

MICHAEL FISHBANE

Jewish Biblical
Interpretation:
Medieval and Modern

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zum Alten Testament
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Mohr Siebeck

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Michael Fishbane

Jewish Biblical Interpretation:
Medieval and Modern

Collected Essays II

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

In this second volume of collected studies, I have gathered another ensemble of my academic writings that also span the last five decades, and supplement the articles from ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and classical Rabbinic cultures, that appeared in volume I. Here, too, the sequence follows an historical sequence: moving from Byzantine and early European studies in traditional Jewish liturgical poetry; to medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis; to the early modern pietistic movement known as Ḥasidism, and its homilies and modes of Scriptural hermeneutics; on to modern Jewish Thought; and contemporary Thought and Theology (in its varieties). Each of these topics represents academic and personal interests, and the broader themes indicated by the title: *Jewish Biblical Interpretation: Medieval and Modern*. The interpretation of Scripture is one sub-theme; another is its impact on the shapes of Jewish cultures and their religious mentalities.

Overall, each of the parts reflects different types of cultural settings and influences. Thus the core of Part I, dealing with liturgy, is the role of the synagogue and fixed prayers as the host of theological and cultural pedagogy – reciting poems focused on Scriptural themes, but thoroughly impacted by classical rabbinic traditions and its ethos. Part II focuses more directly with the rise and the expansion of multiple modes of exegetical strategies in medieval Europe (particularly, France, Spain, and the Rhineland); and these were, in turn, variously influenced by Arabic, Christian, and Neoplatonic conceptions of grammar, layers of textual meaning, and mystical theosophy. Just as there were notable similarities between Jewish liturgical poetry (called Piyut) and eastern Christian compositions, so there were notable overlaps in theories of exegesis and its terminology – particularly in relations between Jews and Christian literalists and allegorists in northern Europe.

Part III turns to the revivalist movement of modern Ḥasidism in Eastern Europe, beginning in the later 18th century. It is especially marked by its spiritual piety, which transformed Jewish theosophical literature of the high Middle Ages, and by the way it also transformed classical rabbinic exegesis – both its homilies and themes – into a series of vibrant and popular religious genres. A remarkable growth of personal and mystical theology developed in small conventicles, which gradually influenced huge geographical areas in a matter of decades. The modes of hermeneutics are particularly significant, and

comparisons are made in my texts to contemporary hermeneutical theory dealing with voice and text. Part IV, which shifts to more contemporary Central Europe, focuses on several of the significant philosophers and theologians – like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig; and in these chapters one can observe the impact of western intellectual thought, together with the attempts to incorporate within it (and transform it by) traditional Jewish values and concerns. These units convey the making and modes of the modern Jewish religious thinker.

The final section, Part V, turns to contemporary religious thought and theology. In addition to taking up various themes or comparative studies (bearing on issues of autonomy or even spiritual diaries), the considered focus is to bring modern Jewish thought and theology into the contemporary arena, with its complex intellectual and religious valences. Many of these essays reflect my own personal attempts in this vein (supplementing, in several instances, my own books in modern Jewish theology).

I remain ever grateful to the good offices of Mohr Siebeck, beginning with the invitation by Henning Ziebritzki to collect my writings. In the present instance, I want especially to thank Claus-Jürgen Thornton for his exacting and exceedingly helpful annotations to the manuscript, in its final stages; and to my student, Joel Swanson, who so graciously helped collect the essays, and did the initial yeoman work of preparing them for publication.

In conclusion, it gives me great personal pleasure to see the completion of these two volumes of essays, and with them the hope that their publication will bring my work to new readers and scholars.

The University of Chicago, December 2023

Michael Fishbane

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Part I

Liturgical Poetry (Piyut)

Piyyut and Midrash: Between Poetic Invention and Rabbinic Convention

1. Introduction: The Registers of Tradition

The phenomenon of Piyyut, one of the comprehensive designations of Jewish liturgical poetry, whose major classical and early post-classical creativity spans the fifth–eleventh centuries CE, originating in the Land of Israel and spreading east and west, is quintessentially an archaeology of rabbinic tradition. It thus calls to mind the work of Michel Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir*,¹ and its methodological reflections on the complex relationships between the “things said” in culture and the way their selection or re-combination organizes “knowledge” from a vast fund of data – the so-called cultural archive. Not all the data is privileged; and not all persons make the selections. Tracking these processes is thus a matter for cultural hermeneutics. In what follows, I shall allow Foucault’s insights to clear some paths of approach to Piyyut. In so doing, I intend this discussion to be a companion piece to an earlier effort inspired by his thought. In that work, I focused on some of the ruptures and transformations of biblical and midrashic literature in the creation of liturgical epics in classical and early medieval Piyyut.² In the present one, I should like to focus more on creative continuities between Midrash and Piyyut. And just as Piyyut is the third stratum of an archaeology of classical Jewish culture, built upon biblical and rabbinic foundations, every instance of its production plumbs these prior depths, and every instance of its analysis must sift through this stratigraphy to recover both the core deposits and their metamorphosed amalgam. I begin therefore with a brief characterization of these three layers and their essential characteristics.

The stratum of the Hebrew Bible comes first. Each one of its major divisions – Torah (Pentateuch), Nevi'im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings) – is comprised of numerous forms of discourse (some named, some not), all complexly woven into more or less coherent strings of cultural data. The overarching temporal framework of this vast collection, from beginning to end, spans the

¹ Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

² “From Midrash to Epic: The Re-Shaping of Rabbinic Discourse in Piyyut” (see below, pp. 72–90).

creation of the world to the return of the people of Israel from exile; and thus its major historical sequences focus primarily on the emergence and establishment of the nation, through a covenant with God, and therefore on the derivative issues of its social-political destiny. Accordingly, the major religious discourses focus principally on the divine instructions delivered to the people (the laws of the Torah delivered by Moses), the speeches bearing on the people's obedience to these instructions (the various exhortations, judgments, and consolations of the Prophets), and an assortment of discourses whose subjects ponder matters like sin, justice, love, and right living (in the Writings of psalmists and masters of speculative wisdom). Through this ensemble, a diverse cultural archive is organized and presented, culled from traditions stored in numerous circles of priests, prophets, and teachers. In its sweeping scope and fund of data, the Hebrew Bible is thus, itself, an expression of traditions accumulated over centuries. But beyond the overall anthology, even its component parts reflect numerous deposits of selected and newly ordered traditions – evident through parallel and duplicating versions of material; through many anachronistic and proleptic phrases; through intertextual cross-references and summaries of topics; and through assorted revisions and explications of earlier topics.³ Indeed, Moses himself, the archetypal Speaker of divine instructions, is also cast as the first Teacher of Tradition in the book of Deuteronomy, where he reformulates, explains, and revises the older legal and historical record for a new generation. Similar evidence of the culling and ordering of older traditions can be found in various psalms, where diverse historical events are assembled to give specific gravity to renditions of national sin and divine beneficence; and yet further expressions of this mode of liturgical historiography recur in topic summaries gathered by Ezra and Nehemiah – now also reinterpreting or splicing earlier memories concerning the covenant past and national destiny.⁴

In the hands of the emerging national-religious canon in the early post-exilic period, this multiform anthology of discourses and narratives gradually became an authoritative whole – a sacred archive of memory and instruction, in fact, interlocking in all its parts. The result was the transformation of an “open treasury of topics,” of diverse pedigree and authority, into a “closed canon of traditions,” increasingly harmonious and unified. Thus, even where the older materials manifestly attest different degrees of textual authority (from the direct, divine authority of the Law; to the inspired, divine authority of the Prophets; and the creative, human authority of the Writings), the new status of

³ For many of these matters, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985); in that context I first employed the terms *traditum* and *traditio*.

⁴ Regarding all these topics, see *ibid.*, and for the Psalms in particular, cf. I. L. Seeligmann, “Cultic Tradition and Historiosophical Creativity in the Bible” (Heb.), in Anon., *Religion and Society [Dat vehevrah]* (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1964), 41–61.

the archive gradually infused all its parts with religious authority (including the Writings). The evidence of later debates suggests that the canonic authority of the national archive came first, and only later were there selective discussions regarding the inspired status of some of the seemingly secular writings, and the need to ascertain whether they too, like the Torah, were “holy” (divine) teachings that would also “defile the hands” because of their inherent sanctity.⁵ The bold attribution of such works as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs to the Holy Spirit were among the ways these concerns were answered for all time.⁶

The stratum of rabbinic Midrash comes second. For the rabbinic heirs of Scripture, this corpus is its fundamental archive – a vast and variously integrated ensemble of interconnecting discourses. Through a complex network of textual correlations and strategies, the primary words of Torah were connected with the discourses of the Prophets and the Writings, and also explained with reference to them. Citation and reinterpretation is thus the signal mark of this reception of scriptural tradition, and the sages who produced these new discourses made sure to render them in a new linguistic key, utterly different from Scripture;⁷ to index them as the teachings of named sages, utterly distinct from the biblical heroes; and to highlight the oral nature of their teachings, utterly subordinate to the Written Torah and its authority.⁸ Any number of rhetorical tropes and arguments could be used to interpret “Scripture by Scripture.” For example, the Creation narrative in Genesis could be filled out on the basis of data and allusions discovered in the books of Psalms or Proverbs; the meaning of certain patriarchal episodes could be dramatically and religiously deepened by reinterpreting a verbal expression found there on the basis of vastly different uses of the term elsewhere; and the civil or ritual laws could be correlated and explicated through various analytical or synthetical strategies of traditional authority (for one could hardly read the sacred texts with an impromptu, idiosyncratic, or natural logic). These exegetical techniques could be alternatively playful and surprising, turning common words into clever riddles needing decoding; or they could be legally sober and precise, making ambiguous rules

⁵ See the discussion and sources in Shamma Friedman, “The Holy Scriptures Defile the Hands: The Transformation of a Biblical Concept in Rabbinic Theology,” in *Minhah le-Nahum: Biblical and Other Studies Presented to Nahum M. Sarna*, ed. M. Brettler and M. Fishbane (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 117–132.

⁶ Cf. the *petiḥtas* to these books in Midrash Rabbah.

⁷ The linguistic registers are markedly different. Cf. A. Bendavid, *The Language of Scripture and the Language of the Sages [Leshon mikra uleshon ḥakhamim]*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1967).

⁸ For useful discussions of these matters, see A. Goldberg, “Form-Analysis of Midrashic Literature as a Method of Description,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 36 (1985): 159–174, and A. Samely, “Between Scripture and Its Rewording: Towards a Classification of Rabbinic Exegesis,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991): 39–67.

clear and differentiating apparently similar formulations through subtle syllogisms cultivated in the scholastic repertoire.⁹ Pure study of the weekly sabbath Torah readings was one motivation for such exegesis; another was the practical need to resolve complex theological and legal matters that emerged over time; and still another was the attempt to connect or justify an oral practice with the written Scripture. In searching through these texts, and turning them every which way, no jot or tittle in Scripture was deemed extraneous; indeed, an “impoverished” or problematic expression in one place could be “enriched” and resolved through another – all depending on one’s hermeneutic proclivity and presumption regarding the particular character of scriptural language (i.e., whether it resembles human discourse for the most part, or whether its graphemes were also believed to bear hyper-signification).

Through these intentional interventions and inventions, there accumulated traditions of rabbinic meanings for all the parts of the Torah – meanings that transformed biblical Scripture into a rabbinic teaching; and there also developed numerous rhetorical forms or tropes for the explication of passages – explications that could remain in the study hall or also be performed as sermons in the synagogue (the midrashic collections include both, and the locus of origination is not always certain given their present reformulations). Significantly, all alternative possibilities (for explicated theology and law) are routinely preserved in the collections, such that rabbinic anthologies of interpretations all derive from Scripture: its sentences are broken down into smaller lemmatic units (or citations), and the exegetical discourses connected with them in the name of a given sage are listed with others on the same passage as a series of expansions or variations. The lemma that sponsors or triggers these discourses thus provides the heading for each anthological subunit. The tradition thus agglutinates taxonomically around specific phrases and is multivocal in every sense (i.e., a diverse accumulation of voices of the sages recorded, stylized, and revocalized by unnamed anthologists). And when it became customary to recite certain prophetic lections on special sabbaths (in addition to Torah passages), or to recite scrolls like the Song of Songs or Lamentations on specific festivals or fast days, these Writings were similarly subjected to intense exegetical investigations and anthologized. Thus, as with the sabbath day, the stations of the liturgical year provide the scriptural selections for sacred study, with the result that ever-new correlations among the three parts of Scripture were produced by new types of exegetical discourse – in content and rhetorical form. Midrashic tradition is this vast weft of correlations and determinations; and each anthology is a synchronic canon of diachronic strings of tradition. As we have them, these discourses are now traditions for the eye; but they first emerged and were continuously circulated for the ear alone – as

⁹ For a richly annotated conspectus, see Yonah Fraenkel, *The Modes of Aggadah and Midrash [Darkhei ha’aggadah vehamidrash]*, 2 vols. (Givatayim: Yad Le-Talmud, 1991).

an open canon, orally performed by the sages in the study hall and by preachers in the synagogue.

The liturgical poems of Piyyut come third. This stratum of Jewish religious culture cannot be understood independently of the prior two. In Piyyut, however, they assume an entirely new and distinctive integration. The biblical stratum is engaged, since the liturgical poems follow the lectionary cycles of Torah readings – for the sabbaths, major holidays and intermediate days, and other special occasions (minor feast and fast days, new moon celebrations, or the four special sabbaths in the month of Adar); but they also include references to weekly prophetic lections and special prophetic cycles (of judgment and consolation). The midrashic stratum is also engaged,¹⁰ inasmuch as all the foregoing biblical narratives, teachings, and laws are presented together with their rabbinic interpretations – be this explicitly, through use of its content in fragmentary or also more elaborate expositions, or more implicitly, through use of allusions, oblique hints, or even by simply adducing the scriptural proof-texts appended to certain midrashic teachings. And yet this hardly says it all; for if the primary cycle is the biblical lectionary, it is even more specifically the liturgical cycle of prayers for these days, and their sequences of blessings, as established in the rabbinic synagogue tradition, that sets the themes and the styles of the piyyutim. Thus, for example, the small cycle of prayers that follow the call to worship (Barekhu) and precede the proclamation of faith (Shema) include blessings for the heavenly lights and God’s love of Israel, and these provide thematic topics that are also marked by references (biblical and midrashic) to the specific Torah reading for that sabbath or festival. Or, in a similar fashion, the central Amidah (“standing prayer”) is also marked by thematic references to a particular lectionary for each of the eighteen prayers recited in a weekday service (*qerovah*) celebrating a festival or fast day (such as Purim or Tish’a Be’av); or the first three (of the seven) statutory benedictions of the Amidah recited during the sabbath service (*shivata*), with a special emphasis on the recitation of the *trisagion* (Qedushah) recited in the third slot. Between the second and third benedictions there were also six (or more) poetic units, some of which, in the middle of this sequence, became quite long (especially the epical cycles beginning with the Creation and climaxing on the specific event celebrated on that holiday – such as the sacrificial service celebrated on Yom Kippur); or the grand epical recitations on the specific historical topic of that day (such as the exodus from Egypt), found in the final

¹⁰ For overall comments, see E. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages* [Shirat haqodesh ha’ivrit biyemei habeinayim] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 266–269, and the earlier foundational study of the influence of midrashic rhetoric by A. Mirsky, *The Origins of Forms of Early Hebrew Poetry* [Yesodei tsurot hapiyyut] (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1969).

(ninth) poetic unit.¹¹ Add to this thematic mix the decisive fact that these materials are presented in unique verse forms (lines and stanzas), with complex and dense syntactic structures (elliptical and enigmatic), and even using special linguistic features (neologisms – deverbals nouns or denominative verbs – rooted in scriptural or rabbinic vocabularies), and one can readily appreciate the independent and complex character of this cultural stratum.¹²

But this is not all; more must be added. First, each piyyut-unit is a distinctive collocation of traditions. That is, the older midrashic anthologies are culled and collated by the ḥazan, or precentor, who recites these poetic additions before the standard blessings. It is his poetic talent that draws from the fund of tradition and determines its formulation (even when older tropes or terms are used), so that we do not have in any instance multiple traditions on a subject (though different exegetical voices from the past may occur in different places in the liturgy where the lectionary is alluded to). Nor are the original tradents cited by name (as against hoary rabbinic precedent); only their teachings are re-cited by the ḥazan in his own voice. Indeed, just this precentor is the “voice of tradition” at any given point – its latter-day channel and formulator; only he determines, in any given instance, which rhetorical devices are taken over and adapted, and what is of thematic and theological significance. The result is that all the various cultural strata are interfused for the most part, though it became customary to transcribe the biblical citations used or alluded to in the first and second blessings of the Amidah at their conclusions (hence they were not a part of the original, prayer recitation); and, in one or another of the piyyutim, the practised ear can discern certain of the standard rhetorical forms of midrashic exegesis (as I shall examine). The ḥazan is thus the teacher of tradition in each piyyut, and the prayer service becomes a place of its instruction.¹³

The fact that these teachings occur *within* the prayers themselves introduces the second point to be noted here – which is that Piyyut is a kind of *poetic theology*. As noted, each of the sub-units of the service (the theme of light, for example, at the outset of the morning service, or the references to God as the shield or protector of Abraham, in the first blessing of the Amidah) is presented together with topics derived from the particular scriptural lectionary in play for that sabbath or special day; and thus the various liturgical themes of light and love, or protection and salvation, become prisms for the theological refraction

¹¹ On these liturgical forms, cf. Fleischer, *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry* (above, note 10); also L. Weinberger, *Jewish Hymnography: A Literary History* (London: Littmann, 1995).

¹² All this effects another distinct linguistic register. Cf. the contributions of Sh. Spiegel, “On the Language of the Paytanim” (Heb.), a fascicle reprint from *Hado’ar* 42 (no. 23) (1962–1963): 397–400, and J. Yahalom, *Poetic Language in Early Palestinian Liturgical Poetry* [Sefat hashir shel piyyut ha’erets yisra’eli hakadam] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1985).

¹³ Discussed in Fishbane, “From Midrash to Epic” (below, pp. 72–90), with further considerations below.

of assorted biblical and rabbinic topics. And in this overall regard, one must not discount how the forms of versification involved, with their assorted allusions and intertextual associations, create a thick texture of passages and yield the kinds of meta-semantic meanings only possible through poetic language. This matter cannot be stressed enough: the intersection of biblical and midrashic selections through new poetic collocations creates the distinctive oral theology of Piyyut. In this liturgical setting, in the course of sacred prayer, the community hears anew (in the voice of the *hazan*) the ancient oral tradition of the written Torah. Perceptively and imperceptively, the two become one.

Since I have presented the several cultural strata of Judaism in linguistic terms, let me resume these cultural registers in this formal mode. Taking my cue from Ferdinand de Saussure,¹⁴ I shall describe the diverse vocal expressions of Scripture (both the named or anonymous narrative units) as distinct *paroles* of the deep *langue* (or linguistic resource) of ancient Israel (itself being variable and historically complex); and then add that as these various *paroles* coalesce into larger anthologies or units of tradition, they themselves become the *langue* for all the later strata of the biblical tradition. Thus, with the closing of the scriptural canon, this diverse complex of *paroles* becomes, in effect, the vast *langue* of rabbinic culture.¹⁵ Let us call this register one. Its use in interpretative acts by the sages results in distinctive exegetical *paroles* (and this holds both for the specific, biblically *based* interpretations, called Midrash, and for all the biblically *informed* or *inspired* derivations, known as Mishnah). Just this received “textual” complex, which variously comprises the “mind” of the sages and underlies their discourse and thinking and knowledge, is, in effect, their cultural *langue*. Let us call this register two. In turn, the collocation of these two canonical strata comprises the *basis of* and *inspiration for* the poetic *paroles* of Piyyut. I shall call this register three; and although it is clearly distinctive in language, form, and instruction, the strong impact of the biblical and midrashic heritage is evident throughout (in its linguistic bases, in its rhetorical structures, and in its theological content). It is to this complex phenomenon, and especially its creative midrashic inflections, that I now turn.

¹⁴ F. de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale* (4th ed.; Paris: Payot, 1949); regarding *langue*, see esp. 124: “la langue est un système dont tous les parties peuvent et doivent être considérées dans leur solidarité synchronique.”

¹⁵ I first used these terms for these anthologies in my *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11–13.

2. The Forms of Midrash in Piyyut: Types and Transformations

In the ensuing discussion, I shall present a variety of instances of the use and reuse of Midrash in Piyyut. These cover many different techniques, genres, and rhetorical types. Each is intended to be exemplary of a new moment in Jewish cultural creativity, and was chosen for that purpose out of numerous (and in some cases myriads) of cases. The examples were also selected to demonstrate the broad geographical and temporal spread of classical Piyyut. Hence they cut across several spatial regions (the land of Israel; Byzantium; and Ashkenaz); across a broad historical arc (fifth to eleventh centuries); and include multiple ḥazanim (Yose ben Yose; Yannai; Rabbi Eleazar bei-R. Qillir; Rabbi Pinḥas Hakohen ben Jacob; Rabbi Shimon bar Yitzḥak Hagadol; and Rabbi Benjamin ben Samuel). This said, they are not presented in terms of historical or regional groupings, but by form or type. In exploring these cases, I shall go more deeply into topics mentioned in the initial discussion.

2.1 The Use and Transformation of Exegetical Anthologies into Paytanic Epic

In the Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael (“Yitro” 9),¹⁶ we find the following collection of rabbinic comments on the scriptural account of the Sinai revelation:

All the nation saw the thunder (qolot) [and lightning] [Exod 20:15]. They saw what appeared and was heard, according to Rabbi Ishmael. Rabbi Aqiba said, “They saw and heard what appeared; they saw the word of fire that went forth from the mouth of God [lit. the Power] and was chiselled (nehtzav) upon the tablets, as [Scripture] says, The voice of the Lord ignited (hotzev) flames of fire [Ps 29:7]. And all the nation saw <the qolot: a voice (qol)> of many voices (qolei qolot), and a torch of many torches. And how many voices and torches were there? This means that [the many voices] caused each person to hear according to their capacity [koho]; as [Scripture] says, The voice (qol) of the Lord in strength (koah) [v. 4].”

Rabbi said [that “This phrase] proclaims the praise of Israel, for when they all stood before Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, they heard each word [viz. each commandment of the Decalogue] and interpreted (mefarshim) it; as [Scripture] says, He/It encircled them [the nation] and they [the nation] understood it [Deut 32:10].”

As is evident, this passage presents a series of exegetical explications on the puzzling phrase, “All the nation saw the thunder and lightning.” For what could Scripture have meant by this oxymoron of “seeing thunder”? Surely, one naturally sees lightning but hears thunder. Two of the leading sages from the formative rabbinic generations (early second century CE), Rabbi Ishmael and Rabbi Aqiba, interpret according to their proclivities. Ishmael, who understood Scripture as formulated in a comprehensible, human manner, presumed that the text is written elliptically and that one should fill in the gaps; accordingly, one should supplement an unsaid hearing of the thunder (alongside the specified seeing of the lightning) in order to render the passage sensible. By contrast,

¹⁶ *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael*, ed. Ḥayyim S. Horovitz and Yisrael A. Rabin (2nd ed.; Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman Books, 1960), 235.

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