

## THE IDENTITY OF WHO/WHAT IS GREATER THAN THE TEMPLE IN MATTHEW 12:6

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***Abstract:** What is greater than the Temple is an ongoing debate among New Testament (NT) scholars. Scholars interpret what is greater than the Temple either as the kingdom of God/heaven, the superior service of the disciples of Jesus, love/mercy, or Jesus. However, though some of the literature so far reviewed considered Matthew's usage of comparative adjectives in his Gospel, it is not exhaustive. This article intends to investigate Matthean style of using the comparative adjective to help interpret the one on 12:6. This article uses the text-centred approach of exegesis to unravel the identity of what is greater than the Temple in Matt. 12:6. The study concludes that what is greater than the Temple would be a temple or something relating to the Temple. We conclude that what is greater than the Temple is Jesus' ministry.*

**Key Words:** Comparative adjectives; ἱεροῦ; Jesus ; μεῖζόν; ὃδε.

### **Introduction**

The puzzle of what is greater than the temple in Matt. 12:6 still lingers in NT scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The expression ὅτι τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεῖζόν ἐστιν ὃδε in v. 6 has received diverse interpretations from scholars.<sup>2</sup> The main argument has centred on μεῖζόν as a comparative adjective.<sup>3</sup> This clause is only found in Matthew's account.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas R. A. Hare, *Matthew*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1993), 130-132.

<sup>2</sup> See John Appiah and Daniel Berchie, "A Review of what is Greater than the Temple in Matthew 12:6 in Contemporary Scholarly Debate," *Valley View Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 1 (2019): 135-144.

<sup>3</sup> Appiah and Berchie, "A Review," 135-144.

<sup>4</sup> Blomberg and Luz attest to the difficulty of the meaning of ὅτι τοῦ ἱεροῦ μεῖζόν ἐστιν ὃδε in Matthew 12:6. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew* (The New American Commentary 22; Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992), 197; Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8-20* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 181-182.

What has made the interpretation of *μειζζόν* in v. 6 difficult is its variant readings. While the majority of the witnesses favor the neuter *μειζζόν* in 12:6, other witnesses use the masculine gender *μειζζων* in 12:6.<sup>5</sup> This varied reading has contributed to the debate.<sup>6</sup> However, Matt 12:41, 24 seem to suggest that gender might not help in determining the meaning of the comparative adjective in 12:6. In 12:41, 42, the adjective *πλεϊτον* seems to compare Jonah (v. 41), and Solomon (v. 42), though the gender in both is neuter.

This is an exegetical study that employed text-centered approach. It includes the following steps: *Textual* (syntax and text-grammar) study, which investigated the grammar of some keywords and how they relate to each other in the text, such as τοῦ ἱεροῦ μειζζόν ἐστιν ὧδε (Mat 12:6); *Lexical and semantic study*, which included an investigation of the lexical meaning of *μειζζόν*; *Literary* (style and structure), which investigated the Matthew's style of using comparative adjectives in his Gospel and how they contribute to the understanding of the subject under study.

In synoptic Gospel studies, the setting of the sayings and the deeds of Jesus are key to understanding any text.<sup>7</sup> Scholars have identified three settings for this purpose: First, the actual life setting of Jesus' ministry. This setting revolved around the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in the first third of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.<sup>8</sup> Second, the church's situational needs shaped the words and the deeds of Jesus prior to the documentation of the Gospels. This setting centered on the apostolic preaching about Jesus material during the second third of the 1st century CE.<sup>9</sup> Third, the setting during which the writings of the Gospels

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<sup>5</sup> See Randolph V. G. Tasker, ed., *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; London: Tyndale, 1969), 125.

<sup>6</sup> Textual analysis of the text favours *μειζζόν*. It is found in the oldest manuscripts. The writers of this article favour *μειζζόν* as the original.

<sup>7</sup> William F. Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narrative: The Gospels and Acts," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve W. Lemke and Grant I. Lovejoy, 2nd ed. (Nashville, TN: Broadman, 2002), 319-320.

<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1997), 107; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 107, 108; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319.

took place. This setting centered on the written Gospels during the last third of the 1st century CE.<sup>10</sup>

The writer is aware of the debate over whether Matthew or an editor added Matt 12:5-6 to the original debate of the Sabbath conflict of Matt 12:1-8.<sup>11</sup> As such, the article would limit itself to the literary analysis of Matthew's use of comparative genitives to determine the meaning of τοῦ ἱεροῦ μείζον ἔστιν ὧδε.

### ὅτι τοῦ ἱεροῦ μείζον ἔστιν ὧδε (Matt. 12:6)

The expression ὅτι τοῦ ἱεροῦ μείζον ἔστιν ὧδε has been interpreted differently by biblical scholars. Representative interpretations include the following:

- a) The kingdom of God is greater than the Temple.<sup>12</sup>
- b) The superior service of the disciples of Jesus is greater than the Temple.<sup>13</sup>
- c) Mercy or love is greater than the Temple.<sup>14</sup>
- d) Jesus is greater than the Temple.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Brown, *An Introduction*, 109; Warren, "Interpreting New Testament Narratives," 319-320. In the view of Warren, both the settings of Jesus and the Evangelist contribute to understanding the text.

<sup>11</sup> Some have argued that the omission of this saying by Mark and Luke suggest it is a particular Matthean creation, not a saying of the historical Jesus; see Benjamin W. Beacon, "The Redaction of Matthew 12," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 46, no. 1-2 (1927): 20-49.

<sup>12</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 197; John M. Hicks, "The Sabbath Controversy in Matthew: An Exegesis of Matthew 12:1-14," *Restoration Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1984): 86; Thomas W. Manson, *The Sayings of Jesus* (London, UK: SCM, 1949), 189.

<sup>13</sup> Birger Gerhardsson, "Sacrificial Service and Atonement in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Devon, UK: Paternoster, 1974), 28; David Hill, "On the Use and Meaning of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew's Gospel," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1978): 115.

<sup>14</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 181, 182, 188; Dan M. Cohn-Sherbok, "An Analysis of Jesus's Arguments Concerning the Plucking of Grain on the Sabbath," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 2 (1979): 31-41; Margaret Davies, *Matthew* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 94.

<sup>15</sup> Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Word Biblical Commentary 33A; Dallas, TX: Word, 1993), 330; David L. Turner, *Matthew* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 310; Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 8: 282; Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel: The Backgrounds, Significance and Implication* (JSNTSS 139; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 302; Robert K. McIver, "The Sabbath in the Gospel of Matthew: A Paradigm for Understanding the Law in Matthew?" *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 2 (1995): 238, 240; Francis Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1980), 5: 392; William D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *Matthew 8-18* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh, UK: T.

Analysis of how Matthew used comparative genitives in his Gospel could aid in interpreting the expression under study. Although majority of witnesses favor the he neuter  $\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{o}\nu$ ,<sup>16</sup> other witnesses use the masculine gender  $\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{o}\nu$ .<sup>17</sup> Blomberg admits that “such grammatical distinctions were often blurred in Hellenistic Greek.”<sup>18</sup> In the view of Luz, “what is greater than the temple in 12:5-6 is an open question.”<sup>19</sup> The above considerations give the impression that scholars admit the difficulty in interpretation of the Greek  $\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{o}\nu$  in 12:6.

Meanwhile, Matthew used the Greek adjective of degree,  $\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{o}\nu$  in its various forms, ten times in his Gospel.<sup>20</sup> In 11:11, John the Baptist is greater than those born of women who came before him; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than him. In 13:32, the mustard seed is the smallest of all seeds, yet is the greatest among herbs when it grows. In 18:1, Jesus’ disciples asked him who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. In Matt 18:4, Jesus answered his disciples that “whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” In Matt 20:31, two blind men cried out to Jesus for mercy. When the multitude tried to stop them, they cried out the “more” (cf. “Have mercy on us, O Lord, Son of David” in 20:30 and 31, NKJV). Finally, in Matt. 23:11, Jesus told the disciples that the greatest among them should be their servant. In 23:17, Jesus asked a rhetorical question about which is the greater, the gold or the Temple.<sup>21</sup>

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& T. Clark, 2003), 314; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel of Matthew*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 112; Richard T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 461; Francois P. Viljoen, “Sabbath Controversy in Matthew,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 32, no. 1 (2011): 9, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Sinaiticus Based Text (s), NA27/UBS4 Greek New Testament (nu), Robinson-Pierpont (Byzantine) Text (rp), Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament (wh), Tregelles Greek New Testament (Corrected) (tg);  $\mu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\zeta\acute{o}\nu$ (Gb/Sz) c.a01B03D05E07G011K017M021S028 U030V031 G036P041al plus<sup>100</sup> Tischendorf’s Critical Apparatus and Gregory’s TEXTKRITIK (BibleWorks Version). The neuter *meizon* is the reading of the most ancient mss and is followed by RSV “something greater”. Randolph V. G. Tasker, ed., *The Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; London, UK: Tyndale, 1969), 125.

<sup>17</sup> The masculine *meizōn* found in the later Greek manuscripts (mss) and in the Vulgate. Tasker, *The Gospel according to St. Matthew*, 125.

<sup>18</sup> Blomberg, *Matthew*, 197.

<sup>19</sup> Luz, *Matthew 8-20*, 181, 182.

<sup>20</sup> The Greek adjective is used two times in Matt 11:11, and once each in 12:6; 13:32; 18:1, 4; 20:31; 23:11, 17, 19.

<sup>21</sup> This was in the context of Jesus denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees that they value the gold of the temple than the temple itself. In 23:19, Jesus again asked a rhetorical question about

Matthew's usage of other adjectives of degrees which appears to bear some similarities with μείζον includes περισσότερον (11:9); and πλεον (12:41, 42). In 11:9, John the Baptist is greater than a prophet; in 12:41, Jesus' preaching exceeds the preaching of Jonah; in 12:42, Jesus' wisdom exceeds the Wisdom of Solomon. Wallace explains that "the comparative adjective normally makes a comparison and the largest group of instances involves an explicit comparison in which the adjective is followed by a genitive of comparison or the particle ἢ."<sup>22</sup> He adds that sometimes the adjective is followed by παρά or ὑπέρ. The comparative adjective frequently stands alone and functions as a noun. When it occurs as such, the comparison is implied in the text.<sup>23</sup>

Analyses of how Matthew used comparative adjectives in his Gospel could help in interpreting the comparative genitive in Matt 12:6. Of the ten occurrences of μείζων/μείζον in Matthew's Gospel (11:11a, 11b; 12:6; 13:32; 18:1, 4; 20:31; 23:11, 17, and 19), six are used as normal comparative (11:11a, 11b; 12:6; 20:31; 23:17, and 19). However, the other four are comparative in form but superlative in meaning (13:32; 18:1, 4; and 23:11). A common characteristic of the comparative and superlative adjectives in Matthew's Gospel is comparing entities within the same category.<sup>24</sup> These include comparison of towns (2:6; 11:21; 11:24), prophets (11:9), persons (11:11), money (20:10), preaching (12:41), and wisdom (12:42). Therefore, the use of μείζον in 12:6 could indicate "a greater temple."

Moreover, Matthew compared soul with food; body with clothing (6:25) and the gold in the temple with the temple (23:17). He also

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the sacrifice on the altar and the altar, which is greater (this was in the context of Jesus denouncing the scribes and the Pharisees for valuing the sacrifice on the altar than the altar itself.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 299.

<sup>23</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 299.

<sup>24</sup> The only exception is the comparison between a camel going through the eye of a needle and a rich man entering the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:24), unless the process and difficulty of entry is the emphasis. The infinitive is a verbal noun. It can function as a noun. It can also function as a verb. When it functions as a noun, it can act as a subject or an object of another verb (as in the case of Matt 19:24). When it functions as a substantive, the infinitive is either the subject (or predicate nominative of εἶναι) or the object of the main verb. In Matt 19:24, the infinitive functions as the predicate nominative of εἶναι. In Greek the substantive quality of the infinitive is recognized by sometimes adding the singular neuter article to it (articular infinitive). Cf. Norman H. Young, *Syntax Lists for Students of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 4, 5.

equated the offering on the altar with the altar (23:19). Thus, in 6:25; 23:17, 19, Matthew compared related entities. Therefore, *μείζον* in 12:6 could also be something associated with the temple. However, when Matthew compared two related entities like the gold in the temple and the temple (23:17), he mentioned the two items (6:25; 23:17, 19).

Further analyses of Matthew’s use of normal substantive comparative adjectives in his Gospel could assist in the interpretation of 12:6. Table 1 below gives a summary of normal substantive comparative adjectives in Matthew’s Gospel.

Table 1: Normal Substantive Comparative Adjectives in Matthew’s Gospels

<i>περισσότερον</i> (Matt. 11:9)	he is more than...
<i>μείζον</i> (Matt. 12:6)	“something” greater than...
<i>πλεῖον</i> (Matt. 12:41)	“something” more/greater than (the preaching) of Jonah
<i>πλεῖον</i> (Matt. 12:42)	“something” more/greater than (the wisdom) of Solomon
<i>πλεῖον</i> (Matt. 20:10)	“something” more than denarius

The analysis of Table 1 suggests that Matthew used normal comparative substantives by comparing things of the same kind. For instance, in 11:9, the people went to see a prophet (John the Baptist). Jesus affirmed that he, John the Baptist, was more than a prophet. Thus, the Greek compared two entities within the same category: *προφήτην* (a prophet) *περισσότερον προφήτου* (more than a prophet). Moreover, in 12:41, “the men of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah.” Jesus seemed to affirm that his preaching was more than the preaching of Jonah.

The Greek again compared two entities within the same category: *τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰωνᾶ* (the preaching of Jonah) *πλεῖον Ἰωνᾶ* (“something” more than the preaching of Jonah). Additionally, in 12:42, the queen of the South came to hear the wisdom of Solomon. Jesus declared that his wisdom was more than the wisdom of Solomon. The Greek again compares two entities within the same category: *τὴν σοφίαν Σολομῶνος* (the wisdom of Solomon), *πλεῖον Σολομῶνος* (“something” more than the wisdom, of Solomon).

Moreso, in 20:10 the labourers who were hired first supposed that they would receive *πλεῖον* (“something” more than) *δηνάριου* (a denarius). The Greek implies that a denarius is compared with more than a denarius the labourers who came early thought they would receive. Therefore, the above analyses suggest that in 12:6, Matthew would compare two temples: the one in Jerusalem and another temple.

In Matthew’s Gospel, substantive comparative adjectives always agree with the nouns they represent in number and gender. However, they do not always agree in case with the nouns they represent. What is greater than the Temple might, therefore, be neuter in gender or feminine, since *μειζόν* has no feminine form. What is greater than the temple might also be singular in number.<sup>25</sup>

The comparative adjective *μειζόν* in 12:6 is a nominative neuter singular. The Greek *μειζόν* is used as a normal comparative adjective.<sup>26</sup> It is used as a substantive and leaves the comparison implicit. Thus, the substantive implies a noun. This presupposes that the implied noun seems to be an entity or a concept.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Matthew’s style is to compare entities within the same category. The entity compared in 12:5-6 is the temple in Jerusalem. The Greek *μειζόν* in 12:6 refers to a temple or something relating to the temple. From the above analysis, the evidence seems to point to Jesus and his ministry. Jesus was present and justifies the Greek adverb of place *ᾧδε* “here or in this place” in Matt. 12:6.

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<sup>25</sup>Wallace clarifies that, the gender of a substantive adjective “is generally fixed by sense rather than by grammatical concord” (Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 296). He expounds that if the substantive adjective points out to a male then, more like than not, it is masculine. It is also the same with the feminine. The substantive adjectives referring to a female is most likely feminine, and neuter for an entity or a concept (pp. 130-132).

<sup>26</sup>Wallace explains the basic difference between positive adjective and adjectives of degree (comparative and superlative). The positive adjective focusses on the properties of a noun in terms of kind, and refers to an absolute notion. In addition, the positive adjective focusses on quality. The comparative and superlative adjectives concentrate on the properties or nature of a noun in terms of degree. They infer a relative rather than an absolute notion. He further explains that the comparative and superlative adjectives are intra-categorical in focus. That is, the comparative and the superlative focus on a quality shared by entities of the same kind. The difference between the comparative and the superlative adjectives is number. The comparative basically compares two entities. The superlative basically compares three or more entities. The elative is used of either comparative or superlative to describe an intensification of a positive notion. Wallace admits that there is much overlap in usage among positive, comparative and superlative in Koine Greek (Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 296).

<sup>27</sup> Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 297.

Table 2 provides a detailed illustration of the comparison between Jesus and the Jewish Temple, the priests who work in the Temple, and the disciples who work with Jesus.

Table 2: An Example of the Priests’ Work in the Temple on Sabbath and the Disciples Eating Grain on the Sabbath in Matthew 12:5-6.

The priests.	The disciples of Jesus.
The Jerusalem temple.	Jesus and his ministry
The Jerusalem temple is inferior compared to Jesus and his ministry.	Jesus and his ministry are superior compared to the Jerusalem temple.
The priests worked in the Temple	The disciples work with Jesus
The priests sacrificed (worked) on Sabbath.	The disciples plucked heads of grain and ate on Sabbath.
The priest profaned the Sabbath by the work in the Temple.	The disciples profaned the Sabbath by plucking and eating heads of grain on Sabbath (at least from the Pharisees’ point of view).
The priests are innocent (blameless) though they sacrifice (work) on Sabbath because they worked in the Temple.	The disciples are innocent (blameless) though they plucked heads of grain and ate on Sabbath because they work with Jesus whose ministry is greater than the Jewish Temple.

The analyses above establish Jesus’ authority as the one who expounds on the law.

**Implications**

The following implications are drawn from the analysis of the first Sabbath conflict in Matthew’s Gospel (12:1-8):



- a) Jesus had the authority to clarify the law in specific cases for his disciples. In 12:3-4, Jesus used *gezerah shewah* as a hermeneutical scheme to give further details about the law, that the Sabbath regulations could be relaxed for a genuine need.
- b) In 12:5-6, Jesus again used *gezerah shewah* as a hermeneutical scheme to give further details about the law, that another divine instruction could relax the Sabbath regulations.<sup>28</sup>
- c) In 12:7, Jesus emphasized that mercy should be the underlining force in interpreting the Sabbath regulations.<sup>29</sup>
- d) In 12:8, Jesus as the master/Lord of the Sabbath should be understood in the context of his authority to interpret the law regarding the observance of the Sabbath.

## Summary

The analysis of how Mathew used comparative adjectives in his Gospel has provided some insights into the interpretation of the one in 12:6, μείζόν, and, by extension, what is greater than the temple in 12:6. It was discovered that Matthew compared entities within the same category. These include comparison of towns (2:6; 11:21; 11:24), prophets (11:9), persons (11:11), money (20:10), preaching (12:41), and wisdom (12:42). Therefore, μείζόν in 12:6 could also be a temple. Matthew also related entities in his Gospel. These related entities include soul with food and body with clothing (6:25), the gold in the temple with the temple (23:17), and the offering on the altar with the altar (23:19). However, when he compared two related entities, he mentioned the two items (see 6:25; 23:17, 19).

Further analyses of Matthew's use of normal substantive comparative adjectives in his Gospel has revealed that Matthew used normal comparative substantives by comparing things within the same category. These included, by implication, προφήτην (a prophet) περισσότερον (more than) προφήτου (a prophet), τὸ κήρυγμα Ἰωνᾶ (the preaching of Jonah) πλεῖον ("something" more than) Ἰωνᾶ (that, the preaching, of Jonah), τὴν σοφίαν Σολομῶνος (the wisdom of Solomon) πλεῖον

<sup>28</sup>Matthew Theison argue that Matthew implied that the temple service was superior to the Sabbath observance; Matthew Theissen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospel's Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2020), 160-62; cf. *Jubilees* 50.10-11; *Mishnah, Temurah* 2.1; *Sifre Numbers* 144; *Babylonian Talmud, Yoma* 85b.

<sup>29</sup>Theison further argues that the charity supersedes the Sabbath requirement; Theissen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*, 160-162.

(“something” more than) Σολομῶνος (that, the wisdom, of Solomon), and δηνάριον (a denarius) πλεῖον (“something” more than) δηνάριου (a denarius) (see 11:9; 12:41, 42, 20:10). Therefore, μεῖζόν in 12:6 could also be compared with a temple.

From Matthew’s use of comparative adjectives, what is greater than the Temple should be Jesus and his ministry. Thus, Jesus used the rabbinic hermeneutic of *gezerah shewah* to compare the priests in the Temple with Jesus’ disciples (12:5-6). The priests’ work in the Temple on Sabbath was compared with the disciples’ eating on the Sabbath. An additional divine regulation could relax the Sabbath law and allow the priest to work on Sabbath because they were associated with the Temple. Similarly, the disciples could pluck heads of grain and eat on Sabbath because they were associated with Jesus and his ministry, which is greater than the Temple.

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