12:9 refer to edifying or instructive discipline (cf. Thiessen 2009:369).
- The context of both Deuteronomy 8:5 and Hebrews 12:9 indicates that God’s discipline shows his compassion and favour.
- Both Deuteronomy 8:1, 3 and Hebrews 12:9 refer to life as a result of obedience. Israel is commanded to obey the Lord wholeheartedly so that they may live (Dt 8:1; יִשְׂרוּאֵל), although the addressees of Hebrews are to subject themselves to the heavenly Father, which will result in life (Heb 12:9; καὶ ζήσομεν). Overall, obedience to God which results in life has a strong Deuteronomic ring to it (cf. Coetsee 2019b:107–114).

38. This outline is indirectly supported by Brueggemann (2001:103), Otto (2012:898) and Lundbom (2013:346).

39. Although the question remains which Greek version of Deuteronomy was available and used by the writer of Hebrews (cf. Coetsee 2019a:8), Wevers’ (2006) critical edition can be used as a baseline. A comparison between Deuteronomy 8:1–5 in Rahlfis’ (1996) edition of the LXX and Wevers’ (2006) edition of Deuteronomy contains only minor changes that do not change the meaning or interpretation of the passage.

The broader context of Hebrews 12 refers to Deuteronomy: the majority of quotations from, and allusions to, Deuteronomy appear in the latter portions of Hebrews, especially Chapter 12 (Kibbe 2016:121, 132). Hebrews 12:3 probably alludes to Deuteronomy 20:3 (Steyn 2007:160), and Hebrews 12:15 to Deuteronomy 29:17 LXX (Guthrie 2007:988).

Finally, there is a possibility that Proverbs 3:11–12 is based on Deuteronomy 8:5, or at least that ‘the concept of discipline’ in Deuteronomy 8 ‘informs the writer of Proverbs’ (Spellman 2016:499). This would explain several of the parallels between Hebrews 12:9 and Proverbs 3:11–12.42

The following points, however, are noteworthy against viewing Deuteronomy 8:5 as the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9:

- Deuteronomy 8:5 does not refer to ‘life’; Deuteronomy 8:1, 3 does.
- ‘Life’ in Deuteronomy 8:1, 3 refers to quality of life; in Hebrews 12:9, ‘life’ refers to eternal life.
- The context of the two passages differs: although the backdrop of Deuteronomy 8 is the testing of the Lord because of the previous generation’s sin and rebellion, the backdrop of Hebrews 12 is persecution.

In conclusion, the number of parallels between Deuteronomy 8:1–5 and Hebrews 12:9 makes it a strong possibility that Deuteronomy 8:1–5 forms the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9. But again, as with other proposed backgrounds, the argument is not conclusive.

### Integration of findings

#### The most likely background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9

The findings of the investigation of the possible background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9 are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrews 12: Baseline</th>
<th>Numbers 16 or 27</th>
<th>Hebrews 10:38</th>
<th>Proverbs 3:2</th>
<th>Jewish trad.</th>
<th>Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5</th>
<th>Proverbs 6:23</th>
<th>Deuteronomy 8:1–5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Context: persecution</td>
<td>- X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links on to Proverbs 3:11–12</td>
<td>- X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to illegitimate sons</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to ‘discipline’</td>
<td>- ± X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specifically educative discipline</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline shows compassion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparison fathers and Father</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to ‘respect’</td>
<td>- ±</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to ‘life’</td>
<td>± X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>± ±</td>
<td>± X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in a result clause</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life as eternal life</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future form of the verb ζάω</td>
<td>- X</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

X, Yes; -, No; ±, To some extent; Jew. trad., Jewish tradition.

Although Table 1 may be an oversimplification, it gives an idea of the number of parallels between the different proposed backgrounds and Hebrews 12:9. These parallels suggest that, of all the proposed backgrounds for the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, the most likely is Deuteronomy 8:1–5.

Intertextuality, however, is always in the eye of the beholder. In a sense it is and will remain a subjective enterprise. Consequently, it is not conclusive that Deuteronomy 8:1–5 is the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9. It is clear, however, that Deuteronomy 8:1–5 as the background is a strong possibility, and that scholars should give more attention to this possibility in their interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, and the interpretation of Hebrews 12:4–13 in general.

### The interpretation of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9

If Deuteronomy 8:1–5 is the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, the implications for the interpretation of the phrase are the following:

- **The meaning of ‘life’**: ‘Life’ in Hebrews 12:9 should be interpreted in the way it is used in the context of both Hebrews 12 and Deuteronomy 8, namely as eternal life (Heb 12:9) and quality of life (Dt 8:1, 3). Consequently, eternal life in Hebrews 12:9 does not refer to a mode of being that lies ahead or starts somewhere in the future, but to an existence that the hearers already share in. Moreover, in the context of Hebrews, quality of life means to respond to God’s gracious revelation in his Son by obeying him. Quality of life is to draw near to God through his Son and to grow spiritually. For the writer of Hebrews, this is what it truly means to live; this is life in the complete sense of the word.43 This interpretation is supported by passages in Hebrews that refer to the present riches of a life of faith (e.g. the positive experiences listed in the grave [Heb 6:4–6]), and the immediate context which expresses the aim of life as sharing in God’s holiness (Heb 12:10) and acquiring ‘the peaceful fruit of righteousness’ (Heb 12:11).

---

42.Thiessen (2009:374) argues that the writer of Hebrews presumably ‘uses Prov 3.11–12 and not Deut 8.5 since the Proverbs citation can be used as a direct exhortation to his readers’.

43.This interpretation of ‘life’ has previously been proposed by Buchanan (1972:213) and Peterson (1982:174), and recently by O’Brien (2010:466–467). All of these scholars, however, note this in the passing without elaboration.

---

41. It may be vice versa (that Dt 8.5 is based on Pr 3.11–12), but it seems less likely.
In brief, if Deuteronomy 8:1–5 is the background of the phrase ‘and live’ in Hebrews 12:9, the writer uses the phrase to positively exhort his hearers to live life as their heavenly Father intended it, from now up to eternity, by wholeheartedly obeying his revelation in his Son.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests
The author has declared that no competing interests exist.

Author’s contributions
I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

Ethical consideration
This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information
This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability statement
Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer
The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References
Block, D.J., 2012, Deuteronomy, The NIV Application Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.
Calvin, J., 1583, Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews, translated from the original Latin and edited by J. Owen, Calvin Translation Society, Edinburgh.
Hughes, P.J., 1977, A commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
Lundborn, J.R., 2013, Deuteronomy: A commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.
Merrill, E.H., 1994, Deuteronomy, The New American Commentary, Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN.