

Jesus' teaching on the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44: Towards a contextual reading of the text in relation to the church's teaching on giving

Okeno P. Akoth
St. Paul's University

Abstract

The poor widow in Mark 12:41-44 is praised for her generosity shown in contributing what she had to the Temple treasury. Because she contributes "out of her poverty", she is actually more generous than all the rich people who contribute large sums out of their surplus. This seems to hold up the widow as an example of the true piety and generosity that exist among God's people. However, the context of Mark 12:41- 44 raises the question whether the generosity of the poor widow should be taken as an occasion for praise as it has been traditionally held or for lament, as some scholars have suggested. When interpreted as cause for lament, the widow's action would illustrate the perils of institutional religion whereby the Temple establishment manipulated this generous woman into parting with what little she possessed. This research has discussed the meaning of the poor widow's story, by means of an exegetical analysis of the pericope and, subsequently, by the contextual reading of this pericope within its immediate narrative context, as well as in the broader context of the whole Markan narrative. The research has followed the steps of exegeting a biblical text such as historical approach, literary approach, text and translation, biblical and theological approach as well as application among others. The research has proposed a theological concept, "A concern for God's Law on widows." The argument has been that the poor widow should not be thought of as the exemplary giver. Rather, she is more properly to be understood as the exemplary victim of a corrupt religious establishment. This research has established that Jesus' words concerning the widow and her offering, is not a commendation, but is the crowning condemnation of the temple establishment. Further, it has established the single sin of the scribes for which Jesus condemns them (Mark 12:40) and which is aggravated by their office as the official teachers of Israel's religion. Their sin had a direct impact on the economic welfare of the widow in particular and the entire people in general. They compounded their sin of hypocrisy by actually overturning the Law of Moses, thus robbing those in society who were the most needy and vulnerable. On this understanding the research has shown that, the widow's impoverished condition alone is a scandal in Israel in the light of Torah. But the circumstances of her poverty make the scandal far more grievous, for it has come at the hands of those who are teachers in Israel: the guardians of Torah and the true religion of Yahweh.

Key words: Temple treasury, Poor widow, Scribes, Generosity, Poverty

Background of the problem

The problem of the text is enlarged by the contradicting interpretation of various scholars, as shown in the section of the literature review. For instance, the conclusion of the classic discussion is that Jesus is merely praising the widow's selfless giving. Other scholars argue that the widow was not to be esteemed for her self-giving piety, but mourned because she fell victim to the improper teaching of the scribes. Other scholars say that the widow's action is to be seen as commendable. Indeed, that Jesus would praise the widow is not a surprising conclusion to most readers.

In the Old Testament, widows, along with the fatherless and aliens, were the most vulnerable and dependent class of people in the land. As such, widows were entitled to unique protection under the Law of Moses. In Exod. 22:22–24 an Israelite was forbidden to afflict a widow. If a widow was afflicted it was her privilege to appeal directly to Yahweh for justice. A woman without a husband or sons, particularly if she were advanced in age, would be unable to support herself. In the covenant renewal of Deuteronomy 27 Yahweh promised curse for the man who withholds justice from the widow (v. 19). Thus, the Old Testament backdrop brings into sharp relief the criminal nature of the scribes' activity while reminding the reader that, as a measure of Israel's spiritual condition, the treatment of widows in Jesus' day makes the nation as deserving of judgment as in times past. Hence the text has been interpreted as a condemnation of the religious establishment due to the mistreatment and victimization of widows.

The other problem is that the text has been interpreted as providing the church with a commendation of good giving. The story is presented in order to encourage generous giving to the fullest extent possible and at an equally great personal cost in spite of extreme poverty. The widow becomes nothing more than an object. For many readers, the figure of the poor widow is praised by Jesus as an exemplary model of generosity and true piety. Thus, it continues to inspire countless church stewardship campaigns and is viewed as urging everyone to be a sacrificial giver as was this poor widow who even in her relative poverty still gave the very last and best that she had. Such a reading has been interpreted as suggesting that one should give "until it hurts" and further suggests, perhaps, that one should continue to give well past the point of reason. The praise conclusion continues up through the present with a variety of implications for Christian giving. The poor are still poor, the rich are still rich and the church is still collecting money, which is against the teachings of Christ on this text. This event involving the widow and the temple treasury

actually is pitiable indeed. A widow starves for a rather insignificant addition to the temple, a few ounces of copper, several bricks, postage for imported building materials.

This has necessitated this research to examine the account of the widow's offering by analyzing Jesus' pronouncements about the widow and her offering. Thus, the aim of the research was to understand both the meaning of the pericope itself and the lesson Jesus wanted his disciples to learn as well as its relevant application today. Further, the research has shown how the condemnation of the scribes is primarily concerned about their preoccupation with the mere appearance of godliness. It is clear that the poor widow stands in contrast to the evil scribes. Whereas the scribes are ostentatious and devious, she is little noticed as sincere and generous. The context portrays Jesus indicting religious leaders for "devouring" widows' houses and also denouncing those who paraded their wealthy selves around the temple while acting as though they are giving sacrificially. Widows had very little voice, which is why throughout Scripture God calls on His people to take care of them and others who dwell on the periphery of that experience. This narrative of the poor widow is to be taken in its connection with the discourse to the scribes just given (Mark 12:38 - 40). It places their hypocrisy and avarice in the most glaring light. They were religious for a pretence while the poor widow was in whole hearted sincere. They for gain while the poor widow with consecration of all she had to her Lord. In the midst of their profanations of His Temple, by avarice, Jesus notices this pious act of a widow such as they robbed. The expectation is that whoever or whatever is the object of the devouring, it will be completely consumed as a result. In financial matters, a devoured victim would be left penniless.

Statement of the problem

It has been noted in the background of the problem that the text has been given contradictory interpretation. The question that this research seeks to answer is on whether the poor widow was an exemplary commendation of good giving or an exemplary condemnation of the victimization of widows by the religious establishment. This helped the research to address the statement of the problem, which is on the implications of the text to self-giving and whether the giving of the poor widow should be applied to modern church giving.

Research objectives

1. To examine how women, especially the widows, were treated during Graeco – Roman world and in Jewish culture.

2. To analyze previous interpretations of the passage in its interpretative history.
3. To examine the literary meaning of the text in Mark 12: 41- 44.
4. To examine the text's implication and make appropriate application to modern Christian giving.

Research questions

1. How were women, and especially the widows, treated during Graeco-Roman world and in Jewish culture?
2. What are the previous interpretations of the passage in its interpretative history?
3. What is the literary meaning of the text in Mark 12: 41- 44?
4. What is the text's implication and its appropriate application to modern Christian giving?

The purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to establish whether the widow was an exemplary commendation of a good giver or an exemplary condemnation of the victimization of widows by religious establishment. It was also to ascertain the implications of the text to self-giving and whether the giving of the poor widow should be applied to modern church giving.

Research hypotheses

1. The poor widow was an exemplary condemnation of the victimization of widows by religious establishment.
2. The giving of the poor widow should be applied to modern church giving to challenge those with the means to sacrifice more and not to get those already in poverty to give more.

Significance of the study

The significance of the study focuses on what knowledge the research contributes to the existing body of knowledge as well as informing the policy makers what should be done on the subject of research. The significance of the study is presented under the heading of discovery and sharing.

Discovery and Sharing

The sharing of discoveries has shaped much of human history and the way of life as it is known today. The research discovers how the traditional view of Interpretation has adverse economic effects on the poor. In most cases, the religious leaders collect money from the poor to sustain their lavish styles of life as opposed to supporting the needy. Thus, robbing those in society who are the most needy and vulnerable. The research endeavors to share the effects of traditional understanding with a view of changing the perception of those who hold to this view.

Justification of the study

The poor widow in Mark 12:41-44 seems to be a woman whose basic needs have been absorbed by wealthy religious leaders who contribute to culture where those barely able to survive are still expected to give to support the very system stripping them of their ability to live. This does not diminish the generosity of the widow, but all of this together makes the words of Jesus an indictment of the religious leaders and broken system, not primarily a story about how people should give more. The irony here is a story meant to challenge those with means to sacrifice more has become, in the hands of some, a story to get those already in poverty to give more. The widow's actions, honoured by God, are also an echo of the needs of abusive people. The widow's echo shows how easy it is to vanish someone's true identity into something others can use. The study thus recommends that the widows should be supported to regain their sense of self-worth. The families, friends and the society should be sensitized to clearly identify with the psychosocial challenges that widow's experience and in the process avail alternative support systems that would help the bereaved in adjusting to widowhood.

The stories about the widows and others in poverty who are taken advantage of by those in power, the disparity between those who control the community's wealth and those who do not, or simply by the system is frustrating. It is not fair; it is not right. God is still calling the church to pay attention to the poor, the lost, the forgotten, the disenfranchised, and the victims of economic violence. The study recommends that the churches should organize a pastoral ministry of widowhood that would assist the widows in accessing services and resources, such as pastoral care and counselling and form the basis for the churches and all the believers to become more involved in the ministry of widowhood and play a vital role in supporting widows through awareness creation and availing other support systems to improve upon their wellness. The churches should be the initial point of increasing the visibility of widows through widow profiling and

documentation. Through the churches, the widows should be encouraged to be involved in income generating activities and self-care initiatives that would facilitate and improve upon their wellness.

Literature review

There is no doubt that Mark 12:41-44 has been understood differently. The context of Mark 12:41-44 raises the question whether the generosity of the poor widow should be taken as an occasion for praise, the usual approach or for Lament an approach suggested by Addison G. Wright (1982:256). According to Bayer (2008: 437-443), placing the story of the widow between Jesus' condemnation of the scribes (12:38-40) and his announcement of the Temple's destruction in 13:1-2, is appropriate. It does not only form a fitting contrast to the previous section and the hypocritical scribes who eat the widows' property, but also it sums up what has gone before in the gospel. Also, it makes an excellent transition to the passion story. Thus far in Mark 11 – 12, the Jerusalem Temple and its officials have been treated from a critical perspective in 11:15 – 19. Then in 13:2, Jesus prophesy the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; an event that occurred in 70 A.D under the Romans.

The biggest bone of contention which has informed this research, however, is the very sense of the widow's act and of Jesus' comment on it. For many readers of the Markan narrative, the figure of the poor widow is praised by Jesus as an exemplary model of generosity and true piety. This reading can be regarded as the usual, or traditional, interpretation of the story (Oden and Hall, 1998:168-171). Some commentators, however, wish to see in the widow's offering of her last penny a tragic and painful example of an exploited woman. The widow's act would be nothing but a misguided expression of false piety inspired and encouraged by the religious leaders, and consequently Jesus' comment ought to be read as a lament. This interpretation was suggested by Wright (1982: 256-265) and won a substantial number of adherents like H.C Waetjan and Ched Meyers (Waetjan, 1989:183-196, Myers, 2002:320-325). Eventually, recent authors have noted a deliberate ambiguity within the story which leaves it open to both interpretations (Donahue and Harrington, 2002: 365; Focant, 2004: 475).

Some early biblical commentaries focus on how the absolute relationship between the offerings, that is, those of the wealthy were large while that of the widow was very small. However, the relative relationship of the offerings is that the wealthy give "out of abundance" while the widow gives "her whole life" (Swete, 1977: 294; Taylor, 1981: 498). Thus, the conclusions of the earlier

discussions is that Jesus is merely praising the widow's selfless giving. The other is that the widow is instructed by the example of temple authorities and aristocracy and acts in turn. As such, her act is pious, selfless, and worth more than that of the wealthy. That Jesus would praise the widow is indeed not surprising conclusion to most readers. Wright notes that most commentators believe "that the text calls for little explanation," and "that the story speaks for itself" (Wright, 1982:257). The conclusion in which the widow is praised for her piety was reached by Jerome, Chrysostom and Augustine (Oden and Hall, 1998: 176-80) who refer to the story in order to encourage generous giving to the fullest extent possible. Wright notes that the praise conclusion continues up through the present with a variety of implications for Christian giving (1982:258). Wright further considers the widow as misguided by the poor teaching on the part of religious authorities. Their actions warrant Jesus to condemn them and her offering was merely a sign of the times (:263). Based upon immediate context, therefore, Wright argues that the widow was not to be esteemed for her self-giving piety, but mourned because she fell victim to the improper teaching of the scribes.

The problem is further captured by Joy Parker (2015:10) in his essay states,

A traditional reading of Mark 12:41-44 continues to inspire countless church stewardship campaigns and is viewed as urging everyone to be a sacrificial giver as was this poor widow who even in her relative poverty still gave away the very last (and best) that she had. Such a reading has been interpreted as suggesting that one should give "until it hurts" and further suggests, perhaps, that one should continue to give well past the point of reason. The institutional appeal of such a reading is undeniable, as it stands to benefit structures of power and place the burden of supporting that structure on vulnerable individuals. It asserts more likely a decried religious system that demands tribute from someone clearly so ill-equipped to afford it. The religious structure precisely ignoring real human situations in pursuit of grand ideological principles of generosity and self-sacrifice.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (1991:589-604) admits that Wright is correct in looking to the occurrence of "widow" in the prior verses as her first noted context, but incorrect in suggesting that the widow is a victim of the scribes who "devour widows' houses." Instead, the irony is on the widow's good deed versus the scribes' bad deeds. She proposes contexts in which the widow is put together with other women in Mark's gospel. Instead of finding interpretive clues in preceding and succeeding passages, she looks to other stories in Mark that provide similar

situations or characters, particularly women interacting with Jesus. Grouped with these other instances, the act of the widow is praised by Jesus and the “classic” interpretation of the widow as heroine is upheld. Malbon’s “gospel women” narrative contexts open up significant dialogue with Wright’s analysis. They not only support the viability of the classic interpretation of the role of the widow as pious but eschew the idea that she is misguided or pitiable. Thus, Malbon presents a contemporary, even postmodern return to the “classic” idea that the poor widow is acting primarily in pious charity. Malbon critiques Wright, stating that the widow does not merely fall victim to the scribes’ incorrect teaching and Jesus is simply not being cynical. She is, however, modest with respect to her creative alternatives, deliberately leaving her readers completely open to make up their own minds. This research has therefore contributed to the understanding of the story of the poor widow in Mark’s Gospel in relation to the church’s teaching on giving.

Research methodology

This research used triangulation research methodology, which mainly is used in the social sciences. The term ‘triangulation’ originates from the field of navigation where a location is determined by using the angles from two known points. In research, triangulation refers to the use of more than one approach to researching a question. The objective is to increase confidence in the findings through the confirmation of a proposition using two or more independent measures. The combination of findings from two or more rigorous approaches provides a more comprehensive picture of the results than either approach could do alone. Triangulation is generally considered to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study and to enhance the rigour of a research study. The method can be used in theological research especially in exegesis where one employs several methods and tools, such as literary criticism, philological criticism etc., thus the method has been useful.

Scope and delimitation

This study is confined to the pericope of “The poor widow of Mark 12:41-44.” This was selected due to its unique pronouncement that Jesus said at the end. The fact that it is certainly in agreement with other texts such as Mk.9:41, Lk.12:15 and Lk.12:37, which is typical of Jesus’ teachings.

Previous interpretations of the passage in its interpretative history

Most historical-critical biblical scholars have used this poor widow as an effective model for illustrating the spirit of true offering, total commitment, self-offering, loyalty, generosity, humility etc. Influenced by Bultmann's form critical analysis, (Bultmann, 1972: 32, 56). Vincent Taylor insists that this narrative of the poor widow is a type of "pronouncement story" which exists to emphasize Jesus' teaching on almsgiving (Taylor, 1981: 496). Robert Gundry insists that the main point of this story is one of the relative values of various offerings. In other words, the amount of offering does not matter to God. Rather, the attitude behind it is more important (Gundry, 1993: 728-730). D. E. Nineham also views this narrative as a teaching parable for the lesson that the true gift is to give all that we have (v.44). He further explains that in his view, the function of this narrative, on the one hand, is to present a summary of Mark's message about discipleship while, on the other hand, it is a superb transition to Jesus' passion narrative of Jesus giving his whole life for his people (1963: 334-335). Most historical-critical interpretations of this brief narrative have focused on providing a positive model to satisfy the themes of self-giving, generosity, commitment, etc. Even though these interpretations praise the poor widow as exemplary, they are not concerned with the poor widow's situation and motivation. Rather, they subordinate her to their theological interests.

While the majority of scholars interpret the poor widow as a positive exemplary figure, contrasting the genuine piety between the rich scribes and the poor widow, there are, in fact, scholars who view the act of the poor widow as a symbol of the corrupt religious authority. C.S. Mann explains 12:41-44 as a continuation of 12:38-40 which suggests Jesus' attack on the scribes and their official establishment. The scribes led the poor widow to make offerings with all she had, even though she was poor. Thus, the story of the poor widow's offering is used as evidence to exhibit the oppression of the scribes toward the widows who were the weakest and the oppressed socially, economically, and politically. Addison G. Wright develops this negative view of the poor widow further, saying that Jesus' words describing the action of the widow are not words of praise but rather are 'lamenting.' Wright leads readers to imagine the real social and economic situation of the poor widow and challenges conventional meanings of this narrative including Jesus' comment on the widow's offering (Wright, 1982:256-265). For Wright, this narrative is a sad story of the poor widow who was misguided and exploited by the religious authorities and institutions. The poor

widow's offering is not an example to follow, but rather a situation to avoid. Jesus' last comment on what the widow was doing should be understood as Jesus' lament and the continuation of Jesus' attack on the scribes.

Since Wright's intriguing study, this negative view of the poor widow's action has been further explored. H. C. Waetjen also emphasizes the corruption of the temple system which had functioned as the control centre of the "tributary mode of production," and insists that the poor widow's offering reflects a corrupt religious system (Waetjan, 1983:183-196). Ched Myers also understands the structure of this narrative as 'polarization,' that is, rich scribes vs. poor widows. However, Myer does not emphasize the contrast between the religious hypocrisy and the genuine piety. Rather, in his view, Mark charges the abuses of the poor in the narrative of the poor widow (Myers, 2002: 320-323). Upon surveying the negative views of the poor widow's offering, these studies focus on the corrupted temple system and its religious authority, and use the widow's story to expose their wrongdoing and abuse. They do not explore the widow's motivation fully from her perspective, but treat her as a passive and invisible subject.

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, in her essay, insists that Mark presents characters as both positive and negative models for the readers to follow or to reject. Malbon avoids making the widow a heroine because the poor widow only functions as a flat character for the sake of showing the huge framework of the Markan story of "who Jesus is and what it means to be his follower" (Malbon, 2000:166-188). Also, Malbon opens more possibilities for different interpretations according to diverse contexts. Geoffrey Smith understands that the passage of Mark 12:41-44 serves to expose the poor widow both as a positive example of piety and a negative victim of authority. Regarding its location, the poor widow's pericope is located looking back at the denunciation of the scribes and is also anticipating the prophetic discourse of the destruction of the temple. Moses' law provided designations for the widows who were unable to support themselves so that they would neither be destitute nor starving. In Deuteronomy 27:19, Yahweh promised to curse the man who engages in injustice toward the widow. In a word, the mistreatment of widows was a sin against God's will as the prophetic writings show. Against this Old Testament backdrop, the fact that the widow in Mark 12:41-44 was impoverished and neglected is evidence of the Israelites' disobedience to the law and their corruption. Thus, Smith, on the one hand, still appreciates the

poor widow's act as the model of true piety, while he views the narrative of the poor widow as the summarization of the Israelite' "chronic disregard of God's law and the sham religion of the nation's leaders," on the other hand (Smith, 1997:27-36). The multiple readings attempted by Malbon and Smith open the horizons for diverse interpretations.

Implication of the poor widow that Jesus addressed

In the contemporary society, the Markan message provides powerful insights for developing a theology of widows, as widows in the global scenario today suffer similar discriminations. The majority of the widows are in a state of suffering, being homeless, jobless, starving, sick, oppressed, exploited, persecuted, robbed, raped, hungry, and dying. Similarly, the poor widow in Mark 12:41-44 seems to be a woman whose basic needs have been absorbed by wealthy religious leaders. Through the story, the evangelist emphasizes the need of building up an egalitarian society, strictly warns and demands the rich to hold onto the ethics of the Law, and comforts the poor by foretelling about the destruction of the Temple that exploits them. Thus, the story remains as a double-edged weapon to establish a social fact.

In the pericope, the triple-oppression of this person, firstly as woman, secondly as a widow, thirdly as a needy poor is pictured through socially intertwined terms. The widow is a victim of an imbalanced society in which she was oppressed as a poor, subjugated as a woman, and dehumanized as a widow, i.e., she was suffering from triple-oppression. An Israelite widow was particularly vulnerable and dependent because of her inability to provide for herself. In agrarian Israel, it was necessary to own and work on the land for one's sustenance. This extract describes the divine intervention on the matters of the socially marginalized. Further, it is noticeable that the self-denying character of the widow is presented as a model of true discipleship over against the self-centered spirituality of the scribes or the rich. In the contemporary Kenyan context, the story of the widow can be presented as a paradigm for discipleship, and the involvement of Jesus as a prophet of justice who warns the church authorities to take side with the poor, the oppressed and marginalized of the society.

Those with means should sacrifice more

The Church attracts a captive audience already experiencing socio-economic problems and therefore a people looking for immediate solutions even if it means reaching out for

supernatural interventions. The needy people, widows seeking solutions, the sick, and the vulnerable, all flock to Churches possibly for supernatural interventions. It is therefore not a surprise for the poor widow story to be used as an exemplary giver. The irony here is a story meant to challenge those with means to sacrifice more has become, in the hands of some, a story to get those already in poverty to give more.

Karl Marx (1978) notes that the poor members in society are likely to save the little that they have in order to pay tithe or help in church development activities. In this way, the poor are impoverished, while the clergy grow richer and live lavishly. The questions which arise are: Should the faithful members of the church become poorer in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven? And, should the church ministers get richer at the expense of the laity? (Morris, 2012:252). A reality which justified both Karl Marx and Max Weber's theory on how religion can be used to suppress people for the benefit of the leaders.

Making impact in the socio religious and politico-cultural life

The life-situation of the widow in the narratives of Mark provides a paradigmatic rhetoric for us to take into the live-life situation of Kenya. Kenya, the home for more than 27,744,864 (50.1%) female population, is a country steeped in its plurality of traditions, customs, religions and institutions (<https://countrymeters.info/en/Kenya>). The widow of Mark 12 is a living testimony for all the widows, oppressed women, and all the people in Kenya and elsewhere around the globe. She must not be looked at merely as a historical monument; instead place her into the real-life situation of all the oppressed and exploited classes as a directive force for transforming the structures that are prevalent in the contemporary global scenario. While the Rabbis walked around in long robes the widows were ended up in tiny coins; while the rabbis were greeted with respect the widows were considered as a public disgrace; while one people group was comfortable with their best seats the other was without a place to lay their heads; while one group was honourable in every aspect of life the other was shameful; and the one constructed their own mansions splendidly, the other' houses were devoured. These caricatures go well with the context of the poor verses the rich disparity in the Kenyan scenario. The presentation of the Markan widow over against the giant men can be taken as a symbolic expression of a social reality in Kenya.

Today, the trend called individualism has dangerously affected the mutual social character of human beings. In the case of widows, an added stigma of oppression is placed on them making them more vulnerable victims of all kinds of discrimination and atrocities. A literary analysis of Mark asserts that Jesus' Movement was in sharp conflict with the Judaism of his time and the crucifixion was the end result. The theme of Mark's Gospel, the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many connects well with the story of the needy-poor-widow-woman. Jesus raises the status of the poor widow before the rich; that is the climax of this rhetorical irony. Mark's Gospel beckons for self-denying service for others as the disciple of Jesus Christ. The church in the present-day context, must be a 'church for others,' to make impact in the socio religious and politico-cultural life.

Conclusion

Having examined the story of the poor widow in its context, there appears to be no reason to conclude, as has been the traditional view, that Jesus is commending the widow for generosity in the face of poverty, for devotion to God, or for anything at all. His words, neither being directed to her, nor containing even a hint of praise, cannot be understood in any positive light. An idea that moves away from a focus on the poor widow's gift as exemplary financial stewardship. Jesus' words are merely observations of both the relative amount of the widow's offering and of her financial circumstances, observations likely provided by Jesus to his disciples to direct them to open their eyes, and in light of the rapidly approaching end of his earthly ministry, to think for themselves. In the absence of words of approval, the church must turn, not to our prejudices, but to the context at hand in order to elucidate our understanding of Jesus' words. Within this context, not a single word of commendation for the temple edifice and authorities is to be found.

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