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CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN ANCIENT NEAR EAST WISDOM

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\*In quotation of the *NASB*, some Scripture references have been altered by the author via the insertion of the name *YHWH*, in place of the term LORD.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Ancient Near East (ANE), a common manner in which individuals were instructed was by the use of wisdom literature. When the broader aspect of ANE culture is considered, a great deal of continuity is seen between Israelite wisdom and that of her surrounding neighbors. Similarities in form, structure and didactic purpose were prevalent throughout ANE societies, as would be expected given the shared customs and histories of these diverse peoples. However, when the foundation of wisdom is considered, and what would be called wisdom in general, there is a great antithesis between Israel and her ANE counterparts.

First, this study will evaluate some of the more common continuities and discontinuities between Israelite wisdom and those surrounding her. Next, the “fear of *YHWH*” will be addressed, with an emphasis placed on the attributes of God as the foundation of all wisdom. Finally, this essay will address the foundation of all wisdom and knowledge, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, when considered, reduces all other worldviews and notions of wisdom to mere foolishness. In the end, this essay will demonstrate that what was perceived to be wisdom to the nations surrounding Israel, was instead foolishness and density of thought because of their rejection of the Triune king, *YHWH*.

## WISDOM LITERATURE IN THE ANE

To say that wisdom literature played an important role in the ANE would be a gross understatement.<sup>1</sup> Instead, wisdom literature in Israel and the nations surrounding her played an

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<sup>1</sup> Hayford states of the nature of wisdom literature the following, “Wisdom literature is a type of literature, common to the peoples of the ancient world that included ethical and philosophical works. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament consists of the books of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, and certain of the psalms . . . In general, two principal types of wisdom are found in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament—practical and speculative. Practical wisdom consists mainly of wise sayings that offer guidelines for a successful and happy life. These are maxims of commonsense insight and observation about how intelligent people should conduct themselves.” Jack W. Hayford and R. Samuel Thorpe, *Everyday Wisdom for Everlasting Life: A Study of Proverbs*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), n.p.

essential part in the development of the experience of the individual and in this respect, in the development of the culture as a whole. This is noted by Marlin E. Thomas when he proclaims, “From the earliest periods we have clear evidence that man put his mind to the arduous task of seeking to understand at least the social processes of life. Those insights were then later reduced to writing so that succeeding generations might learn from the experiences of the past. This attempt by ancient man to control his destiny by comprehending and manipulating favorably the forces of social behavior has come to be known by the genre of ‘wisdom literature.’”<sup>2</sup>

## THE NATURE OF WISDOM LITERATURE

### *Continuity*

While there is a great deal of diversity in the types and forms of wisdom literature, diversity which was largely a result of the worldview of the individual culture, there was nevertheless great continuity as well. For example, non-prescriptive law codes were normative in ANE thought, and much of law, which in these cultures was to be used as “judicial wisdom,” was intimately intertwined with what would be called the wisdom of the era. As John Walton notes, “Relatively few sayings could be found in ancient Near Eastern literature that would be contrary or unacceptable to biblical wisdom, and vice versa.”<sup>3</sup> Hence, a vast amount of common ground exists between Israelite wisdom writings and her surrounding neighbors, and the spirit of this correspondence permeated deep within the cultural expressions of these related, yet autonomous nations. Jeremy Kisch notes as much when he states, “Continuities in laws, ideas, and institutions existed between Sumerian civilization and those found in Biblical times. Similar motifs also

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<sup>2</sup> Marlin E. Thomas, "Psalms 1 and 112 as a Paradigm for the Comparison of Wisdom Motifs in the Psalms," (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29, no. 1, March 1986), 15.

<sup>3</sup> John H. Walton. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*, (Downers Grove, IL: Baker Academic, 2006), 309.

existed in ancient Egypt. Among the similarities was a wisdom literature that consisted of riddles, proverbs, and stories about human suffering.”<sup>4</sup>

### *Structure and Literary Forms*

There is also a similarity of structure when differing streams of ANE wisdom are viewed in comparison with one another. For example, Bob Utley notes in his article, *Introduction to Wisdom Literature*, that “Albright has revealed the similarity between Hebrew and Canaanite wisdom literature especially the Ras Shamra texts from Ugarit, written about the 15th century B.C.”<sup>5</sup> Utley goes on to list some similar features between these two camps of writings, namely, that Israelite and Canaanite wisdom writing both included: (1) same word pairings, (2) presence of chiastic parallels, (3) superscriptions, and (4) the sharing of genre form.<sup>6</sup> Gary Tuttle reaches a similar conclusion when he states, speaking of the shared use of literary forms that typical ANE wisdom writings employed, that, “Comparison speech is, of course, pervasive in the OT wisdom literature, but certainly the scribes had no corner on that literary market. Similarly, simile is a favorite device, though not unique to the wise men. Finally, antithetical parallelism is a typical way for the scribes to couch their comparison.”<sup>7</sup>

### *Didactic Usage*

This commonality in wisdom types was a product of the era,<sup>8</sup> with all cultures in the ancient Near East producing works with similar strands of thought for similar purposes, namely, for the

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Kisch, "Job's Friends: Psychotherapeutic Precursors," (*Psychotherapy*, 27, no. 1, Spring 1990), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Bob Utley, *Introduction to Wisdom Literature*. 10 12, 2012. bible.org (accessed 02 26, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Gary A. Tuttle, "The Sermon On The Mount: Its Wisdom Affinities And Their Relation To Its Structure," (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 20, no. 3, September 1977), 214.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Bennett notes, “The personal and individual (rather than national) nature of Wisdom literature contributes to its international flavor. Other literature from the ancient Near East shares many of the concerns and

education of the culture and for the assimilation of proper thought to the masses. Much of that which would be called wisdom literature in the ANE revolved around or dealt with the issue of the cosmic order, law retribution and in some cases, eschatology,<sup>9</sup> as noted by Stephen Bennett when he states, “The apposition of cosmic order and chaos is an important theme in the Bible and was especially important for the teachers of wisdom (Perdue, *Sword and the Stylus*, 12). Egyptians considered the goddess Maat to be the embodiment of this notion of divine order, which extended also to human customs and behavior (especially justice or right behavior).”<sup>10</sup> Thus, wisdom literature was both common and normative in the didactic sense, being utilized as a didactic means of relaying general truths and life experience to both the peasant and the noble alike. Michael V. Fox expresses the didactic use of wisdom literature when he states that;

Didactic Wisdom Literature comprises pedagogical texts intended primarily to instruct and acculturate boys to their particular culture, social caste, and religious group, and to promulgate its ideals and self-image. Often the counsels apply to adults as well, but all assume that their audience is male. These texts seek to shape a man who has the character- qualities—skills of comportment, practical talents, ethics, and religious bearing—that will make him well suited to his social role and who can transmit the ideas and attitudes to future generations.<sup>11</sup>

In noting the words of Fox, the scholarly consensus is that there is widespread agreement in the types and forms of ANE wisdom writings, with great similarity or shared thought between

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literary techniques of biblical Wisdom literature. Much of the advice transfers easily across these similar cultures. The similarity of Egyptian literature was first recognized when the ancient Egyptian document *Instruction of Amenemope* was translated in 1923. Although scholars hesitate to call the ancient Near Eastern instructions “Wisdom literature,” there are documents that share common subject matter, literary form, and world view with the biblical wisdom.” Stephen J. Bennett, *The Lexham Bible Dictionary: (Wisdom Literature)*, (Edited by John D. Barry. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Jer 8.8-9, Isa 9.6 via prophetic writings.

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, *LBD*, n.p.

<sup>11</sup> Michael V. Fox, "Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom Literature (Didactic)," (*Religion Compass*, 5, no. 1, 2011), 1.

the vastly different people groups. Thus, while the worldviews of these differing ANE cultures was vastly different, there certainly was commonality in the manner in which these differing groups approached particular experiences, and this commonality was cross-cultural, as noted by G. Lloyd Carr when he states that;

The wisdom literature is one of the best attested and most important classes of ancient Near Eastern texts. Take, for example, the proverb or folk-wisdom genre. John Ruffle has identified more than thirty types of similarities "from the structural passages which give the works their basic form, through the general and specific content of the books, to the details of vocabulary and figurative images" that, allowing for regional, national and cultural differences, still manifest an 'underlying similarity of thought and expression'<sup>12</sup>

### *Discontinuity*

Yet, despite the great amount of continuity in types and features that persisted in ANE wisdom writings, there is likewise a great amount of discontinuity as well. Namely, the origin and definition of what would be called wisdom was vastly different from culture to culture, with covenant Israel having a vastly different source of what would be called "wise" when compared to her surrounding neighbors. Hence, there was a great gulf or antithesis between monotheistic Israel and her surrounding polytheistic neighbors. The primary source of wisdom, from the Israelite perspective was that of *YHWH*, the covenant God of Israel. In contrast, the ANE cultures surrounding Israel looked to their pantheon of gods as a source for wisdom and instruction.

First, Assyria believed that *Sin*, the Assyrian moon god, was the primary source of wisdom in that culture, as noted by Jeffrey J. Niehaus when he states, "The moon god is involved as god of wisdom and change. The god who governed change also had (and could give) the wisdom to

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<sup>12</sup> G. Lloyd Carr, "The Love Poetry Genre in The Old Testament And The Ancient Near East: Another Look At Inspiration." (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25, no. 4, December 1982): 489.

manage well amid change.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, it was often the case that in the cultures surrounding Israel, that wisdom was granted as a reward for good conduct or rule, and in this sense, it was not given in a benevolent sense.

For example, in ancient Egypt, those who held the position of Pharaoh believed that the deity *Amon-Re* appointed them as such, and that “Royal appointment included a divine gift of law, instruction and wisdom for good rule.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, via their “divine appointment” to the Egyptian throne and their proficiency in ruling, the individual would later be granted (further) wisdom by the Egyptian deity “Thoth, the god of healing and wisdom.”<sup>15</sup>

This granting of wisdom was likewise true of the Babylonian culture and their pantheon as well, where Warad-Sin petitioned the god *Nanna* for wisdom in the building and fortification of Ur when he proclaimed, “The god Nanna . . . ordered me . . . to strengthen the base of shrine Ebabbar, to build the cities of the gods of the land ... about enlarging Ur, and reinforcing its enforcing wall, of making its foundation greater . . . I implored the god (Nanna) humbly. The god Nanna, [my] lord, was favorable (to my prayer).”<sup>16</sup>

As in Biblical theology, the gods of Israel’s ANE neighbors granted wisdom to individuals for various reasons. However, there is likewise a sharp difference between the source of this granting, namely, the gods of the various pantheons and *YHWH*. Perhaps the greatest difference in the primary source of wisdom comes via the very nature of the ANE gods themselves, who

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<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *Ancient Near Eastern Themes in Biblical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2008), 534-535, Kindle.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 548.

<sup>15</sup> John D. Currid, *Against the Gods: The Polemical Theology of the Old Testament*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Publishing, 2013), 1481, Kindle.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 832.

were dependent on human support. In ANE thought, there was a triangle of thought whereby mankind, the gods and nature were intimately interconnected and dependent. This is noted by Walton when he proclaims that “the temple existed as a fulcrum of mutual dependence. The gods had their needs met through the temple . . . and the people had their needs met by the beneficence of the contented deity. An inscription of Arik-din-ili from just before 1300 BC . . . indicates that the king built the temple of Shamash ‘in order that the harvest of my land might prosper.’”<sup>17</sup> Walton goes on to assert that because of this mutual dependence, “The prosperous harvest then becomes the resource for bountiful offerings to be made to the temple-the cycle of cosmic life in the ancient Near East.”<sup>18</sup>

In noting this, while it is true that Israel’s neighbors believed that wisdom was indeed imparted to them via the favor of the gods (as a divine gift), it is nevertheless true that there was a human influence and aspect to wisdom in these cultures as well. In this sense, and without the existence or aid of an immutable creator in these systems of thought, wisdom is reduced a subjective and distant abstraction and not the reflective thinking of an omnipotent God.

Hence, the worldview which was held by those surrounding cultures of the ANE and the various presuppositions which shaped that worldview was in stark contrast to that of the Israelites, who held to the belief of an immutable, omniscient and omnipotent creator of both heaven and earth. This contrast is vital in that the Hebrew sense of true wisdom and how it would be defined in the pages of Scripture was that of the reflective thinking of the non-dependent and eternal God. Hence, the concept of wisdom in Jewish thought and particularly, the

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<sup>17</sup> Walton. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 128.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

source of that wisdom, was absolute and knowable, unlike the distant and unconcerned polytheistic gods of Israel's neighbors.<sup>19</sup>

### THE ANTITHESIS OF BIBLICAL WISDOM

As previously noted, there is both continuity and discontinuity between OT Israel and her surrounding neighbors when the nature, message and function of wisdom and wisdom literature is considered. Hence, while there may be many strands of the worldview web which are similar, there is nevertheless a vast difference in the ultimate faith commitment of these worldviews. This difference, as previously noted, comes in many forms. However, at the center of these differences is the monotheism of Israel and omnipotence of *YHWH* and His ultimate control of all of creation and all that comes to pass in the creative sphere. Hence, while there may be similarities in the individual expressions of wisdom when the broad landscape of ANE thought is considered, it is likewise true that the foundation of those expressions are in stark contrast to one another when Israel and her ANE counterparts are considered.

### *YHWH*, THE COVENANT GOD OF SCRIPTURE

When the nature of *YHWH* is considered up and against the various pantheons of the ANE, dissimilarity is inevitable. First, Genesis chapters 1-2 tell the reader that *YHWH* is creator of both the heavens and the earth. And, while there are similarities in the structure of the Genesis creation narrative to that of Israel's ANE counterparts, it is nevertheless true that the Biblical narrative of creation finds the one true God creating *ex nihilo* (from nothing), and not, as so

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<sup>19</sup> For example, in ANE thought, the gods were often at war with one another, not omniscient or omnipresent, and they were not regarded as omnipotent. They were territorial in nature and dependent on one another to prosper and reproduce. Moreover, it was often the case that they were not at all involved in the creative act, but rather, they governed or brought to order the chaos which previously existed. Hence, what the modern would define as "nature," was in reality in much of ANE thought, that which was not dominated by God, but rather, something which was mutually depend upon by the gods.

many ANE legends proclaim, simply subduing or bringing order to the preexistent chaos and primordial waters.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Attributes of YHWH*

Next, the attributes of *YHWH* are inexhaustible in nature and in this sense, they are in stark contrast to that of the gods of ANE thought. This is summarized well by the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, section 1, when it proclaims;

There is but one only, living, and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute; working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will, for His own glory; most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin; the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him; and withal, most just, and terrible in His judgments, hating all sin, and who will by no means clear the guilty.<sup>21</sup>

In short, there is no temporality, wavering of thought or weakness in *YHWH*. Moreover, the “Aseity” of *YHWH* sets Him apart from the gods of the ANE, as Feinberg notes when he states, “Aseity (from the Latin *a se*, “from itself”) is nuanced in a variety of ways, but the main idea of aseity is that God depends on nothing other than himself for his existence.”<sup>22</sup> When this aspect of *YHWH* is considered up and against all other systems of thought, or in particular, Israel’s ANE neighbors, it is imperative to proclaim that *YHWH* alone meets the transcendental requirements for the preconditions of objective knowledge, wisdom and experience.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Walton notes that “In the ancient Near East the precosmic condition is neither an abstraction (“Chaos”) nor a personified adversary. But the primordial sea, which is the principal element of the precreation condition, is personified by Nammu in Sumer and by Nun in Egypt, and it can be perceived in an adversarial role.” John H. Walton. *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 478-480, Kindle. While Walton would argue that the creation narrative in Genesis 1 is that of making things functional, it is likewise true that Walton would argue that God created from nothing prior to Gen 1.

<sup>21</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 2:1.

<sup>22</sup> John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 209.

<sup>23</sup> On this critical point, Greg L. Bahnsen argues, “Consequently we need to argue from “the impossibility of the contrary,” showing that only Christianity provides the preconditions of intelligibility for man’s experience and

The main purpose in highlighting this point when comparison study is done between the wisdom of the ANE and that of Israel is two-fold. First, for wisdom to be objective in nature, it must itself be grounded in that which is universal and transcendent in nature. Meaning, the concept of wisdom is not autonomous from its foundation and standard, and in this sense, objective wisdom does not stand alone, but rather, it is ontologically grounded in the nature of God Himself. Second, while something may be deemed wise and beneficial from a human perspective, it is nevertheless not wisdom if it is not grounded in the universal standard or foundation of wisdom.<sup>24</sup> Hence, true wisdom is not simply outward conformity to a set of propositions, but rather, it's a condition of the heart where the individual accepts and partakes in particular actions by faith (Ps 111.10).

### *The Fear of YHWH*

Twenty-three times in the OT Scriptures the phrase “The fear of *YHWH*” is utilized. Job 28.28 tells the reader that “the fear of *YHWH* is wisdom,” while Ps 111.10 informs the reader that “the fear of *YHWH* is the beginning of wisdom.” It is here vital to note that an individual's epistemological foundation or starting point must be *YHWH* Himself, because all wisdom, as previously mentioned, is ontologically grounded in Him. Hence, when Prov 1.7 informs the reader, that “The fear of the *YHWH* is the beginning of knowledge; Fools despise wisdom and instruction,” it is likewise telling the reader that anyone outside of the salvific relationship is dense and unwise. Moreover, the necessities of living a virtuous life are grounded in the “fear of

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reasoning. If Christianity were not true, the unbeliever could not prove or understand anything.” Greg L. Bahnsen, *Always Ready: Directions for Defending the Faith*, (Edited by Robert R. Booth. Nacogdoches, TX: Covenant Media Press, 1996), 2625-2626, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, it is wise to abstain from premarital sexual relations for a plethora of reasons. Yet, if the foundation for those reasons is rejected, namely, the moral law of *YHWH* and His holy and unchanging character, it is nevertheless true that the individual is not practicing wisdom, because he has denied the foundation and grounding of wisdom itself.

*YHWH*,” according to Ps 19.9. Hence, one of the main didactic teaching points of wisdom literature is grounded in the very character of *YHWH* Himself.

This knowledge of and reliance upon *YHWH* via the Israelite worldview is in stark contrast to the surrounding regions around Israel. For example, in Ex 5.2, Pharaoh proclaimed, when pressed to allow the Israelites to exodus from Egypt to worship the Lord, ““Who is *YHWH* that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know *YHWH*, and besides, I will not let Israel go.” Moreover, Lev 18.26-30 proclaims that Israel was to obey the words and laws which *YHWH* had prescribed, and it was not to do as the surrounding ANE cultures had done, namely, the many abominations which were performed in the land, so that the land would not “spew out” the Israelites for the rejection of their covenant God. Hence, the manners, customs and wisdom of the surrounding ANE cultures was little more than abomination and defilement in the eyes of *YHWH*. And, while on a human level, many of these customs would seem wise on their periphery, they were nevertheless the epitome of foolishness when the redemptive aspect is applied.

### *Christ, the Wisdom of God*

Finally, this brief study would be remiss if it lacked mention to the very foundation of wisdom itself, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, the second member of the Triune God-head is the epistemological starting point of all true thought, and because of this, all proper reasoning, thought, logic, wisdom and knowledge must incorporate the divine *logos*. Colossians 2.3 is a prime example of this concept, where it states that Jesus Christ is the foundation of all “wisdom and knowledge.” Next, in 1 Cor 1.18-31, Jesus is described as “the wisdom of God,” with all of those who reject Christ being described as fools who have had their so called wisdom destroyed (v. 20). Ephesians 1.8-9 tells the reader that “all wisdom and insight” has been bestowed upon

the believer through the blood of Jesus, with James 1.5 informing the reader that wisdom is a divine gift of God that is given freely.

Finally, in Acts 17, when Paul confronts the wise philosophers on Mars Hill, he does not presuppose the foolish presuppositions of the world, but rather, he testifies of Christ and Him crucified. On this point, Graeme Goldsworthy proclaims “That Jesus is the locus of all wisdom is crucial to our investigation. We do not have a wisdom Jesus who is different from a salvation history Jesus. The Christology of wisdom is part of the total Christology of the New Testament.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, there is no true wisdom without the foundation of wisdom itself, which is the “Wisdom of God,” Jesus Christ.

## CONCLUSION

While there are indeed many similarities between the forms, styles and intentions of ANE wisdom writings, it is nevertheless apparent that these wisdom teachings are vastly different when one considers the foundation of wisdom itself. Meaning that which would be considered wise is not wisdom at all if it lacks faith in *YHWH*. And, although there was great continuity between the teachings of Israel and her surrounding neighbors, these similarities are nevertheless meaningless if they only apply to the temporal life. Meaning, a life lived apart from the union of *YHWH* with man is no life at all, and in this respect, wisdom is impossible because it lacks the very one in whom all wisdom and knowledge has been deposited, the Lord Jesus Christ. In short, the author of Ecclesiastes echoes the plight of man in chapter 1, verse 2 of his poetic work when he proclaims, “‘Vanity of vanities,’ says the Preacher, ‘Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.’” The solution to his plight, and the plight for all of mankind is found in the very foundation of wisdom Himself, as the “preacher” notes when he states, “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is:

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<sup>25</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, "Wisdom and its Literature in Biblical-Theological Context." (*SBJT* 15, no. 3, 2011). 46.

fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (Ecc 12.13-14).

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