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Hebrews 6:7–8 and its Old Testament background: An intertextual study

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Author:
Albert J. Coetsee[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Albert Coetsee,
albert.coetsee@nwu.ac.za

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Scholars have long sought to identify the Old Testament background underlying the agricultural imagery in Hebrews 6:7–8. Despite several strong proposals, no consensus has emerged regarding a single primary intertext. This study re-examined the passage from an intertextual perspective. The study was situated within New Testament studies, with particular focus on the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews and the interpretation of Hebrews 6:7–8. The investigation first evaluated the most frequently proposed Old Testament backgrounds of Hebrews 6:7–8, namely Genesis 1–3, Isaiah 5:1–7 and Deuteronomic covenant traditions. It then examined the passage's key terms in the Septuagint using Hatch and Redpath's concordance, supplemented where necessary by the Göttingen Septuagint. Particular attention was given to lexical clustering and conceptual associations. The findings demonstrated that Hebrews 6:7–8 did not depend on a single Old Testament source. Genesis 1–3 provided the creational framework and explained the imagery of thorns and thistles, while Deuteronomy supplied the covenantal logic of blessing and curse. Isaiah 5 functioned as a secondary conceptual parallel. The study concluded that Hebrews employed scriptural imagery recognisable to an audience shaped by Israel's Scriptures. The metaphor reinforced the warning of Hebrews 6:4–6 by portraying divine provision, expected fruitfulness and the consequences of persistent unfaithfulness.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The study contributed to New Testament studies, biblical theology and intertextual research by demonstrating that Hebrews 6:7–8 is best understood through the convergence of multiple scriptural traditions rather than a single primary intertext.

Keywords: Hebrews 6:7–8; intertextual study; Old Testament background; Genesis 1:11–12; Deuteronomy 11:11–12; Isaiah 5:1–7.

Introduction

In Hebrews 6:7–8, the author employs what scholars have variously described as an agricultural illustration (DeSilva 2000:229; Moffatt 1924:81; Thompson 2008:135), parable (Hughes 1977:222; Lane 1991:143; Weiss 1991:352), example (Westcott 1914:153), image (Attridge 1989:172; Guthrie 2007:962), picture (Cockerill 2012:277) or metaphor (Grindheim 2023:319). The text reads:

> [7]γῆ γὰρ ἡ πιοῦσα τὸν ἐπ᾽ αὐτῆς ἐρχόμενον πολλάκις ὑετὸν καὶ τίκτουσα βοτάνην εὔθετον ἐκείνοις δι᾽ οὓς καὶ γεωργεῖται, μεταλαμβάνει εὐλογίας ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ [8]ἐκφέρουσα δὲ ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους, ἀδόκιμος καὶ κατάρας ἐγγύς, ἧς τὸ τέλος εἰς καῦσιν. (NA[28])
>
> [7]Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. [8]But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over. (NRSV).

Hebrews 6:7–8 functions as an explanatory illustration of the severe warning in Hebrews 6:4–6, as indicated by the conjunction γάρ at the beginning of the sentence.[1] Using the imagery of a single plot of land that can yield either useful produce or thorns and thistles, the author typologically depicts the two possible outcomes for the addressees:[2] the blessing of faithfulness or the judgement of apostasy (Allen 2010:377–378; Kleinig 2017:295). The verses operate within a positive-negative rhetorical flow, with verse 7 portraying the favourable outcome and verse 8 the unfavourable,[3] as summarised in Table 1.

1.The force of γάρ in Hebrews 6:7 is interpreted differently. While some scholars argue that Hebrews 6:7–8 functions primarily as an explanatory illustration of Hebrews 6:4–6 (e.g. Kistemaker 1984:165; Schreiner 2015:189), others contend that the metaphor more fundamentally shapes how the warning should be interpreted (e.g. Allen 2008:127; Verbrugge 1980:62–63). At minimum, the conjunction clearly links the agricultural imagery closely to the preceding warning.

2.The participle ἐκφέρουσα is generally interpreted as conditional (see Greenlee 1998:202), highlighting the two contrasting outcomes of the illustration.

3.Ellingworth (1993:325) notes the positive-negative flow of Hebrews 6:4–12: 6:4–6 (negative; reality); 6:7 (positive; image); 6:8 (negative; image); 6:9–12 (positive; reality).

TABLE 1: The positive-negative flow of Hebrews 6:7–8.

Component	Positive (Heb 6:7)	Negative (Heb 6:8)
Ground	Drinks up the rain repeatedly	(Drinks up the rain repeatedly)
Produce	Crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated	Thorns and thistles
Outcome or end	Receives a blessing from God	Worthless; on the verge of being cursed; end is to be burned over

Agricultural imagery of this kind is very common in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps 1:3–4; Jr 17:5–8; Pr 24:30–34), the parables of Jesus (e.g. Mt 13:3–9, 18–23 ‖ Mk 4:3–9; Lk 13:6–9) and Greco-Roman literature (e.g. Philo, *De Agricultura*; *De Opificio Mundi* 132; Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* 95.52).[4]

Scholars have long sought to identify the Old Testament background underlying the imagery in Hebrews 6:7–8. The present study contributes to this discussion by re-examining the passage from an intertextual perspective. It proceeds on the premise that Hebrews 6:7–8 intentionally evokes scriptural traditions and therefore focuses on the investigation of the possible Old Testament backgrounds of the imagery.

The article begins by examining the most frequently proposed Old Testament texts as potential backgrounds and reassessing their explanatory value. The principal proposals include Genesis 1–3, the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7 (esp. Verbrugge 1980:61–73), and passages in Deuteronomy relating to covenantal blessing, curse and obedience, most notably Deuteronomy 11:11–12 and 11:26–28 (esp. Allen 2008:130–134; Guthrie 2007:962–964).[5] Despite the prominence of these proposals, no consensus has emerged regarding a single primary intertext.

Building on this overview, the study then turns to a detailed analysis of lexical correspondence in the Septuagint, tracing the occurrence, semantic range and conceptual associations of the passage's key terms. Lexical correspondence in the Septuagint is traced using the concordance of Hatch and Redpath (1998), based on the Rahlfs edition of the Septuagint. Where textual variation may be exegetically significant, particularly in key background passages, the Göttingen edition is consulted. By analysing clusters of vocabulary within their broader scriptural contexts, this section seeks to clarify and, where appropriate, refine the proposed Old Testament backgrounds of the imagery, while also identifying additional scriptural resonances.

The study concludes by considering the exegetical and theological implications of this convergence for understanding the meaning and function of the imagery within the argument of Hebrews.

4.Attridge (1989:172 n. 74) notes several parallels in Philo's writings but cautions against positing direct dependence, because both authors likely draw on common stock metaphors. Weiss (1991:352 n. 97) similarly regards a specific Philonic background as unlikely.

5.Less likely, although supported by several parallels, is the possibility that the author had in mind the cities of the Jordan plain, Sodom and Gomorrah, which were once 'watered … like the orchard of God and like the land of Egypt' (Gn 13:10) but were later destroyed by fire as an act of divine judgement (Gn 19:24; cf. Dt 29:22–25). Scholars occasionally mention other potential backgrounds, such as Isaiah 28:23–29 and Ezekiel 19:10–14, although these are generally considered less likely (cf. Lane 1991:143).

Proposed Old Testament backgrounds for Hebrews 6:7–8

Scholarly discussion has focused on three primary loci for the most probable Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:7–8: the creational and curse traditions of Genesis 1–3, the Song of the Vineyard in Isaiah 5:1–7 and the covenantal framework of Deuteronomy (esp. Dt 11:11–12, 26–28). Each contains agricultural references together with evaluative language and themes of blessing and judgement in different combinations, which resonate with Hebrews 6:7–8 to varying degrees. The following subsections briefly outline these proposals and assess their explanatory potential.

Genesis 1–3

One of the most commonly proposed Old Testament backgrounds to Hebrews 6:7–8 is the account of creation and the fall in Genesis 1–3:

- Both Genesis 1:11 and 1:12 refer to the 'earth' [γῆ] bringing forth 'vegetation' [βοτάνη] at God's command, mirroring the 'ground' [γῆ] in Hebrews 6:7–8 that produces 'vegetation' [βοτάνη].
- In Genesis 3:17–18, God declares that the 'earth' [γῆ] is 'cursed' [ἐπικατάρατος] because of Adam's actions and that it will consequently produce 'thorns and thistles' [ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους] for him. Similarly, Hebrews 6:8 refers to the ground producing 'thorns and thistles' [ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους] that is 'on the verge of being cursed' [κατάρας ἐγγύς].

Various scholars have regarded these parallels as significant. Hughes (1977:223), for example, argues that the 'affinities' between the texts 'would not have been missed by the Hebrew readers of this letter'. Similarly, Westcott (1914:154) observes that:

> [*T*]he primal record of Genesis furnishes the example of fruitful fertility … and the example of noxious growth … followed in the one case by blessing ([*Gn*] 1:13), and connected in the other with a curse ([*Gn*] 3:17).

Ellingworth (1993:327) too views the use of βοτάνη as an allusion to Genesis 1:11–12, while Attridge (1989:173 n. 79) states that 'The language of Gen 1:11–12 may have been of some influence here'. Other scholars emphasise the specific parallel between the 'thorns and thistles' of Genesis 3:17–18 and Hebrews 6:8, arguing that Hebrews 6:8 contains 'a clear allusion' (Lane 1991:143) or even 'oral-scribal intertexture' (DeSilva 2000:229 n. 48) with Genesis 3:17–18.

The greatest drawbacks of this hypothesis are: (1) that the curse language of Genesis 3:17–18 lacks the explicit counterpart of blessing found in Hebrews 6:7–8; and (2) the sequence of events is reversed: in Genesis, the curse occasions the thorns and thistles, whereas in Hebrews the land is cursed because of the thorns and thistles (Allen 2008:129). Consequently, Allen (2008:129) regards the Genesis material as only 'a secondary allusion', 'illustrative of the significance

of apostasy and the seriousness of its consequences'. For this reason, while Genesis 1–3 may illuminate certain features of the imagery in Hebrews 6:7–8, several scholars stop short of identifying it as the passage's primary Old Testament background.

Isaiah 5:1–7

In his article 'Towards a new interpretation of Hebrews 6:4–6', Verlyn Verbrugge (1980:61–73) proposed that Isaiah 5:1–7 forms the primary Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:7–8. In approaching the imagery of Hebrews 6:7–8, he asks (Verbrugge 1980):

> Is there, then, a passage in the Old Testament which speaks of a well-cultivated field which is supposed to yield good fruit but yields thorns (*akanthas*) instead? The answer is in the affirmative: Isaiah 5:1–7. (p. 64)

Verbrugge (1980:64–65) bases this proposal on several similarities between Isaiah 5:1–7 and Hebrews 6:7–8: the use of the noun ἄκανθα (Is 5:2, 4; Heb 6:8); the description of a field that is well-cultivated (Is 5:1–2; Heb 6:7); the reference to rain, with the field in Hebrews 6:7 being well-watered while the punishment in Isaiah 5:6 consists in the withdrawal of rain; and the similar outcome in both passages, namely burning in Hebrews 6:8 and a barren wasteland in Isaiah 5:6 (cf. Göttingen LXX, ed. Ziegler 1983:137–138).

On this basis, Verbrugge (1980:65) concludes that because Isaiah 5 concerns the nation of Israel, 'the interpretation of Heb. 6 [*is placed*] squarely within the context of God's relationship to his people as a covenant community'. Hebrews 6:4–6 is then concerned with God's rejection of his covenant community rather than the loss of salvation by individual believers. Verbrugge (1980:68–69) further supports this reading by appealing to several New Testament passages that address the covenant community corporately rather than individual believers.

The possibility that Isaiah 5:1–7 forms the background to Hebrews 6:7–8, or at least provides a close parallel, had already been noted prior to Verbrugge's study (e.g. Bruce 1990:140 [1964]; Hughes 1977:223). Verbrugge, however, develops this proposal in greater detail than earlier commentators, and a number of subsequent scholars have found his argument persuasive. Cockerill (2012:278), for example, states that 'the ideas of this passage [*Heb 6:7–8*] are closest to those of the Song of the Vineyard in Isa 5:1–7'. Similarly, Grindheim (2023:320 n. 197) regards Isaiah 5:1–7 as the closest Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:7–8.

The proposal that Isaiah 5:1–7 forms the Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:7–8, however, has not gone unchallenged. Weiss (1991:352 n. 97), for example, considers a conscious reference to Isaiah 5:1–7 LXX in Hebrews 6:7–8 improbable. Attridge (1989:172 n. 69) likewise finds the parallels between the two passages inexact and cautions that Hebrews 'is concerned as much with individuals as with the community as a whole'. Grindheim (2023:320 n. 197), while regarding Isaiah 5:1–7 as the closest background to Hebrews 6:7–8, similarly emphasises that Hebrews 6:4–8 has individual members of the community in view rather than the covenant community as such. DeSilva (2000:229) provides one of the most detailed discussions of the differences between Isaiah 5:1–7 and Hebrews 6:7–8 (*original emphasis*):

> Hebrews 6:7–8 speaks not of vines or grapes (a major feature of Is 5:1–7 and other illustrations that can rightly be said to *depend* on this text, e.g. Mt 21:33–43), but rather vegetation in general. It is thorns and thistles, not sour grapes, that bring about the destruction of the ground. Moreover, the production of thorns and thistles is the cause of the cursing or burning in Hebrews 6:8 but the result of the divine verdict in Isaiah 5:6.

Ultimately, Isaiah 5:1–7 'fails to explain the full gamut of Hebrews' reference' (Allen 2008:129), particularly because the explicit blessing-curse language that structures Hebrews 6:7–8 is absent from the Isaiah passage. Accordingly, while Isaiah 5:1–7 provides an important conceptual parallel – particularly regarding divine expectation and judgement – it is better understood as a secondary background than as the primary intertext of Hebrews 6:7–8.

Deuteronomy 11:11–12, 11:26–28 and covenantal themes in Deuteronomy

Among the various Old Testament backgrounds proposed for Hebrews 6:7–8, Deuteronomy has received the most sustained scholarly attention. Scholars have focused particularly on Deuteronomy 11:11–12 and 11:26–28, together with the broader covenantal framework of blessing and curse developed throughout Deuteronomy 28–30 and 32. This position is argued most prominently by George H. Guthrie (2007:962–964) and David M. Allen (2008:127–134), and is acknowledged in varying degrees by several other commentators.

Guthrie (2007:963) identifies several points of contact between Hebrews 6:7–8 and Deuteronomy. Most notably, he highlights Deuteronomy 11:11 (LXX), which uniquely describes the land as drinking rain from heaven using the terms γῆ, ὑετός and πίνω – the same lexical combination found in Hebrews 6:7. To Guthrie's knowledge, this is the only instance in the Septuagint where the land is said to drink rain using this precise vocabulary. He further notes the prominence of the blessing-curse polarity within Deuteronomy's covenantal framework, particularly in Deuteronomy 11:26–28 and 28–29, where obedience leads to blessing and disobedience results in judgement upon both the people and the land. Guthrie also observes that Deuteronomy associates divine judgement with fire (esp. Dt 32:22), a motif that resonates with Hebrews' broader use of fire imagery (Heb 6:8; 10:27; 12:29).[6] He further suggests that the expression κατάρας ἐγγύς [near to a curse] may reflect Deuteronomic usage of ἐγγύς to denote the imminence of judgement, as in Deuteronomy 32:35. While acknowledging that the phrase

6.In the two other instances where fire functions as an image of divine judgement, plausible Deuteronomic antecedents may also be present. See Coetsee (2024b:6–8) for discussion of Deuteronomy 29:20 in relation to Hebrews 10:27, and Coetsee (2024a:219–251) for Deuteronomy 4:24 (or 9:3) in relation to Hebrews 12:29.

'thorns and thistles' recalls Genesis 3:18, Guthrie (2007:963) concludes that 'several elements from Deuteronomy seem to be echoed in the proverbial imagery of Heb. 6:7–8'.

Writing independently and contemporaneously with Guthrie, Allen (2008:127–134) similarly argues that Deuteronomy – particularly Deuteronomy 11:11–17 and 11:26–28 – forms the primary Old Testament background of Hebrews 6:7–8. Drawing on earlier work by Mathewson (1999:209–225), Allen (2008:128–131) links Hebrews 3:7–4:11 and 6:4–8 through a shared desert typology. He argues that the imagery of land drinking rain recalls Deuteronomy 11:11, while the blessing-curse dichotomy of Hebrews 6:7–8 recalls Deuteronomy 11:26–28. Allen (2008:131) further appeals to Deuteronomy 29:22–23, where covenantal infidelity results in the devastation and burning of the land, concluding that the burning of Hebrews 6:8 should be understood as punitive rather than restorative. For Allen (2008:131, 134), Deuteronomy prefigures nearly every major element of Hebrews 6:7–8 – land, rain, fruitfulness, blessing, curse, burning and destruction – in a way unmatched by Genesis 3:17–18 or Isaiah 5:1–7 taken in isolation. On this basis, he concludes that Hebrews adopts a fundamentally Deuteronomic covenantal perspective.

A broader group of commentators likewise discern Deuteronomic resonances in Hebrews 6:7–8 (cf. Allen 2010:382; Mitchell 2007:125; Thompson 2008:135), although often with greater caution. Lane (1991:143) and Weiss (1991:352 n. 97) note that the juxtaposition of blessing and curse naturally evokes Deuteronomy 11:26–28, while DeSilva (2000:231–233) argues that Hebrews reflects Deuteronomic covenant categories without necessarily depending on a single text. Cockerill (2012:278) similarly acknowledges broad Deuteronomic echoes while remaining cautious about positing a direct allusion to Deuteronomy 11:11.

At the same time, the proposal is not without criticism. Cockerill (2012:279 n. 53) questions whether the lexical parallels between Hebrews 6:7 and Deuteronomy 11:11 are sufficiently precise to establish deliberate allusion, noting that the shared vocabulary is limited, appears in different forms and sequence, and functions differently in each context: in Deuteronomy, the land that drinks rain is the promised inheritance granted for covenant faithfulness, whereas in Hebrews the land functions metaphorically for a community subject to evaluation. Grindheim (2023:320 n. 197) similarly cautions against pressing the parallels too far, while Schreiner (2015:190 n. 304) acknowledges broad thematic resonance with Deuteronomy while rejecting a specific allusion to Deuteronomy 11:11.

Despite these reservations, the Deuteronomic proposal remains significant. Even if direct literary dependence on Deuteronomy 11:11 cannot be demonstrated, the convergence of themes such as divine provision, agricultural fruitfulness, blessing-and-curse and judgement by fire situates Hebrews 6:7–8 within a recognisably Deuteronomic covenantal framework. Whether this reflects direct allusion or broader theological resonance requires further examination in the lexical analysis that follows.

Preliminary conclusion

An overview of the primary Old Testament backgrounds proposed for Hebrews 6:7–8 indicates that no single text fully accounts for the imagery in the passage, although each proposal illuminates certain aspects of it. Genesis 1–3 provides the creation framework and explains the appearance of thorns and thistles, while Deuteronomy (esp. 11:11–12; 11:26–28) provides the covenantal framework of blessing and curse. Isaiah 5:1–7 offers a well-known example of prophetic agricultural imagery of judgement, although the evidence suggests that it functions as a broader conceptual parallel rather than as a primary intertext for Hebrews 6:7–8.

These observations suggest that the author of Hebrews may be drawing not from a single source but from a broader network of scriptural traditions. To explore this possibility further, the following section examines the Septuagintal vocabulary of Hebrews 6:7–8 and its distribution within the Greek Old Testament.

The Septuagintal vocabulary and scriptural resonances in Hebrews 6:7–8

Following the preceding survey of proposed Old Testament backgrounds, this section turns to a closer analysis of the Septuagintal vocabulary of Hebrews 6:7–8. It examines the occurrence, semantic range and conceptual associations of the passage's key terms in order to assess more precisely the scriptural traditions that may underlie the imagery. Lexical data are drawn primarily from Hatch and Redpath's concordance (1998), based on the Rahlfs edition of the Septuagint, and checked using Logos Bible Software, with key background passages also compared against the Göttingen edition. Because broader thematic parallels can at times remain subjective, particular attention is given to clusters of terminology within their broader literary contexts, because such patterns provide a more controlled basis for evaluating existing proposals and identifying additional scriptural resonances.

Land, rain and receptivity [γῆ, ὑετός, πίνω]

The noun γῆ occurs almost 2700 times in the Septuagint.[7] According to Muraoka (2009:129), γῆ may denote a variety of related concepts, including: (1) land as opposed to sky; (2) subterranean space; (3) lower level and surface; (4) land or ground as opposed to the sea; (5) area or region; (6) the inhabitants of the earth; and (7) dust. In Hebrews 6:7, γῆ clearly denotes cultivated land or soil, corresponding to its common LXX usage as 'land' or 'ground'.

7.The entry of γῆ in Hatch and Redpath (1998:240–255) spans 16 pages. According to Strong's-tagged LXX concordance provided by the Blue Letter Bible, the noun is found 2698 times in 2333 verses in the Septuagint (Blue Letter Bible n.d.).

On its own, however, γῆ offers limited intertextual traction. More suggestive are contexts in which γῆ occurs together with the noun ὑετός [rain] and the verb πίνω [to drink], a combination that closely resembles the imagery of Hebrews 6:7, where the land is said to 'drink' the rain that falls upon it.

The noun ὑετός occurs 75 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:1384). It frequently denotes life-giving rainfall that sustains agricultural productivity, and it is often portrayed as a divinely controlled blessing, although in some contexts its withholding or destructive excess may signify judgement (Muraoka 2009:693–694).

Of these 75 occurrences, 31 (approximately 41%) appear in combination with γῆ (Gn 7:4, 12; Ex 9:29, 33; Lv 26:4; Dt 11:11, 14, 17; 28:12, 24; 2 Sm 23:4; 1 Ki 8:36; 17:7, 14; 18:1; 2 Chr 6:27; Job 5:10; 29:23; 37:6; Ps 71:6; 134:7; 146:8; Ec 11:3; Hs 6:4; Is 30:23; 55:10; Jr 10:13; 14:4; 28:16; Ezk 22:24; 38:9).[8] These occurrences are concentrated primarily in covenantal and prophetic contexts in which rainfall signifies divine favour towards the land (e.g. Lv 26:4; Dt 11:14; 28:12) or, conversely, its withholding as an expression of judgement (e.g. Dt 11:17; 1 Ki 8:35–36).

The verb πίνω [to drink] occurs 266 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:1134–1135). Sixteen of these instances combine πίνω with γῆ (Ex 7:21; Nm 20:17; Dt 11:11; 1 Sm 30:16; 1 Ki 18:42; 2 Ki 6:23; Es 4:17; Ps 74:8; Is 7:22; 9:1; Jr 2:18; 28:7; Ezk 12:19; 31:14, 16; 39:18). Only three occurrences link πίνω with ὑετός, and significantly, only one passage combines all three terms – γῆ, ὑετός and πίνω – namely Deuteronomy 11:11 (cf. Guthrie 2007:963). The passage states:

> **ἡ** δὲ **γῆ**, εἰς ἣν εἰσπορεύῃ ἐκεῖ κληρονομῆσαι αὐτήν, **γῆ** ὀρεινὴ καὶ πεδινή, ἐκ τοῦ **ὑετοῦ** τοῦ οὐρανοῦ **πίεται** ὕδωρ. (Göttingen LXX, ed. Wevers 2006:165–166; [*author's own emphasis*]
>
> [11]But **the land** into which you are entering there to inherit it is a hilly **land** and flat; it will **drink** water from the **rain** of the sky (NETS; [*author's own emphasis*]).

This convergence renders Deuteronomy 11:11 a particularly significant intertextual candidate. Deuteronomy 11 situates rainfall within a clearly covenantal framework (Tigay 1996:109), in which agricultural fertility is conditioned upon Israel's obedience (Dt 11:14) and its withholding functions as judgement for apostasy (Dt 11:17). While Deuteronomy 11:11 refers to literal land and rainfall, whereas Hebrews employs the imagery metaphorically, the lexical and conceptual parallels remain significant. Read against this background, the imagery of land 'drinking rain' in Hebrews 6:7 evokes the same covenantal logic linking divine provision with human response.

Cultivation, growth and fruitfulness [τίκτω, βοτάνη, ἐκφέρω, εὔθετος and γεωργέω]

The terms τίκτω, βοτάνη, ἐκφέρω, εὔθετος and γεωργέω develop a shared semantic field of cultivation, growth and agricultural productivity. In Hebrews 6:7–8, this vocabulary sustains the image of fertile land as the framework for depicting divine evaluation.

8.In this section, chapter and verse references to Old Testament texts follow the LXX.

TABLE 2: NETS renderings and semantic distribution of βοτάνη in the LXX.

NETS renderings	Occurrences (number of times)	LXX references
'vegetation'	3	Genesis 1:11, 12; Zechariah 10:1
'herbage'	6	Exodus 9:22, 25; 10:12, 15[2×]; Jeremiah 14:5
'grass'	2	1 Kings 18:5; Isaiah 66:14
'fodder'	1	2 Kings 19:26
'plant'	1	Job 8:12
'herb'	1	Wisdom 16:12
'garden'	1	Isaiah 58:11
'pasture'	1	Jeremiah 27:11

The verb τίκτω occurs approximately 231 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:1351–1352). Its primary meaning is 'to give birth' (Muraoka 2009:680), typically referring to a woman bearing a child. In a secondary and metaphorical sense, the verb can denote the production or result of something (e.g. Sir 8:18). In Hebrews 6:7, τίκτω functions metaphorically to describe the land producing a beneficial yield. Because of the verb's high frequency in the LXX, a comprehensive survey is unnecessary. Of greater relevance is whether τίκτω occurs in combination with other key terms of Hebrews 6:7–8, thereby forming meaningful lexical clusters.

The noun βοτάνη occurs 16 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:225–226) and consistently refers to vegetation growing from the land (Muraoka 2009:120), although its rendering varies in different contexts (see Table 2).

Only one passage combines βοτάνη with τίκτω, namely Jeremiah 14:5.[9] In that context, however, the terms describe a drought in which does give birth [τίκτω] but abandon their young because vegetation [βοτάνη] is lacking. The imagery differs substantially from Hebrews 6:7–8, where agricultural productivity functions as an evaluative metaphor.

Although βοτάνη does not occur in combination with ἐκφέρω, εὔθετος or γεωργέω in the LXX, it does appear with two other key terms from Hebrews 6:7–8: with πίνω in Job 8:12 and with ὑετός in Zechariah 10:1. Neither context, however, closely parallels Hebrews 6:7–8. More significant is Genesis 1:11–12, where βοτάνη occurs together with γῆ:

> [11]… Βλαστησάτω **ἡ γῆ βοτάνην** χόρτου … [12]καὶ ἐξήνεγκεν **ἡ γῆ βοτάνην** χόρτου … (Göttingen LXX, ed. Wevers 1974:77 [*author's own emphasis*])
>
> [11]Let **the earth** put forth pasture land **vegetation** … [12]And **the earth** brought forth pasture land **vegetation** … (NETS [*author's own emphasis*])

Genesis 1:12 also includes the verb ἐκφέρω (aorist ἐξήνεγκεν), producing a triadic lexical convergence with Hebrews 6:7. The verb ἐκφέρω occurs approximately 89 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:444–445). Literally meaning 'to bring out' or 'to carry forth' (Muraoka 2009:219), it appears in a

9.Three of the key terms of Hebrews 6:7–8 occur in Isaiah 66 (τίκτω in Is 66:7–8; γῆ in Is 66:8; βοτάνη in Is 66:14), but they are dispersed within the chapter and exhibit little lexical or thematic connection with Hebrews 6:7–8.

variety of contexts, including the removal of objects, persons or substances (e.g. Lv 4:12; 16:27; Ezk 12:4), as well as agricultural or productive imagery associated with growth and yield (Gn 1:12; Lv 26:10; Can 2:13; Ezk 17:23; Hg 1:11). In such contexts, it denotes the visible productivity of the land, making it particularly relevant to the imagery in Hebrews 6:7–8. Apart from Genesis 1:12, however, ἐκφέρω does not occur together with other key terms from the passage. Although this overlap does not indicate literary dependence, it does suggest a conceptual association in which land productivity is linked to divine agency.

In contrast to the other key terms investigated in this section, εὔθετος and γεωργέω occur only rarely in the LXX. The adjective εὔθετος appears only twice (Ps 31:6; Sus 15; cf. Hatch & Redpath 1998:570), where it denotes something 'appropriate' or 'well-suited' (Muraoka 2009:299), in both cases referring to a favourable time. The verb γεωργέω occurs three times (1 Chr 27:26; 1 Esdr 4:6; 1 Macc 14:8; cf. Hatch & Redpath 1998:240) and denotes the activity of cultivating the land (Muraoka 2009:129). Neither term appears in combination with other key terms from Hebrews 6:7–8 in the LXX. In Hebrews, εὔθετος is applied to vegetation, thereby shifting the sense from temporal suitability to agricultural usefulness and sharpening the evaluative dimension of the metaphor.

In summary, direct lexical overlap among these terms is limited. Nevertheless, Genesis 1:11–12 presents the clearest convergence of γῆ, βοτάνη and ἐκφέρω. In this creational context, the earth brings forth vegetation in response to the divine command, establishing a conceptual pattern in which productivity reflects responsiveness to God's will. A similar dynamic is implied in Hebrews 6:7–8. Although the text does not explicitly emphasise divine agency in the sending of rain (cf. Mt 5:45; Ellingworth 1993:327), such agency is presupposed. Likewise, those 'for whom' (δι' οὓς) the land is cultivated point implicitly to God as the ultimate recipient of its fruitfulness (Koester 2001:316). The imagery therefore suggests that divine provision elicits a corresponding response, reinforcing the evaluative logic of the metaphor.

Blessing and approval [εὐλογία and μεταλαμβάνω]

The terms εὐλογία and μεταλαμβάνω function together in Hebrews 6:7 to describe the positive outcome of divine evaluation. The land that produces useful vegetation 'receives blessing from God' [εὐλογίαν μεταλαμβάνει ἀπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ], combining the act of reception [μεταλαμβάνω] with the content received [εὐλογία]. Together the expressions articulate the favourable divine verdict upon productive land.

The noun εὐλογία occurs approximately 96 times in the Septuagint (Hatch & Redpath 1998:574–575). According to Muraoka (2009:302), its semantic range includes: (1) praise or blessing directed towards God; (2) a pronouncement of well-being spoken over another person; (3) a state of prosperity or favour; and (4) concrete benefits granted by God. Particularly significant is the frequent association of εὐλογία with divine agency, as blessing is typically portrayed as something bestowed by God, often within covenantal contexts.

TABLE 3: The occurrences and usages of ἄκανθα in the LXX.

Usages	Occurrances (number of times)	LXX references
Literal usage	**5**	-
Thorns as literal vegetation	3	Exodus 22:6; Judges 8:7, 16
Thorns as poetic contrast	1	Canticle of Canticles 2:2
Thorns as protective barrier	1	Sirach 28:24
Figurative usage	**22**	-
Thorns as sign of curse and covenantal desolation	10	Genesis 3:18; Hosea 9:6; 10:8; Isaiah 5:6; 7:23, 24, 25; 32:13; 34:13; Jeremiah 12:13
Thorns as symbol of failed fruitfulness	3	Isaiah 5:2, 4; Jeremiah 4:3
Thorns as metaphor for wicked people (in some contexts: about to be judged)	4	2 Samuel 23:6; Psalm 117:12; Isaiah 33:12; Ezekiel 28:24
Thorns as image of hardship, obstruction or folly	5	Psalm 31:4; 57:9; Proverbs 15:19; 26:9; Ecclesiastes 7:6

A notable feature of εὐλογία in the LXX is its repeated juxtaposition with its semantic opposite, κατάρα. Hatch and Redpath (1998:574–575) list 11 occurrences where the two appear together (Gn 27:12; Dt 11:26, 29; 23:5; 30:1, 19; Jos 9:2; Ps 108:17; Sir 3:9; Zch 8:13; Ml 2:2). In several of these passages, the contrast reflects the covenantal alternatives, where obedience results in blessing and disobedience in curse. This polarity is especially prominent in Deuteronomy, where Moses sets before Israel the choice between blessing and curse as the consequences of covenant loyalty or rebellion (Dt 11:26, 29; 30:1, 19). The repeated pairing of εὐλογία and κατάρα therefore establishes a theological framework in which divine approval and judgement function as mutually exclusive covenantal outcomes.

The verb μεταλαμβάνω occurs far less frequently in the LXX, appearing only 14 times (Hatch & Redpath 1998:916). Apart from a variant reading in Esther 5:1[10] and one occurrence in Wisdom 18:9, it is otherwise confined to the books of the Maccabees (2 Macc 4:21; 11:6; 12:5, 8, 21; 13:10, 23; 15:1; 3 Macc 3:1; 4:6; 4 Macc 8:8; 16:18). The verb generally denotes receiving or sharing in something, and Muraoka (2009:454) classifies its uses as receiving information, receiving something in exchange or participating in a share of something. An illustrative example appears in Wisdom 18:9, where the righteous are described as 'sharing' [μεταλήμψεσθαι] alike in the Passover night, which is marked by both 'good things' (i.e. salvific deliverance) and 'dangers'. Although this passage is unlikely to lie behind Hebrews 6:7–8, it demonstrates the verb's capacity to express participation in outcomes within events shaped by divine agency.

In Hebrews 6:7, the verb emphasises the receptive dimension of divine favour. The land does not generate blessing independently but receives it from God as the result of producing useful vegetation. Although the verb carries no

10.Hatch and Redpath (1998:916) list a variant reading in Esther 5:1, μετέλαβεν (S^1), in place of the more widely attested μετέβαλεν ('he changed'). The Göttingen edition (ed. Hanhart 1983:170) likewise records the variant (S*), although its main text retains μετέβαλεν.

specialised technical sense in the LXX, its semantic range coheres with the broader conceptual framework of divine bestowal. Within the metaphor of Hebrews 6:7–8, the combination μεταλαμβάνει εὐλογίας thus expresses the positive verdict pronounced upon fruitful land within a broader covenantal logic of blessing and judgement, a framework most clearly articulated in the Deuteronomic traditions.

Rejection, curse and judgement [ἄκανθα, τρίβολος, ἀδόκιμος, κατάρα and καῦσις]

Whereas verse 7 depicts productive land receiving blessing, verse 8 presents the opposite outcome through imagery of thorns, rejection, curse and burning. The lexical cluster ἄκανθα, τρίβολος, ἀδόκιμος, κατάρα and καῦσις together expresses the negative outcome of divine evaluation.

The noun ἄκανθα occurs 27 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:43) and refers to thorny or prickly vegetation typically associated with uncultivated or desolate land (Muraoka 2009:19). Although the term occasionally denotes literal thorns, it is more frequently employed figuratively – especially in prophetic literature – to describe desolation, failed cultivation or the consequences of divine judgement (summarised in Table 3).

Closely related is the noun τρίβολος, which denotes another type of prickly plant (Liddell, Scott & Jones 1996:1817; Muraoka 2009:686). The term occurs only three times in the LXX (Gn 3:18; Pr 22:5; Hs 10:8).[11] Notably, the pairing of ἄκανθα and τρίβολος occurs only in Genesis 3:18 and Hosea 10:8. Because Hosea's phrasing appears to echo Genesis,[12] Genesis 3:18 provides the most plausible background for the expression used in Hebrews 6:8. As noted earlier, within that context, thorns and thistles emerge as the consequence of the curse placed upon the ground following human disobedience.

The adjective ἀδόκιμος further reinforces the evaluative dimension of the metaphor. The term, which denotes 'having failed a test, counterfeit' (Muraoka 2009:11), occurs only twice in the LXX (Pr 25:4; Is 1:22), where it describes impure or worthless silver. Although these passages are not direct intertexts for Hebrews, they confirm the semantic range of the term: something that fails examination and is therefore rejected. In Hebrews 6:8, the adjective similarly characterises land whose productivity proves unacceptable, indicating its disqualification under divine evaluation.

The noun κατάρα [curse] occurs 40 times in the LXX (Hatch & Redpath 1998:742) and frequently appears in covenantal contexts, where divine judgement is expressed in terms of curse and blessing. While some occurrences refer to human pronouncements of cursing, the majority portray God as the ultimate agent of judgement. The concentration of occurrences in Deuteronomy is particularly significant. There the covenant community is confronted with the alternatives of blessing and curse, which correspond respectively to obedience and disobedience (Dt 11:26, 28–29; 27:13; 28:15, 45; 29:27; 30:1, 19). This Deuteronomic framework establishes curse as the judicial consequence of covenant violation. The prophetic literature, which often reflects strong Deuteronomic influence, presupposes the same framework, portraying exile, desolation and national disaster as the outworking of covenant curse (e.g. Ml 2:2; Is 64:10; Jr 24:9; 51:8; Dn Th 9:11).[13]

Finally, the noun καῦσις refers to burning or consumption by fire (Muraoka 2009:393) and occurs seven times in the LXX. Although only Daniel 7:11 explicitly describes divine judgement using this term, the broader scriptural motif of fire as an instrument of divine punishment is widespread. Throughout the Old Testament, divine fire frequently functions as an instrument of judgement, consuming rebellious individuals or hostile cities (e.g. Gn 19:24; Lv 10:1–2; Nm 16:35; Is 66:15–16).[14] In Hebrews 6:8, the reference to land destined 'to be burned over' [εἰς καῦσιν] therefore evokes familiar imagery of divine judgement awaiting persistent unfruitfulness and disobedience.

Taken together, these terms present a coherent picture of failed productivity. Thorns and thistles recall the curse upon the ground (Gn 3:18), ἀδόκιμος signals disqualification under evaluation, κατάρα reflects covenantal judgement, and καῦσις anticipates final destruction by fire. Within the metaphor of Hebrews 6:7–8, the unproductive land thus represents those who fail to respond faithfully to the divine provision they have received.

Synthesis of lexical and intertextual findings

The lexical evidence, specifically the distribution and clustering of key terms in the Septuagint, indicates that the imagery of Hebrews 6:7–8 is best understood not as a direct allusion to a single Old Testament passage but as the convergence of several scriptural traditions associated with land, productivity and divine judgement.

Creational traditions provide the basic agricultural framework. The description of the earth producing vegetation echoes the language of Genesis 1:11–12, where the land brings forth plant life in response to the divine command.

The curse tradition associated with the fall explains the appearance of thorns and thistles. Genesis 3:17–18 portrays these plants as the consequence of human disobedience and the curse placed upon the ground. The collocation ἀκάνθας καὶ τριβόλους in Hebrews 6:8 strongly recalls this imagery, evoking the disruption of the earth's intended fruitfulness.

11.The noun τρίβολος is also attested in 2 Samuel 12:31 (noted by Cockerill 2012:279 n. 52), where it occurs in the phrase ἐν τοῖς τριβόλοις τοῖς σιδηροῖς. In this context, however, it refers to iron threshing implements rather than thorny vegetation.

12.Hosea 10:8 contains the phrase ἄκανθαι καὶ τρίβολοι ἀναβήσονται ἐπὶ τὰ θυσιαστήρια αὐτῶν (Göttingen LXX, ed. Ziegler 1984:170), rendered in NETS as 'thorns and thistles shall grow up on their altars'.

13.Sirach 41:10 contains both γῆ and κατάρα ('Everything that is from the earth will return to the earth; so impious persons are from a curse to destruction'; NETS). The passage is sapiential in character, focusing on mortality and the fate of the wicked rather than covenantal warning language. Despite the lexical overlap, it therefore differs in conceptual framework from Hebrews 6:7–8.

14.For divine fire as an instrument of judgement in covenantal and prophetic contexts, see Coetsee (2024a:226–229).

The covenantal framework of blessing and curse provides the theological logic governing the illustration. Deuteronomic traditions repeatedly present the alternatives of blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. The language of εὐλογία and κατάρα in Hebrews 6:7–8 reflects this polarity, while the imagery of rainfall sustaining the land resonates with Deuteronomy 11:11.

The prophetic tradition employing agricultural imagery, most notably Isaiah 5:1–7, offers a broader conceptual parallel in which failed fruitfulness signifies disobedience and invites judgement. The evidence, however, suggests that this text functions as secondary background rather than a primary intertext for Hebrews 6:7–8. Moreover, its imagery likely reflects Deuteronomic covenant theology, reinforcing its role as a secondary expression of this broader tradition.

The imagery of Hebrews 6:7–8 is therefore best understood as theologically structured rather than dependent on direct textual allusion, drawing on a network of scriptural traditions organised around creation, covenant and judgement.

Conclusion: Exegetical and theological implications

The agricultural illustration of Hebrews 6:7–8 has long raised questions regarding its Old Testament background and its role within the warning of Hebrews 6:4–6. The lexical investigation undertaken in this study has shown that the imagery does not depend upon a single primary Old Testament source. Instead, the author of Hebrews employs imagery that would have been widely recognisable to an audience shaped by Israel's Scriptures. More specifically, the metaphor draws on creational traditions in Genesis 1–3 for its agricultural framework and curse imagery, while Deuteronomic traditions provide its covenantal logic of blessing, curse and human response.

It therefore seems best to agree with scholars who reach similarly broad conclusions. Cockerill (2012:279), for example, observes that the relative imprecision of these allusions indicates that the author is not evoking the specific context of any single passage. Ellingworth (1993:326), citing Nairne (1913:337), similarly notes that the imagery appears to be drawn 'partly from observation of nature, partly from the language of the Old Testament'.

With regard to the exegetical and theological implications of this convergence, particular significance should be attached to the warning associated with the unproductive land. The expression κατάρας ἐγγύς [near to a curse] conveys the imminence of judgement rather than a merely hypothetical possibility. The subsequent reference to burning likewise evokes broader biblical traditions in which fire functions as an instrument of divine judgement. Although this imagery has sometimes been interpreted as referring to the temporary cleansing of a field by fire, many commentators rightly observe that within Hebrews – where fire regularly signifies eschatological punishment (Heb 10:27; 12:29) – the imagery more likely points to final judgement (Moffatt 1924:82; Schreiner 2015:191).

Ultimately, the agricultural imagery of Hebrews 6:7–8 functions as a powerful rhetorical illustration that reinforces the urgency of the warning in Hebrews 6:4–6. Those who have received God's gracious provision are expected to produce fruit appropriate to that provision. When the land yields useful vegetation, it receives blessing; when it produces only thorns and thistles, it faces judgement. In this way, the metaphor vividly portrays the theological logic of the passage and calls the audience to perseverance and covenant fidelity in response to divine provision.

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