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# An Examination of the Sabbatical Year in Leviticus 25 and Its Implications for Academic Practice

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*The Sabbatical Year.* <sup>1</sup>The LORD said to Moses on Mount Sinai, <sup>2</sup>“Speak to the Israelites and tell them: When you enter the land that I am giving you, let the land, too, keep a Sabbath for the LORD. <sup>3</sup>For six years you may sow your field, and for six years prune your vineyard, gathering in their produce. <sup>4</sup>But during the seventh year the land shall have a complete rest, a Sabbath for the LORD, when you may neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. <sup>5</sup>The aftergrowth of your harvest you shall not reap, nor shall you pick the grapes of your untrimmed vines in this year of sabbath rest for the land. <sup>6</sup>While the land has its sabbath, all its produce will be equally for you yourself and for your male and female slaves, for your hired help and the tenants who live with you, <sup>7</sup>and likewise for your livestock and for the wild animals on your land. (Leviticus 25:1-7, New American Bible)

As a Department Chair, one of my responsibilities is to work with faculty to apply for, coordinate, and schedule around their sabbatical leaves. The paperwork and scheduling, especially covering the vacated classes, becomes critically important — and I spend more time and energy on the *how* of the sabbaticals than on the *why*.

Though I had previously encountered the concepts of Sabbatical Year and Jubilee Year as found in Leviticus, I never really connected the ideas to sabbatical as practiced in academia. It was the Jubilee Year I was most familiar with, particularly as it relates to the Catholic Church’s papal celebration of the Trinity associated with the new millenium. As I was thumbing through the Pentateuch, looking for an inspiration for a final paper in a biblical studies course, the word Sabbatical all but jumped off the page and caught my

attention. I began to wonder whether or not all the paperwork I deal with as department chair has any connection to the sabbatical concept as portrayed in the Bible. This leads to the two research questions which guide this essay:

*RQ1: What is the historical and biblical significance of the sabbatical year as described in Leviticus 25:1-7?*

*RQ2: What connections can be made between the biblical concept of sabbatical year, and the concept as practiced in academia?*

To answer these questions, this paper will first examine the sabbatical year as portrayed in the Hebrew scriptures. Due to the number of historical and interpretive issues to be addressed, this section accounts for a majority of the analysis. Next, definitions and practices of the sabbatical year in academia will be outlined. Finally, connections between the two forms of sabbatical will be analyzed, with conclusions drawn about the role the Leviticus sabbatical can play in our understanding and execution of academic leave.

### SABBATICAL YEAR IN LEVITICUS

Before delving specifically into the meaning of the sabbatical year, it is necessary to first address the historical and theological context of the book of Leviticus, in order to understand the larger whole in which sabbatical plays a part.<sup>1</sup> To that end, the exegete may be dismayed by Grabbe's (1993) assessment: "No other book of the Bible is less appealing, at first sight, to the modern student of theology than Leviticus" (p. 11); echoed by Bailey's (1987) observation that "readers have found it opaque" (p. 3). Leviticus is initially perceived as a dry listing of laws and admonitions, with very little narrative or prosaic imagery. Upon closer inspection, one finds an intriguing theology and a connectedness to contemporary issues.

Leviticus is the third book of the Bible and the middle of the five chapters of the Pentateuch. The title reflects the focus on matters associated with the levitical priesthood (Gorman, 1977), religious leaders presumably descended from Jacob's son Levi (Porter, 1976). Ironically, notes Noth (1965), the book "deals hardly at all with Levi and the Levites; less, in fact, than any other book of the Pentateuch" (p. 9). What is covered are the rituals, traditions, rules, and regulations that pertain to all liturgical activity in Israel at the time. The instructions are given both to the priests who coordinate the activities, and to the laity, i.e. the entire people of Israel, regarding their religious and civic obligations (Gerstenberger, 1993; Gorman, 1977; Porter, 1976).

Most scholars agree that Leviticus belongs to the Priestly (P) tradition, those writings whose final redaction took place sometime during and after the Babylonian exile, around the sixth century B.C.E. (see, for example, Bailey, 1987; Gerstenberger, 1993; Gorman, 1977; Grabbe, 1993; Noth, 1965; Porter, 1976). When describing the Pentateuch, Porter asserts that Leviticus "is much more distinctively priestly in character than most of the other sources in those books" (1976, p. 3). Of course, nuances exist in this understanding. Gerstenberger (1993) speaks to a contemporary view which does not view Leviticus as a book at all, but rather a fabricated set of excerpts from a larger legislative text, "sewn together like a patchwork quilt from many different, individual pieces" (p. 3). Other scholars recognize this "patchwork" orientation but are comfortable with the explanation that the priestly writers worked with and adapted older material along with their own legal perspectives.

Despite agreements on the general time period of redaction, Porter (1976) acknowledges that, while dating the final version of the text may be possible, to ascertain the true origin of the material is problematic. Levine (1989) makes a similar observation, noting that despite the reference to historical events in Leviticus, the book is not historiographical. Many of the rituals and laws covered in the book could pre-date the Babylonian exile.

#### *The Holiness Code.*

Though exact dating of regulations is improbable, evidence suggests that the section of Leviticus dealing with the Sabbatical Year is most likely from an older set of laws which were inserted into the book. Chapters 17-26 are often referred to as The Holiness Code (Bailey, 1987; Budd, 1996; Gerstenberger, 1993; Gorman, 1997; Joosten, 1996) or the “laws of holiness” (Childs, 1979; Noth, 1965). Identified in 1877 by Klostermann, these ten chapters have a distinctive character in their “vocabulary, style, and theology” (Joosten, 1996, p. 7). Budd, Gorman, and Joosten offer a variety of common characteristics, including the focus on blessings and curses, allusions to the exodus, Yahweh’s self-designation (e.g. “I am the LORD”), and the relational, enactment-based nature of the laws. While the scholars noted above tend to agree that the Holiness Code is distinct from the remaining P documents, they are undecided as to whether or not the code was originally an independent and homogeneous block of laws, or whether they were gathered separately, edited with a priestly hand, and set collectively in the midst of Leviticus.

#### *The Sabbatical Year.*

Though most often referred to as the Sabbatical Year in English translations, synonymous labels include Sabbath Year, Fallow Year, Year of Rest, and Year of Remission. The sabbatical passage immediately precedes the passage regarding the Jubilee Year, which took place every fifty years and, in addition to leaving the land fallow, mandated the release of debt and the freeing of slaves. These passages combined are unique to the Hebrew scriptures, as they transcend the annual cycle associated with all other festivals and holidays, and the rituals involve much more social engagement than other forms of celebration (Gerstenberger, 1993).

Interestingly, the “main character” of the Sabbatical Year is the *land*, and not the individual who tends to the land. The emphasis on agriculture is appropriate given the culture and economic realities of the Israelite people (Joosten, 1996). Levine (1989) paints a more detailed picture of the culture, describing it as economically strained and stratified society, where slavery and forfeiture of property was common, and “all indebtedness was associated with the land” (p. 169). Gertsenberger concurs, noting the social and economic interrelationship between the people addressed and the land on which they lived, going so far as to describe the scene as “a socioeconomic sphere of power relations cast in a religious frame of reference” (1993, p. 374). It makes sense that some of the laws passed down related to this primary economic indicator.

The opening scene of the passage begins with the LORD speaking to Moses from Mount Sinai, telling him to inform the Israelites that the land they are to receive is also to keep a sabbath for the LORD. Unlike humans, who are to observe the Sabbath every seventh day, the land is to rest every seventh year. The first important item to recognize is the significance of the number seven. Gorman (1997) traces this back to the creation story and the movement from chaos to order and argues that, in the priestly tradition, seven indicates “movement, passage, restoration, construction, and reconstruction” (p. 10). Thus, a land owner may sow fields, prune vineyards, and reap harvests for six straight years, but on the seventh year the land must go fallow.

Once the significance of the time range is established, it seems reasonable to ask why the land is to be left alone. Does it serve an agricultural purpose? Levine (1989) posits that the fallow year helped reduce the amount of sodium in the soil, especially in those areas that used irrigation. Porter (1976) argues that the law was a “practical necessity” in a culture “which knew nothing of the rotation of crops or the use of fertilizers or manure” (p. 198). The implication seems to be here that God mandated the rest to improve the soil quality. While this may have been a fortunate by-product of the fallow year, most scholars agree that the primary purpose for Sabbath in any form is an enactment of worship.

Such an argument is offered by Noth (1965), who points out that the passage explicitly states that the Sabbath is for Yahweh. Bechtel’s entry in the on-line *Catholic Encyclopedia* echoes this by identifying that the main objective of the sabbatical year “was to bring home to the people that the land was the *Lord’s*, and that we were merely His tenants at will... In that year He exercised His right of sovereign dominion” (1996, emphasis original). The land belongs to Yahweh, agrees Gorman (1997), and the Israelites needed to recognize that they were both tenants and servants of God. Wevers (1997) similarly points out that the land is a gift from God in the eloquent statement below:

A Sabbath for the Lord is not for its own sake, i.e. intended to preserve its fertility through having it lie fallow for a year, but it is a Sabbath in honor of the Lord, a mark of respect for the Lord’s gift of the land to his people. (p. 402)

Following the establishment of the seven year rest as homage to the Lord, the passage continues to detail what can and can not be done during the sabbatical time period. Landowners may not sow or prune their fields, or reap or pick the harvest of anything that grows of its own accord on the land. Interestingly, since the prohibition was for the land – not people – other forms of work were not forbidden. Even jobs associated with the fields themselves, such as building walls or digging wells, were acceptable as long as no crops were cultivated (Bechtel, 1996).

In a somewhat confusing turn of phrase, permission is then granted to use the produce of the fields as food for yourself, your servants and hired help, tenants who live with you, and your livestock – not to mention any wild animals that care to dine on the fruits of the untended land. This seems contradictory. If you are not to harvest even the aftergrowth, how can you use it for food? Most scholars seem to ignore this question. Levine (1989) offers some explanations. As for the aftergrowth, Levine suggests this refers specifically to produce which grows from those seeds which had fallen to the ground in the previous planting season. Though vague, there appears to be a distinction between this type of growth, and that which occurs within a season of its own accord. Budd (1996) differentiates between those crops which occurred naturally, and those which were the product or byproduct of “work.” Better is the explanation that the landowner is not allowed to “officially” reap a harvest. That which is growing wild is fair game for everyone, slave or free, person or beast. As long as the landowner enters the field on a daily basis (Budd, 1996, p. 345) and gathers what they need to survive just like anyone else, they are fine. Levine defines this as exemplifying the freedom of the Sabbatical year, as “Man and beast are free to roam about and gather their sustenance” (Levine, 1989, p. 171).

*Related Scripture.*

The Sabbatical Year passage can be better understood by comparing and contrasting it with similar references throughout the Hebrew scriptures. The first place we encounter such a passage is Exodus 23:10-11:

For six years you may sow your land and gather in its produce. But the seventh year you shall let the land lie untilled and unharvested, that the poor among you may eat of it and the beasts of the field may eat what the poor leave. So also shall you do in regard to your vineyard and your olive grove.

In contrast to Leviticus, the Exodus passage is more humanitarian (Budd, 1996). The rationale for the fallow year is to privilege the poor, and no statement is made either on behalf of the land or of respect for Yahweh. Budd portrays one as a “provision for the poor” and the other “a provision for the community at large, including the land owner” in which the emphasis is “ecological” (p. 341). Levine (1989) stresses the importance of the fact that only in the Holiness Code is the rest period referred to as Sabbatical.

The next most relevant passages are in Deuteronomy, beginning with 15:1-11, which refers to the relaxation of debts every seventh year. Like the Exodus passage, the underlying motivation is social justice (which is merely implied in Leviticus). Other than the seven year similarity, there is no mention of land, rest, or respect for Yahweh. One law is economic, the other agricultural. Joosten (1996) views it unlikely that either of the codes knew of or used the other. The time frame similarity may be a coincidental usage of the reverential number seven to describe the progression from chaos to order.

Deuteronomy 31:10-13 speaks directly to the fallow period, calling it the year of relaxation. Rather than embellishing the criteria for land usage, it only stipulates that during the Feast of Booths/Feast of Tabernacles of that year, the law should be read aloud to all Israelites and resident aliens, so they would know and fear the Lord. Finally, the seventh year is referenced in 1 Maccabees 6:49, 53. In the narrative description of the war between the Jews and King Antiochus V Eupator, it is noted twice that the army suffered because the storage bins were empty due to the fallow year. It is interesting to note that, despite the direct references to the year of rest, the word Sabbatical/Sabbath is still not used in these contexts. This makes the Leviticus passage more singularly unique and worthy of analysis.

*Implications of the Sabbatical Year.*

Before turning to the academic counterpart of this analysis, several interpretations regarding the Sabbatical year will be offered at this point. In reading the observations and commentaries from scholars, a common theme seemed to emerge in their conclusions. Though variously stated and argued, it often seemed to narrow down to a couple of questions: “To what extent are we to take the Sabbatical Year directive literally?” and “What are we to gain from such a prescription today?” While various scholars cast doubt on the actual practice of the fallow year, Gerstenberger (1993) stated it most directly:

What are we to make of this reasoning? It is not just our own rationalistic view that makes this appear extraordinarily alienated from reality. Even at that time, objections and doubts arose concerning whether God’s blessing really could be calculated with calendary regularity. According to our own understanding, it is simply impossible to impose this kind of coercion on nature (and on God). (p. 376)

His conclusion is that we either understand the prescriptions as an ideal model for how Israel should be, or we are stuck with a theoretical model to give to an “urban congregation that itself no longer has anything to do with actual agricultural labor” (p. 377). Here Bailey (1987) picks up the argument well, and establishes a protocol for understanding the Sabbatical year despite our entirely different economic base:

Undoubtedly, an unswerving application would wreck modern industrial economies and do far more harm than good. Nonetheless, the “spirit” of the material must prevail, and not its “letter,” as both synagogue and church have long realized. (p. 105)

What, then, constitutes the “spirit” of the Sabbatical year? Porter (1976) suggests that a key moral lesson of Leviticus is that following God’s directives is a way of expiating sin and restoring a right relationship with the Redeemer. A more concrete observation is offered by Gorman (1997), who argues that the theology of Leviticus “must be located within the category of human enactment” (p. 5). In other words, humans are more than just thinkers. They enact their lives, and do so in community and through ritual. Referring to all of the injunctions in Leviticus, Gorman states: “Rather than seeing them as rigid rules that must be followed with absolute precision, they will be viewed as guides that allow for personal nuancing and configuring” (p. 7). Regarding the sabbatical year, one might presume to identify forms of social enactment that make manifest the goals of respect for God, respect for the land, the practice of rest, and the preferential treatment of the poor.

### SABBATICAL YEAR IN ACADEMIA

*Every seven years faculty need to be repotted.*

John Gardner

Compared to the agricultural practices outlined in Leviticus, academic sabbaticals are a very recent phenomenon. The first American school to grant sabbaticals, in 1880, was Harvard University. It was an innovation developed by the school’s president, Charles W. Eliot, following a decade of failed experiments with leave of absence policies (see Eells & Hollis, 1962). Described as “one of academia’s most important vehicles for professional renewal and development” (Zahorski, 1994), the most common definition of sabbatical comes from Good’s *Dictionary of Education*:

A plan for providing teachers with an opportunity for self-improvement through a leave of absence with full or partial compensation following a designated number of years of consecutive service (originally six years). (cited in Eells & Hollis, 1962, p. 3)

This definition, according to Eells and Hollis (1962), implies three universal characteristics: “(1) purpose, (2) compensation, (3) a definite period of prior consecutive service in the institution” (p. 3). To this list, Zahorski (1994) adds two additional criteria, including a required return to service and the filing of a report on the sabbatical experience.

The *Faculty Handbook* at my home institution captures all of these criteria in its description of sabbaticals. The purpose is defined as:

The sabbatical leave program is designed to support activities which will enhance a faculty member's professional development, broadly conceived, and which will, as a result, benefit the University. The intent is to provide a semester or a year's release from normal duties. (1998, p. V-13)

Given these definitions, sabbaticals appear to exist for both faculty members and their respective places of employment. This view is supported by Zahorski (1994), who provides a list and corollary descriptions of benefits to both faculty and the institution. Benefits to faculty include rejuvenation and renewal, time for reflection, a fresh perspective, new professional relationships, opportunity to remain current, and enhanced teaching. Institutional benefits include increased faculty productivity, strengthened programs, enhanced learning environment, improved morale, enhanced loyalty, enhanced intellectual climate, enhanced recruitment and retention, and an enhanced institutional academic reputation (pp. 116-122).

At this point, one could ask what, if any, actual link is there between the sabbatical of Leviticus and these definitions and characteristics of academic practice? Eells and Hollis do acknowledge that the original meaning of sabbatical was agricultural, not educational, and they identify it as originating in early Jewish law as formulated by Moses. However, they also credit Book 31 of *Historiae Naturalis* (Natural History) by Roman writer Pliny the Elder, who spoke of an ancient Median river named Sabbathion which flowed for six days, but rested on the seventh.

Richard Murphy attempted to draw a comparison in a 1959 *Quarterly Journal of Speech* article, stating:

The origin of the term, of course, is from the Jewish sabbatical year, in which fields were to lie fallow, at rest. In the terminology of agriculture, fallow land is plowed, tilled, the weed kept down, but no crop raised. So the professor plows and tills himself, but is not expected to produce a crop of students that year. (cited in Eells & Hollis, 1962, p. 5)

Unfortunately, Murphy misinterprets the Leviticus mandate, as no work was to be done on the field. Beyond that, no real connection is made between the two other than the professor-focused agricultural metaphor. Thus, the connection between Scriptural and academic sabbaticals seems tangential at best; perhaps no more than a semantic accident or coincidence. Even accidental connections, however, can provide fodder for critical thought.

## CONNECTIONS

The similarities are obvious. Both are called sabbatical. Both take place every seven years (though that rule is very loosely interpreted in academia). Both are directly or indirectly connected to the notion of rest and relaxation. The dissimilarities are more obvious. On the one hand, we have a document penned by Leviticus priests somewhere around the sixth century B.C.E. intended to impart God's wish for agricultural practices to ancient Israelite communities. On the other hand, we have academic policies created this century geared to inform faculty members what is expected of them in a year where they focus on research rather than teaching. Still, academics can divine lessons from the unique qualities of the sabbatical year in Leviticus regarding both purpose and practice.

*Purpose.*

Let us begin with the actual rationale and justification for the practice of academic sabbaticals. Some view it as a *right* of faculty; a well-deserved respite from the toil of the classroom. Others view it as a *privilege*; a gift made available to those who have earned it. I have encountered a broad range of arguments concerning sabbaticals, from “all faculty deserve sabbaticals at regular intervals whether they have a project in mind or not” to “only those tenured faculty who demonstrate legitimate professional need should be eligible.” I have even encountered some faculty who view sabbaticals as an *intrusion*; an administrative litmus test that pulls them out of the classroom and forces them to do research. What Leviticus teaches us is that sabbatical is an *obligation*. We neither earn it, nor have it provided freely. Rather, we are expected to engage in a “fallow year” for purposes larger than personal down-time or administrator’s expectations. And, as biblical scholars note regarding the year of rest in Leviticus, the “seven year time” frame conveys the spirit of the obligation, and does not mandate a law-like chronology. In other words, a faculty member in their fifth, eighth, tenth, or twentieth year may be a prime candidate for sabbatical; seven is merely a guideline.

And what are these “larger purposes” to which sabbatical calls us? It is interesting to note that, though the behavioral directive in Leviticus was imparted to the landowner, the landowner was neither the end nor object of the directive. The *goal* was to honor God, and the *benefactor* was the land (and to a lesser extent, poor people and hungry animals). *Perhaps sabbatical years, though given to teachers, are not necessarily for the teachers. The goal may be to honor a higher call – “Education” – and the benefactors are the students who will be enriched by the byproducts of the fallow year.*

This supra-mission of sabbaticals was stated as early as 1907, when Columbia University stipulated that such leaves were granted “not in the interest of the professors themselves, but for the good of university education” (cited in Eells & Hollis, 1962, p. 4). This perspective is often paid merely lip service in academia. As department chair, my role in coordinating sabbaticals may include impressing upon faculty who the actual recipient of the sabbatical is – the students that they teach and the knowledge that it fosters.

Related to this, we can learn from biblical scholars who argue that Leviticus should be interpreted in light of its enactment, and not its ritual. Just as the Sabbatical year in Leviticus is to be viewed as communal and relational, can the academic sabbatical be embraced more for its socio-emotional and systemic features? Feelings are as important to the process as task. We need to face the paperwork as a necessary part of the process, but must recognize that the enrichment of faculty and the community they serve is far more important than the application forms and scheduling logistics. The spirit of the sabbatical demands attention more so than the ritualistic law that puts it into place.

*Practice.*

Leviticus also informs two applicable manifestations of the sabbatical: the execution and the product. Concerning the actual execution of the sabbatical year, we can easily model ourselves after the directives that no “official” work should be done during the fallow period. Thus, it is inappropriate to ask (or manipulate) faculty on sabbatical leave to till the land via advising, service, meetings, or other forms of professional engagement. I have spoken to many faculty who bemoan the fact that their sabbatical was not a traveling one, as they felt great pressure to come to work every day and engage in non-teaching activities.

On the other hand, I have seen faculty on sabbatical being chided on those days they do show up (e.g. “What are you doing here? Go home.”). The directive in Leviticus clearly states that a landowner can enter the field on a daily basis to gather sustenance for



themselves, as well as for those who are dependent upon them. If a faculty member on leave wants to show up in the office for conversation, support, or even supplies, then so be it. And if they “feed” their “tenants” and “guests” (e.g. meet with students) of their own free will, that is to be allowed.

The final element of practice to be addressed is the product that the sabbatical is intended to bring about. Note that the earliest definitions of academic sabbaticals did not include any kind of product requirement. Additions such as filing reports and promising to remain with the institution are fairly contemporary additions. While an institution’s motives for making sure their investments are fruitful are understandable, such criteria run contrary to the spirit of the Biblical sabbatical. The LORD never mandated that the landowner return to the field in year eight, and certainly never expected some kind of proof that the fallow year was productive for them. This does not suggest that faculty not be held accountable for paid release time, but it questions the utility of emphasizing product over process. If the teacher is enriched; if students are better served; if the act of education and the dissemination of knowledge are enhanced; how much do we really need in terms of publishable results?

Future directions include pursuing the academic connection even farther, such as developing a mission statement or guide for the relational end of sabbaticals. It would also be intriguing to see how the concepts apply to other workplaces. Rogak (1994) reports that numerous companies, including IBM, Apple, AT&T, Tandem software, Wells Fargo Bank, Xerox, and numerous law firms, have begun implementing their own version of sabbatical leaves. It might be valuable to continue this comparison and contrast with biblical perspectives.

To sum, the concept of the Sabbatical year as presented in Leviticus is a unique component of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the only code where the object of attention is the land. Though the extent to which the contemporary reader can take its meaning literally, the spirit of the year provides for some interesting interpretations. While the purpose of the academic sabbatical year is quite different, academicians can learn from the lessons of Leviticus, and approach their leaves of absence with a more obligatory yet relational sense of its purpose, and a more flexible and transformation-focused sense of its practice. In the end, both the higher power – Education – and the fertile land – students – will be better served.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>The reader must bear in mind that this analysis offers just one of many possible interpretations of the text. Just as a critic employing Dramatistic methodologies would interpret text differently than a critic employing Feminist methodologies, so too does an analysis based in Christian biblical hermeneutics differ from interpretations that may stem from other faith-based lenses. When dealing with faith values, however, the potential to offend increases dramatically. The purpose of this essay is to ponder, not proselytize, and the author hopes that readers will approach it in that spirit.

The author would like to thank one of the reviewers who offered fascinating commentary on how this analysis might be approached within traditional (orthodox) Judaism. The reviewer noted that the Torah is meant as a spiritual guide with ethical imperatives. “The essential purpose of the biblical sabbatical, even as it exists today in the State of Israel, is to testify to Hashem’s omnipotence

and ultimate control over all existence.” From this perspective, to apply scriptural edicts to tenuously connected contemporary events would be inappropriate at best and offensive at worst. Again, no offense is intended.

The reviewer also noted, and the author wholeheartedly concurs, that different views exist regarding the dates of redaction of the text. Similarly, resources from other faith perspectives, such as the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, would lead to alternate understandings.

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