

“Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ” IN HEBREWS 4:12-13

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Abstract

The well-known reference in these verses to the Word of God as “sharper than a two-edged sword” is often understood by interpreters (and translators) as referring to a fearful instrument of judgment, of punishment, even of execution. This study challenges that assumption, understanding the metaphor differently. The picture the author gives us may more likely be drawn from the medical amphitheater, in which a patient is “stretched out and naked before the eyes” of a benign surgeon who skillfully wields the sharp, scalpel-like blade, carefully dividing sinews from marrow, soul from spirit, thoughts and intentions of the heart. Analysis of the tone of the surrounding context, and the particular language of the pericope itself, leads to the conclusion that this paragraph is positive, rather than negative, in prospect, an encouragement rather than a warning.

1. *Introduction*

The writer of Hebrews employs the integral expression “Word of God,” either *ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ* or *ῥῆμα θεοῦ*, four times.¹ Compared with other New Testament books, this is a rather dense concentration, an indication of the theme’s relative importance to the writer.² In the rich poetic description of *ὁ λόγος τοῦ Θεοῦ* at 4:12-13 the author

¹ 4:12, 6:5, 11:3, 13:7.

² The expression appears once each in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Philipians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 2 Peter and 1 John, twice in 2 Corinthians, and 5 times in John’s Apocalypse. Expressions like “the word of truth” (2 Cor. 6:7 and 2 Tim. 2:15), and “the word of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:8), might be added to the total of 11 occurrences of “the Word of God” in Paul’s letters (6 in the undisputed epistles) to bolster the impression of importance the concept indubitably had for Paul, appearing as it does here and there throughout his correspondence. But the density of Hebrews’ usage is singular and noteworthy among individual epistles of the NT. A similar interest in this term is approached only by Luke, for whom “the Word of God” is a favorite expression. He employs it 12 times in Acts and 5 times in his gospel (compare with Matthew, Mark, and John, once each), and he interchanges it with the locution *ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου* 9 more times in Acts (see 13:42-49).

describes the activity of the Word of God with regard to the human heart. The terms he uses (“living and active,” “sharper than a two-edged blade,” etc.) are well known and widely cited on a popular level, but familiarity with this text may mislead the reader. Reconsideration of the language and context of 4:12-13 leads us to call into question the common depictions of the μάχαιρα δίστομος as a sword of judgment and of the pericope itself as a warning.

2. Referent for “The Word of God” in 4:12

Spicq avers that the author has in view first of all the words of Scripture when he says ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ, words through which God addresses himself to the human soul. But he immediately concedes that the proposition of v. 12 is too general to be limited only to the OT, and broadens the compass of the referent of ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ in 4:12 to include 1) other Scripture (including NT writings), 2) the words of God proffered by the Christ, and 3) the content of the apostolic witness concerning the person and life of Jesus, which is effectively identical to “the Gospel.”³

Kittel finds Heb. 4:12 to parallel closely Col. 1:25, in which the old covenant and the new are combined as one unified Word of God, so he finds it “hard to decide” whether the Word of God in Heb. 4:12 is the OT or the early Christian message,

... but in these cases the idea of an alternative would probably be contrary to the concern of the NT author, since for him—this may be seen most plainly in the λαλεῖν of Heb. 1:1f—there are not two Words of God but only one, which is given as such in the continuity and unity of salvation history.⁴

He concludes that the content of “the Word of God” as used throughout the NT, whether the implied referent is the OT or apostolic announcements, is the message about Jesus,⁵ an assessment corroborated by our own studies that focused on Hebrews.⁶

³ Ceslas Spicq, *L'Épître aux Hébreux* (2 vols.; Paris: Librairie LeCoffre, 1952) 2.88.

⁴ Albert DeBrunner, Herman Kleinknecht, and Gerhard Kittel, “Λέγω, λόγος, ῥήμα, λαλέω,” in *TDNT* (10 vols.; ed. Gerhard Kittel; trans. Geoffrey Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 4.112-13.

⁵ Kittel, “λόγος,” 115-16.

⁶ Gene R. Smillie, “*The Word of God*” in *the Book of Hebrews* (Ph.D. diss., Deerfield: Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2000) 353 pp.

3. *Qualifiers and Properties of ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ in 4:12-13*

Ζῶν in the initial position of the sentence emphasizes the attribute, giving it primary place among the list of qualities of the Word that follow.

The word of God is 'alive' (ζῶν), not so much, in Hebrews, because it brings life in some esoteric or metaphysical sense, but because it is full of vital relevance. It is meaningfully addressed to the author's own generation, even if spoken long ago. The same notion is conveyed by the adjective 'active' (ἐνεργής).⁷

Ellingworth sees the sequence ζῶν . . . ἐνεργής . . . τομώτερος . . . διύκνούμενος . . . κριτικός as increasingly specific qualifiers.⁸ The movement of the pericope is towards an ever more intimately focused examination of the human heart. Not only grammatically but conceptually the language of v. 12-13 deliberately inverts the common notion of "word" as object of a predicate, and makes it an active subject, addressing the human soul as object. Kittel, in the context of demonstrating that the Word in the wider realm of the NT is considered efficacious, says, "This Word does not simply point to grace, salvation, and life. It effects grace, salvation, and life."⁹ Mowinckel and Caemmerer have both shown that in the OT as well, "the Word of God" is an active force, not static archives.¹⁰

The author of Hebrews articulates this view of the Word of God as dynamic (ἐνεργής), describing its action in ample detail. He begins with the participle διύκνούμενος, which naturally expands the metaphor τομώτερος ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν μάχαιραν δίστομον. The specific language of the text focuses on the penetrating, dividing, and discerning qualities of the Word of God, its capacity to finely distinguish between such subtleties as soul and spirit, thoughts and intentions of the heart, etc.¹¹ In

⁷ Harold Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989) 134.

⁸ Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 261.

⁹ Kittel, "λόγος," 118.

¹⁰ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God* (trans. Reinart Bjornard; New York: Abingdon, 1959) 26-42, 123-6; Richard Caemmerer, "A Concordance Study of the Concept 'Word of God,'" *Concordia Theological Monthly* 22 (1951) 170-85.

¹¹ On whether the emphasis of διύκνούμενος is on "penetrating" or "dividing between," see the balanced discussion of Attridge (*Hebrews*, 134-6). Much depends on how one perceives the meaning of each term in the following qualifier ἄχρι μερισμοῦ. Our own sense is that a subtle refinement develops between this opening expression and the second adjectival phrase, καὶ κριτικός ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας. The penetrating power of the word is emphasized at the beginning with διύκνούμενος, and as the examples of what it is so finely-sharpened as to pass between continue, it

4:2 the author had discussed the division between the people of the wilderness generation who believed the Word and those who were not joined together with them in belief;¹² the present discussion appears to echo that theme. The living, searching Word has the power to discern the heart of each one, to determine whether that individual believes or does not.¹³

It also has the power to persuade, to inculcate belief. Significant parallels may be seen in the image and language of Acts 2:37, where Luke describes the reaction of those hearing Peter’s message at Pentecost, [οἱ] Ἀκούσαντες (cf. τοῖς ἀκούσασιν, Heb. 4:2). Luke says they were “pierced to the heart.” That locution, κατενύγησαν τὴν καρδίαν, closely resembles the image evoked with διϊκνούμενος . . . καὶ κριτικὸς ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας in Heb. 4:12. The subsequent reaction of the hearers described in Acts 2:37-41 shows what Luke means by “pierced to the heart”: they were convinced, convicted, and converted by the Word of God they heard proclaimed by Peter.¹⁴ They were transformed by it, from the hardness of heart that had been endemic to their state in the gospels narratives,¹⁵ to willingness to repent and live in obedience to the gospel (Acts 2:37-47). The figure of speech expressed in the Acts text is so similar to the one Hebrews employs at 4:12 that it may provide a valuable clue to what the latter figure, the Word piercing to the inner recesses of the heart, means.¹⁶

The immediately prior syntax of Heb. 4:1-11 combines first person plurals (v. 1, 2, 3, 11) or collective expressions like “the people of God” (4:9) or “them” (v. 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 11) for those addressed and

subtly moves into the sphere of “distinguishing between” or “judging,” which is articulated in the second adjective, κριτικός. The author is talking about two related activities, using two adjectives to establish a continuum along which the full sense of what the Word does may be found.

¹² Reflecting our view of the better reading of the textual problem at 4:2. The accusative συγκεκρασμένους is supported by P13, 46, A, B, C, D, 33, 81, 88, while ⳨ is virtually alone with συγκεκρασμένος. The early copyist of Sinaiticus would have “corrected” the more difficult plural reading to provide what is admittedly a smoother syntax with the singular nominative.

¹³ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.89-91.

¹⁴ Acts 2:36, just before this, and 2:38, just after, would be Luke’s version of the *kerygma*, the core of the gospel message Peter proclaimed.

¹⁵ Hardness of heart is also the issue in Heb. 3:7-4:11, the immediately preceding context of the text at hand.

¹⁶ The correspondence would naturally be that much greater if Luke were established as the author of both works, as was commonly suggested by the earliest generations of students of Hebrews, and later by Aquinas, Calvin, Delitzsch, Westcott, and a few others.

challenged by the Word, with singulars that bring out the individualization of the response required, usually indefinite pronouns like τις (v. 11) or τινάς (v. 6), but also the participle ὁ εἰσελθὼν (v. 10). At the end of 4:13 the first person plural ἡμῖν is used again, as in the exhortation at v. 11 (σπουδάσωμεν οὖν εἰσελθεῖν κ.τ.λ.), yet the picture in v. 12-13 of a sharp-edged instrument piercing into the profundities of the human person until it reaches the very heart, and able to discern between the ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐνοιῶν καρδίας, must surely be taken as referring to individuals, case by case.¹⁷

By calling attention to μερισμοῦ (unique to this writer in the NT) immediately following διϊκνούμενος,¹⁸ Attridge refutes Schweizer's argument that the NT *hapax* διϊκνούμενος means that the Word merely penetrates into the elements listed, rather than dividing them from one another,¹⁹ while Guthrie suggests that μερισμοῦ actually weds the notions of penetration and division, "the permeation of the Word into every aspect of a man's being."²⁰

The variegated nature of the individual being "dissected" by the Word is expressed in the three word-pairs "soul and spirit, joints and marrow, thoughts and intentions of the heart." The doublet contained in διϊκνούμενος ἄχρι μερισμοῦ ψυχῆς καὶ πνεύματος, ἀρμῶν τε καὶ μυελῶν, rather than opposing the physical to the spiritual aspects of

¹⁷ The parallels with Philo's λόγος τομεύς have been widely noticed. In *Her.* 129-136, particularly, Philo explains how the Λόγος divides all of creation into parts, heavy and light, each element distinguished by the divine reason from the others; in *Mut.* 108 he speaks of "the sharp-edged Λόγος able to probe and explore each thing." *QG* 4.62 says, "The foolish man . . . is convicted by the divine Logos, which enters his soul and examines and searches him"; *Her.* 55 identifies a "spiritual soul within the soul," a parallel with Hebrews' soul and spirit division. While Ronald Williamson has endeavored to show that the particular terms used by Philo in these expressions are not always the same as those of Hebrews, the concepts are too obviously parallel to suppose that these two writers had no knowledge of one another. See the discussions in Sidney Sowers (*The Hermeneutics of Philo and Hebrews* [Basel Studies of Theology 1; Richmond: Knox, 1965] 66-69); Williamson, particularly on Heb. 4:12-13 (*Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* [ALGHJ 4; Leiden: Brill, 1970] 386-409), and Spicq (*Aux Hébreux*, 1.39-76; 2.88-91), whose work L.D. Hurst says "must be judged to have failed" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews: Its Background of Thought* [SNTSMS 65; Cambridge: University Press, 1990] 41). Hurst's evaluation, however, is based primarily on Barrett's analysis of the alleged Platonism of Hebrews in comparison with Philo, and on Williamson's overall weakening of Spicq's data base; he does not interact with the λόγος τομεύς in Philo himself.

¹⁸ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 135 n. 31.

¹⁹ Eduard Schweizer, "ψυχή," *TDNT* 9.651.

²⁰ Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary* (TynNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 117.

an individual, is more likely a literary device linking the two pairs together. Their relatedness in secular literature is illustrated by Euripides' expression πρὸς ἄκρον μυελὸν ψυχῆς (“unto the depths of the soul”).²¹ For the ancients “marrow,” deeply hidden inside the bones, served metaphorically for that which was most intimate in the body of a person. While Attridge readily entertains the notion that ἀρμῶν τε καὶ μυελῶν may be a metaphorical equivalent of ψυχῆς καὶ πνεύματος, he says “it is probably better to understand the [entire four-element] phrase as a complex summary of the whole of human nature.”²²

Spicq understands the difference between πνεῦμα and ψυχή, as based on Hebraic conceptual differences between the faculty of the divine (פִּתְוִי) and the principle of human life, of the senses, (שֵׁנַי).²³ Similarly Guthrie says, “The New Testament use of *pneuma* for the human spirit focuses on the spiritual aspect of man (i.e. his life in relation to God), whereas *psyché* refers to man's life irrespective of his spiritual experience (i.e., his life in relation to himself), his emotions and thought.”²⁴ While such generalizations may be accurate for the literature in general, they miss the particularity of Hebrews' concept of ψυχή. The author clearly uses ψυχή, at 6:19; 10:38, 39; 12:3; and 13:17 for the *spiritual* nature of the human (or divine, 10:38) person. This makes the fine distinction cloven by the Word in 4:12 between ψυχή and πνεῦμα even more subtle, since Hebrews uses ψυχή to refer to the spiritual aspect of human being.

Spicq calls the next pair, ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας, synonymous, but translates them “sentiments et pensées” to deliberately distinguish the affective nuance of the former from the rational nuance of the latter.²⁵ The Word of God is depicted as penetrating the outer, coarser elements of a being through to the inmost intimate faculties at the center of his heart, discerning even the subtle distinctions between motivations and thoughts, between feelings and intentions. The effect of the Word's penetration to such a depth of the human psyche is that it makes known what was hidden, particularly, in this context, with regard to the issue of belief or unbelief.

God's word is a *discerner*, (κριτικός, one that has power to discern), for it brings the light of knowledge to the mind of man as it were from a labyrinth, where

²¹ In *Hippolytus* 255, cited by Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.89.

²² Attridge, *Hebrews*, 135.

²³ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.89.

²⁴ Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 119.

²⁵ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.90.

it was held before entangled. . . . There is no creature, he says, which is hid from the eyes of God; there is, therefore, nothing so deep in man's soul, which cannot be drawn forth into light by that word that resembles its own author; for as it is God's office to search the heart, so he performs this examination by his word.²⁶

4. *The Operation of the Word of God on the Human Heart*

The purpose of this piercing, penetrating, distinguishing, and judging that the living and active Word does upon the human soul and spirit and heart is not overtly stated; it must be discerned from the context. That analysis is crucial. The whole meaning of the pericope 4:12-13 will differ depending on whether one interprets the word/sword as punitive, an agent of God's wrath, or as something more benign.

Down through the centuries interpretation of ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ in v. 12 as an instrument of judgment has by far predominated in both scholarly and popular understandings of Heb. 4:12-13.²⁷ Windisch, for example, says that the Word of God here is not the gospel of salvation that God speaks to us but rather a power that he uses to attack and subdue the resistant and stubborn to the point of their surrender (viz. Jer. 23:29, Isa. 49:2, John 12:48).²⁸ Guthrie calls it "an active force of judgement," and lists 4:12-13 among the warning passages,²⁹ while Attridge agrees that "the application focuses on God, the all-seeing judge. It is thus a stern word of warning . . . balanced by the following remarks on Christ as merciful High Priest."³⁰ Bonsirven calls the Word in 4:12-13 "an implacable dispenser of justice,"³¹ while Lane warns of "the fearful prospect of judgment that is held out to the community in v. 11-13,"

²⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews* (Calvin's Commentaries, 22 vols.; trans. and ed. John Owen; Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989) 22.104-105.

²⁷ An informal survey of international colleagues revealed that in the commonly used Bibles in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and four different African languages, the word used to translate μάχαιρα inevitably evokes a large, terrifying broadsword, a samurai weapon, or the like. In each of those linguistic contexts the Word of God in this passage is by inference understood to be an instrument of judgment and punishment.

²⁸ Hans Windisch, *Der Hebräerbrief* (HNT 14; Tübingen: Mohr, 1931) 35.

²⁹ George H. Guthrie, *The Structure of Hebrews: A Test-Linguistic Analysis* (NovTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1994) 129-30.

³⁰ Attridge, *Hebrews*, 134.

³¹ "Un justicier impitoyable"; Joseph Bonsirven, *Théologie du Nouveau Testament* (Paris: Montaigne, 1951) 412.

Those who remain insensitive to the voice of God in Scripture may discover that God’s word is also a lethal weapon . . . The word of God poses a judgment that is more threatening and sharper than any two-edged sword . . . [it] poses as the only alternative to faithfulness the option of death (3:17; 4:11).³²

Calvin’s understanding of the mortal wound that the word/sword rends in the human soul is that it puts to death the carnal nature, though the outcome is inferred to be new spiritual life:

[W]e shall never be renewed in the whole mind . . . until our old man be slain by the edge of the spiritual sword. Hence Paul says in another place, (Phil. ii. 17), that the faithful are offered as a sacrifice to God by the Gospel; for they cannot otherwise be brought to obey God than by having, as it were, their own will slain. . . .

[And as to the Word of God heard by] the reprobate themselves . . . they inwardly feel that they are, as it were, slain; they make evasions in various ways, so as not to come before God’s tribunal; but though unwilling, they are yet dragged there by this very word which they arrogantly deride.³³

This sort of theologizing on Heb. 4:12 is predicated on the notion that the author is comparing the Word of God to a deadly sword, and ample reasoning may be supplied to support this inference.³⁴ Comparing the tongue and a sword is a metaphor found frequently in the Scriptures (Isa. 49:2, Hos. 6:5, Prov. 5:4), as is the more direct and striking image of a double-edged sword (ῥομφαία δίστομος) coming from the mouth of Christ in Rev. 1:16 and 2:12, and from the mouth of one whose name is ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ in Rev. 19:15, 21. (In the latter verse it is clearly a sword of judgment that kills the armies of those men who followed the beast and the false prophet.) The image of tongue as sword is also found widely among both rabbinical and secular writers, and in Aramaic papyri at Elephantine from the fifth century B.C.³⁵

The general notion that in “biblical vocabulary” the Word of God as μάχατρα must mean a military or judicial sword may derive as well from the similar sounding syntagme in Eph. 6:17 that calls for believ-

³² William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC 47A; Dallas: Word, 1991) 102-103.

³³ Calvin, *Commentary*, 101. Elaborating on the two-edged sword, Calvin’s translator and editor John Owen says, “Beza and Scott, as well as Calvin, regard its convincing and killing power as intended. ‘It enters,’ says Beza, ‘into the inmost recesses of the soul, so that it inflicts on the perverse a deadly wound, and by killing the old man quickens into life the elect.’ Stuart views its killing power as alone intended: ‘The sense is,’ he observes, ‘that the divine commination is of *most deadly* punitive efficacy.’” (*Commentary*, Appendix R, 375; emphasis his).

³⁴ See the case made by G.W. Trompf (“The Conception of God in Hebrews 4:12-13,” *StTh* 25 [1971] 123-32).

³⁵ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.89.

ers to take up τὴν μάχαιραν τοῦ πνεύματος ὃ ἐστὶν ῥῆμα θεοῦ.³⁶ However, two cautions are necessary before one attempts to apply the meaning of Eph. 6:17 to Heb. 4:12. One, Eph. 6:17 refers to a ῥῆμα θεοῦ (not ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ). Students of the Ephesians text have come to identify ῥῆμα in this context as a specific and pertinent word (in the sense of “a choice word,” referring to what might amount to a whole discourse), perhaps “an immediate Spirit-inspired ‘word’ peculiarly adapted to a crisis or struggle.”³⁷ Two, the contexts are entirely different, so the meaning of the two lexemes are different. In Ephesians 6, believers are called upon to wield “the sword of the Spirit, which is a word of God” in combat against the onslaughts of the forces of darkness, while in Hebrews the instrument is used upon the believer. Thus, though the martial “sword of the spirit, which is a word of God,” in Eph. 6:17 often subtly influences readers’ perception of both the referent and the meaning of Heb. 4:12, it probably should not.

In any case, the overwhelming impression brought upon μάχαιρα in Heb. 4:12, whether from that text or others, is of a devastating sword of judgment or punishment. In Hebrews itself the term μάχαιρα appears two other times beside this one, at 11:34 and 37, and in both of them it is clearly an instrument of death. Furthermore, in several paraenetic sections of Hebrews (e.g., 2:1-3; 10:28-31), the writer alludes to the punishment of those who refused to obey the Word in the past, in order to construct an *a fortiori* argument about how much more worthy of punishment one would be who ignores the present revelation through Jesus Christ and his messengers. In light of all this, it is not without reason that many read judgment in the “sword” imagery of 4:12, especially in the context of the author’s preceding argument, which warns repeatedly from 3:7 on not to be like the unbelieving generation whom God punished in the wilderness.

The NT *hapax legomenon* τετραχλισμένα following directly in v. 13 also contributes to this impression. It means having the neck bared and the head stretched back, as, for example, for a sacrificial throat-cutting.³⁸ Putting together these two terms, μάχαιρα and τετραχλισμένα

³⁶ Unlike Eph. 6:17, Heb. 4:12 does not actually say the Word is a μάχαιρα, but rather compares it with one, describing it as τομώτερος ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν μάχαιραν δίστομον.

³⁷ Paul Eckel, “Ephesians 6:10-20,” *Interpretation* 45 (1991) 292; cf. Markus Barth, *Ephesians 4-6* (ABC; New York: Doubleday, 1974) 800-807; F.W. Beare, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (IB 10; New York: Abingdon, 1953) 744.

³⁸ Spicq identifies 14 different texts in Philo that use τετραχλίζω with the sense of “to force an adversary to compliance” (*Aux Hébreux*, 1.52). But Franz Delitzsch denies that the secondary violent meaning of τετραχλισμένα is necessary. It is sufficient, he

understood in those ways, one emerges with a gruesome image of what the author would be saying the Word of God does. This image of butchering action is compounded if one understands Hebrews' language here, as Spicq claims is “universally recognized,” to reflect the dividing-into-separate-parts action of the λόγος τομεύς, as employed by Philo.³⁹

But one must question whether this can really be what the writer of Hebrews intended, that the Word of God be understood as a grisly instrument of death, slaying and dismembering the person it addresses. Such a devastating idea of the meaning of 4:12-13 contradicts what the same writer has to say later about the once-for-all, completely efficacious sacrifice that Jesus Christ has already offered. Furthermore, as we shall show below, the momentum of the rhetoric that precedes this pericope, as well as the encouraging tone of what immediately follows it, are incongruent with a picture of an executioner wielding his sword. Since this passage is immediately followed by joyful encouragement to confess our sympathetic and helpful high priest Jesus, to hold firmly onto the faith we profess, and to approach the throne of grace with confidence to receive mercy and grace (v. 14-16), it is difficult to conceive of v. 12-13, right before those cheerful thoughts, as pertaining to judgment and capital punishment.

On the other hand if instead of the metaphor here referring to death-by-dismemberment, the author alludes, rather, to a health-giving intervention by the Word of God, it would be congruent with both its fore- and its after-context. We submit that the metaphorical language of v. 12 and 13 may be drawn from the medical field of the first century, describing a surgical procedure that has as its purpose to expose what is unhealthy, and to cure it, making the patient whole and sound. The phrase ἀφανῆς ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, πάντα δὲ γυμνὰ καὶ τετραηλισμένα τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ (v. 13) could easily describe a patient in the surgical amphitheater: stretched out⁴⁰ and laid bare before

warrants, to posit its literal primary meaning: “head thrown back, exposing neck and chest; i.e., open, unconcealed, exposed to view” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [3rd ed., 2 vols.; trans. Thomas Kingsbury; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883] 2.215).

³⁹ Philo says God uses the Λόγος to cut sacrificial animals into two parts in Gen. 15:10 (*Her.* 130).

⁴⁰ Guido Majno, an Italian surgeon interested in the history of his discipline, shows a diagram of the “Hippocratic bench” upon which patients in ancient Greece were stretched with a winch (*The Healing Hand: Man and Wound in the Ancient World* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975] 163).

the surgeon's eyes⁴¹ . . . and his very sharp, two-edged surgical knife (or "scalpel," to use the modern technical term).⁴² The resultant picture, "All is uncovered before him, naked and stretched out before his eyes," as the patient would be for an operation, seems perfectly apt as the meaning of ἀφανῆς ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, πάντα δὲ γυμνὰ καὶ τετραχλισμένα τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς αὐτοῦ.⁴³

The likelihood of medical field language being employed in this pericope is increased by the author's choice of the term μάχαιρα in v. 12. While either μάχαιρα or ῥομφαία may be and are translated "sword" throughout both testaments in the Bible, it is the latter, not the former, term which always unambiguously refers to the large weapon that the word "sword" evokes in English. A μάχαιρα, on the other hand, is often a short dagger or knife.⁴⁴ It is the term used in LXX, for example, for the flint knife used to perform the delicate operation of circumcision (Josh. 5:2, 3; 24:31), a surgical procedure one would not attempt with a broad sword, particularly on infants! Ehud was able to conceal a μάχαιρα δίστομος (the exact term used in Heb. 4:12) strapped to his thigh in order to assassinate the Moabite king Eglon, into whose belly the instrument slipped, blade, handle, and all (Judg. 3:16-22).⁴⁵ Michaelis gives "the first sense" of μάχαιρα from the time of Homer to be a knife or tool used in sacrifice, shaving, cooking, etc. He notes that from the time of Herodotus it can refer to a dagger or "smaller sword to be distinguished from the sword proper (ῥομφαία)," and says that "things are much the same in the world of Israel and Judah," where eventually the term passed into the language as a loanword, כַּרְכַּר, used by rabbis for the knife used to peel fruit.⁴⁶ Concerning Heb. 4:12 Michaelis is unambiguous:

The choice of μάχαιρα (cf. Is. 49:2) distinguishes this verse from Rev. 1:16; 2:12, 16; 19:15, 21, where ῥομφαία δίστομος or ὄξεια is used. But the image is also

⁴¹ Celsus (a surgeon contemporary with Philo) wrote of "the need to have everything open and exposed" in order for a surgeon to perform well (*de Medicina*, Prooemium 25-36, recounted in Majno, *Healing Hand*, 354).

⁴² Attridge notes in passing that Philo, in addition to his many references to the Logos as a sword, "also can use other personifications of the word or words of God. Cf. e.g., *Som.* 1.69 for words as physicians" (*Hebrews*, 133 n. 12).

⁴³ Πάντα here is without the article.

⁴⁴ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 262.

⁴⁵ Though in this case the knife was used to do violence, the point to retain is that it was so short as to be undetected, strapped between Ehud's groin and his knee, and disappeared inside Eglon's body.

⁴⁶ Wilhelm Michaelis, "μάχαιρα," *TDNT* 4.524. See the extensive bibliography amassed there, both of the literature of antiquity and from archeological sources.

different. The sword is not used to punish and destroy, but pitilessly to disclose the secret thoughts of the heart of man. [*Pace* Käsemann, “Wandering,” 1 n. 4] Hence μάχαιρα is not a sword. To cut the joints and marrow one does not use a sword. The picture is that of the knife used by the priest or butcher, or even perhaps the surgeon.⁴⁷

Majno shows pictures of a dozen first century surgical knives found at Pompeii and at Athens, all about seven inches in length and, what is more, all having two cutting edges, one at each end of each instrument. The surgeon held the knife in the middle, using either end of the knife according to need.⁴⁸ Perhaps μάχαιρα δίστομος refers to such an instrument, having “two mouths” each of which were also double-edged in the traditionally-understood way. The evidence is compelling that the μάχαιρα with which ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ is compared in Heb. 4:12 is different from the broadsword used to destroy; it more likely refers to a small delicate instrument used for performing curative surgery.

If this picture of what the author is alluding to in Heb. 4:12-13 is accurate, the operation (pun unintended but apt) of the language refers throughout this paragraph would be altered significantly. Understood this way, the entire pericope would come into focus minus the moribund innuendo that accompanies more common conceptualizations of μάχαιρα as a metaphor for the Word of God as a broadsword. The passage could now be understood as the benevolent, albeit painful, vivisection of the human soul performed by the Great Physician, using the Word of God as his sharp instrument in hand. This instrument pierces (διϊκνέομαι) so deeply as to divide soul and spirit, joints and marrow, separating the ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας.⁴⁹

Thus understood, the text would be saying that as readers are addressed by the Word of God they are utterly exposed, as the patient is before the surgeon;⁵⁰ the one so addressed is rendered thoroughly vulnerable to its probing and radically curative effect on his or her

⁴⁷ Michaelis, “μάχαιρα,” 527. In the footnote that accompanies this final evaluation, Michaelis says from his research that “ordinary knives are not usually two-edged. . . . Surgeons’ knives might be two-edged. . . . μαχαίριον is often used for the surgeon’s knife (μαχαίριον ἰατρικόν in Arist. and Plut., cf. Liddell-Scott, *s.v.*)” (527 n. 26).

⁴⁸ Majno, *Healing Hand*, 356-7. Cf. his bibliography, with 14 entries, on Roman surgical instruments (528 n. 163).

⁴⁹ Κριτικός also derives etymologically from “dividing.” Διϊκνούμενος is not that different in sense from κριτικός. Both terms have to do with dividing, separating, or discerning a difference between two elements (Attridge, *Hebrews*, 134-6).

⁵⁰ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.90.

life, as it penetrates deep into the inner recesses of one's being,⁵¹ laying aside the layers of sinews and tissue encountered on the way, finally, to the heart.⁵² There, those things that had been hidden are revealed before the unblinking eye of the surgeon, who does what is necessary. Yet the instrument is ζῶν καὶ ἐνεργής and consequently the effect of this surgical intervention is salutary and life-giving, rather than menacing and life-threatening.⁵³

The object of this careful operation is the heart, a word that "is of thematic importance in Hebrews as a whole . . . and Heb. 3:7-4:13 in particular."⁵⁴ Καρδιά is indeed prominent in the immediately preceding context: at 3:8, 10, 12, 15 and 4:7 it is specifically *hardness* of heart (understood in this instance as unbelief) that is in view. It would be consistent with that motivating concern of the previous context that 4:12-13 proposes the solution to this problem of "hardness of heart." The Word of God pierces through the protective outer layers of the nature of a human being that envelop the hidden human heart, cutting away, as it were, "the flesh," to borrow an allusion to a Pauline figure of speech with which our author may easily have been familiar.

To expose and radically strip the heart of its hardened shell, its "fleshly nature," in order for the person to be renewed and made "whole," might be described metaphorically as a "circumcision of the heart." The author does not actually employ that term here, but some readers have posited that the pericope may be a delicate allusion to that process. It would fit well with the biblical concept of circumci-

⁵¹ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 262.

⁵² Because only in Alexandria could vivisection be performed on human beings (on criminals; Rome did not permit the practice), major strides in surgical knowledge advanced in Alexandria (Majno, *Healing Hand*, 328-30, 536). Erasistratos, who discovered, circa 250 B.C., that the human heart is a bi-valvular pump, describes the surgical procedure in laying open the chest cavity to expose the heart (summarized in Galen [circa A.D. 130], *De placitis*, KV. 548-50). His descriptions, and those of the anonymous Greek Sicilian who wrote *Περὶ Καρδίας* just before Erasistratos's day, are reminiscent of the language of Heb. 4:12-13 (Majno, *Healing Hand*, 329-37). Erasistratos also advanced medical understanding of the relationship between various tissues and organs, discovering that some tissues (e.g., bone marrow) have "spaces" where nutrients may be supplied "between the vessels and fibers of the connective tissue" (*Healing Hand*, 334-5); compare διυκνούμενος ἄχρι μερισμοῦ . . . ἄρμων τε καὶ μυελῶν in Heb. 4:12.

⁵³ Spicq emphasizes the "dynamic vitality" of the Word of God expressed in ζῶν καὶ ἐνεργής: "Elle a en elle-même la force de susciter la vie de l'âme. . . . Étant vie, elle apporte la vie avec elle" (*Aux Hébreux*, 2.88).

⁵⁴ James Swetnam, "Jesus as Λόγος in Hebrews 4,12-13," *Bib* 62 (1981) 220.

sion of the heart. Compare, for example, the metaphorical circumcision language used in Col. 2:11 to speak of spiritual transformation: “in him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.”

“Circumcision of the heart” is a key biblical expression for the wholly right covenant relationship to God. In addition to the command language of Deut. 10:16, where the Israelites are charged to “Circumcise your heart, and no longer stiffen your neck,” and Jer. 4:4, “Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and remove the foreskins of your heart, Men of Judah,” the promise is made already in Deut. 30:6 that after Israel is taken into punitive captivity and then restored, “the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.”⁵⁵ While hope for such an eventuality was rising just before the NT era,⁵⁶ it was a state that eluded Israel under the Old Covenant.⁵⁷

For our author to allude to such a concept at this point in the argument he develops between 3:7 and 4:16 would be natural. The NT message proffered by Hebrews is couched in a progression of OT images that parallel the historical sequence of the events or institutions forming the images. The author had talked about angels as means of revelation, about Moses’ ministry, afterwards about the wilderness generation, and then, right before this pericope, about Joshua, who was not able to give them “rest.” Between the triumphant entering the land, to which the author had just alluded (“Let us hurry to enter that rest,” v. 11), and the victories that followed in Israel’s history, was the event at Gilgal where Joshua circumcised that whole generation with flint knives (*μαχαίρας πετρίνας*) LXX of Josh. 24:31 (not preserved in the Massoretic text) emphasizes that *τὰς μαχαίρας τὰς πετρίνας* with which Joshua “rolled away the reproach of Israel” were later buried with him “and they are there to this day,” an indication of the major

⁵⁵ Cf. Jer. 31:33-34, “I will write my laws on your heart, etc.” cited in Heb. 8:10 and 10:16.

⁵⁶ “I shall cut off the foreskin of their heart . . . and I shall create for them a holy spirit . . . and I shall purify them so that they shall not turn away from following me from that day forward and forever, and their souls will cleave to me and to my commandments” (*Jubilees* 1:23-24); cf. *1QpHab* 11:13, *Man* 5:5.

⁵⁷ The burden of Heb. 3:17-4:13 is for readers to progress beyond the failures of the older generation; the interpretation we are suggesting for 4:12-13 would show how and why they are able to do so.

importance of that event (and those instruments) for the children of Israel. After Joshua performed that operation, the people “rested” until they were healed (Josh. 5:2-9).⁵⁸ Thematically, Heb. 4:12-13 fits right into this sequence of historical events. The author would be showing how the living and active Word of God, understood as the New Covenant message, performs upon the heart of the one who hears it, with more successful outcome than did the Word heard under the older conditions before God spoke in a Son.⁵⁹

If in 4:12-13 the author is alluding to “cardiac circumcision,” with delicate and indirect language befitting his elegant style, one would expect readers closer to his time and culture to have caught the allusion. The subtleties of his having projected the thought of Joshua’s circumcision of Israel to the reader, followed by a more graphic description of open cardiac surgery, thus creating the metaphorical figure that derives from the combination of the two, may well escape the modern reader. But one would expect that early Christian readers, particularly those in dialogue with Jews, might have perceived the figure if indeed it is alluded to here . . . and they did.

Given the NT concept of circumcision of the heart as that which makes a Christian “a real Jew,”⁶⁰ it is not surprising that some early church fathers did see Heb. 4:12-13 as a reference to the particular spiritual “operation” that is sometimes called “the circumcision of the heart.” Justin Martyr details the parallels between Jesus, who “gave the people rest,” and Joshua who was not able to give them rest;⁶¹ notably, “Jesus Christ circumcises all who will with knives of stone.”⁶² Many early church fathers follow Justin’s emphasis on Jesus’ ministry of “circumcision of the heart,” though Justin himself does not actually bring Heb. 4:12 into the discussion of the parallels between Joshua and Jesus.⁶³ In several cases, the discussion in Heb. 4:9-11 of Joshua’s not giving them rest leads the early student of scripture to see this ministry of “the circumcision of the heart” as what is described in

⁵⁸ LXX: ἦσυχίαν εἶχον αὐτόθι καθήμενοι ἐν τῇ παρεμβολῇ ἕως ὑγιασθήσαν; Massoretic: וישבו תחתם במחנה עד היותם חיים.

⁵⁹ S. Lyonnet, “La circoncision du coeur, celle qui relève de l’Esprit et non de la lettre,” in *L’Evangile, Hier et Aujourd’hui* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1968) 92-94.

⁶⁰ Rom. 2:29.

⁶¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 24, 113-14, 132, discussed in F.F. Bruce (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* [rev. ed.; NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 77 n. 28; 81-82 n. 51).

⁶² Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 24.

⁶³ Swetnam, “Jesus as Λόγος,” 218.

v. 12, and Jesus as the operand figure.⁶⁴ Swetnam elaborates on this understanding found in Origen, Hilary of Poitiers, and Aphrahat,⁶⁵ and demonstrates how such an interpretation solves several exegetical problems in the context, for example, the connection between v. 9-11 and 12-13:

Viewed in the context of an implied comparison with the ineffectual initiatory rites of Joshua the emphasis suggested by the elaborate imagery of 4,12 becomes intelligible: the author is giving the reason why the Christians will succeed whereas the Israelites failed . . .⁶⁶

In sum: Heb. 4,12 is a description of circumcision of the heart . . . which serves as the basis for asserting that the Christians are assured of entrance into God's Rest while the Israelites under Joshua were not.⁶⁷

The vocabulary of v. 12-13, along with that of the sclerosis of the heart expressed in 3:8-15, may deliberately evoke the language of the OT, where “stiff-neckedness” and the related and conceptually equivalent image “hardness of heart” are common. Spicq proposes that the author's use of *τραχηλίξειν* (which derives from *τράχηλος*, the neck) reflects a double reference: “Circumcision evokes both nakedness and the neck. To remove the stiffness of neck is to become docile to the Word of God.”⁶⁸ In support of this conflate interpretation, he cites the parallelism in LXX of Deut. 10:16, a charge to “circumcise your hardened hearts, and do not harden your necks,” noting that the elocution *περιτεμεΐσθε τὴν σκληροκαρδίαν ὑμῶν καὶ τὸν τράχηλον ὑμῶν οὐ σκληρυνεῖτε* reflects the key terms and the principal concepts that Hebrews is treating in chapters three and four. Spicq argues that the author of Hebrews is using *γυμνὰ καὶ τετραχηλισμένα* in v. 13 to evoke, by his allusions to “exposing naked” and “circumcise,” the combination of the OT idioms for stiff-neckedness and its cure, the circumcision of the heart. “The uncircumcised heart is the hardened heart,

⁶⁴ The fifth century Syriac father Aphrahat in his treatise *On Circumcision* identifies Jesus as the one who “circumcises the heart” in Heb. 4:12: “Jesus our Saviour circumcised a second time, with the circumcision of the heart, the people who had been baptized by baptism, and they were circumcised *with the scimitar which is sharper than sword with two edges*” (J.R. Harris, *Testimonies* [2 vols.; Cambridge: University Press, 1920] 2.55-56; emphasis his).

⁶⁵ Swetnam, “Jesus as Λόγος,” 217-18.

⁶⁶ Swetnam, “Jesus as Λόγος,” 219.

⁶⁷ Swetnam, “Jesus as Λόγος,” 221.

⁶⁸ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.91. The etymological fallacy is always a danger in such analyses. But to recognize that the origin of a word does not exhaust or even define its meaning in a given literary context does not mean that a writer cannot make use of his readers' awareness of the presently-used term's original meaning for his own rhetorical purposes.

closed to the Word of God. This [Word] is like the knife of circumcision, that cuts off the [enveloping] flesh, that exposes the flesh to view. Similarly, to no longer stiffen the neck is to accept the divine will, to submit to it.”⁶⁹

To summarize, we have seen the plausibility of understanding surgical language and imagery to be the base for interpretation of Heb. 4:12-13, with the Word of God being compared to a sharp surgical instrument used for curative purposes. We have also noted the natural progression of thought that would incur from such an interpretive solution to Hebrews 3 and 4, from the problem of a hardened, unbelieving heart discussed continually since 3:7 to the image of a “heart operation” in 4:12-13 as the solution to that problem. Literary extrapolation to the concept “circumcision of the heart” that elsewhere in Scripture describes such a cure for hardened, unbelieving hearts or stiff necks would, then, be congruous with the given terms of the paragraph. We have further noted that several early church fathers, and a few modern scholars, have perceived Hebrews’ discussion of Joshua’s incomplete ministry in Heb. 4:8-11 to continue into v. 12-13.⁷⁰ They infer that in these verses Joshua’s namesake, Jeshua (“Jesus”; the two are identical in the Greek text), is the one circumcising the heart, so that readers who hear this Word and are probed by it can now enter the Rest that is the topic of 3:14-4:11.

5. *What the Author Expects As The Result of Encounter With This λόγος*

In support of the foregoing interpretations, we note that the emotional tenor of the writer in this section is sanguine. The momentum of his argument leading into and out of 4:12-13 reflects confidence and assurance of the readers’ reception and application of the exhortation; a warning that the Word of God is a death-dealing sword of judgment would seem ill-placed in this context. The whole point of the *κατάπαυσις* section, for example, is that because the earlier generations did not exhaust the ample invitation, the Rest is still available to contemporary readers, an opportunity that the writer repeatedly urges the readers to “enter.” Even while acknowledging the danger implicit from the precedent cases of unbelief, the tone of the writer is optimistic with regard to his readers.

⁶⁹ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.90.

⁷⁰ Bruce, however, expressly denies the early church fathers’ view that Heb. 4:12-13 is about the circumcision of the heart (*Hebrews*, 81-82 n. 51).

“Tone,” however, is admittedly a slippery substance to contain and identify. Differences of opinion inevitably arise as to whether the writer’s expectation is negative or positive, and thus whether judgment or affirmation is in view. One decision that effects whether one sees the expectations of the author as positive or as doubtful is the matter of how one interprets the *ἐάν . . . κατάσχομεν* constructions at 3:6 and 3:14 (we are the household of Christ “if we hold firm our confidence and the boast of our hope until the end,” and we have become partakers of Christ “if we hold firm the beginning of our assurance until the end,” respectively). If doubt were the predominant “tone” of the author⁷¹ the whole argument would be freighted with incertitude and anxiety; some commentators do in fact read it that way. However, the conditional *ἐάν* plus aorist subjunctive constructions of 3:6 and 3:14 are each followed with identical *ἐάν* plus aorist subjunctive constructions in the very next line of Greek, *σήμερον ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούσῃτε* (“today if you hear his voice”), at 3:7 and 3:15 respectively. The conditional is not used in those cases to cast doubt upon whether or not one may hear the voice of God today, but simply to state the condition to which he hopes the readers will respond rightly. The proximity and repetition of these identical grammatical constructions with the conditional sentences of 3:6 and 3:14 are indications of the author’s style that help determine our reading of those passages.

Another pivotal choice to make appears in 3:12 and 13, and 4:1 and 11, where *ἵνα μή* or *μήποτε* plus subjunctive clauses pose alternatives based on whether belief or unbelief is exercised. In each of these cases, whether the writer appears to envision failure or success often depends, in English translation, upon whether *μή* or *μήποτε* is translated, respectively, “lest someone,” with the failure spelled out as an imminent possibility, or “so that no one,” with the failure expressed as avoided.

There is a world of difference between whether one understands 3:12 as “Take care, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart,” or as “Take care, so that there not be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart.” Again, the whole tenor of the passage will differ, depending on whether one understands 3:13 as “Encourage

⁷¹ Seeing this as a “third class conditional sentence, where the condition is stated as a matter of doubt, but with some expectation of realization” (A.T. Robertson and W. Davis, *A New Short Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [New York: Harper & Bros., 1931] 353).

one another day after day . . . lest some one from among you might be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,” or as “Encourage one another day after day . . . so that no one from among you might be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Since such alternative possibilities are posed four times leading up to 4:12, a particular momentum, either pessimistic or optimistic, will have been firmly established, the “tone” of the pericope clearly set, by the time one passes into the enigmatic μάχαρια complex at 4:12 from the last ἵνα clause in 4:11. That clause is either “lest someone fall into the same example of disobedience,” or “so that no one falls into the same example of disobedience,” depending on the nuance perceived in ἵνα μή τις.

Our own judgment is that the latter translation more accurately transmits the writer’s intent in each of these syntagmes; he expects that, having heard the Word of God, his own generation will not fall into disobedience. Since μή is used six other times in the immediate context with its unambiguous emphatic negative sense,⁷² the burden of proof would be upon those who propose that the writer breaks his own rhythm to use it differently in the ἵνα clauses.⁷³

Another clue as to whether and to what degree the author alludes to the possibility of failure and implied punishment is that the exhortation at 4:11, just before our key verse, is in the first person plural (σπουδάσωμεν οὖν εἰσελθεῖν εἰς ἐκείνην τὴν κατάπαυσιν).⁷⁴ The author’s self-inclusion in the exhortation “So, let us hurry to enter that rest,” tilts expectation towards the positive result. He urges his readers to do what he himself is going to do.

Moreover, if one continues reading what follows immediately after 4:12-13, the tone is overwhelmingly positive, emphasizing in 4:14-5:2 the empathy and sympathy of “our compassionate high priest” for the ignorant and misguided. He gently and graciously helps, rather than punishes, the weak. The writer thus forms a deliberate contrast with the atmosphere of judgment that lurked so close to the Word in the earlier dispensation, as he had evoked it in 3:8-4:6.

⁷² 3:8, 15, 18; 4:2, 7, 15.

⁷³ *BDF* does see μήποτε as indicating “apprehension” on the part of an author. With the subjunctive, “anxiety is directed towards warding off something still dependent on the will” (F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* [trans. and rev. R.W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961] 186-8).

⁷⁴ The other ἵνα μή or μήποτε plus subjunctive clauses at 3:12, 3:13, and 4:1 each couple with a second person plural, “someone of you,” or, as we propose, “no one among you.”

Yet it also may be risky to overemphasize the optimism of the author, and to ignore the sober side of the abundant paraenetic material that warns of the dire consequences of not heeding the exhortations. The role of the Word of God here is judiciary, to scrutinize and evaluate the profound depths of the human person addressed.⁷⁵ In the multi-faceted description of ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ at 4:12, the series of adjectives culminates with κριτικὸς ἐνθυμήσεων καὶ ἐννοιῶν καρδίας.⁷⁶ That it is the critical faculty of the Word of God that is emphasized by κριτικός, a perspicuity that disallows hypocrisy, is underlined by the language of nakedness and exposure in v. 13.⁷⁷ Perhaps one of the nuances evoked by the adjective δίστομος (“double-edged”) is that “it cuts both ways,” to apply a contemporary, but parallel, figure of speech. That is, confronted with the Word of God, the hearer may either believe or reject that word. In either case the Word itself pierces to the depths of the heart, seat of individual personhood, to discern (and judge) its thoughts and intentions with regard to that Word.

We conclude that, in principle, the great danger implicit in not believing the Word of God remains real in Hebrews’ day, but that the whole momentum of his rhetoric, from the affirmation that “we are his house ἐὰν τὴν παρρησίαν . . . κατάσχωμεν” in 3:6 through the culminating προσερχώμεθα οὖν μετὰ παρρησίας in 4:16, is a sober but joyful affirmation of the power of the living Word of God, a word that the author himself announces in the present generation. This tone or atmosphere must be taken into account when deliberating the question of whether ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ in 4:12-13 is to be taken as punitive or curative. From what we have seen of both the preceding and the following contexts, the author would have the readers soberly remember the grave consequences of unbelief in earlier generations but encourages, rather than threatens, them with his depiction of the Word of God as a sharp instrument that probes deep into the heart of the hearer. The paragraph is then followed, in v. 14-16, with a cheerful depiction of the Christians’ sympathetic and helpful high priest, a theme consistent with the author’s positive expectations of the hearers’ response to the word he has announced.

⁷⁵ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.89.

⁷⁶ Κριτικός is *hapax* in NT, but universally understood as “able to judge [between].”

⁷⁷ Spicq, *Aux Hébreux*, 2.90.

6. *The Living and Active λόγος Is "Sharper" Than the Earlier Word*

The central difference which the author discerns between those who heard God's Word under the old covenant and those who have heard it, and are now hearing it, under the new, is that those first hearers had failed to respond in faith.⁷⁸

Such a difference is widely acknowledged. Yet explanations are often lacking for why such a formulaic difference may be observed. It strikes one as peculiar and problematic that an entire generation heard the Word of God and failed to believe it, while another generation (and, in prospect, subsequent generations) are expected to believe and successfully comply with it. Such sweeping optimism leads to the inference that, for it to have two such differing results, something about the Word of God itself must be different in the two respective situations. While the author does not spell out what that difference is, he offers hints throughout the course of his treatise.⁷⁹ The whole book of Hebrews may be considered an amplification of the opening statement in 1:1-2 that God who in the past spoke in various ways to the fathers in prophets has now spoken to us in a Son. That the author therefore expects the Word of God to have a more salutatory effect today than it had with previous generations is consistent with his many arguments throughout the book that the present ministry of Jesus Christ is better than everything that preceded it. Since the author's own message is mediation of the Word that announces this ministry, his expectation is naturally that his urgings and exhortations will indeed be heeded, and the alternate pitfalls of unbelief and disobedience avoided.

7. *Conclusion*

Like a skillfully wielded scalpel in the hand of a practiced surgeon, the living and active Word of God sculpts away sclerosis of the heart that may have hitherto prevented belief. It penetrates to the quick, discerning between soul and spirit, between thoughts and intentions of the heart. The one who hears the Word is exposed by it, stretched

⁷⁸ R.A. Clements, "The Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 28 (1985) 44.

⁷⁹ We have elsewhere attempted to understand Hebrews' portrait of the relationship between the written word of the older covenant and the "word written on hearts" of the new covenant, but it is too large a subject to be treated here (Smillie, *Word of God in Hebrews*, 261-320).

out and laid utterly naked before the eyes of one to whom, in turn, the hearer must now respond with a word of his own (πρὸς ὃν ἡμῖν ὁ λόγος, 4:13). The author is confident that this word will be one of belief, as he and his readers, probed by this curative tool, confess together their common faith (κρατῶμεν τῆς ὁμολογίας, 4:14).

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