

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

The epistle of Paul to the Romans exhibits the grandeur and beauty of pristine Christian faith and portrays its vivid theme, “The righteous shall live by faith” (1.17).¹ No writer could say more than Paul did in these few words, since contained therein is the whole of Christianity in capsule form. Paul elaborated on this theme in his letter and produced what justly has been called the “Cathedral of the Christian faith.”² In Romans, he reflects on this straightforward but profound insight and produces his grand systematic theology that “great intellects . . . have discussed . . . only to discover depths beyond depths.”³

Of course, great literary works like Romans can benefit from and be illuminated by an introduction to lay the foundation for and lead the reader to a study of the text itself. This introduction will discuss several issues that typically fall to the genre of “special biblical introduction” (i.e., “deals with the individual books of the Bible”⁴). Examples of questions that engage those who interpret biblical literature include: (1) who wrote the book (authorship); (2) to

¹All scripture is taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2001) unless noted otherwise.

²D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), 164.

³Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), 219.

⁴H. S. Miller, *General Biblical Introduction* (Houghton, New York: The Word-Bearer Press, 1937), 13.

whom did the author address his correspondence (destination); (3) how did the recipients of the letter come under the purview of the author (the origin of a church); (4) what type of people (i.e., their race or nationality) received the letter (audience); (5) from where did the author write (milieu); (6) when did the author write his letter (date); (7) what caused the author to write (occasion); and (8) why did the author choose to correspond (purpose). These are basic issues that deserve attention, but some less general issues that pertain only to Romans also call for some discussion. For instance, why were the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters of Romans omitted from a few ancient manuscripts? This puzzle falls under the issue of the letter's structure—its unity and integrity—and will be given some attention at the end of the paper.

Authorship. Paul's authorship of the letter is beyond any real dispute. Radical critics have dismissed Paul's authorship, for example, Edward Evanson, a controversial English clergyman, in his *The Dissonance of the four generally received Evangelists* (1792), and Bruno Baur, a German theologian and philosopher, in his *Kritik der paulinischen Briefe* (1842). But the internal and external evidence for Paul's authorship is strong. The letter begins, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle . . ." (1.1). The character of the writer is consistent with what we know about Paul. He was an apostle to the Gentiles (11.13; 15.15-20) as was Paul (Galatians 2.7-8; Acts 26.16-18). As far as external evidence, Romans is ascribed to Paul first by Marcion. The Muratorian Canon and the Old Latin and Old Syriac versions likewise attest to Paul's authorship. "From Irenaeus onward the references to Romans are full and complete in all

the Church writers; it is uniformly recognized as by Paul as canonical.”⁵ Because of this strong internal and external evidence, Paul’s authorship of Romans rarely is disputed.

Destination. The letter itself indicates clearly its destination. Paul sends greetings “to all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1.7). He speaks of his desire “to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome” (1.15). The first chapter seems to imply that Paul was not addressing a single, organized body of Christians as he did at Corinth (cf. 1 Corinthians 1.1-2). He did not address “the church of God at Rome” because “the Roman brethren were composed of several groups or ‘house churches.’”⁶ From chapter sixteen it appears that the saints at Rome assembled for worship in different houses. “Whether this was due to their lack of an adequate place for united assembly, or due to their scattered location in that great city, cannot be determined.”⁷ Even though, these bands of God’s people must have possessed some knowledge of one another, since Paul expected all the saints to receive his letter.

Audience. Paul for certain had not visited Rome before writing this letter. He was not the founder of Christianity in Rome. He had wanted to visit Rome to impart some spiritual gift to believers there (1.11), but he had been hindered in some way (1.13; 15.22-23). Furthermore, Paul alludes to the fact that no other apostle started the Roman church, since Paul determined “to

⁵Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 220.

⁶Jimmy Allen, *Survey of Romans* (Searcy, Arkansas: n.p., 1973), 13.

⁷Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 167.

preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation" (15.20). So how did the church at Rome begin? Three prominent views are held.

First, "the Roman Catholic view has been that the church was founded by the apostle Peter."⁸ Proponents of this view assert that "according to tradition, it [the church at Rome, dwf] was founded by Peter, who became its first bishop, holding office till his martyrdom twenty-five years later."⁹ But evidence points to the contrary. "In the earliest form of the tradition Peter and Paul are always named as joint founders."¹⁰ So the Catholic tradition is weakened by the statement of Paul himself that the church existed before his personal visit (1.9-13; 15.22-24). And, "the claim that Peter went to Rome in A.D. 42, after his escape from prison under Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12), and remained there for twenty-five years is impossible in view of the evidence in the New Testament."¹¹ Peter was still in Jerusalem when the disputation over circumcision transpired in A.D. 49, and Paul makes no personal references to Peter in the letter (written about A.D. 56 or 57)—strange indeed if Peter served as bishop of the church. Also, "Suetonius records that Cladius banished Jews from Rome in A.D. 49 because there had been

⁸Ibid, 169.

⁹T. Henshaw, *New Testament Literature* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1952), 253.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 169.

rioting at the instigation of one called Chrestus.”¹² “Chrestus” is possibly a misspelling of “Christus” or the Latin for Christ. If so, Christianity already was present in Rome.¹³ But Peter was in Jerusalem in A.D. 49, so Peter did not establish the Roman church.

The second view holds that the Roman church was founded by “sojourners from Rome, both Jews and proselytes” on their return from Jerusalem after their conversion on Pentecost (Acts 2.10). Hiebert, Thiessen, and Sanday and Headlam dismiss this possibility on grounds that the young converts would not have gained enough knowledge to lay the foundation of a church. But in response to this, Guthrie’s point is appropriate: “Their knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus would be continually increasing as Christian travelers brought back with them accounts of apostolic preaching and teaching. In this way the Roman church must have heard a good deal about the work and ministry of the apostle Paul before he wrote to them.”¹⁴

This raises the third view as to the origin of the church at Rome, that is, “that it was founded by various Christians who had taken up their residence in Rome, many of them being Paul’s converts.”¹⁵ “The greetings of the last chapter of this Epistle show that Paul had many acquaintances among the number, and the names seem to imply that most of them were

¹²Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 393.

¹³Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 291.

¹⁴Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 394.

¹⁵Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 221.

Greeks.”¹⁶ Although the second possibility as to the origin of the church at Rome is not impossible, the latter suggestion seems the most likely.

Lengthy discussion has ensued about the composition of the Roman church, but it probably consisted of both Jews and Gentiles with the latter in the majority. “Such a composition is to be expected in a cosmopolitan city with a strong Jewish colony, and is supported by an analysis of the epistle itself.”¹⁷ In some parts of his argument in the letter, Paul is addressing Jews. Such is evident in the direct questioning that relates to the Jews in chapter two and the reference to “Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh” (4.1), although this need not indicate a Jewish church since Paul used “our fathers” in a letter sent to a predominately Gentile church (1 Corinthians 10.1).¹⁸ But on the other hand, Paul addresses himself more often to the Gentile audience. He includes them among those to whom he has been commissioned (1.5); he considers them “among the rest of the Gentiles” (1.13); and he plainly states in 11.13, “I am speaking to you Gentiles.” Moreover, “he implies that the Romans are among the Gentiles whom he, as a priest, is offering up to God (15.14-18),”¹⁹ and more than half the names of the salutatory in 16.3-15 are in Latin and Greek. So the majority of Christians at Rome when Paul

¹⁶B. W. Johnson, *The People's New Testament*, Vol. II (reprint; Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n.d.), 11.

¹⁷Donald Guthrie, “Epistle to the Romans,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, edited by J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 1102.

¹⁸See Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 395.

¹⁹Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 224.

wrote his letter were probably Gentile converts, although the possibility for a minority Jewish group is not completely out of the question.

Milieu. Evidence points to Corinth as the place where Romans was written. In Romans 16.23, Paul reveals that Gaius was his host at that time, and Paul had baptized a Gaius at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.14). Paul also alludes to “Erastus, the city treasurer.” “An inscription discovered in Corinth and dating from the first century reads, ‘Erastus, the commissioner of public works, laid this pavement at his own expense.’”²⁰ This is possibly the same Erastus, since “commissioner” is to some degree synonymous with “treasurer.” Paul mentions Phoebe who belonged to the “church at Cenchreae” (16.1), and Cenchrea was located due east of Corinth. Paul as well mentions Timothy and Sosipater as sending greetings (16.21), and both of these men were “Paul’s companions when he left Greece on his last journey to Jerusalem.”²¹ And, Paul affirms in Romans 15.25-26, “. . . however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” Considerable attention was given to this special collection in Paul’s letters to Corinth (1 Corinthians 16.1-4; 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9), and there is no doubt that this “fits the time when Paul was in Achaia (Acts 20.1-3; 24.17) and Corinth was in Achaia.”²² Finally, Paul “mentions that he has preached the Gospel ‘even unto Illyricum’ (15.19), a

²⁰Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 291.

²¹Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 397.

²²Allen, *Survey of Romans*, 14.

statement which he could not have made until he got to Achaia on his third missionary journey.”²³ All of the preceding indicates a Corinthian origin, the time of which would be Paul’s three month stay in Corinth during his third missionary journey (Acts 20.3).

Date. Presupposing the unity of Romans, the date of the letter can be affixed with little difficulty. “Paul’s departure from Corinth on his third missionary journey *en route* for Jerusalem took place either in AD 57 or 58.”²⁴ This date generally is agreed on by most biblical scholars. Hiebert, however, goes further and lists several factors that point to a date in the “early months of the year A.D. 58, perhaps during the month of February.”²⁵ He reasons, first, the letter was written some time after Paul arrived in Corinth, since the calm atmosphere of the book suggests that the various troubles besetting the Corinthian church had been settled. Second, Phoebe’s journey to Rome necessitated an open season for navigation (i.e., sometime after March 10). Third, Paul’s statement—“at present, however, I am going to Jerusalem” (15.25)—was penned before he discovered the Jewish plot against him (Acts 20.3), and this motivated him to go to Macedonia first.²⁶ It does seem Paul wrote Romans early in the year (i.e., in the spring of AD 57 or 58), since he left Corinth early enough to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost (Acts 20.16).

²³Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 177.

²⁴Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 397.

²⁵Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 177.

²⁶Ibid.

Occasion. The occasion of the letter is not given specifically, but the contents of the book point to an opportunity that provoked Paul to write the Christians in Rome. Many of Paul's writings arose out of a pressing need to correct dissident developments in a particular church or to warn against possible false teaching. But this does not seem to be the case with Romans. The letter came about as a result of the apostle's missionary interests. Paul wanted to: (1) preach good news to the Gentiles in Rome (1.13-15); (2) strengthen the church at Rome by bestowing spiritual gifts (1.11-13); and (3) receive help from the Romans to go to Spain (15.24).²⁷ "When he learned of the impending visit of Phoebe to Rome he determined to avail himself of the opportunity to communicate with the Roman church and to inform them of his coming and his plans."²⁸ This opportunity coupled with the possibility that Jewish agitators (i.e., Judaizers) might sway believers in Rome away from their faith in Christ brought about the need, in Paul's mind, to write the Romans and pen what has been labeled "the most profound work" in the New Testament.²⁹

Purpose. In regard to Paul's purpose, "the attempt of scholars to determine the reason why Paul wrote the kind of letter that he did has produced a diversity of answers."³⁰ Guthrie in

²⁷Allen, *Survey of Romans*, 15.

²⁸Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 178.

²⁹J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans* (reprint; Delight, Arkansas: Gospel Light Publishing Company, n.d.), 289.

³⁰Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 178.

his *New Testament Introduction* discusses five basic views.³¹ First, some scholars have stressed the idea that Paul was aiming his letter at a heretical faction present among Jewish Christians at Rome. But this opinion has found little favor. “Clearly an anti-heretical purpose does not dominate the Epistle.”³² Although Paul emphasizes the fallacies that try to reestablish the law or old covenant and warns against promoters of such (i.e., “watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught,” 16.17), this does not seem to be the basis for the entire letter. Paul’s references to the Gentiles and his personal plans weigh against a polemical purpose for the letter.

Second, other scholars have stressed a purpose just the opposite of the above. They see as Paul’s major emphasis the vindication of his commission to preach good news to the Gentiles and the letter as his attempt to harmonize Jewish and Gentile factions in the church. This idea no doubt accounts for the Gentile considerations in his letter, but such a rationale fails to account for Paul’s extensive treatment of the error of the Jewish agitators (e.g., chapters 1-8).

Third, many affirm that Paul’s purpose was to set forth an important doctrinal treatise. Heibert states, “It is evident that the Apostle is being divinely led to give to the Church of Christ this clear and comprehensive presentation of the doctrine of salvation by faith for all subsequent generations.”³³ Bratt suggests this same idea in saying Paul’s purpose was “to teach his readers

³¹Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 398-399.

³²Guthrie, “Epistle to the Romans,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 1102.

³³Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 181.

the fundamentals of the faith.”³⁴ Although this view—that Paul desired to send to the Romans a full statement of his theological position—has much to commend it, “it cannot be maintained that he envisaged laying the foundations of Pauline theology in this way.”³⁵ Some of Paul’s theological statements are not reflected at all in the argument of Romans. The idea of cosmic reconciliation and eschatological considerations are not discussed. The resurrection of Christ, the doctrine of the church, and spiritual leadership and its gifts are not discussed as fully in Romans as Paul does elsewhere. And, the historical references (e.g., chapters 9-11) and personal allusions (1.7-15) are important sections of Romans that must be weighed when deciding Paul’s purpose. No one denies that Paul expounds doctrine in Romans, but this purpose alone does not satisfy all the internal evidence that the letter presents.

Fourth, “at the time of writing the Epistle, Paul had reached a turning-point in his career. In the course of some twenty years of missionary activity he had preached the Gospel of Christ ‘from Jerusalem, and round about even unto Illyricum’ (15.19), establishing churches in the provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia.”³⁶ It might appear that Paul’s pioneering work in the East had come to a close, and now others could build on the foundation that he had laid. But Paul was not one to relinquish his efforts, since his great desire was to evangelize the

³⁴John H. Bratt, *New Testament Guide* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1946), 46.

³⁵Guthrie, “Epistle to the Romans,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 1102.

³⁶Henshaw, *New Testament Literature*, 255-256.

whole world. “His new plan was to evangelize the West, using Rome as a base of operations.”³⁷

Paul therefore wrote to the Roman church, introduced himself to them, and solicited their cooperation in his proposed missionary campaign in the West. Paul, as it were, gathered up the fruits of his past labors in his mind and submitted a written conclusion of these great things to the church at Rome. Paul foresaw the strategic importance of Rome for future evangelistic efforts, so he wrote to these believers to: (1) keep them from false teachings; (2) put to rest possible problematic developments among the Christians there; and (3) prepare the Romans for his intended future visit.

But even though Romans is an apt summation of Paul’s past life and his efforts among both Jewish and Gentile believers, Romans was written to meet the immediate needs of its readers as well. This is the last view that should be stressed. The situation of the readers cannot be overlooked. In Romans “much primitive doctrine is taken for granted. The apostle has probably received a fairly comprehensive report of the state of the church from Aquila and Priscilla and others of his associates and converts who had contact with the church. He seems to have been aware of certain intellectual problems which were of some concern to the Christians and sets out to answer them.”³⁸ In response to their problems, Paul seems to elicit what is called by McNeile “a comprehensive apologia for the principle of universal religion as set over against

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 399.

Jewish nationalism.”³⁹ This purpose seems to be adequate as it accounts for the letter in its entirety. Paul wrote to all the believers in Rome to the exclusion of none, and he wrote for their benefit and not particularly to promote his own personal desires. Paul did stress doctrinal issues, but that was not the totality of his reason for writing, because reflected in the letter are personal and even touching sentiments that show Paul’s tender concern and compassion for the souls of those whom he cherished.

Structure, Unity, and Integrity of the Text. Several problems about the structure and unity of Romans are of interest. Several scholars have suggested that chapter sixteen was sent to Ephesus instead of Rome. The arguments for this are: (1) it is beyond possibility that Paul knew so many people in a city that he never had visited; (2) the reference to Aquila and Priscilla points to Ephesus since they were in Ephesus not Rome earlier (Acts 18.18, 26; 1 Corinthians 16.19) and at a later time (2 Timothy 4.19); (3) the mention of Epaenetus as “the first convert to Christ in Asia” (16.5) naturally suggests Ephesus; (4) it is unlikely that Paul would commend Phoebe (16.1, 2) to a church he never visited; (5) Paul would not have issued a warning like he did in 16.17 to a church over which he had no authority; (6) most of the names of chapter sixteen are Greek rather than Roman; and (7) the words of 15.33 form an apt conclusion to a letter.

At first glance, these arguments seem convincing, but after more serious reflection each argument is answered easily. First, an independent letter consisting largely of personal greetings would be very odd. “It has been aptly remarked that such a letter, consisting almost entirely of

³⁹Ibid.

greetings, would be a monstrosity for any other age than our modern penny picture-postcard age.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, “to send individual greetings to a church where he knew all the members would be quite contrary to Paul’s practice in his other epistles.”⁴¹ The only other letter that reflects this practice is Colossians, and they also had not been visited by Paul. Paul’s policy apparently was not to single out individual Christians in churches familiar to him, but at Rome such personal greetings would serve as a useful commendation.

Second, the excellent means of travel within the Roman empire makes the movements from one locale to another by Aquila and Priscilla less of an impossibility. Third, there is no reason why Epaphroditus was forced to remain in Asia. Fourth, Phoebe need not be recommended to a church where Paul was known. Paul, unknown by face to the church in Rome, could easily recommend Phoebe to these people (unless perhaps he was an obscure writer and that is not the case). Fifth, although there are no records of such false teaching in Rome as 16.17 indicates, such a warning would have equal relevance in Rome as it would in Ephesus. Sixth, “Sanday and Headlam have shown that a large number of the names that occur in chapter 16 have been found in the inscriptions in Rome.”⁴² Seventh, the concluding words of chapter fifteen are not an apt conclusion to a letter; such would be unparalleled in Paul’s writings. In light of these objections, the unity of Romans should be upheld.

⁴⁰Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 174.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 225.

A greater difficulty comes from the various recensions of the letter. The words “in Rome” (1.7, 15) are lacking “in one bi-lingual manuscript . . . while the reference in verse 7 is also omitted in one minuscule . . .”⁴³ In the manuscripts, the doxology of 16.25-27 is found in different locations: (1) at the end of chapter sixteen; (2) at the end of chapter fifteen; (3) after chapter fifteen and chapter sixteen; and (4) not at all. The benediction—“the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all”—also is located: (1) at the end of 16.20; (2) after 16.24 (many of the manuscripts for this omit the doxology altogether); and (3) after 16.27. Finally, there is evidence that Marcion’s text omitted chapters fifteen and sixteen. How are these different textual problems to be resolved?

Regarding the omission of the reference to Rome in 1.7 and 1.15, one might think Paul’s letter to Ephesus is a parallel case. “Ephesians was evidently designed from the first as a circular letter, and a blank was left in the opening salutation which could be filled in with any appropriate place-name.”⁴⁴ But Ephesians and Romans are not identical and exactly parallel. “No other place-name could stand in place of ‘Rome’ in Romans 1.7, 15, because the context (Romans 1.8-15) refers to Rome and Rome only.”⁴⁵ The doxology is placed by the most reliable and ancient manuscripts after chapter sixteen. The other possibilities are attested barely and consequently

⁴³Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 405.

⁴⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963), 30.

⁴⁵Ibid.

carry little weight. The textual evidence for the benediction is confusing. Its placement after 16.20 is affirmed well by a variety of manuscripts, and its placement after 16.24 occurs in good Western texts. But these textual witnesses omit the doxology and put the benediction at the conclusion of the letter.⁴⁶ For this reason, the inclusion of both doxology and benediction is the most likely original. As for Marcion's recension, "there is no extant Greek Manuscript which omits these two chapters."⁴⁷

How are these variations to be explained? Some have suggested that Paul prepared two letters—one specifically for Rome and another for general circulation. But it seems improbable that Paul would edit his own writing like this. "Much more probable is the view that Paul wrote the epistle in its long form and that it was later cut down by others."⁴⁸ Many see Marcion as the culprit of this textual dissection, since his anti-Semitic tendencies would demand that he renounce such phrases as "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction" (15.4) and "Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (15.8). Bruce even goes so far and conjectures that "when the Roman church repudiated Marcion and his teaching, he might have judged it unworthy to be mentioned in the text of his *Apostolikon*."⁴⁹ This would account for "in Rome" being

⁴⁶Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 3rd ed., 405.

⁴⁷Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 172.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁹Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 30.

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omitted. To be sure, the case for Marcion's involvement in the textual confusion is strong, but his handiwork is not the only possibility. "It is not impossible that the mutilation was done by orthodox editors or copyists in an effort to give the epistle a more universal tone."⁵⁰ Trying to adapt Romans for general use, these editors possibly omitted chapters fifteen and sixteen (since they contain references local to Rome) and they removed "in Rome" from 1.7 and 1.15 to eliminate any local reference. Whichever, either of the latter two explanations would account for the textual phenomena of Romans.

To conclude, the Roman letter, written by the apostle Paul at Corinth in the spring of A.D. 57 or 58, was sent to the predominately Gentile church in Rome. The book, purposed to fill its readers' needs, is a unified literary construction.

⁵⁰Hiebert, *An Introduction to the Pauline Epistles*, 173.

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