Anarchists Against Civilization: Rewilding, the Roots of the Christian Faith

By: Andy Lewis

"At the present time all 'progress' consists in developing the framework of civilization... the universal catastrophes of the present time are not due to accident, or bad luck; nor are they mere breakdowns in the happy mechanism of 'progress.' They are the inevitable product of the essential structure of civilization." —Jacques Ellul (Presence of the Kingdom)

Mystical union with nature is central to the way many indigenous cultures perceive the world. As Jesus Sepulveda shows in his seminal work Garden of Peculiarities (1), nature as a concept is the result of standardization which flows seamlessly with the development of civilization. An indigenous, nature based way of life rebels against such standardization in part due to an intensely animist spirituality. American Indian mythology is replete with stories of rocks that speak, trees that have preferences and rivers that have bad days. When viewed from the comfortable detachment of metaphor, most 21st century Christians will grant a certain amount of validity to these stories. Only when it becomes clear that these tales of a living, speaking, feeling world are not just metaphor, but genuine accounts of human interaction with a living community of sentient beings, only then do the eyes of 21st century Christians narrow and say with a measured voice "Let's remember Genesis 1:28."

I'm consistently amazed that so few ecological, socially minded, "radical" Christians have failed to see the animistic, indigenous traditions in the Hebrew- Christian Bible. But more than that, I'm shocked that even fewer Christians have no idea that the central narrative of the Bible is against civilization! Sabbath economics, Exodus, Genesis, Jesus' baptism and vision quest, it's really much more difficult to defend civilization biblically than it is to come to the conclusion I have.

It is my intent with this essay to show points of agreement between animistic indigenous cultures and The Hebrew-Christian Bible. I also hope to emphasize the need for remembering the model set by our ancestors in the faith who followed the liberator God out of civilization into the wilderness. I wish to convey the simple fact that Christian should be synonymous with anti-civilization. My point of reference is deeply steeped in current anti-civilization/ anarcho- primitivist/ rewilding theory and practice. The writings of Jacques Ellul and recent contributions to the study of overlapping themes in the Hebrew- Christian Bible and anarcho-primitivist theory by contemporary theologian Ched Myers are the foundation for much of this essay. While I do not intend to focus on any one

chapter or verse from the Bible, I will certainly refer in passing to specific sections. I refer to God in the masculine and feminine form without specific rhyme or reason other than to accentuate gender inclusiveness. Moreover my larger purpose in writing this is contribute to a discussion among radical Christians regarding common themes among contemporary advocates of anarcho-primitivism/ rewilding and biblical themes as read through the lens of Israelite resistance to the project of civilization. That Ched Myers has more thoroughly developed many of the themes and ideas presented in this essay goes without saying. Hence I quote liberally from his works to augment my own. It is with a deep sense of gratitude and respect that I present sections from his texts and I encourage anyone with abiding interest in this essay to seek out Myers' writings as they far surpass the scope and depth of topics presented here.

So removed from an intimate understanding of human beings place in nature are most civilized humans that when they do take time to think about the natural world it's usually in terms of how to manage or preserve it. Indeed, this view of nature as resource strikes close to the heart of this culture, and civilization itself. When a unique living being is reified, stripped of its uniqueness and labeled as a resource, the road is paved for atrocities of every magnitude. Perhaps the worst part is that these atrocities are often times not viewed as such. The religious validation of the day seems to provide easy justification and purpose for those committing the atrocities. Today, the religious validation for the genocidal war on nature is science as it springs from the enlightenment tradition of detached study for purposes of control. But the widespread Christian notion of a fallen world that is destined for destruction while human souls are swept up to eternal reward or damnation has not done anything to thwart the march of human destruction.

An often over looked trend in both this scientific and widespread Christian worldview is the absence of particularity and uniqueness when speaking of or interacting with nature. Indeed the word nature itself implies an element of control. To speak of nature as a thing which can be measured, owned and comodified, a thing which is not comprised of unique beings but merely other measurable resources is to do away with all pretense of respectful relationship. This carries over to human interaction. Women and men become static unchanging "things." As Derrick Jensen notes, "If when I look at a woman I see orifices I'll treat her one way. If when I look at a woman I see a woman I'll treat her another way. And if when I look at this particular woman I see this particular woman I'll treat her differently still."(2)

One of the main differences between a civilized and indigenous worldview is the perception of identity. Many indigenous people see all living beings as living in concert with one another, i.e. flowing in and out of each other so that in the end I'm as much the river I drink from as the river is me and the deer who crosses it

and the trout who swims in it. All are bound together not just in a mystical or spiritual way (although that's part of it) but in a material way. So to say a deer or trout or river is essentially this particular thing marked by such and such traits would be seen as the absurd idea it is by many indigenous people. It's difficult to speak English without objectifying/ reifying the beings that comprise the living world. The fact that the Hebrew Bible was written by an indigenous people group who's language was far more embodied or attached to the material world than modern English should give one pause when considering the way many Biblical texts have been interpreted by people using highly abstracted languages within cultures that have long since abandoned any allegiance to the material/living world.

For about 10,000 years there's been a war waged by humans against every living being, this war could broadly be referred to as civilization. Civilization is marked by domestication, patriarchy, intensive agriculture, slavery, organized warfare, sedentary life, increased population, importation of resources, rigid hierarchy, cities and anthropocentrism.

Anthropocentrism is a violent worldview that provides ethical validation for the insanity of civilized humans. (by anthropocentrism I mean perceiving the world as a resource for human ends, specifically as it relates to the wide spread Christian perception of humans as the pinnacle of creation without responsibility to be in respectful relationship with every other living being), without anthropocentrism civilization could not exist and this war could not continue. It is one of the most deeply rooted of all civilized ideologies. The opening chapters of Genesis clearly detail the fall into civilization whereby humans are cut off from Edenic communion with creation. Many Christians have used the mandate in Genesis to "subdue" and "rule over" the earth and every creature as the basis for an anthropocentric worldview. The actual meaning of this text can be debated. I will merely recommend the phenomenal article "In the Beginning God Created the Earth and 'Ecoterrorism'" by Lisa Kemmerer (3), numerous books and articles by Jacques Ellul(4) and Theodore Hiebert's "The Human Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions."(5)

Hiebert contends that the second chapter of Genesis shows servanthood as the proper role for humans in regards to creation, noting that all life being made from the soil suggests common identity. (Hiebert 139, 140) Given this interpretation we can place the Hebrew creation myth solidly within an indigenous understanding of relationship. (e.g. I am the river; the river is me, as is the tree on the bank, the squirrel in the tree etc..) Without this indigenous understanding we need only look around to see the effects of God ordained anthropocentrism. Myers says it plainly, "Indeed, the moral tale of the Fall in Genesis 3 defines human sin as alienation from the earth. Not content with living from and with 'everything that has the breath of life' (Gen 1:30), humans instead

lusted after the 'tree of knowledge'- a metaphor for our compulsion to re-engineer the 'good' creation. Thus the human vocation of 'naming' creation (Gen 2:19ff) – that is, living in a loving relationship with it- is corrupted into the dominating role of 'adjudicating' the world- a stance of control and instrumentality (Gen 3:4-5)."(The Bible and Earth Spirituality) Humans freed from the bonds of communal relationship and set free on the course towards a disembodied (non) existence will pursue that end without a second thought. Call the endpoint of this course heaven, or a techno utopia, the results are the same. The natural world is killed as humans subdue every living being to their ends.

It's quite clear today that this homogenizing techno-culture is supplanting the natural world. But long before cell phones, Ipods and The Discovery Channel took the place of relationships with White Pines, foxes and raindrops; the insidious silencing of every living being took place. But to say it actually happened is not true. It would be more accurate to say humans, specifically civilized humans stopped listening. This unwillingness to hear (or see) more than firewood when looking at a tree or hear more than potential energy for production when near a river has horrid effects. In his book The Others: How Animals Made us Human (6), Paul Shepard posits that it's through watching animals that humans learned how to interact with the living world around them. In another book, Nature and Madness (7) Shepard shows how civilized humans cut off from the natural world have literally become insane, developmentally infantile, manifesting their "personal nightmares on a social level."(Nature)

How many living beings are within 10 feet of you right now? Most 21st century humans live their lives in sensory deprivation chambers called schools, offices, homes, cities etc.. It's not just lonely to pretend to live in a world where only humans think, feel, speak and live with meaning, it's insanely destructive and in the end suicidal. The sensory deprived civilized have always had ways of making up for the loss of connection to reality, namely addiction, warfare, work, progress, technological and scientific advancement (especially in industrial civilization) and the quest for power.

These are a few of the carrots dangling from the stick or maybe beer cans dangling from the cubicle would be more apt. But humans aren't as "perfect" as the machines they create. The rates of depression, obesity and general malaise among the most high tech countries are tell tale signs that something's wrong. It's the same story since the first cities were built. Walls were an integral part of these ancient predecessors to Detroit and Los Angeles. The walls were there just as much to keep slaves (usually recently captured hunter gatherers) and others who remembered the old way of life inside the city as it was to fend off attacks from outside. Since its inception civilization has been about power and creating ways

to keep people from escaping, resisting and returning to the old nature based ways of life.

"In the primeval creation narrative this slow 'descent into madness' culminates in the building of alienated and alienating metropolises such as Babel (Gen11). In our own time the reach of Babel- that which we call 'civilization'- has become lethal on a global scale. The real 'plot' of the Bible, however, is about the liberation of humanity from this archetypal Babylonian captivity. It is thus no accident that right on the heels of Babel we meet Abram and Sarai, who are called to forsake 'civilization' for the outlands of Canaan (Gen 11:31ff). This feral movement into spaces undomesticated by empire establishes the enduring counter- history of YHWH, from the Exodus journey of Israel to the discipleship journey of the church." —Ched Myers (The Bible and Earth Spirituality)

It should come as no surprise that Genesis, Exodus and many other Biblical stories are pretty much never read with a critique of civilization in mind. Empire and power maybe but certainly not civilization! What if Ched Myers is right when he says Genesis1-11 should be read as "the first literature of resistance to the grand project of civilization – rightly warning against its social pathologies and ecocidal consequences."(The fall) In his legendary essay "Against History, Against Leviathan"(8), Freddy Perlman brings to light the importance of the Genesis and Exodus stories as well documented examples of people who found their way out of the cannibalistic worm like Leviathan (civilization). "The book at the origin of today's Civilizing Religions does not begin with Civilization-builders, say with Sumerians who launched the first Leviathan. Its first chapter tells of an earthly garden, Eden, a place reminiscent of the state of nature. Its second chapter tells of the withdrawal of people from the entrails of a

large Leviathan. The book then uncritically describes these people's attempt to launch a Leviathan of their own, but the Book goes on to tell of painful and often insupportable captivities in the bowels of other worms. The overall impression it gives is that the wonders of Civilization are not positive, life- enhancing wonders.... The exodus of Israel from Egypt is not a major withdrawal, but it is a well documented one, so that we can get an inside view of some of the actions and even some of the thoughts of the participants."(p.47) Perlman goes on to say, "I suspect they remember, and call Eden, what others remember as the Golden Age. And if they are uncomfortable in Egypt, the memory that there is an outside, even a pleasant, idyllic outside, must stimulate in them a desire to leave the greatest and wealthiest of all ancient Civilizations."(p.48)

What are the implications for Christians if there really is a biblical narrative against civilization? Certainly some will be quick to say, "We can't go back, we live in a fallen world." And I'm sure others are thinking similar thoughts such as " If civilization is not God's preference why the hell are Christians told they're

destined to live in a city for all eternity." (i.e. The New Jerusalem in The Revelation.) I also imagine there are questions such as, "What about the New Testament, certainly Jesus never had any problem with civilization. Empire and political power sure I can go that far. I've read Yoder, Hauerwass and Shane's book but they never said anything about civilization." I'll start with "we can't go back."

"the bodies of indigenous knowledge...shine like a beacon in the night. The information required to recreate this reality is still in place in many indigenous cultures." —Ward Churchill (Since Predator Came)(9)

It's true, we can't go back. We can't bring back Eastern Wood Bison; we can't close our eyes and wish away domestication, patriarchy, factories, desertification, holocausts and the bureaucratic technicians who perpetuate them daily by "just following orders." But we can learn from the wisdom of indigenous peoples, we can start to escape the isolation chambers and begin to watch and listen to animals, rivers and trees. We can learn to be human again. Not traumatized, techno dependent, domesticates, but wild, healthy humans in responsible respectful relationship with other wild beings. We can take the first step and admit we have a problem. We can name the problem, call it out and denounce it as the most hideous manifestation of humanity's fall from original creation, which God pronounced as "good."

Paul Shepard puts it plainly, "We must close the circle to that sweeping, four word dictum which is intended to close the door on access to the primitive: 'You can't go back'... In advocating the 'primitive' we seem to be asking someone to give up everything, or to sacrifice something: sophistication, technology, the lessons and gains of History, personal freedom and so on... Primitivism does not mean a simplified or more thoughtless way of life but a reciprocity with origins, a recovery misconstrued as inaccessible by the ideology of History."(Post- Historic Primitivism)(10)

This "reciprocity with origins" is essential for Christians living in the modern day Leviathan. Myers writes, "...Hebrew scriptures emphasize the discipline of re- membering. As the Deuteronomic refrain puts it: 'Remember the long way that the Lord your God has led you' (Dt 8:2)... [the Civilized chose to] domesticate the wilderness and to conquer its peoples, instead of finding God among both. We have therefore become like the idols we worshipped: economically dominating yet captive to 'affluenza,' politically grandiose yet impotent to change what we dislike, children of empire who still piously invoke God's blessing and favor. But there is another way. Repentance means to turn around, and that means not only facing the past but recovering what was left behind...there are life ways which just might show us the way out of our historical conundrums." (Led by the Spirit) In

another section Myers asks, "Are we as a people still defined by the exodus journey, or have we abandoned it?" Remember this Exodus is not simply going out of Empire; it's a liberation from Civilization. Myers continues "...the God of Israel is known not so much as Creator as the One 'who brought you up out of Egypt; (some 25 times in Deuteronomy alone). This memory is meant to function as a warning to the people not to practice the former life ways... Israel must 'never return to that way again; (Dt 17:16)."(Led by the Spirit)

It's clear that the various architects of Civilization have far more devoted disciples today than does God the liberator who brought our ancestors in the faith out of the depths of Leviathan. So how do we enact liberation from Civilization in our context, bound as we are by technological infrastructure, near total dependence upon oppressive systems of domination and domesticated spirits that have been beaten down since we first emerged into the world of strangers (artificial environments typified by hospitals, funeral homes and the employees who work there mark our entrance and exit from the world)? The answer once again tells us we not only can, but must go back. Back to the roots of our faith, to find our way out of oppressive Civilization following God the liberator.

If we honestly look at what stands between us as 21st Century people in North America and a primal future as wild humans tracking elk in the shadows of abandoned office buildings wrapped thick with kudzu vines, we're as close as humans have been in a long time. Peak oil, global warming, dead zones in oceans, super viruses...take your pick. The potential for a catalyst that will set the wheels in motion is endless. One thing is clear, civilizations collapse. The Mayan ruins, the Cahokia mounds outside St. Louis, the reminders are all around us. Civilization is an unsustainable way to live. Remember the Garden of Eden between the Tigris and the Euphrates? It's a desert now because of intensive agriculture; this same process is playing itself out in the chemical drenched fields of mid-western American states.

The only difference between this civilization and others is that this one has gone on for a lot longer (due to technological and scientific innovations always finding new ways create problems then 'solve' those same problems) so the collapse will be that much worse or welcomed, depending on your allegiance. The poorest countries with people who are still living in nature based ways will be better off instantly. Developing countries with people recently removed from traditional life ways will have problems but those who still have any memory of how to live without technological infrastructure will be in better shape than most. Those in the worst possible situation for the collapse of civilization are those of us in the wealthiest most developed countries, simply because of their almost total loss of indigenous wisdom. Water, food, shelter, most people in the wealthiest countries have little or no knowledge of how to procure these outside of the techno

dependent systems that provide them. It will be a true case of the "first shall be last and the last shall be first" and the meek inheriting the earth. Clearly the collapse of civilization will find resonance with many Biblical themes. Other proponents of the end of civilization are tigers, frogs, salamanders, elm trees, rivers, oceans, polar bears the list goes on . . .

This isn't to say that the collapse will be over night or that it will even be one collapse. There will certainly be desperate attempts by those in power to keep grasping at every chance to preserve their wealth and control. There will undoubtedly be terrible years and decades of struggle but the more people that are willing to jump ship so to speak and join with wild creation will make the collapse that much softer. For more collapse scenarios and pondering of the topics presented here I can't urge you enough to read Derrick Jensen's two volume book Endgame (11) and Species Traitor 4: An Insurrectionary Anarcho- Primitivist Journal, edited by Kevin Tucker. (12)

I just want to take a moment to clarify something. I am not connecting the inevitability of the collapse of civilization with some sort of "the end is near" Christian evangelism. I am not saying that the kingdom of god is at hand when the electric grid goes down and infrastructure collapses. I'm simply saying that since it's inception, Civilization has been and continues to be a way of life characterized by violence, slavery domestication, patriarchy...in short hell. So while I'm not trying to promote some Left Behind evangelical apocalypticism, I am trying to renew the tradition of our early ancestors in the faith. I'm trying to remind my brothers and sisters to remember God the Liberator in the midst of 21st century captivity.

Truly, I would flee far off, I would lodge in the wilderness... Confuse, O Lord, confound their speech, for I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within; Ruin is in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its marketplace. (Psalm 55:7, 9-11)

So that's all well and good but what about the city in the Revelation? If city culture (civilization) is so bad why is The New Jerusalem depicted as such?

As Ellul shows in The Meaning of the City, this new city is an incredible sign of Gods mercy. It is in The New Jerusalem that God redeems the most horrific manifestation of humanity's rebellion against God's original good creation. Remember that in this city there is a tree... "The purpose of this tree is to call to mind all God's creation and long history of redemption after the fall. Its purpose is not utilitarian, but by its very uselessness to repeat to resurrected, glorified (humanity), alive with the very life of God, the greatness of God's work, his patience and love." (Ellul, Meaning of the City) Far from being a mandate for cities and Civilization, The New Jerusalem should be understood as the

miraculous grace of God mercifully purifying the abomination that is city culture, civilization. Ellul goes on to show how this city represents an incredible sign of Gods respect for the freedom of humanity. Even though the city is the pinnacle of humanity's revolt against creation and creator, God redeems this hellish manifestation and reconciles it with her divine will. This interpretation of the New Jerusalem has always struck close to my heart. But I want to clarify something here as well. I'm not just moved by this incredible sign of God's respect for human freedom. I'm overwhelmed by the knowledge that Gods original good creation will be restored in the same cyclical movement that we can enact here and now. By acting now to regain access to the wisdom that bound humans and nature together we take a huge step away from the abomination that is civilization. I recognize full and well that any circle back will not be washed clean of the tragic legacy of civilization. But the promise of The New Jerusalem does not abdicate us from the responsibility of remembering the liberator God who is still waiting for us to follow him out of civilization. But perhaps this liberation is not just a movement away from the city, but also a movement back into the belly of Leviathan.

"Jesus invites us to turn back to the wisdom of indigenous peoples..." Ched Myers (Led by the Spirit into the Wilderness...)

So what about Jesus and why don't we hear about this Biblical anti-civilization theme from "radical" Christians?

Jesus' ministry continually reminds his disciples of the old ways, especially the Exodus model of their ancestors. He's baptized by a feral rewilder named John, he provides enough food for all in the wilderness while invoking the lesson of manna guarding against surplus. Perhaps the greatest tragedy in the development of civilization is that the cultural wisdom of many indigenous peoples (sharing, not gathering surplus and a higher respect for being than doing) left them so vulnerable to attack by the twisted values of the civilized. The teachings of Sabbath economics as conveyed in the Jubilee and Jesus's feeding of the masses finds uncanny resonance with Marshal Sahlins', Stone Age Economics. Sahlins shows that far from the stereotype of primitive humans starving and living in a state constant scarcity, Pre civilized life was marked by affluence in every way. It's these indigenous values that Jesus exemplifies; nowhere so clearly as his vision quest.

Myers writes, "Indigenous people understand far better than we that the 'bush' is precisely the place to examine the way we have internalized the pathologies of empire. The wild spaces of nature represent a mirror to us to see how domesticated under 'civilization' we have become. In this wilderness mirror we

can more clearly see how Satan has lured us into all the other narratives that constantly compete with the biblical one for our allegiance." (Led by the Spirit...)

Jesus' vision quest as related in Matthew and Luke is fully integrated with the indigenous ritual of passage. "This is both a very real exterior adventure beyond the margins of society and an interior passage of cleansing. Yet the journey to/ in the 'spirit world' is also a sojourn through mythic time, in order to encounter the story and destiny of one's self and one's people. That this sojourn lasted 'forty days' (Lk 4:2) is clearly intended to invoke Israel's forty- year wanderings in the wilderness after Egypt... Jesus believes that his people have lost their bearings, and that course- correction can only come through a kind of 're-visioning' of the fateful choices that led liberated Israel back into captivity." (Led by the Spirit...)

At the end of Jesus' vision quest and temptation his ministry commences. Ultimately leading him into the city only to be crucified "outside the gates." Jesus' ministry is a call to rewild, to forsake the domesticated Gods and oppressive systems that serve them in favor of the wild God of all creation. Myers writes "This 'radical otherness' of the wilderness God, who refuses to be domesticated under any regime or civilization, was expressed archetypally in the name revealed famously to Moses in the burning bush: Yahweh- 'I will be whoever I will be' (Ex 3:13-15)." Jesus' baptism is certainly an immersion into the old nature based ways of his ancestors, typified by sharing, lack of surplus and a respectful relationship with creation.

We desperately need to take notice of the rites of passage Jesus models for us. Ecstatic communion with wilderness has been crucial to the continuation of nature based life ways and is essential now if we have any desire to recover the way of our ancestors in the faith. Wild nature is waiting for us to return. Frogs, pines, rivers, moose, eagles all are waiting for us to have ears to hear and eyes to see.

If we really want to be the wild living people we're called to be, then we must be ready to suffer the consequences. We must be realistic in acknowledging it won't be easy to step away from the only way of life we've ever know. It won't be easy to re-learn old ways. But it will be a journey following the Way of Exodus and Jesus. A return to the sacred community of all creation is long overdue.

We must also be realistic and know there will be persecution because the way of Christ leads back into the heart of civilization, back to the city. But this journey, this way back is not a return to the vomit that is civilization. It's a prophetic witness from people radically transformed in the wilderness, a call to leave the city, a call to return to the old ways. It's a call to bring down idolatrous civilization. But it's also action; it's Gideon sabotaging the idolatrous shrine to

Baal under the cover of night. (Judges 6) The way does lead back to the city, but clearly wild people will not live with the city any more than domesticated people will live with the wilderness.

It's time for radical Christians to realize the horror that is civilization. How much more will it take for advocates of peace and justice to realize there is neither peace, nor justice so long as there are cities? How long will it be before socially minded Christians abandon the attempts to make peace with civilization? When will Christians remember their faith leads them out of the city and into the wilderness where we can be transformed and given the vision and courage to return with a prophetic word and witness? For the sake of all God's good creation I pray it's not too long.

(1) Sepulveda, Jesus. The Garden of Peculiarities (Feral House 2005)

(2) Jensen, Derrick. (he uses this example a lot; I think it's in Endgame, Thought to Exist in the Wild and definitely in his talks.)

(3) Kemmerer, Lisa. In the Beginning: God Created the Earth and "Ecoterrorism", Igniting a Revolution, Voices in Defense of the Earth (AK Press (sucks) 2006)

(4) Ellul, Jacques. The Meaning of the City, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1970) (5) Hiebert, Theodore. "The Human

Vocation: Origins and Transformations in Christian Traditions" In Christianity and Ecology: Seeking the Well-Being of Earth and Humans, edited by Dieter T Hessel and Rosemary Radford Ruether. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000.

(6) Shepard, Paul. The Others: How Animals made us Human

(7) Shepard, Paul. Nature and Madness

(8) Perlman, Fredy. Against His-story, Against Leviathan!,

(Black & Red, Detroit 1983)

(9) Churchill, Ward. Since Predator Came

(10) Shepard, Paul. A Post- Historic Primitivism, (Black and Green Press)

(11) Jensen, Derrick. Endgame, (Seven Stories Press, New York, 2006)

(12) Species Traitor 4: An Insurrectionary Anarcho-

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Ched Myers-

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