



Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Volume 25 | Number 1

Article 3

January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Nibley, Hugh W. (2005) "Temples Everywhere," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 25: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol25/iss1/3>

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Temples Everywhere

By Hugh W. Nibley

Those of us who saw the recent television documentary *American Prophet: The Story of Joseph Smith* may have noticed an interesting defect in the script, namely, that it was Hamlet with Hamlet left out. It was as if one were to produce the life of Shakespeare with charming views of Stratford-upon-Avon, country school, the poaching story, marriage to Anne Hathaway, showbiz in London, and respectable retirement without bothering to mention that our leading character gave the world the greatest treasury of dramatic art in existence. Or a life of Bach with his niggardly brother-guardian, his early poverty, his odd jobs with local organs and choirs, his acceptance in the courts of the Holy Roman Empire, his nineteen children, and his loving nature without a word about the greatest volume of music ever produced by a mortal.

So it is with Joseph Smith. No one has the slightest inkling of the mass and charge of his legacy to us. I sometimes think how it would be if I had to hand in a term paper, the subject of which was the “Thousand-

This address, given on 4 December 1999 at the Joseph Smith Building auditorium at Brigham Young University, is published here for the first time.

Year History of a Nation,” in detail, fiction if you will, or anything else, but one semester to do it in. Panic as the day approaches—what on earth can I write? What shall I say? Anything you want to, but it had better be good. The newspapers had been heckling and guffawing, and everybody was waiting for Joe to fall on his face. Surprise, surprise! He brought out the book, five hundred pages of factual information, on time, and invited critics to do their worst. And of course everyone, including ourselves, has avoided the big question: How did he do it? Local mobs chased him down country roads and broke into his house at night. But nobody was able to explain where he got the book.

In the same sense, does anyone alive have the vaguest clue as to what Joseph really gave us in the temple? That was the greatest of all. The Book of Abraham tells us a lot about it, but who reads the Book of Abraham? In a letter dated 26 February 1996, the director of Berlin’s Egyptian Museum, in answer to a Latter-day Saint student, responded, “The interpretations printed in the three Facsimiles have nothing to do with Egyptian beliefs: they are pure fantasy.” In the next sentence, however, the director obligingly refers his correspondent to Professor Eric Hornung, specifically to his book on the Valley of the Kings,¹ which he recommends as giving “the real explanations of the Egyptian drawings.” This is welcome advice since Professor Hornung may well be called the supernova of the so-called New School of Egyptology.

Obedient to the good director, we turn at once to Hornung’s guidebook, which refers us to the works of yet another giant: “Egyptian historiography reached its high-water mark with Eduard Meyer.”² With all haste, we repair to the books of Meyer, who bids all students of ancient religion to seek wisdom in the works of giant number four: “Mormonism is one of the most instructive phenomena in the whole area of religious history: And it is most remarkable . . . that students of religion who have sought enlightenment in the most remote, inaccessible, and all but incomprehensible religions of the past have kept themselves strictly aloof from Mormonism and disdained the rich instruction it has to offer.”³ Having viewed the whole field, Professor Meyer can assure us that it is the case of Joseph Smith that sheds light upon all the others and helps us to reach an understanding of the fundamental problems.⁴ And here is my point: Though the great Eduard Meyer was impressed enough to come to Utah in 1904 and carry on his investigations here, he never bothered to read the Book of Mormon, declar-

ing that only a Mormon could have the patience to get through it. For him the Pearl of Great Price does not exist; and yet it was his special field—for that very reason he could not lower himself to take it seriously. Joseph Smith's resurrection of the temple should have electrified him, but in those days it was fashionable for Egyptologists to hold all religion, and especially that of the crazy, irrational Egyptians, in contempt.

It is another picture today. The New School of Egyptology has focused and held its full attention on the religion of Egypt; almost every leading scholar has written a work on the Egyptian concept of the hereafter, which requires deep searching into the temple and funerary literature—recognized as essentially the same. Whoever would have thought it?

The ancient world was filled with temples. Two centuries of worldwide comparative studies has come up with the conclusion that there existed throughout the world from the most ancient times a body of religious beliefs and practices centered around the temple. Everyone recognizes the sameness of the dominant theme and allows for local variations. But it is generally agreed that throughout the world people have held certain general concepts which for some strange reason have been very much the same; the objectives and the rites to achieve them are strangely alike from prehistoric times down to Christianity, virtually unchanged. The temple rites and funeral rites all had the same common intent, namely, to see the worshipper safely through from this world to the next and to guarantee an acceptable eternity hereafter.

To make such a transition the temple is necessary, it being defined as the place of contact (“interface,” says Hornung) between worlds above and below the earth; more recently emphasis has been put on its function as relating to the cosmos. This was the only solution to the one great problem that has ever haunted the human race: the problem of facing death.

Resurrection and eternal life are the *sine qua non* of that piece of mind which is the whole gift of religion. The neo-Freudians have finally recognized “the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man's peculiar and greatest anxiety,” outranking even sex.⁵ In his prize-winning book, Ernest Becker finds that “historic religions addressed themselves to this same problem of how to bear the end of life. Religions like Hinduism and Buddhism performed the ingenious trick of pretending not to want to be reborn.”⁶ Not so our Egyptians. Siegfried Morenz has pointed out the complete contrast between eternity of the Egyp-

tian individual and the Indians' transmigration, the one determined to be himself forever and the other resigned to becoming anything you please—a drop of water in an ocean of being.⁷

If modern scholars are depressed by the mortuary atmosphere of Egyptian culture, our modern world has an even more demoralizing message: the absolute scientific certainty that man “goes back into the ground a few feet in order to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear forever,” taking with him his vast unrealized potential.⁸ No wonder “the full apprehension of man's condition would drive him insane.”⁹ Mircea Eliade concludes his book *Cosmos and History* with a warning that unless we find “a new formula for man's collaboration with the creation” to give tragedies a meaning, we must be “prey to a continual terror.”¹⁰ The temple provides the formula.

Since death cannot be denied, what hope is there for the hereafter? The Egyptian answer, as everybody recognizes today, was to start all over again and have a new life. That meant a new creation. How was that to be effected? There is one glowing example which no one can overlook—the sun. And the Egyptians, like other ancient people, made the most of it. Stick close to the sun was the idea, and do what he does. Get yourself a place in his boat, as a crewmember, attendant (*shms-Re*), or member of the family. To prolong your own life, you must get in on the action—you must be present at the only time and place that the sun, completing one cycle and reaching its lowest point at the solstice, without a split-second hesitation, reverses its direction and begins its upward climb.

This means that everybody in the world had to come together at a special place—the exact center of the cosmos, since it was the point of convergence for the pilgrims' roads from every point on the horizon. And for the beginning of a new life cycle, you must start with the creation all over again. The creation drama is a standard feature of temple worship. Everywhere, as far as we can trace the records and the ruins, there have been great gatherings of the race—the *panegyris*, or “everybody in a circle,” in every part of the world. Many have recognized the phenomenon, but no one can explain when or how it began. Eduard Meyer thinks it started with animals in their periodic meetings to disport and reproduce. Megalithic circles marking the great ceremonial assemblages are found by the thousands and go back to the Stone Age.

I had the good fortune to be stationed near Avebury in Hertfordshire at the end of World War II and

had ample time to examine the vast establishment. That was before it was discovered by the tourists. The stone circle, 1400 feet in diameter, was rivaled by the great artificial mound “Silbury Hill,” 150 feet high, the highest artificial mound in Europe, to beckon the pilgrim from afar. It took thirty-five million baskets of earth to complete—by a community, it is calculated, of only five hundred souls.¹¹ The mountain dominated the flat surrounding plain, littered with the bones of countless ceremonial feasts. From the air (I had to pass over it slowly in regular and frequent glider flights) one could behold traces of prehistoric roads, marked by standing stones, leading from all directions. That is the general layout of countless megalithic ceremonial centers, over ten thousand of which are known and, according to Aubrey Burl, the principal authority, is “strangely parallel in North America where the collapsed trading networks of the Hopewell Indians in Ohio were succeeded by the Temple Mound societies.”¹² According to him, the British “circles were separated from Cahokia by three thousand years and four thousand miles of Atlantic Ocean,” and Cahokia culture goes back to Teotihuacan.¹³ He could neither explain the anomaly nor deny the astonishing resemblance.

Strangely, I was prepared for this surprise (at that time little attention was paid to Avebury), for eight years earlier in Berkeley I had produced a laborious comparative study, a thesis examining eyewitness accounts of some fifteen such holy centers scattered widely in the Old World. Within a year of returning from the army, I went straight to Provo, where Brother Virgil Bushman, a great missionary to the Hopi and Navajo, urged me to come with him and see the culture of the Old World in Arizona. I have described our arrival in Hotevilla in the piece called “Promised Lands.”

I was stunned by what I saw as we came through a low arch at dawn out onto the spectacle of a splendid drama in progress. Here, on a high, bleak rock, surrounded by nothing but what we would call total desolation in all directions, was a full-scale drama in progress in the grand manner of the Ancients. . . . Everything was being carried out with meticulous care; all the costumes were fresh and new; . . . nothing artificial—all the dyes, woven stuff, and properties taken from nature.

What an immense effort and dedication this represented! And for what? These were the only people in the world that still took the trouble to do what the human race had been doing for many

millennia—celebrating the great life-cycle of the year, the creation, the dispensations. I told Brother Bushman that there should be fifty-two dancers, and that is exactly what there were, . . . the sacred number of the Asiatics and the Aztecs, but it was also the set number of dancers in the archaic Greek chorus. [We remember that there were fifty-two rods stored in the ark of the covenant, each *shevet* or staff representing a family in Israel.]¹⁴

Hotevilla is an exciting new study and wild surmise; I refer you to the recent volume by Thomas Mails entitled *Hotevilla: Hopi Shrine of the Covenant, Microcosm of the World*.¹⁵ Through the years I have taken some beautiful reproductions of Egyptian papyri to show to the children and elders in Hotevilla; they have been greatly impressed by the resemblances to their own rituals. The dancers always have the headband and two feathers, stripes on the face, copper bands around the arms, an evergreen wreath around the neck, bandolier over the shoulder, and especially an apron of fox or wolf skin with the tail dangling conspicuously behind, the wand or rattle, the ornament at the knee, and buskins on the feet. And when I have taken professors from Israel to visit the Hopis, they were simply bowled over by the parallels.

The recognition of a prehistoric order of things, religious and political, picked up speed with the founding of the East India Company in 1773; eager young Englishmen discovering the East and the primacy of Sanskrit broke into the open field with “inquiry. . . into all the languages to reduce them to one common center, from which they spread like rays of the Sun.”¹⁶ The progress of the science is marked by the writings of the great Max Müller, who moved from philology to his monumental *Rig-Veda-Sanhita* (1849–1873),¹⁷ to a broader *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* (1879),¹⁸ and finally to his wide-ranging studies on the science of mythology.¹⁹

And so the next step: “If the heathens already possessed . . . an abundant stock of religious *myths*, then song and story could not fail to . . . interweave themselves with the *rites and customs*.”²⁰ Throughout the world students started studying the various major events and making lists of their main features. When these lists were compared, they displayed a surprising degree of conformity, especially in the five main events. Eliade strings together the sacred place (the celestial prototype), the act of creation (the sacred marriage), the confrontation with evil, the victory of the king, and the coronation. To these he adds the

atoning sacrifice (cleansing the people of their sins) and memories of paradise, festivities wistfully but happily recalling the golden age.²¹

As we summed up the picture many years ago, “At hundreds of holy shrines, each believed to mark the exact center of the universe and represented as the point at which the four quarters of the earth converged—‘the navel of the earth’—one might have seen assembled at the New Year—the moment of creation, the beginning and ending of time—vast concourses of people, each thought to represent the entire human race in the presence of all its ancestors and gods.”²² The whole trend can be summed up in an astonishing statement of Eliade: “In extremely diverse cultural contexts we always find the same cosmological pattern and the same ritual scenario,” and as “man progressively occupies increasingly vast areas of the planet, . . . all he seems to do is to repeat indefinitely the same archetypal gesture.”²³

The great object of Egyptian ritual was “the creation, maintenance, and continuation of life beyond death, in the cosmos as well as on earth. . . . After creation . . . the vital forces of all creatures has to be preserved for eternity, this being accomplished by continuous renewal or rejuvenation.”²⁴ It is a case of “periodically recharging the sun,” as Hornung puts it.²⁵ This requires the aid of all living things.²⁶

Mankind must cooperate in “the rites and ordinances that express the unity of the universe [and] must be repeated to keep up [man’s] awareness of them,” without which the whole structure would vanish.²⁷ “Everything meaningful is brought together into a single meaningful whole.”²⁸ It was both with *Natalia* and the resurrection when everyone went wild with the good news that death had been overcome and the hero had risen victorious over death.²⁹

Not the least significant note on the primacy of the temple is the source and origin of civilization. The spin-offs that the great year-rite generated throughout the world were quite inevitable. The bringing together of vast numbers of farmers from widely scattered regions, bringing their local produce to be exchanged for acceptable temple tokens (see 1 Samuel 1:3), required facilities for exchange, “banks” or benches of the money changers in the court of the temple. The exchange of goods and services gave rise to great markets and market centers all over the world. It was the one time and place at which servants could be hired out “for a year and a day.” Contracts had to be made and signed between parties who would not see each other for another year. Legal prob-

lems arose, and courts to take care of them, with agents representing the king himself.

For the long dangerous journey, hostels and hospitals had to be provided. The local youth inevitably engaged in demonstrating the village pride and prowess; boxing and wrestling (the Icelandic *glíma*), songs, dances, dramatic recitations, and plays by traveling troupes still have a ritual significance. At the shrine itself one could receive oracles, healings, dreams, counsel.

Homer has given us the whole picture in his hymn to Apollo. When the gods looked down from their happy halls of Olympus and saw the poor struggling human race, who had been their companions in a golden age, helpless to cope with their condition and, worst of all, without any cure for death or old age, Leto, the ambitious mother of Apollo, saw a chance for undying fame and wealth by having her son go down and establish a circuit of temples, marking the course of the sun through the year, where the people could gather at the New Year all dressed in white, bringing their rich gifts and feasting and dancing and having a wonderful time while celebrating the creation of the world and their ancient companionship with the gods.

Most of all, the temple was the home of the arts and sciences. Vivid portraits of ancestors and sacred images and idols developed a great plastic art. The temple itself was the sacred edifice that required sophisticated geometry according to strict rules and holy dimensions.³⁰ So also did the reapportioning of private and state- and temple-owned fields and forests, resurveyed at the end of each year. The all-important timing of rites and festivals required close observation of the heavens, and the temple as in Egypt was the site of a great observatory. Divination by the study of the liver and other parts of animals and birds, connected with sacrifice, advanced the medical art.

The library was the pride of the temple with the records of the past, including complete genealogies (see Abraham 1:28) and the description of the universe. It was the “House of Life” where all knowledge was deposited forever. Thoth, the librarian, is addressed as “Lord of the Divine Words, Keeper of the Secret Knowledge . . . who established speech and writing, causing the Temples to flourish.”³¹ He is assisted by the “Lady of Writing,” Sšꜣt, whose name shows her to be the Secret-ary (the name means “secret woman”) par excellence.³² Of special interest to Latter-day Saints is the great concern with the records and work for the dead. Here is one of many “Instructions for Sealing the Order (request) of a Man Concerning His Family.” Text: “I come before you

exalted ones (male and female)! The Great One in concurrence with the Council has approved (ordered) the sealing of a certificate (order) concerning this my family. Thoth has said to me, the order has been sealed, giving you his voice. This order has accordingly been validated (*nfr.w*). This correct writing for the Lady of Appearances is to the effect that my family is given to me.”³³

The lady is Seshat, who from prehistoric times has been in charge of all the records. The next item is also Coffin Text 143:

N is Re who comes forth in the *Hnhnw*-ship, a glorified spirit in passage. This N has taken his seat in the West beside the Great God. He has opened the mouth of the earth . . . the gates of Geb. He has assembled dependents of this N before him, along with his proper family. . . . This N has written down a multitude of persons, male and female. N goes among those upon the shore, and hears those within their shrines (tombs). This N unites the dependents. With the coming of this family of N to him, a multitude has surrounded this N. This N has written down those spirits which still remain hidden in places of the West. They give the *ba* to N to give glory to this N . . . causing the caves to open to N with those who are in them in the Nun. This N (legal language) releases their bonds that they may walk in the light. . . . This N issues the command for breath and strength which is stronger than the Gates of Hell (*skr*) to live after death even as Re does every day. If his dependents are not united with him in the Amentit, then he will come down to the lake of the land that devours and flames shall come forth against those who are in the Nun.³⁴

This is designated “for uniting the family of N to him in the other world.” The long Coffin Text 146 is “To Gather the Family in the Next World.” If they are not gathered he shall lose them: “His staff shall be removed from his hand.” This is the language of Israel, for example, the staff, *shevet*, departing from Jacob. If he fails to gather them in the beyond, there will be no great family reunions on earth with the usual parties and feasting. This is an authentic piece of “recognition literature,” like the Clementine *Recognitions* and the moving family stories of the classical New Comedy down to present-day productions of the *Comedy of Errors*. When N arrives in the other world, the family is working in the field. “Now NN’s sister, the woman who is in charge of the great field has said: ‘See, you have come joyful and happy-hearted!’ So said she to NN. ‘Give answer! Has

there been granted to you a valid decree for this family of yours?’ NN has gone down happy and rejoicing, for his family has been given to him. The great ones of NN’s family have gone down joyfully, and their hearts are full at meeting NN. They have left their plows (*h^cb.w*) and their utensils (tools, pots—*hⁿk.w*), on the ground. Conclusion: Assembling the family, father, mother, friends, associates, children, women, concubines, servants, workers, anything belonging to a man for him in the realm of the dead.”³⁵

As with us, one went to the temple for an “endowment,” that is, to be given all the equipment, information, and certification he would need to make the passage from this world to the next. And to our surprise, this is the main theme of all temple and funeral literature. As Richard Lepsius put it in the first edition of the Book of the Dead, “The text applies only to the deceased and the things he will meet with on the long journey after his earthly death. There is described to him where he is going, what he does, what he hears and sees,” or the prayers and addresses which he must give to whatever gods he meets.³⁶

The surprise is that the best account of the endowment is found in Joseph Smith Papyrus XI, the Book of Breathings. The key to the endowment is the eternal progression of the pilgrim from one state of blessedness to another.

As you approach the camp surrounding the temple, you signify your intent with a reassuring *sign*, a *signum*, visible from a distance, calling attention to yourself as Adam does in his prayer and demonstrating your peaceful intent. Upon reaching the gate, you present your *token*, a tangible object (compare *touch*, *digit*, *dactyl*, or a solid handclasp). All these serve as a *tessera hospitalis*, admitting one to a closed group or a party, or a club, guild meeting, etc. It is presented to the doorkeeper, a herald trained in such matters: “The Holy One of Israel is the Keeper of the Gate, and he employs no servant there!” Most important, “he cannot be deceived.”³⁷ The token recognized, you pronounce your name to the doorkeeper in a low voice, a whisper, for it is a special name agreed on between you and your host and should not be picked up and used by anyone else. There is a famous Egyptian story about how Isis tried to get her true name from Re so that she could give it to her son along with the priesthood. So we have names, signs, and penalties introducing us to the ancient rites of hospitality in the mysteries.³⁸

But to be at the temple one must first get there. Essential to every endowment is the journey or

pilgrimage to reach the place. Moreover, once one has arrived the traveling continues, for the passage through the temple from room to room, level to level, and ordinance to ordinance is a true rite of passage.

Throughout the world the candidate begins on his arrival by removing his dusty clothes, and is bathed, anointed, and dressed in white robes and slippers. Then he receives a new name and proceeds from chamber to chamber of the temple. After passing through the veil to depart, he never returns again but proceeds on his way to the next temple for a higher endowment.

What happened to all the temples? The reply to that question is well documented—they were privatized. Free from taxation, but also free to engage in trade as charitable foundations, including accumulating land by grants from the king and nobility along with the serfs to cultivate them, the religious societies became immensely rich, like the Cistercians in the time of Henry VIII. The priesthood of Thebes grabbed everything and finally aspired to take over the rule of the country. And so we have the owners for security converting their shrines to castles.

I spent my mission up and down the Rhine plain in Germany. It was medieval country and Catholic, and I tracted every house in scores of villages and got a pretty good idea of how things worked. All up and down the length of the great river at almost regular intervals were magnificent cathedrals. *Cathedral* means a seat or preaching stand, the center of power of a bishop. And next to the cathedral was the palace of the prince-bishop himself. The dual role of the takeover is represented by Longfellow's notoriously wicked "Bishop of Bingen in his Mouse-Tower on the Rhine" ("The Children's Hour"). It was the new order of the fortified palace that ruled the land. These great structures were under a curse as oppressors of the peasants and doomed to fall. Golden Mycenae, sacred Thebes, Troy itself, Camelot, Hersepolis, the Jomsborg, Aasgard, the House of Usher, San Simeon—all claimed the powers of the temple over subjects. Under the castle was the realm of Pluto, or the caves where the dragons slept guarding the heaps of disastrous Rhine gold, and deeper still the toiling dwarves, the once-free inhabitants of the land slaving to bring forth more gold—the cursed gold of the Nibelungen.

The commercialized temples, "the cloud-capped palaces," stand out in bold contrast to the true solemn temples of Cologne, Speyer, Bruchsal, Freiburg, Worms—I labored in all of them as a missionary. But how did these sacral centers accomplish their end? It

was by a frontal attack, sheer assertion, an overpowering display and demonstration of might and glory from the awesome horns of the Tibetan lamasery to the booming organs of the Byzantine court—an overpoweringly contrived theatrical production of heaven.³⁹

When the emperor entered, Constantine says, and a beam of sunlight hit his garment stiff with jewels, you felt you were in the presence of an angel of God. This mind-boggling theater was taken over by the West and combined the intoxication of the senses with a compelling force of mass action. No one can resist being swept along by such a cheering section. "What society as a whole believes," wrote St. Augustine, "that we also believe and without an inkling of doubt, even though we admit that we cannot know that it is true."⁴⁰

From the sixth century BC on, the art of rhetoric became the substance of education. Quintillion defines it as the *vis persuadendi*, or the art of persuasion; it was also called *suaviloquentia*, or the "soft sell." The Greek sophist and rhetorician Gorgias, one of the founders, worked out the technique which enables the student to speak offhand on any subject for any length of time and to sell anything to anybody. The new art caused an immense sensation, not unlike the computer today, and never lost its control over the public. Plato said it made great things small and small things great by the manipulating of words—a vicious device but a very useful one. "People of every class became inflamed with the desire to achieve the new success," wrote Irvin Rhode. Augustine felt it was the ultimate weapon for conversion and made it the cornerstone of Christian education even while he confessed, "I taught the art of rhetoric . . . and, myself the victim of cupidity, trafficked in loquacity."⁴¹

The problem of rhetoric was to make an irresistible impression immediately on large numbers of people. To do that you had to pour it on. *Copia*, "abundance, excess," is Cicero's favorite word. So this became the obsession of the Western Church—boundless profusion and endless size. St. Peter's and Santa Sophia are meant to be overpowering. When size had to be limited, the Baroque poured it on with massive profusions of glittering gold. Justinian boasted that he had surpassed Solomon's temple. People were out to gather glory to themselves.

I began this talk with Shakespeare and Bach, and I agree with Spengler that they represent the high point of our civilization. Now I invite you to go home from this melancholy meeting and beguile three hours or so before the tube, so that you may experience one full hour of commercials. This is the final triumph and total

corruption of rhetoric—rude, brief, and wrenching interruptions, as garish and distracting as possible, as your attention is jerked from one sales pitch to another, and we sit there and allow this corrupt practice to

inflict the deadly epidemic of the past on our civilization. At this point the only escape I can think of is the temple. I testify to its sanctity and power to purify our thoughts and lives. ❏

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The Newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies (FARMS) at Brigham Young University

Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOL. 25, NO. 1 | 2005

A Publication of the
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