

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY

By C. H. M.

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INTRODUCTION

THE character of the book on which we now enter is quite as distinct as that of any of the four preceding sections of the Pentateuch. Were we to judge from the title of the book, we might suppose that it is a mere repetition of what we find in previous books. This would be a very grave mistake. There is no such thing as mere repetition in the Word of God.

Indeed, God never repeats Himself, either in His Word or in His works. Wherever we trace our God, whether on the page of Holy Scripture or in the vast fields of creation, we see divine fullness, infinite variety, marked design; and just in proportion to our spirituality of mind will be our ability to discern and appreciate these things. Here, as in all beside, we need the eye anointed with heavenly eye-salve.

What a poor idea must the man entertain of inspiration who could imagine for a moment that the fifth book of Moses is a barren repetition of what is to be found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers! Why, even in human composition we should not expect to find such a flagrant imperfection, much less in the perfect revelation which God has so graciously given us in His Holy Word.

The fact is, there is not, from cover to cover of the inspired volume, a single superfluous sentence, not one redundant clause, not one statement without its own distinct meaning - its own direct application. If we do not see this, we have yet to learn the depth, force, and meaning of the words, "**All scripture is given by inspiration of God.**"

Precious words! Would they were more thoroughly understood in this our day!

It is of the utmost possible importance that the Lord's people should be rooted, grounded, and settled in the grand truth of the plenary inspiration of Holy Scripture. It is to be feared that laxity as to this most weighty subject is spreading in the professing church to an appalling extent. In many quarters it has become fashionable to pour contempt upon the idea of plenary inspiration. It is looked upon as the veriest childishness and ignorance. It is regarded by many as a great proof of profound scholarship, breadth of mind, and original thinking to be able, by free criticism, to find out flaws in the precious volume of God.

Men presume to sit in judgment upon the Bible as though it were a mere human composition. They undertake to pronounce upon what is and what is not worthy of God.

In fact, they do virtually sit in judgment upon God Himself. The present result is, as might be expected, utter darkness and confusion, both for those learned doctors themselves and for all who are so foolish as to listen to them. And as for the future, who can conceive the eternal destiny of all those who shall have to answer before the judgment seat of Christ for the sin of blaspheming the Word of God, and leading hundreds astray by their infidel teaching?

We shall not, however, occupy time in dwelling upon the sinful folly of infidels and skeptics (even though called Christians), or their puny efforts to cast dishonor upon that peerless volume which our gracious God has caused to be written for our learning. They will some day or other find out their fatal mistake. God grant it may not be too late!

And as for us, let it be our deep joy and consolation to meditate upon the Word of God, that so we may ever be discovering some fresh treasure in that exhaustless mine – some new moral glories in that heavenly revelation!

The book of Deuteronomy holds a very distinct place in the inspired canon. Its opening lines are sufficient to prove this. –

“These be the words which Moses spake unto all Israel on this side Jordan in the wilderness, in the plain over against the Red Sea, between Paran, and Tophel, and Laban, and Hazeroth, and Dizahab.”

Thus much as to the place in which the lawgiver delivered the contents of this marvelous book.

The people had come up to the eastern bank of the Jordan, and were about to enter upon the land of promise. Their desert wanderings were nearly ended, as we learn from the third verse, in which the point of time is as distinctly marked as is the geographical position in verse 1:

“It came to pass in the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, on the first day of the month, that Moses spake unto the children of Israel, according unto all that the Lord had given him in commandment unto them.”

Thus, not only have we both time and place set forth with divine precision and minuteness, but we also learn, from the words just quoted, that the communications made to the people in the plains of Moab were very far indeed from being a repetition of what has come before us in our studies on the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Of this we have further and very distinct proof in a passage in chapter 21 of the book on which we are now entering:

“These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb.”

Let the reader note particularly these words.

They speak of two covenants – one at Horeb and one in Moab; and the latter, so far from being a mere repetition of the former, is as distinct from it as any two things can be. Of this we shall have the fullest and clearest evidence in our study of the profound book which now lies open before us.

True, the Greek title of the book, signifying the Law a second time, might seem to give rise to the idea of its being a mere recapitulation of what has gone before; but we may rest assured it is not so. Indeed, it would be a very grave error to think so. The book has its own specific place. Its scope and object are as distinct as possible. The grand lesson which it inculcates, from first to last, is obedience; and – that, too, not in the mere letter, but in the spirit of love and fear – an obedience grounded upon a known and enjoyed relationship – an obedience quickened by the sense of moral obligations of the weightiest and most influential character.

The aged lawgiver – the faithful, beloved, and honored servant of the Lord was about to take leave of the congregation. He was going to Heaven and they were about to cross the Jordan, and hence his closing discourses are solemn and affecting in the very highest degree.

- He reviews the whole of their wilderness history, and that, too, in a manner most touching and impressive.
- He recounts the scenes and circumstances of their forty eventful years of desert life, in a style eminently calculated to touch the deepest moral springs of the heart.

We hang over these most precious discourses with wonder and delight. They possess an incomparable charm, arising from the circumstances under which they were delivered, as well as from their own divinely powerful contents. They speak to us no less effectively than to those for whom they were specially intended. Many of the appeals and exhortations come home to us with a power of application as if they had been uttered but yesterday.

And is it not thus with all Scripture?

Are we not continually struck with its marvelous power of adaptation to our own very state, and to the day in which our lot is cast? It speaks to us with a point and freshness as if it were written expressly for us – written this very day.

There is nothing like Scripture.

Take any human writing of the same date as the book of Deuteronomy; if you could lay your hand on some volume written three thousand years ago, what would you find? A curious relic of antiquity – something to be placed in the British Museum, side by side with an Egyptian mummy, having no application whatever to us or to our time – a musty document – a piece of obsolete writing, practically useless to us, referring only to a state of society and to a condition of things long since passed away and buried in oblivion.

The Bible, on the contrary, is the book for to-day.

It is God's own book – His perfect revelation.

It is His own very voice speaking to each one of us. It is a book for every age, for every clime, for every class, for every condition – high and low, rich and poor, learned and ignorant, old and young. It speaks in a language so simple that a child can understand it, and yet so profound that the most gigantic intellect cannot exhaust it. Moreover, it speaks right home to the heart; it touches the deepest springs of our moral being; it goes down to the hidden roots of thought and feeling in the soul; it judges us thoroughly.

In a word, it is, as the inspired apostle tells us, “**quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.**” (Hebrews 4:12).

And then mark the marvelous comprehensiveness of its range.

It deals as accurately and as forcibly with the habits and customs, the manners and maxims of the nineteenth century of the Christian era as with those of the very earliest ages of human existence. It displays a perfect acquaintance with man in every stage of his history. The London of to-day and the Tyre of three thousand years ago are mirrored, with like precision and faithfulness, on the sacred page. Human life, in every stage of its development, is portrayed by a master-hand in that wonderful volume which our God has graciously penned for our learning.

What a privilege to possess such a book!

- To have in our hands a divine revelation!
- To have access to a book, every line of which is given by inspiration of God!
- To have a divinely given history of the past, the present, and the future!

Who can estimate aright such a privilege as this?

But then, this book judges man – judges his ways – judges his heart. It tells him the truth about himself. Hence man does not like God’s book. An unconverted man would vastly prefer a newspaper or a sensational novel to the Bible. He would rather read the report of a trial in one of our criminal courts than a chapter in the New Testament.

Hence, too, the constant effort to pick holes in God’s blessed book. Infidels in every age and of every class have labored hard to find out flaws and contradictions in Holy Scripture. The determined enemies of the Word of God are to be found, not only in the ranks of the vulgar, the coarse, and the demoralized, but amongst the educated, the refined, and the cultivated.

Just as it was in the days of the apostles, “**certain lewd fellows of the baser sort,**” and “**devout and honorable women**” – two classes so far removed from each other socially and morally – found one point in which they could heartily agree, namely, the utter rejection of the Word of God and of those who faithfully preached it. (Comp. Acts 13. 50 with 17:5).

So we ever find that men who differ in almost every thing else, agree in their determined opposition to the Bible. Other books are let alone. Men care not to point out defects in Virgil, in

Horace, in Homer, or Herodotus; but the Bible they cannot endure, because it exposes them and tells them the truth about themselves and the world to which they belong.

And was it not exactly the same with the living Word – the Son of God – the Lord Jesus Christ when He was here among men?

Men hated Him because He told them the truth. His ministry, His words, His ways – His whole life was a standing testimony against the world; hence their bitter and persistent opposition. Other men were allowed to pass on, but He was watched and waylaid at every turn of His path.

The great leaders and guides of the people “**sought to entangle Him in His talk,**” to find occasion against Him, in order that they might deliver Him to the power and authority of the governor. Thus it was during His marvelous life; and at the close, when the blessed One was nailed to the Cross between two malefactors, these latter were let alone; there were no insults heaped upon them – the chief priests and elders did not wag their heads at them. No; all the insults, all the mockery, all the coarse and heartless vulgarity – all was heaped upon the divine Occupant of the center cross.

Now, it is well we should thoroughly understand the real source of all the opposition to the Word of God – whether it be the living Word or the written Word. It will enable us to estimate it at its real worth. The devil hates the Word of God – hates it with a perfect hatred; and hence he employs learned infidels to write books to prove that the Bible is not the Word of God, that it cannot be, inasmuch as there are mistakes and discrepancies in it; and not only so, but in the Old Testament we find laws and institutions, habits and practices, unworthy of a gracious and benevolent Being.

To all this style of argument we have one brief and pointed reply.

Of all these learned infidels we simply say, They know nothing whatever about the matter. They may be very learned, very clever, very deep and original thinkers, well made up in general literature, very competent to give an opinion on any subject within the domain of natural and moral philosophy, very able to discuss any scientific question; moreover, they may be very amiable in private life – truly estimable characters – kind, benevolent, philanthropic, beloved in private and respected in public, – all this they may be, but being unconverted, and not having the Spirit of God, they are wholly unfit to form, much less to give, a judgment on the subject of Holy Scripture.

If anyone wholly ignorant of astronomy were to presume to sit in judgment on the principles of the Copernican system, these very men of whom we speak would at once pronounce him utterly incompetent to speak, and unworthy to be heard on such a subject.

In short, no one has any right whatever to offer an opinion on a matter with which he is unacquainted.

This is an admitted principle on all hands; and therefore its application in the case now before us cannot justly be called in question.

Now, the inspired apostle tells us, in his first Epistle to the Corinthians, that **“the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”**

This is conclusive. He speaks of man in his natural state, be he ever so learned, ever so cultivated. He is not speaking of any special class of men, but simply of man in his unconverted state – man destitute of the Spirit of God.

Some may imagine that the apostle refers to man in a state of barbarism, or savage ignorance. By no means; it is simply man in nature, be he a learned philosopher or an ignorant clown. **“He cannot know the things of the Spirit of God.”**

How, then, can he form or give a judgment as to the Word of God? How can he take it upon him to say what is or what is not worthy of God to write? And if he is audacious enough to do so (as, alas! he is), who will be foolish enough to listen to him? His arguments are baseless, his theories worthless, his books only fit for the wastepaper basket; and all this, be it observed, on the universally admitted principle above stated, that no one has any title to be heard on a subject of which he is wholly ignorant.

In this way we dispose of the whole tribe of infidel writers.

Who would think of listening to a blind man on the subject of light and shade? And yet such a man has much more claim to be heard than an unconverted man on the subject of inspiration. Human learning, however extensive and varied human wisdom, however profound, cannot qualify a man to form a judgment upon the Word of God.

No doubt a scholar may examine and collate MSS. simply as a matter of criticism; he may be able to form a judgment as to the question of authority for any particular reading of a passage; but this is a different matter altogether from an infidel writer undertaking to pronounce judgment upon the revelation which God has, in His infinite goodness, given to us. We maintain that no man can do this. It is only by the Spirit, who Himself inspired the Holy Scriptures, that those Scriptures can be understood and appreciated.

The Word of God must be received upon its own authority. If man can judge it or reason upon it, it is not the Word of God at all. Has God given us a revelation, or has He not? if He has, it must be absolutely perfect in every respect; and being such, it must be entirely beyond the range of human judgment.

Man is no more competent to judge Scripture than he is to judge God. The Scriptures judge man; not man the Scriptures. This makes all the difference. Nothing can be more miserably contemptible than the books which infidels write against the Bible.

Every page, every paragraph, every sentence, only goes to illustrate the truth of the apostle’s statement, that **“the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; . . . neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”**

Their gross ignorance of the subject with which they undertake to deal is only equaled by their self-confidence.

Of their irreverence we say nothing; for who would think of looking for reverence in the writings of infidels? We might perhaps look for a little modesty were it not that we are fully aware of the bitter animus which lies at the root of all such writings, and renders them utterly unworthy of a moment's consideration.

Other books may have a dispassionate examination; but the precious book of God is approached with the foregone conclusion that it is not a divine revelation, because, forsooth, infidels tell us that God could not give us a written revelation of His mind.

How strange! Men can give us a revelation of their thoughts (and infidels have done so pretty plainly), but God cannot! What folly! What presumption!

Why, we may lawfully inquire, could not God reveal His mind to His creatures? Why should it be thought a thing incredible? For no reason whatever, but because infidels would have it so. The wish is, in this case assuredly, father to the thought.

The question raised by the old serpent in the garden of Eden nearly six thousand years ago, has been passed on from age to age by all sorts of skeptics, rationalists, and infidels, namely, "**Hath God said?**"

We reply, with intense delight, Yes; blessed be His holy name, He has spoken – spoken to us. He has revealed His mind; He has given us the Holy Scriptures.

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect [αρτιος], thoroughly furnished unto all good works." And again, **"Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"** (II Timothy 3:16, 17; Romans 15:4).

The Lord be praised for such words! They assure us that all Scripture is given of God, and that all Scripture is given to us. Precious link between the soul and God! What tongue can tell the value of such a link? God has spoken – spoken to us.

His Word is a rock against which all the waves of infidel thought dash themselves in contemptible impotency, leaving it in its own divine strength and eternal stability. Nothing can touch the Word of God. Not all the powers of earth and hell, men and devils combined can ever move the Word of God.

There it stands, in its own moral glory, spite of all the assaults of the enemy, from age to age.

- **"Forever, O Lord, Thy Word is settled in heaven."**

- **"Thou hast magnified Thy Word above all Thy name."**

What remains for us? Just this:

“Thy Word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee.”

Here lies the deep secret of peace. The heart is linked to the throne – yea, to the very heart of God by means of His most precious Word, and is thus put in possession of a peace which the world can neither give nor take away.

What can all the theories, the reasonings, and the arguments of infidels effect? Just nothing. They are esteemed as the dust of the summer threshing-floor.

To one who has really learnt, through grace, to confide in the Word of God – to rest on the authority of Holy Scripture, all the infidel books that ever were written are utterly worthless, pointless, powerless; they display the ignorance and terrible presumption of the writers; but as to Scripture, they leave it just where it ever has been and ever will be – **“settled in heaven,”** as immovable as the throne of God. *

*** In referring to infidel writers, we should bear in mind that by far the most dangerous of such are those calling themselves Christians. In our young days, whenever we heard the word “infidel,” we at once thought of a Tom Paine or a Voltaire; now, alas I we have to think of so-called bishops and doctors of the professing church. Tremendous fact!**

The assaults of infidels cannot touch the throne of God, neither can they touch His Word; and, blessed be His name, neither can they touch the peace that flows through the heart that rests on that imperishable foundation.

- **“Great peace have they that love Thy law, and nothing shall offend them.”**

- **“The Word of our God shall stand forever.”**

- **“All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away; but the Word of the Lord endureth forever. And this is the Word which by the gospel is preached unto you”** (I Peter 1:24, 25).

Here we have the same precious golden link again.

The Word which has reached us in the form of glad tidings is the Word of the Lord which endureth forever; and hence our salvation and our peace are as stable as the Word on which they are founded. If all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass, then what are the arguments of infidels worth? They are as worthless as withered grass or a faded flower; and the men who put them forth and those who are moved by them will find them to be so, sooner or later.

Oh, the sinful folly of arguing against the Word of God – arguing against the only thing in all this world that can give rest and consolation to the poor, weary human heart – arguing against that which brings the glad tidings of salvation to poor lost sinners – brings them fresh from the heart of God!

But we may perhaps here be met by the question so often raised, and which has troubled many and led them to fly for refuge to what is called “the authority of the church.”

The question is this: “How are we to know that the book which we call the Bible is the Word of God?”

Our answer to this question is a very simple one – it is this: The One who has graciously given us the blessed book can give us also the certainty that the book is from Him. The same Spirit who inspired the various writers of the Holy Scriptures can make us know that those Scriptures are the very voice of God speaking to us. It is only by the Spirit that anyone can discern this.

As we have already seen, **“the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; . . . neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”**

If the Holy Spirit does not make us know, and give us the certainty that the Bible is the Word of God, no man or body of men can possibly do it; and on the other hand, if He does give us the blessed certainty, we do not need the testimony of man.

We freely admit that on this great question a shadow of uncertainty would be positive torture and misery; but who can give us certainty? God alone.

- If all the men upon earth were to agree in their testimony to the authority of Holy Scripture
- If all the councils that ever sat, all the doctors that ever taught, all the fathers that ever wrote, were in favor of the dogma of plenary inspiration
- If the universal church, if every denomination in Christendom were to assent to the truth that the Bible is, in very deed, the Word of God – in a word,

If we had all the human authority that could possibly be had in reference to the integrity of the Word of God, it would be utterly insufficient as a ground of certainty; and if our faith were founded on that authority, it would be perfectly worthless.

God alone can give us the certainty that He has spoken in His Word; and blessed be His name, when He gives it, all the arguments, all the cavilings, all the quibblings, all the questionings of infidels, ancient and modern, are as the foam on the water, the smoke from the chimney-top, or the dust on the floor.

The true believer rejects them as so much worthless rubbish, and rests in holy tranquility in that peerless revelation which our God has graciously given us. It is of the very last possible importance for the reader to be thoroughly clear and settled as to this grave question, if he would be raised above the influence of infidelity on the one hand and superstition on the other.

- Infidelity undertakes to tell us that God has not given us a book – revelation of His mind – could not give it:
- Superstition undertakes to tell us that even though God has given us a revelation, yet we cannot be assured of it without man’s authority, nor understand it without man’s interpretation.

Now it is well to see that by both alike we are deprived of the precious boon of Holy Scripture. And this is precisely what the devil aims at. He wants to rob us of the Word of God; and he can do this quite as effectually by the apparent self-distrust that humbly and reverently looks to wise and learned men for authority, as by an audacious infidelity that boldly rejects all authority, human or divine.

Take a case: A father writes a letter to his son at Canton – a letter full of the affection and tenderness of a father’s heart. He tells him of his plans and arrangements, tells him of everything that he thinks would interest the heart of a son – everything that the love of a father’s heart could suggest. The son calls at the post-office in Canton to inquire if there is a letter from his father. He is told by one official that there is no letter, that his father has not written and could not write – could not communicate his mind by such a medium at all, that it is only folly to think of such a thing.

Another official comes forward, and says, Yes; there is a letter here for you, but you cannot possibly understand it; it is quite useless to you, indeed it can only do you positive mischief inasmuch as you are quite unable to read it aright. You must leave the letter in our hands, and we will explain to you such portions of it as we consider suitable for you.

The former of these two officials represents Infidelity; the latter, Superstition.

By both alike would the son be deprived of the longed-for letter – the precious communication from his father’s heart. But what, we may inquire, would be his answer to these unworthy officials? A very brief and pointed one we may rest assured. He would say to the first, I know my father can communicate his mind to me by letter, and that he has done so. He would say to the second, I know my father can make me understand his mind far better than you can.

He would say to both, and that, too, with bold and firm decision, Give me up at once my father’s letter; it is addressed to me, and no man has any right to withhold it from me. Thus, too, should the simple-hearted Christian meet the insolence of Infidelity and the ignorance of Superstition – the two special agencies of the devil, in this our day, in setting aside the precious Word of God. “My Father has communicated His mind, and He can make me understand the communication.”

- **“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God;”** and,

- **“Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning.”**

Magnificent answer to every enemy of God’s precious and peerless revelation, be he rationalist or ritualist!

We do not attempt to offer any apology to the reader for this lengthened introduction to the book of Deuteronomy. Indeed we are only too thankful for an opportunity of bearing our feeble testimony to the grand truth of the divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. We feel it to be our sacred duty, as most surely it is our high privilege, to press upon all to whom we have access, the immense importance – yea, the absolute necessity of the most uncompromising decision on this point.

We must faithfully maintain, at all cost, the divine authority, and therefore the absolute supremacy and all-sufficiency, of the Word of God at all times, in all places, for all purposes. We must hold to it that the Scriptures, having been given of God, are complete, in the very highest and fullest sense of the word; that they do not need any human authority to accredit them, or any human voice to make them available: they speak for themselves, and carry their own credentials with them. All we have to do is to believe and obey, not to reason or discuss. God has spoken it: it is ours to hearken, and yield an unreserved and reverent obedience.

This is one grand leading point throughout the book of Deuteronomy, as we shall see in the progress of our meditations; and never was there a moment, in the history of the Church of God, in which it was more needful to urge home on the human conscience the necessity of implicit obedience to the Word of God. It is, alas! but little felt.

Professing Christians, for the most part, seem to consider that they have a right to think for themselves – to follow their own reason, their own judgment, or their own conscience. They do not believe that the Bible is a divine and universal guide-book. They think there are very many things in which we are left to choose for ourselves; hence the almost numberless sects, parties, creeds, and schools of thought.

If human opinion be allowed at all, then, as a matter of course, one man has as good a right to think as another; and thus it has come to pass that the professing church has become a proverb and a by-word for division.

And what is the sovereign remedy for this widespread disease? Here it is: Absolute and complete subjection to the authority of Holy Scripture. It is not men going to Scripture to get their opinions and their views confirmed; but going to Scripture to get the mind of God as to every thing, and bowing down their whole moral being to divine authority.

This is the one pressing need of the day in which our lot is cast – reverent subjection, in all things, to the supreme authority of the Word of God.

No doubt, there will be variety in our measure of intelligence, in our apprehension and appreciation of Scripture; but what we specially urge upon all Christians is that condition of soul, that attitude of heart expressed in those precious words of the psalmist, **“Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against Thee.”**

This, we may rest assured, is grateful to the heart of God.

“To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word” (Isaiah 66:2).

Here lies the true secret of moral security. Our knowledge of Scripture may be very limited; but if our reverence for it be profound, we shall be preserved from a thousand errors – a thousand snares.

And then there will be steady growth. We shall grow in the knowledge of God, of Christ, and of the written Word; we shall delight to draw from those living and exhaustless depths of Holy Scripture, and to range through those green pastures which infinite grace has so freely thrown open to the flock of Christ.

Thus shall the divine life be nourished and strengthened; the Word of God will become more and more precious to our souls, and we shall be led, by the powerful ministry of the Holy Ghost, into the depth, fullness, majesty, and moral glory of Holy Scripture.

We shall be delivered completely from the withering influences of all mere systems of theology, high, low, or moderate – a most blessed deliverance!

We shall be able to tell the advocates of all the schools of divinity under the sun that whatever elements of truth they may have in their systems we have in divine perfectness in the Word of God; not twisted and tortured to make them fit into a system, but in their right place in the wide circle of divine revelation which has its eternal center in the blessed Person of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

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