

The Translator as a catalyst for theological reflection

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Introduction

The quality of a Bible translation is a multi-faceted issue, and this paper will examine quality by how well the translation communicates the biblical theological concepts of the canon of Scripture. I assume that the canon of Scripture does in fact form one literary unit, and that this unit contains theological concepts that flow from the beginning to the end. Therefore, the quality of a translation can be assessed based on whether or not the readers or listeners can identify, engage with, and appropriate these theological concepts in their own language and culture.

In his reflections on a lifetime as a translation consultant, Philip Stine mentioned several areas to which he would have devoted more attention: literary criticism, biblical theology, training translators and listening (Stine 1999). Stine's observation seems relevant to all the actors in the Bible translation (BT) movement. Concerning biblical theology, he states,

I wish I had spent much more time reflecting on the nature of the Bible. It is one thing to "know" the Bible is crucial to the life of the church, but the variety of beliefs that translators have about the nature of the Bible seriously affects their translations. (Stine 1999)

We could all profit from studying what translators and local churches in a particular language community think about the nature of the Bible. In other words, what do they see as the point of the Bible? What story does the Bible tell and what are the themes? Furthermore, Stine mentions that no matter how competent a translation consultant he might have become, the more important factor for translation quality was actually the competency of the translator (Stine 1999). Hence training translators is a high priority.

In this paper, I would like to delve further into these two emphases of Stine, namely biblical theology and training translators. If our organizations were to focus on mentoring translators to be functional biblical theologians and catalysts for theological reflection in the community, this could have great impact on the quality of translations, and as a subsequent result, community engagement with Scripture.

Brian S. Rosner describes biblical theology in this way:

The task of biblical theology is to present the teaching of the Bible about God and his relations to the world in a way that lets the biblical texts set the agenda. This goal is achieved by allowing them to serve as the very stuff of inductive study and by reading the books more or less in their historical sequence. In other words, biblical theology subscribes to the primacy of the text; the interpretive interest of biblical theology corresponds as closely as possible to what the text is about. (Rosner 2000, 5)

In its attention to the text as literature, biblical theology should seem like an obvious field of study for translators. However, in 2002, Philip A. Noss pointed out that translator training programs had not really seen theological training as a priority:

The training that we have offered to translators has been primarily prescriptive, problem-oriented, relating almost exclusively to the translation task itself. Understanding of theological implications has been assumed to have been acquired in formal theological training that the translator may or may not have acquired. Anticipation of the Church's use of the translated Bible as the foundation for its theological reflection has generally been overlooked in translator training programs. (Noss 2002)

In my own experience here in Isiro, Democratic Republic of Congo, I have seen firsthand how translators can inadvertently contribute to a church's misinterpretation of Scripture and inadequate comprehension of biblical theological concepts. In an article I wrote (Morgan 2020), I examined an interpretation of Exodus 30:11-16 that was commonly taught in one of the major Protestant denominations of this region. This misguided interpretation rested heavily on a failure to link this passage to cultic practices of purification and the metaphor of atonement. Unfortunately the translation reinforced these misunderstandings and enabled pastors to teach this monetary offering as a tax, as a social obligation for preventing calamities, rather than a cultic one.

Translators find themselves, like it or not, right in the fray as biblical theologies meet existing local theologies. It is community-wide conversation where differing worldviews will undoubtedly clash and where philosophical and theological concepts are transformed by the interaction. Translators are ushered into this unpredictable eventuality as they seek to communicate the meaning of Scripture in their own language, and while no one can ever be fully prepared for this situation, many translators lack the tools to engage in the subsequent theological interaction. This interaction occurs as people hear the Scriptures in their language, and the stories and concepts of Scripture elicit a response, which may or may not reflect the original text. It is also helpful to realize that the responses to Scripture are not limited to cognitive effects alone. People are far more complex than that. In his work on the transformation of worldviews, Paul Hiebert pointed out that there are three dimensions to culture: "cognitive (beliefs), affective (feelings), and evaluative (norms)" (Hiebert 2008). If we actually believe that Scripture can play a transformational role in all languages and cultures, then we should expect to see the Bible impact all dimensions of our lives. This paper seeks to provide some practical ways that BT organizations can mentor translators, so that the translators feel that they have some tools at their disposal to help their language community accurately appropriate biblical theological concepts.

The Tension

There is a delicate balance that needs to be struck between allowing the biblical theological concepts to shine through in our translation and not imposing our own theological persuasions on the text. In the end, the text needs to guide these decisions. Sometimes translators are directed less by the text and more by efficiency. In his article, "Checking a Translation for Consistency", Eugene Nida recounted meeting a translator who kept large charts on his wall with all the equivalents for key terms in his translation. With these charts, the translator "could choose the words automatically from the master lists" (Nida 1954). This sounds eerily similar to blindly selecting equivalents from the ParaText Key Biblical Terms tool. So Nida also suggested that the consistency checks only be done after the initial

translation has been done (Nida 1954). Daniel Arichea also has noted that translators can consciously and unconsciously impose theology on a text. For example he told of one translator that translated Mark 1:4 "to suit his theological position, namely that forgiveness is prior to baptism, and not the result of it." (Arichea 1982, 309)

Given the pitfalls that are possible, Ellinsworth encourages translators "to begin by working *inductively* with the Bible text, moving gradually towards a general, descriptive view of what sort of a book or corpus the Bible is, in all its nuanced complexity and historical diversity." (Ellingworth 2002)

With this in mind, perhaps translation consultants have been reticent to teach translators about overarching biblical concepts for fear that the translator might begin to force interpretations onto the text. But if one actually inductively studies the text, then the "descriptive view" should include biblical theological concepts that help the reader to understand the text in its literary context. Translation consultants have a role in mentoring translators in this way. Katharine Barnwell points out that for most translators, their main difficulty is "to achieve a correct and full knowledge of the original message", and that trainers should help the translator "to really understand the message before he translates it" (Barnwell 1980).

Limitations

But how can we practically go about this mammoth task of training translators in biblical theology? In this pandemic and inflation era, Bible translation agencies have had to face ever-increasing costs related to travel and training, which puts major limitations on workshop budgets. Added to this, in many countries, including DR Congo, insecurity mounts a rising challenge to training efforts. These inflationary costs also affect publishing constraints, such as the amount of copies printed, the length of book introductions and supplementary materials. While digital publishing has offered some glimmer of hope for the future, there are still many rural populations who do not have access to smartphones and the internet.

Equipping Translators in Biblical theology

In describing biblical theology, Rosner discusses several different facets, but for the purposes of this paper, I will mention only three. Firstly, biblical theology bases its thematic study on "concepts rather than words" (Rosner 2000). Concepts tend to correspond with certain key terms, so one could easily start to blur the lines between concepts and words. However, as Rosner points out, sometimes parables or other narratives also inform our understanding of a particular concept without making reference to a particular key term. So when teaching translators about biblical theological concepts, the consultant will by all means use key terms, but must go beyond this and engage the themes on a literary level.

Rosner warns that "there is a temptation in studying the Bible's theology too quickly to read one part of it in light of another and thus to miss the individual contours of the terrain and flatten out the whole" (Rosner 2000). So a second facet of biblical theology is to seriously study each individual book as its own literary unit. This involves making every effort to understand what each biblical author intends to communicate. In this analysis, we also need to grapple with the author's use of and allusions to other parts of Scripture.¹

¹ In this regard, see the literary sensibilities in Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor UP, 2016)

Finally, Rosner also points out that the Bible does tell a unified story. It is possible to recount the story of the Bible with its basic plot and message. But not only this, biblical theology also sets as a goal to tell this story in "fresh and unexpected ways" (Rosner 2000). In other words, since the Bible contains so many different subplots, through biblical theology, we can look at the same story from many different viewpoints. This too is perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Bible translation: translators, through the lens of their own culture and language, can engage with the same Biblical story in fresh ways.

Equipping Translators to grow in understanding Biblical Theology

A translation consultant can have many opportunities to share biblical theology with the translators during the course of their relationship. It could happen during devotion times at the beginning of the day, checking sessions, worship services, times of crisis, suggested book readings, basically whenever they find themselves together. There are some other natural ways to incorporate this into our relationships with translators.

In the progression of work, translators need to do exegesis of the text before they begin to draft. But before translators even begin the step of exegesis, translation consultants can guide them through a study of the book that they are about to translate. This is a perfect opportunity to ensure that the team grasps the individual features of a particular book and also the larger literary context within the Bible. Where funding and time permit, this training could take the shape of a single-book workshop, where the goal is to help translators draft the book and continue training in translation principles (Barnwell 1980). During the morning exegetical session, the consultant could incorporate discussions about themes in the passage that link to broader themes in Scripture.

Even when there is no funding available, I have found it helpful to conduct three to five days of training prior to translating a new book. The point of this training is not to draft anything, but just to give the translators a sense of the context. During these few days, I present the overall structure of the book to help the team understand the literary contours of the book. This can be done using introductions to the New Testament and even Bible Project videos. This is also a good opportunity to remind the team about the historical and cultural setting of this particular book. Additionally, the consultant could pick out several key terms to discuss, terms which are particularly important for interpreting the text well or which could prove challenging given the Target Language (TL) and culture. At various points in this training, there are opportunities to point the translators back to the story of Scripture and broader themes that run through the entire text. In a recent training before translating the Gospel of Luke, the translators and I spent time considering the narrative of King David. This discussion arose from noting the literary parallels between Mary's prayer, the *Magnificat*, and Hannah's prayer at the beginning of 1 Samuel, and also from noting the importance of the book of Psalms in interpreting the suffering of the Messiah. Also, the theme of the suffering Messiah led us back to consider Isaiah's suffering Servant and the theme of the new exodus². In doing so, it is my hope that translators will begin to see Scripture as a whole and begin to translate a book within its literary context.

Fortunately, translation consultants are not solely responsible for training translators. In addition, the Bible Translation movement does not depend on any one institutional actor, and there are many

² This material was drawn from Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (2016).

wonderful points of synergy that have been created that can help translators become biblical theologians.

Formal translator training in dedicated Bible translation programs at universities and other institutions has had an enormous impact in Africa. In my own personal experience, I have noted a marked difference when working with a translator that has graduated from a formal program and one that has not. Given the important contribution of these institutions, formal translator training should include courses which help the translators grow in their understanding of biblical theology. This need not be done via specific courses on biblical theology, but could be achieved in courses that survey the Bible or specific books. Since Scripture studies are a significant part of translator training, instructors need simply to incorporate biblical theological themes in these studies.

SIL-Eastern Congo Group has been investing in these strategies over the past four decades, and there are translators today that have superb understandings of Biblical theology. But as new projects begin, we are continually faced with raising up the next generation of translators. Thus, equipping translators in their understanding of Biblical theology should remain a priority in our organizations.

Unfortunately, we cannot limit ourselves to these very good practices. The translator cannot rely on the translation to communicate all the Biblical theological concepts perfectly. Once the translation is published, the readers and listeners, with their own concepts and contexts, are now interpreting and understanding the text. Thus, the translator's personal understanding is only the tip of the iceberg.

Why our current strategy is insufficient

When it comes to this response of readers and listeners to the translated text, our current strategy falls short because it does not assign enough value to the spoken word of local leaders, and our translations render some Biblical concepts unrecoverable.

Ultimately, in our region of DR Congo, the Bible that most people will hear, will not be the text that we have so diligently prepared, but rather the spoken text on the lips and in the life of the local church leader. Bettina Gottschlich-Modibale, in her study on one of the language communities in this region of DR Congo, highlighted this critical factor in Scripture engagement:

Strikingly, the Scripture resource valued highest by all groups of respondents is the personal testimony of the individual Christian but especially the church leader's life, emphasized in both Catholic and Protestant churches and by the church leaders themselves. (95)

There are several implications of this local value system. Firstly, if the translator sees their role as merely limited to the office where they turn out drafts, they are missing the most important factor of their work, which is their visibility in the community. Also, the translator must show themselves to be a living testimony to the Bible through a transformed life. In addition, the translator must find inroads to impact local church leaders because that leader plays an outsized role in how people will hear Scripture.

Secondly, in our efforts to make Scripture communicative, we make efforts to remove the foreignness of the translation in favor of natural communication. Since naturalness is a value to which we ascribe, we encourage translations that would elicit the community response, "God truly does speak my language!" But sometimes, for the sake of naturalness, the TL has to provide multiple renderings for a Biblical concept. At times, that concept becomes practically unrecoverable to ordinary readers because the Bible

fits so snugly into the new domesticated skin that foreign Biblical concepts are merely heard within the existing worldview framework. A poignant example is the critical metaphor of redemption. In Scripture, this metaphor is communicated through clusters of Hebrew terms and narratives in the Old Testament. The New Testament authors use different Greek terms which refer back to the same metaphor in nuanced ways. So Barnwell et al. in their *Key Biblical Terms in the New Testament* point out the following :

The idea of "redemption" here is a metaphor, a figure of speech. It should not be assumed that all aspects of the literal meaning of the word apply. With reference to God's act of redemption, the metaphor cannot be understood to imply that God paid a price to someone, as a person does when purchasing something. Rather God acted to reclaim ownership of his people, and suffered in order to do this. When translating "redemption" translators should avoid any expression that suggests a business deal between two people. (2015)

These authors wisely suggest this as it will help the community avoid the errors of the early Church fathers who saw Christ's redemption as a ransom paid to the devil, a view which Anselm rejected in his *Cur Deus Homo* (Murray, 1955, location 503 of 2270). In a brief survey of some of the translations in our region, most of the languages did not have a single dedicated term for "redemption" but rather rendered it by verbs such as "to free", "to save", and "to deliver". These can all be appropriate renderings given the context in order to remove the idea of a literal business deal and to retain the metaphor. However, speaking from a theological perspective, John Murray cautions against reducing this concept to mere deliverance:

The idea of redemption must not be reduced to the general notion of deliverance. The language of redemption is the language of purchase and more specifically ransom. And ransom is the securing of a release by the payment of a price. The evidence that establishes this concept of redemption is very copious, and no doubt need remain that the redemption secured by Christ is to be interpreted in such terms. The word of our Lord himself (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45) should place beyond all doubt three facts : (1) that the work he came into the world to accomplish is a work of ransom, (2) that the giving of his life was the ransom price, and (3) that this ransom was substitutionary in its nature. (1955, location 420 of 2270).

So while the redemption that Christ accomplished should not be viewed as a business deal with Satan, it also should not be divorced from the language of ransom.

Frankly, there is no easy solution to this problem. For our current translations, would the reader be able to link this word to the great actions of God as Redeemer in delivering his people from Egypt? Furthermore, how could a reader link this term in mother-tongue to the concept of a kinsman-redeemer of the OT, which informs the overall metaphor of "redemption"? In a recent translation of Ruth 4:1, a local translation team rendered this as "the near relative who could take care of the descendants of Elimelek". Obviously this sort of link requires a conceptual background in order to understand family responsibilities and possession in the OT. Without these concepts, how does a teacher grapple with Paul's use of redemption and possession in Ephesians 1:14, "The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him." (NLT) When hearing our translations, would someone be able to link

their word for "to free" and "to save" with the Biblical metaphor of redemption? The reality is that for local pastors and teachers, this background may exist in an official or a trade language, but it is not yet activated for their own mother-tongue.

So if translated Scriptures are going to have an impact in the local community, the translator needs some more tools in order to engage the language community in theological reflection. Philip Noss raised this issue many years ago:

The role of the translator must be recognized to extend beyond the communication of the message through equivalent words and discourse forms and genres. It is more than being an active agent in spreading a religion, whether Christianity or any other. The translator's role is fundamental in the shaping of the future theology of the local Christian church. That role needs to be documented and the translator must be prepared for that very long-term task. (2002)

But what tools are there for this task?

Equipping Translators as catalysts of local language Biblical Theology

Oral Bible Storying (OBS) and Oral Bible Translation (OBT) have been embraced by diverse partnering organizations, and these two methods can help language communities and their churches to gain a sense of the coherence of the Bible, that Scripture is recounting one story from the beginning to the end. This coherence intrinsically communicates biblical theological concepts when story-tellers begin to see the panorama of Scripture, the way the stories and concepts connect throughout the whole narrative of Scripture. In addition, the product of OBS is not a book or recording, but a story-teller. In other words, OBS aims not only to share these concepts with an audience, but to create a community actor, a herald of the coherence of Scripture. Now where these OBS programs are effectively engaging a people and culture, there is sure to be a growing awareness of biblical theological concepts in the TL. Storying should not be seen merely as an alternative to written translation, but should be viewed as a tool that the whole community can use to appropriate Scripture.

As I said earlier, sometimes translators find themselves with no tools to engage the theological discussion that undoubtedly occurs during and after translation. Telling the stories of Scripture is one way to help churches to tie together the individual stories of Scripture into a cohesive whole. Concerning a particular concept, redemption for example, a translator can direct the community to stories within the panorama of Scripture that speak about this concept, and thereby guide the discussion. This is a simple, oral tool for diachronic analysis of that concept. By telling the stories and linking them to the larger textual context, the community can engage in biblical theology in their local language. As the community learns to tell these stories in their local language, they internalize the biblical concepts that are crucial for interpreting the New Testament. Over the past few years in DR Congo, TSC, the IMB, Cru and more recently SIL have collaborated on OBS projects as a way of mobilization for language communities that desire Bible translation. This is a wonderful effort, and translators should appropriate these tools from OBS for their own roles in helping the community to contextualize theology.

There is another tool at our disposal for communicating biblical theological concepts: the topical index. In Katharine Barnwell and Richard Blight's work, *How to Prepare a Glossary and a Topical Index*, the topical index could easily become another tool for reinforcing these theological concepts (Barnwell and Blight 2005). Here in this region of DR Congo, when publishing a New Testament, we have not included

Bible references from the Old Testament in the topical index. However, in the future, I propose that we include Bible references from all of Scripture so that the readers can learn how these themes run throughout. Often, readers have access to a full Scripture in a trade language or a national language. To help a team identify concepts that they might include in such an index, the consultant could refer to the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. The third section of the dictionary offers articles on biblical theological concepts. However, the reality in our region, is that people often do not know how to use glossaries or footnotes. Before and after the publication of Scripture, we need to continue to accompany language communities so that they learn how to use the tools in their hands.

As part of the follow-up after publishing Scriptures, I would suggest incorporating theological and homiletic workshops that target pastors, catechists, teachers and song composers in local churches. The goal of these workshops would be to help teachers in the churches appropriate the key terms and concepts of the translated Scripture and reinforce their abilities to communicate these in their teaching. Why would this be necessary? In addition to the reasons given above concerning unrecoverable biblical concepts, there is also the need for teachers to acquire theological fluency in their mother-tongue. Here in Isiro, DR Congo, we are fortunate to have an interconfessional translation organization. Before publishing Scripture, each translation team checks key terms with representatives from the different church confessions to ensure the acceptability of the term. While this is an essential practice, it is far from sufficient in order to see these key terms become regular parlance in the churches. Those teachers and pastors that have theological education have received this instruction in French (official language) and perhaps in Lingala or Swahili (trade languages). So when they hear key terms in those languages, they have a pre-existing theological framework for interpreting that term. This is not the case for the same word in their local language. Pastors do not necessarily know how to translate their theological knowledge, acquired in another language, into their own local language. This constitutes a major obstacle for using the Scriptures in their ministry. How they end up using translated Scripture in their ministry will largely determine how translated Scripture is used in the community (Gotthschlich-Modibale 2013, 95). So the quality of our translations will be determined by the quality of the teaching done from these texts, whether from the pulpit or from the choir. In light of this, we propose workshops to help these teachers connect their prior theological knowledge with the new translation's terminology.

Depending on the church, this could take different forms. For churches that have published doctrinal statements, catechisms, or an established liturgy, these workshops could begin to translate these materials into the local language, using the key terms that have been accepted by the communities during the translation process. In our region, the Catholic church and some of the mainline Protestant denominations would fall into these categories. For other newly established communities, these workshops would need to be oriented to help them compile their oral theologies in a coherent presentation in their local language. Nathan and Kari Shank have proposed an interesting process in their unpublished article, *Confessing the faith within church planting movements: A guide for training church planting networks toward contextual theology* (2011). In this article, they outline a series of workshops crafted to guide a church to develop a confessional statement for their community. The workshop leaders guide the participants through ten different doctrines : God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, Mankind, Salvation, Evangelism and Mission, the Scriptures, the Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the Family. For each doctrine, the participants first develop a list of questions that concern the doctrine, which they may have encountered or been asked about during their ministry.

Secondly, the participants read through selected Scriptures that address this doctrine from throughout the Bible. In step three, the questions developed in the first step are prioritized by the whole group of participants. In step four, the facilitator leads the participants to develop answers to these questions. Finally in step five, the participants use the questions and answers to draft a summary statement about the doctrine. The authors suggest that this process was designed to take place in a one-day workshop, but another practitioner told me that each doctrine usually takes them three days to complete. This same process could be used to guide churches in target languages of our region as they develop doctrines about any pressing theological issues. As the participants reflect together and speak about these doctrines in their local language, they will begin to feel more and more at ease with theologizing in their mother-tongue. And as they link key terms to Scripture's use of those terms, they begin to form a biblical definition of that particular concept. They hear that term reflected in a particular story of Scripture, or they see how one of the authors uses that term in their arguments. In this way, the participants create new meanings for these concepts, which no longer resemble simply their common usage, but also their significance for the story that the Bible is telling. For the sake of feasibility, we should begin with simply treating one doctrine, and I think "redemption" could be an appropriate starting place. In Isiro, teams happen to be translating Ruth and Luke, and redemption figures in both of these books.

While theological reflection is a key component of these workshops, we need to also help language communities with homiletic instruction. Translation teams and even translation departments of BT agencies should also be encouraged to create supplementary study materials such as short, guided Bible studies, through which they help church teachers communicate biblical theology. For example, one team in Isiro, DR Congo recently published the book of Genesis, and they have written a short Bible study guide to go along with it. SIL-Eastern Congo Group's Scripture Engagement department has also helped develop some short introductions to Genesis, Matthew, and Luke, which are written in local trade languages and target rural pastors who have very few study resources. These introductions are longer than those contained in our published portions of Scripture, given publisher limitations on introductions, and it is our hope that these introductions can help the pastors better understand those books' immediate and broader contexts. Ideally, in this region, books should be distributed after oral presentations of the material. In other words, these printed Scripture resources need to be distributed *after* a community leader has orally presented the material. The book then serves as a memory guide so that the community can remember what the leader said.

Finally, it needs to be noted that some of the most powerful tools for communicating biblical theology are in the arts. Music, visual art, dance, video and radio drama—there is so much potential here for helping a community understand and appropriate theological concepts and the story of the Bible. Church artists should be included in the theological and homiletic workshops so that they can be equally prepared to communicate the story and concepts of Scripture.

Conclusion

I have proposed that one of the most significant ways that BT organizations can impact the quality of translations is by helping translators become a vanguard of biblical theologians in their language and culture. Philip Noss claimed the following about a translator's vital role:

The translator's role is fundamental in the shaping of the future theology of the local Christian church. That role needs to be documented and the translator must be prepared for that very long-term task. (Noss 2002)

In this paper, I have suggested some ways that translators can be prepared for the task that is before them. Biblical theology can be instilled in translators through their formal training years, OBS mobilization efforts, consultant mentoring, single-book workshops, topical indexes, theological and homiletic workshops, supplemental Bible study resources, and a vast array of artistic works.

Perhaps a resource partner or a program manager is reading this paper and thinking, "There is no way to add all of this into our existing programs and still meet our priorities, goals, and deadlines. So it will just need to be done by other organizations." This kind of thinking unfortunately reveals a serious confusion over priorities. If Bible translation organizations were still mostly concerned about and driven by producing books, then my proposals are definitely inconvenient. Many leaders, such as Wayne Dye and Michel Kenmogne, have reminded us of the importance of people. Kenmogne noted the key role that African theologians need to play in Bible translation:

Reflecting on their context and their world, and using their own vocabulary drawn from their own community, African theologians are able to offer a unique and lasting contribution, not only to African problems in general, but also to specific translation problems in the Bible. (Kenmogne 2009, 108, my own translation)

The translators themselves can be the catalyst for this theologizing in their mother-tongue if we provide them with the tools, and the continued reorientation of our priorities away from products and towards people will have a direct impact on the quality of our translations.

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