

The Bible and Divorce

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The question of Biblical grounds for divorce is widely debated in Christian circles. Opinions from a free right to divorce and remarry to an absolute prohibition of divorce are held. Views are held for different reasons; some espouse a position because of church tradition, others hold positions convenient for their current situations, while others sincerely seek to know and abide by the Scriptural teaching. The controversy on the issue could lead to frustration on the part of those who wish to know the truth, but the Scriptures, which are of no private interpretation (2 Pe 1:20), present only one position, and the perspicuity of the Bible through the Holy Spirit guarantees that the children of God may know the genuine teaching of their heavenly Father.

Genesis 2:23-24 records the institution of marriage:

And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.<sup>1</sup>

This passage is quoted in relation to the nature of marriage in three other passages (Matt 19:5, Mr 10:7, Eph 5:31). Man is to leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they then become one flesh. Marriage should have this element of “leaving” in accordance with societally recognized standards, such as the marriage ceremony of modern times, “cleaving” to the other partner, and the joining of the two in “one flesh,” the physical part of the relationship. While all sexual intercourse results in a “one flesh” status (cf. 1 Cor 6:16), this does not of itself constitute marriage, for the “leaving” and “cleaving” must first occur. An argument against divorce based on the word “cleave” has been made:

The Hebrew word for “cleave” suggests the idea of being glued together. It is used in Job 38:38 of dirt clods which stick together after the rain. It is used by Joshua of a military alliance (Josh. 23:12). The word is also used of the leprosy that would cling forever to dishonest and greedy

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

Gehazi (2 Kings 5:27). In marriage, the husband and wife are “glued” together— bound inseparably into one solitary unit.

An interesting characteristic of glue is its permanence... Items which are glued together cannot be separated without great damage. The same is true of persons “glued” together in marriage. It is a permanent relationship until death. There is no allowance made in Genesis 2:24 for divorce and remarriage.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that the verb employed here, *davaq*, is strong.<sup>3</sup> However, we can read theology back into words that are not conclusive— while it is appropriate to use Genesis 2:24 as a supporting verse if one concludes that divorce is always wrong from other passages, one would not want to use this as a staple proof-text for the position.

The next chronologically important passage in relation to the matter of divorce is Deuteronomy 24:1-4:

When a man hath taken a wife, and married her, and it come to pass that she find no favor in his eyes, because he hath found some uncleanness in her: then let him write her a bill of divorcement, and give it in her hand, and send her out of his house. And when she is departed out of his house, she may go and be another man’s wife. And if the latter husband hate her, and write her a bill of divorcement, and giveth it in her hand, and sendeth her out of his house; or if the latter husband die, which took her to be his wife; her former husband, which sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after that she is defiled; for that is abomination before the LORD: and thou shalt not cause the land to sin, which the LORD thy God giveth thee for an inheritance.

Those who propose that divorce and remarriage are justifiable today in certain circumstances lean heavily upon this passage.<sup>4</sup> Several matters deserve consideration in relation to this text. It does not constitute the institution or approval of divorce, but

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<sup>2</sup> *The Divorce Myth*, Carl Laney, p. 20

<sup>3</sup> See *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 179-180. The related adjective *deveq* signifies joining or soldering.

<sup>4</sup> See, as an example, “The Bible Says: Divorce and Remarriage is NOT Adultery,” Stephen E. Jones. The fact that he builds a lot of his early case upon speculation, from the association of Hammurabi and Nimrod to Shem and Melchizedek, weakens whatever arguments he makes that would appear to be actually based upon the Biblical text.

simply provides for its regulation— the necessity of formal, written documentation to make a divorce legal was in contrast with contemporary heathen practice, which only required verbal repudiation; the Mosaic command was designed to make divorce more difficult, as well as protect women. A comparable example is the New Testament command to slaves to submit to their masters, although slavery is neither commended nor declared in harmony with ultimate Divine purposes (Eph 6:5-9). Divorce, along with other deviancies from the original divine pattern of one woman and one man for life, like polygamy, originated with sinful man, not God. The inspired prohibition of marriage between a divorced woman and a priest (Lev 21:7) demonstrated that stigma remained attached to the practice of divorce in the legal dispensation. Furthermore, the Savior explicitly stated that this Mosaic concession was because of the hardness of Israelite hearts, while “from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8, Mark 10:5). Jesus’ statement to the Pharisees in this matter would seem to them the more reasonable since “the Rabbis themselves taught that a somewhat similar concession had been made (Deut 21:11) by Moses in regard to female captives of war— as the Talmud has it, ‘on account of the evil impulse’ (Kidd. 21b).”<sup>5</sup> It is also noteworthy that adultery was not grounds for divorce in the Mosaic economy, but for death (Lev 20:10). Deuteronomy 24 does not alter the original divine pattern established in Genesis two, and it must be subordinate to New Testament teaching which was not toned down because of the hardness of Jewish hearts. A similar understanding applies to Ezra 9-10, where divorce was enacted, with neither a record of divine approval or disapproval, that the nation of Israel might continue to exist as a distinct entity. Christians today are explicitly commanded in 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 not to divorce an unconverted spouse, so this example from the post-exilic nation struggling for survival is contravened by an explicit inspired directive.

The book of Malachi provides insight into God’s view of divorce:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book 4, chapter 22, p. 706 (1993 ed.)

And this have ye done again, covering the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping, and with crying out, insomuch that he regardeth not the offering any more, or receiveth it with good will at your hand. Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the LORD of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously. (Malachi 2:13-16)

The previous verses (2:10-12) deal with Jewish men divorcing women of their race to marry “the daughter of a strange god,” or the heathen. We can see from this passage that God views divorce as a covenant relationship (v. 14), a stronger tie than that of a simple contractual obligation, as marriage was viewed in the law of Hammurabi. We also see that God “hateth putting away,”<sup>6</sup> which He sees as dealing “treacherously.” There are no listed exceptions. God does not state His hatred for sins that lead to divorce, but His hatred for the act itself. Since it is never right to do what the Lord hates, Malachi two presents a strong Biblical argument against divorce.

Mark 10:1-12 and Luke 16:18 clearly state the Lord Jesus Christ’s teaching on the divorce issue. The background to the questioning of the Pharisees lies in the competing Rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai. The school of Shammai generally considered the word “shame” in Dt 24:1 a reference to unchastity, which they thought formed the sole prudent cause for divorce; this was, however, not a matter of legal obligation on the man’s part, but a matter of prudence within the liberal scope the Law was deemed to provide for “putting away.”<sup>7</sup> The school of Hillel saw the matter differently, and

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<sup>6</sup> “Putting away” is from the Hebrew *shalach*, which does signify divorce (among many other things associated with “sending”) in the appropriate contexts. See *BDB*, pg. 1019, and Dt 22:19, 29, Jer 3:1.

<sup>7</sup> A good portion of the information on the competing Rabbinical schools comes from *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Book 4, chapter 22.

declared divorce permissible if a wife burned her husband's dinner, or if he found another woman more pleasing than she. One Rabbi thought the words "if she find no favour in his eyes" (Dt 24:1) implied that the discovery of a woman more attractive constituted grounds for divorce. Both schools thought feminine moral blame made divorce a duty. In stark contrast, Jesus stated that what "God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:9); based on Genesis two, the Lord completely forbade divorce. He therefore explained to His disciples that remarriage is adultery (Mark 10:11-12), for the offending partner is still united to his original spouse in God's eyes. Consequently, "whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery; and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery" (Luke 16:18). Marriage is a divinely recognized relationship ordained by God and indissoluble until death.

We find the so-called "exception clause" in the gospel of Matthew:

It hath been said, Whosoever shall put away his wife, let him give her a writing of divorcement: but I say unto you, That whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery. (Matthew 5:31-32)

And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery. (Matthew 19:9; see Matthew 19:1-12)

It is asserted that the "saving for the cause of fornication" justifies divorce, and sometimes remarriage, in situations as varied as the positions of authors writing on the topic. However, to interpret the phrase in this manner would contradict the Lord's statement in the context of Matthew 19, "What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (19:6), the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus consistently rises above the views of His Pharisaic contemporaries— if He makes exception for divorce based upon immorality, He takes the view of the Shammaiites—

the declarations of Mark 10:1-12, and Luke 16:18, Paul's statements in Romans 7:2-3 and 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, which he asserts represent the Lord's instructions, the categorical opposition to divorce expressed in Malachi 2, and other Scripture. Something else must be intended.

The Greek words for "adultery" and that employed in the clauses in question, "fornication," are distinct (see Mt 15:19, Mr 7:22, 1 Cor 6:9, Gal 5:19, Heb 13:4). It is likely that the distinction in the words used appears because the "exception clause" deals with immorality during the Jewish betrothal period. Matthew 1:19 would serve as an illustration of this use. The strength of the betrothal bond, which could only be broken by legal divorce or death, was unique to the Jewish culture (cf. Dt 20:7, 24:5), although the Greeks and Romans did have a form of the practice;<sup>8</sup> the uniquely Jewish flavor of Matthew's gospel explains his singular inclusion of the clause. An alternative view is that the exception clause deals with the sins of Leviticus 18:6-18. Parallels in the commands of James and the general council in Acts chapter fifteen are said to support this interpretation, while such a use of *porneia* has some parallel in contemporary Jewish literature.<sup>9</sup> Whatever the case, it is improper to use the exception clause to justify divorce.

Paul addresses the issue of divorce in the books of Romans and 1 Corinthians:

For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. (Romans 7:2-3)

And unto the married I command, yet not I, but the Lord, Let not the wife depart from her husband: but and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband: and let not the husband put

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<sup>8</sup> See pgs. 69-70, *The Divorce Myth*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pgs. 71-76.

away his wife. But to the rest speak I, not the Lord: If any brother hath a wife that believeth not, and she be pleased to dwell with him, let him not put her away. And the woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. (1 Corinthians 7:10-13)

The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. (1 Corinthians 7:39)

These passages clearly teach that only death breaks a marriage, and that remarriage constitutes adultery. Sound hermeneutics dictate that plain texts such as these must be determinative in the construction of Biblical theology and influence our view of less clear texts; it would be improper, for example, to allow a particular view of the exception clause to overthrow these transparent texts. Paul also asserts (7:10-11) that his teaching about divorce is based upon the commands of the Lord—the inspired interpretation of Christ’s words constitute a plain declaration that remarriage is adultery. The covenant bond inaugurated in marriage lasts a lifetime. Despite this, some have read a right to divorce and remarry into the words of 1 Corinthians 7:27-28, “Art thou bound to a wife? Seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned...” However, to interpret these words in this fashion would overthrow the doctrine revealed earlier in the chapter. The context of 7:25-35 deals with the unmarried; to be “loosed from a wife” refers to a state of freedom from matrimonial ties, not divorce. The words “not under bondage” in 1 Cor 7:15 have similarly been used to support divorce. More accurately:

Paul is simply saying that if an unbelieving partner demands separation, the believer is not “under bondage,” (literally, “enslaved”) to preserve the marriage union. Paul is saying that it is not necessary for the believer to contest the divorce action or engage in legal maneuvers to prevent it. Since God has called us to peace, the bitterness and strife of contesting a divorce or separation must be avoided. Notice, however, that Paul says nothing in verse 15 about a second marriage for the deserted spouse. In arguing the right of a deserted believer to remarry, one writer

states, “If they could not remarry, they certainly were in bondage, were they not?” But how can we advocate the possibility of a second marriage when Paul himself is silent!... If an unbelieving husband divorces his wife, she is no longer bound to her husband, but she is still bound to the law of God... The two alternatives of reconciliation or a lifelong single life would still apply (7:11).<sup>10</sup>

Any other conclusion must ignore the context of the passage and make the Scriptures contradictory. The clear statements of Paul which forbid divorce cannot be explained away because of positions proof-texted into other verses.

Those who believe that divorce is justified in certain instances appeal to Jeremiah 3:8, and conclude that “God Himself recognized (and thereby taught us) that divorce for the sexual sin of adultery is an option. He taught us this by both precept and example in His own relationship with Israel. What God has taught, let no man deny!”<sup>11</sup> The passage presents an apparently strong argument: “And I saw, when for all the causes whereby backsliding Israel committed adultery I had put her away, and given her a bill of divorce; yet her treacherous sister Judah feared not, but went and played the harlot also.” Furthermore, Hosea 2:2 reads: “Plead with your mother, plead: for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband...” How can these declarations be reconciled with the passages mentioned above, that clearly forbid divorce? First of all, we must recognize that the metaphor of marriage when employed to describe the relationship between men and God symbolizes the closeness of communion between the faithful and their Lord. We see in the Old Testament that those faithful to God’s chosen nation, Israel, are pictured metaphorically as a bride or wife. The same holds true in the New Testament for the church, God’s recruiting agency for His kingdom in this dispensation. In the Mosaic economy, as in all ages, salvation has been a free gift to all who believe in Christ, but the special miracles of God, His greatest manifestations, and the fullness of worship was only

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, pg. 87

<sup>11</sup> *Marriage, Divorce, & Remarriage in the Bible*, Jay E. Adams, pg. 71.

available in the Old Testament to those that allied themselves with the nation of Israel and could consequently participate in the sacrifices, the Tabernacle and Temple worship, and so on. In the New Testament, the church, the congregation of baptized believers, is God's chosen institution, and is pictured as Christ's body (1 Cor 12), and bride (2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:23-32). The church is also called God's temple (1 Cor 3:9-17, 1 Tim 3:15)—it is the NT place of God's special presence. The fellowship of the church with Christ is seen in the NT quotation of Genesis 2:24 in Ephesians 5:31-32; the OT word "cleave," which deals with the close communion of man and wife in their unique relationship, is translated "joined" from the Greek in Ephesians with reference to the church and her Savior. One does not need to join the church to be saved, but fullness of communion with Christ will not be available to the NT believer who refuses church membership. In contrast to both unscriptural universal ecclesiology which equates all believers with the bride of Christ at this present time and the "future glorified" view that correctly sees the church as a local entity but removes her from a present status as bride, the Bible places the church in a present bridal relationship (2 Cor 11:2, Eph 5:29-32). The same was true for Israel in the Old Testament; her bridal status with God was spoken of in the present tense (Ezekiel 16:8ff, Jer 3:14, etc.). "Cleaving" closeness to God is the present joy of His obedient saints (cf. 1 Cor 3:16-17).

In the Old Testament, as in the New, one of God's children could sin and fall away from obedience and His Lord's chosen institution (cf. Heb 10:25, 1 Cor 5:7, 13). While still eternally secure, such would temporally lose the special fellowship available for the faithful. A backslidden member of a true Baptist church today can leave and join a Methodist church with less strident preaching, and thus, while still reckoned righteous in the sight of God, lose the temporal joy of being part of the bride of Christ. In eternity, however, the New Jerusalem is referred to synechdochically as the bride (Rev 21:2), and all the blood-washed, whatever their degree of disobedience to the Lord or faithfulness to God's institution during their lifetime, will, free from sin, "cleave" to their God forever.

It is God's purpose that those dead to sin by Christ "should be married to another," (Romans 7:4), that is, brought into that place of close fellowship, and He will not allow His will to be eternally frustrated. We can see this same working in God's covenantal promises to Israel; as He swore to Abraham, "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26, Genesis 17:7-8), inherit the fullness of the promised land, and see the fulfillment of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31), which was given specifically to "the house of Israel" and "the house of Judah" (31:31). At the end of the Tribulation, when Israel turns back to God, her Messiah shall come, destroy her enemies, and re-establish the nation in its bridal relationship. A careful comparison of Romans 9:25-27, Hosea 1:10 and 2:23, and Revelation 19 will demonstrate this;<sup>12</sup> the marriage supper of the Lamb does not occur in heaven for the church alone, but occurs on the earth at the commencement of the Millennial kingdom with the participation of all the saints. The Supper only commences after the destruction of the great whore (19:2), which is far along within the Tribulation period; we hear that the marriage supper "is come, and His wife hath made herself ready" (19:7) immediately before the second coming of Christ (19:11ff) to redeem Israel, the "wife" in view, who has now turned back to God and received imputed righteousness (19:8)— the church age saints have already been glorified for seven years, so to make them only "ready" at this point is unreasonable, whatever one may have personally experienced about the speed with which women adorn themselves. "Is come" (ἦλθεν) is a futuristic aorist; it "involves the use of the aorist tense to indicate an event which has not in fact happened but which is so certain to happen that it is depicted as though it had already happened."<sup>13</sup> "[H]ath made herself" (ἡτοιμασεν) refers to the conversion of

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<sup>12</sup> Paul does not take his quotes in Romans 9 out of their original context; verses 25-26 deal with the restoration of Israel, as seen in Romans 11, not with Gentiles— the "also" of 9:27 demonstrates this, as does the natural interpretation of Hosea one and two. Some make a distinction between Israel, which is alleged to be God's earthly wife, and the church, which is then made Christ's heavenly bride. A close study of the terms employed of both entities will demonstrate their fluidity; for example, 21:9 refers to "the bride, the Lamb's wife," while a thousand years after the marriage supper the New Jerusalem is called "bride," not "wife" (Revelation 21:2). The saints of this dispensation will also "reign on the earth" alongside their Old Testament brethren (Rev 2:26-27, 20:6).

<sup>13</sup> *Syntax of New Testament Greek*, Brooks & Winbery, pg. 103

Israel which had just occurred; it should be classified as a dramatic aorist, “a use for emphasis or dramatic affect... it describes something which has just happened, the effect of which is felt in the present.”<sup>14</sup> It was the common belief of first century Jews that “in the day of the Messiah redeemed Israel would be gathered to a great feast, together with the patriarchs and heroes of the Jewish faith”<sup>15</sup> (cf. Is 25:6, Mt 8:11-12, 20:21, 23, 22:1-14, Lu 13:28-29, 14:15-24, 22:29-30). Indeed, were the marriage supper in heaven during the Tribulation, rather than in the Millennium when Christ has established His kingdom, the Savior would not be able to drink anything (Mt 26:29, Mr 14:25, Lu 22:18). It is apparent from the Scriptures, then, that God brings the nation He married back to Himself; the separation because of her sin lasts only until the impending future time when, by repentance, “the wife hath made herself ready.”

We have seen that in the bridal metaphor which relates God and His people separation because of sin, including spiritual adultery, is only temporary. The context of Jeremiah 3:8 supports this as well; the Lord says He “put them away,” yet still affirms “I am married unto you” (Jeremiah 3:14) and foretells her restoration; He is still her husband and Lord, and He will bring her back to Himself. In the immediate context of Hosea 2:2 we see that God promises Israel “I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD.” (2:19-20). The Lord both declares that Israel is not His people (Hos 1:9), since they have violated the Sinaiatic covenant, yet they remain His and He will restore them (Hos 1:10, 2:16-20, 3:5, 11:1-11, 13:14-14:9), in accordance with His unconditional promises to Abraham. Isaiah 50:1 and 54:1-17 show God as “husband” still to Israel, without an abiding “bill of divorcement”— because of their sin, God “for a small moment... fors[ook] [Israel], but with great mercies will [He] gather [her]” (54:7). On

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 102-3.

<sup>15</sup> *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim, Book 3, chapter 19, p. 379.

strictly Mosaic grounds, God could divorce Israel, but “the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was... after, cannot disannul, that is should make the promise of none effect” (Gal 3:17)— the promises to Israel in Abraham and the greater, eternal covenant promises that, by grace, bring a sure (Rom 4:16) and eternal salvation to the chosen, forbade the Lord’s divorce of His people (Rom 11:28-29). These higher principles of grace, expounded by Jesus Christ (Mark 10:1-12) in accord with God’s original design (Gen 2:24), apart from the lower permissive standard (Dt 24:1-4) allowed temporarily because of hard hearts (Mark 10:5), prohibit human divorce, just as they prevent God from putting away His people forever. The child of God, if he finds himself in a marriage to a persistently sinful and adulterous spouse, should act as his Lord commanded Hosea: “Then said the LORD unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the LORD toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine” (Hosea 3:1, cf. Jer 3:1). He should follow the precept and example of his God and Savior and seek for reconciliation, not divorce.

Examination of the relevant passages on divorce in the Bible make it clear that God’s original plan in marriage of one man and one woman for life cannot be violated by the New Testament Christian. Originally instituted in the Garden of Eden and clearly reaffirmed by Christ (Mark 10:1-12) and the apostle Paul (Rom 7:2-3, 1 Cor 7:10-11), sound hermeneutics dictate that less clear passages which involve seeming exceptions to this rule must be interpreted in light of such plain Scriptural affirmations. The fact that God “hateth putting away” (Mal 2:16) is also demonstrated in His restoration of Israel, despite her sinful and backsliding ways. All believers can rejoice in this as another in the cornucopia of Scriptural evidences that God’s faithfulness and unconditional love will bring all of His people home (Jn 10:27-30, Ro 8:28-39, etc.) to be joined to Him as His everlasting and eternal spouse (Rev 21:2), with none put away or ultimately lost— and

consequently, out of love for their great God and Savior, and in His power, obey His admonitions to shun divorce absolutely.

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