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CHAPTER 1

Jews, Heathens, and Other Dissenters

Visiting Georgia in 1735, a colonial official wrote that “a Jew workman bred in the Brazil taught” the colonists to build houses “nimble and in a neat manner.” In 1741, as he navigated a growing population of “clamorous malcontents,” another official wrote that “nothing had given me so much pleasure since my arrival” as the vineyard of “Mr. Lyon, a Portuguese Jew.”¹ That these men took notice of these particular activities was no coincidence. The English understood the construction of homes to be a sign of land’s possession, and they envisioned the “New World” as a garden that they should cause to “be fruitful and multiply,” following God’s command in Genesis. Founded in 1732, Georgia was a late outpost of the British Empire, cut out of the Carolina colony to create a charitable utopia.² At the southern edge of Britain’s continental colonies, it was part of a large expanse of land that abutted the Atlantic Ocean south of the Chesapeake Bay and curved around the northern edge of the Gulf of Mexico. At various times, the British, the French, and the Spanish all exploited and relied on the peoples native to this hot, wet region. Ships took from its shores animal furs and skins, crops grown on seized land, and enslaved people; they returned with manufactured goods as well as laborers kidnapped from diverse African civilizations—although Georgia was free from slavery, at least at first.³

Amid a massive, ongoing, and violent exchange, Jews joined a fragile new colony. They hoped to find safety and prosperity, but it was far from guaranteed. Looking westward across the territory that would come to be known as the South, they knew that much of it was off limits to them. The places where they could and did live were governed by and for Christians. The early South—the South before “the South”—was a place where racial domination commingled with Christian power, even as diverse religious traditions found expression. Jewish men and women would carve out places for themselves in southern port cities. Indeed, Lyon—known in other sources as Abraham DeLyon—and his unnamed coreligionists were not only building shelter or growing crops but enacting British claims to land that they insisted was “empty,” despite the active presence of Native peoples.⁴ They also helped create a congregation, still in existence today, in which they continued to affirm their difference.

In Georgia, as in other colonial contexts, Jews were present in two ways: in the minds of colonial officials, who saw them as useful but persistently other, and as flesh and blood human beings, trying to build comfortable lives on the colonial frontier.⁵ They were able to do so because of the presence of Native groups and enslaved Africans who, in the eyes of colonial elites, simply seemed more threatening. Jews troubled the ideals of English Protestant empire, and yet they were Europeans with a shared antipathy toward Catholic Spain.⁶ Positioned on the right side of two out of three hierarchical dichotomies that defined England’s empire, Jews would gain access to new political rights, as well as to the most valuable and violently acquired resources available: land and other human beings. Although part of a global and Atlantic community, the Jews of Charleston and Savannah, along with those soon living in other southern locales, would eventually come to see themselves as Americans. They would prove ready and willing to overthrow the political order in which they had gained these opportunities and to find their footing in an ambitious but violent new nation.⁷

In Virginia and in Barbados—colonized by the English in 1607 and 1627, respectively—freedom was defined by Christianity, but over the course of the seventeenth century, it was recast in terms of whiteness,

sometimes quite literally on bureaucratic documents. This was a result of the growing number of Black and Indigenous Christians, but it occurred at the moment Jews were coming to reside in England and its colonies.⁸ While no Jews appear to have settled in agricultural Virginia, Barbados was home to a Jewish congregation by 1654, made up of Jews fleeing the oncoming Portuguese in Brazil.⁹ The next year, under the rule of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, the question of readmitting Jews to England itself was revived and, after a vigorous public debate, tacitly allowed. One reason that Englishmen were willing to entertain the presence of Jews in their midst was the hope that Jewish dispersion would facilitate the return of Christ.¹⁰ Another was a growing culture of English “toleration,” born of the realities of post-Reformation Protestant sectarianism and the alternating religious commitments of the country’s monarchs. At the same time, philosophers were beginning to champion reason—over and above revelation—as a source of human knowledge, and to argue that humans possessed “natural rights.”¹¹ This push toward freedom of expression, which historians associate with the “Enlightenment,” was further encouraged by economic competition with the Dutch, who had granted Jews permission to settle in Amsterdam and the Dutch colonies in 1604.¹²

As non-Anglicans and as foreigners, Jews remained at a legal disadvantage, and they were occasionally targeted with specific restrictions. In Barbados, for instance, they were allowed to testify in court on the five books of Moses, but from 1688 to 1706 there were restrictions on Jewish slaveholding.¹³ Gradually, the category of “white” worked to elevate the status of non-Anglican Europeans, including Jews.¹⁴ By the end of the seventeenth century, significant numbers of Iberian Jewish refugees had settled in Port Royal, Jamaica; Newport, Rhode Island; and New York; as well as in the Dutch colonies of Curaçao and Suriname (which had been English before 1667). These communities included individuals whose distance from the Inquisition varied, but who understood themselves to be members of an expansive *nação*, or “nation,” of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.¹⁵ Through their participation in transatlantic trade and their ongoing connections with coreligionists on both sides of the Atlantic, some of these “Port Jews” acquired considerable

wealth, which they used to establish synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and *mikva'ot* (ritual baths).¹⁶

As they worked within the dynamic system that historians call “the Atlantic World,” some Jewish traders likely ventured northward from Caribbean centers to the southeastern parts of North America.¹⁷ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Jews were imagined as part of the Carolina colony before they arrived there. On March 1, 1669, the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (FCC) was adopted by the province’s eight founding proprietors. Overseen by Anthony Ashley Cooper and a young John Locke, this document laid out in punctilious detail their utopian plan for a new colony. It was frequently revised and never fully implemented, but it was widely circulated as an advertisement for emigration and it helped shape the contours of Carolinian society and politics. It envisioned an orderly, balanced, and hierarchical society run by a hereditary nobility under the authority of the king and the Church of England. It also granted explicit permission to “Jews, heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of Christian religion” to create “a church or profession.”¹⁸

The relevant section begins by dividing those outside of the Church of England into two categories: “the natives of that place . . . [who are] utterly strangers to Christianity” and “those who remove from other parts to plant there [who] will unavoidably be of different opinions concerning matters of religion.” The former, “whose idolatry, ignorance, or mistake gives us no right to expel or use them ill,” are granted a negative form of toleration, while the latter will positively “expect to have [liberty] allowed them.” Jews are clearly not “natives of the place,” but their explicit mention later in the paragraph makes it unclear whether they are included as those “of different opinions.” The language of “Jews, heathens, and other dissenters” suggests that Jews constituted a third category alongside Native Americans and dissenting Protestants. Indeed, in earlier writings Locke had distinguished Jews and other non-Christians from Christian dissenters.¹⁹ Undergirding the acceptance of all these groups was the assumption that they “may be won over to embrace and unfeignedly receive the truth,” of the Church of England. Jews were to be tolerated, then, but the nature and degree of their difference was left unclear, and the goal was to eliminate it altogether.²⁰



FIGURE 1.1. “A Plan of Charles Town” by Edward Crisp, 1704. From the New York Public Library.

The city of Charles Town (figure 1.1; renamed Charleston in 1783) was founded in 1670 and soon attracted a steady stream of European settlers, among them a large number from Barbados, which was plagued by overcrowded lands and declining fortunes. Ultimately centered on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers and surrounded by dangerous swamps, the new city, and its colony, was shaped by the pursuit of profit and the conflict with Catholic Spain in nearby Florida.²¹ For Jews enmeshed in international trade networks, whose ancestors or coreligionists had been expelled or persecuted by the Spanish, Carolina would have held considerable risk but also a clear appeal. The evidence from this period is scarce, but it shows Jews seeking their place within a multireligious colonial project. The first concrete documentation of a Jew in Carolina is from 1695, when Governor John Archdale, a Quaker, used a Spanish-speaking “Jew for an interpreter” with the Yamasee.²²

This was one among a number of Mississippian groups in the region, including the Westo, the Savannah, and the more proximate Natives who came to be known as “Settlement Indians.” They shared a culture of agriculture and hunting, living in dispersed towns linked by kinship networks.²³ The encounter between the unnamed Jew and Yamasee was part of a complex system of intersecting economic and diplomatic ties. Carolinians relied on trade with Native Americans, primarily in deerskins and in enslaved people, and competed with the Spanish for alliances to ensure their security. These relationships provided the Yamasee and other groups with access to global markets and military support, but they also instigated conflict within and among Native groups, as well as between Natives and their so-called allies. In 1714, the frustrated Yamasee killed two colonial officials, triggering a bloody war that sharpened divisions and deepened distrust between Natives and the European settlers with whom Jews had cast their lot.²⁴

The colony’s Barbadian residents, among whom were likely its first Jews, brought with them a penchant for both slavery and single-crop agriculture. Relying on the knowledge and skill of enslaved Africans, they soon fixed upon rice as the colony’s main crop for export, and by 1708 there were more enslaved people than free ones in Carolina, even as the colony continued to export large numbers of enslaved Natives.²⁵ Slavery enriched the colony but also inspired fear of rebellion, especially after 1693, when the Spanish offered freedom to any who escaped to Florida.²⁶ Although few Jews seem to have engaged in agriculture, from which they had been legally excluded in Christian Europe, they profited from slavery early on.²⁷ Jewish religious authorities understood slavery to be legally permitted, and shared with Christians the tradition that Africans were descendants of the biblical Noah’s cursed son Ham.²⁸ In Barbados in 1679, all but five of fifty-four Jewish families had owned enslaved people, and Charleston records show that in 1696 Simon Valentine, a Jewish merchant who had previously lived in New York and Jamaica, purchased an enslaved man named Dick from Samuel Mincks, a fellow Jew.²⁹ Ashley Cooper and Locke had planned for slavery, firmly yoking it to race. The FCC declared that “every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what

opinion or religion soever” and reiterated that religious affiliation would not affect “any man’s civil estate or right.”³⁰ In 1712 a law was passed stating yet again that baptism would not bring manumission.³¹

The FCC described the Church of England as “the only true and Orthodox, and the National Religion of all the King’s Dominions, so also of Carolina.”³² In reality, however, the Church was slow to start in the colony. After 1701, the newly founded Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts sent Anglican ministers from London, although there was often a shortage because many died or abandoned the disease-ridden colony.³³ Those who stayed fought uphill battles to convert Natives and enslaved Africans, among whom were practitioners of Indigenous religious traditions, Catholicism, and Islam.³⁴ Nor did the Church of England have a monopoly among European settlers. The FCC had required only that colonists believe in God and attend some kind of public worship, further dictating that “no person whatsoever shall disturb, molest, or persecute another for his speculative opinions in religion, or his way of worship.”³⁵ Already by 1700, Anglicans accounted for less than half of the European settlers in the colony.³⁶

Among the dissenting groups attracted to Carolina were Huguenots—Protestant refugees from Catholic France who were closely allied with the Anglicans—as well as Scottish Presbyterians, Quakers, Lutherans, and Baptists.³⁷ In 1697 Simon Valentine and a small group of fellow Jewish men joined with the Huguenots in requesting naturalization, which the colonial legislature granted them as part of an “Act for Making Aliens Free of this Part of this Province, and Granting Liberty of Conscience to all Protestants.” Although associated here with Protestant dissenters, in other documents Jews were described as “of the Jewish nation,” indicating that Jewish difference still went beyond a matter of “speculative opinions in religion” alone.³⁸ There is little evidence about Jewish practice in this period, but it is likely that Jews resembled the colonists described by minister Brian Hunt in 1728: “Not a few Parishioners worship God in their own way, that is at home in a way they do not apprise the world.”³⁹

In the face of Carolina’s tremendous diversity, there were ongoing debates about the extent of toleration, especially in political life. In 1704

the Anglican Church was formally established, which meant, among other things, that non-Anglicans could not serve in public office. Dissenting Protestants responded by raising questions about the legitimacy of the governing assembly. They complained to the House of Lords that “all sorts of people, even aliens, Jews, servants, common sailors and negroes were admitted to vote at elections.”⁴⁰ In trying to recover their own rights, Protestant dissenters carved out a conception of political belonging that excluded Jews and classed them with a range of communal outsiders. Ultimately, the establishment was upheld, but dissenters’ political rights restored. The colony was divided into ten parishes, which acted as both religious and political districts; they were run by vestrymen elected by Anglican parishioners. After 1722, Charleston’s skyline was dominated by Saint Philip’s Church, a monumental structure with three large porticos, a cupola, and a dome. Its steeple was topped by a cock, invoking the anticipation of Christ’s return and asserting Anglican power over the city.⁴¹ Jews paid taxes that contributed to its maintenance and they lived almost literally in its shadow, looking up at its soaring steeple as they walked through the city. Catholics, never openly welcomed, were officially excluded from the colony in 1716.⁴²

England’s Catholic enemies configured race and religion very differently and in ways that explicitly excluded Jews. Inquisitorial documents from New Spain record in considerable detail accusations and punishments for “Guarding and Observing the Dead Laws of Moses,” although not nearly as many as in Spain itself.⁴³ As historian David Graizbord argues, “Jews and *judeoconversos* constituted a ‘race’ or a consanguineous ‘caste’ that was culturally unassimilable, indeed toxic to the Old Christian community of faith—and blood.”⁴⁴ In French Louisiana the very first article of the 1724 Code Noire required the colony’s directors and officers “to drive out of the said country all Jews who may have established their residence there. These, as declared enemies of the Christian name, We command to leave in three months.”⁴⁵ Adapted from codes used to govern French holdings in the Caribbean, the Code Noir forbade religions other than Catholicism and, among other regulations, required that enslaved people be baptized. While in practice some privileged Jews were allowed to operate within French territories, it is

unlikely that any Jews settled in New Orleans in the initial decades following its 1718 founding.⁴⁶ In Louisiana, as in Carolina, Jews were imagined before they had arrived there, although in the French Catholic context their settlement was pointedly forbidden.

By contrast, Jewish settlers arrived somewhat unexpectedly in the new colony of Georgia, which was designed by its trustees as a charitable sanctuary for impoverished Englishmen and persecuted European Protestants.⁴⁷ Among those collecting funds for the enterprise were a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in London, who interpreted the colony's promise of religious sanctuary as maximally inclusive and used their funds to send a group of their coreligionists.⁴⁸ On paper, the colony's charter offered "liberty of conscience . . . in the worship of God to all persons . . . except papists," which would seem to include Jews.⁴⁹ In practice, however, the trustees complained that "certain Jews have been sent to Georgia contrary to the intentions of the Trustees, and which may be of ill consequences to the Colony."⁵⁰ They tried to persuade resident trustee James Oglethorpe to make the Jews leave, but they had already arrived, and to a community in the midst of a vicious epidemic. According to Oglethorpe, Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, a Portuguese Jewish physician, "immediately undertook our people and refused to take any pay for it."⁵¹ Jews were implicitly excluded from the vision of the colony of Georgia, but the precarity of the colonial endeavor nevertheless enabled them to claim a place within it.

The group that arrived from London on July 11, 1733, included forty-one Jews, who made up as much as a quarter of the colony's total European population at the time.⁵² Thirty-three were of Spanish or Portuguese descent, and eight were from German lands. They brought with them a Torah scroll and a circumcision box, signaling their intention to establish sacred space and perpetuate religious identity in the new city, located on a bluff overlooking the Savannah River.⁵³ Shaped by its charitable mission, Georgia's population included an eclectic mix of "German Pietists, Highland warriors, Lowland gentry, and English servants."⁵⁴ It was settled less than twenty years after the traumatic Yamasee War, and its survival was secured through careful diplomacy between James Oglethorpe and Native groups. Especially important were the Creeks,

a powerful confederation with a decentralized and consensus-oriented political organization.⁵⁵ The trustees initially restricted land ownership and prohibited slavery in the colony, although there were other forms of unfreedom present, including indenture.⁵⁶ Among the early Jewish settlers there were a number of servants, including Shem Noah, possibly a man of African descent, who arrived as a servant to Zippora Nunes Ribeiro. In the following months, Abraham DeLyon's wife, two daughters, and "servant David" joined them, as did a Mr. Deas and his servant Abram.⁵⁷

There is much more robust documentation of Jews in early Georgia than in Carolina, because they arrived later and in greater numbers. There were also several enthusiastic diarists in the colony who recorded their impressions, taking special interest in the Jews' internal divisions. An Anglican minister reported that compared with the German Jews, the Portuguese "are more lax in their way, and dispense with a great many of their Jewish Rites."⁵⁸ Whereas the former came from open Jewish communities, some of the Iberian Jews had lived portions of their lives as public Christians and suffered under the Inquisition. These differences apparently fueled discord between the two groups; Lutheran minister Johann Boltzius reported, "There is hate and persecution among themselves."⁵⁹ Evidence from elsewhere in the Jewish Atlantic shows that Portuguese Jews in particular were protective of their status as members of an exclusive *nação*.⁶⁰

While ministers and state officials highlighted the novelty of Jewish conflict, the two groups were part of a shared community. Benjamin Sheftall, one of the so-called German Jews, kept records of births, deaths, marriages, arrivals, and departures of Jews in Savannah, regardless of origin.⁶¹ Sheftall was a devout man who would live the rest of his days in Georgia. Within his first year there, he had recorded the community's first birth and its first marriage. In 1735 he noted the founding of a congregation. According to a Christian minister, "A boy speaking several languages, and especially good in Hebrew is their reader and is paid for his services."⁶²

The congregation was called Mickve Israel—"hope of Israel"—gesturing toward the fervent messianic expectations that were shared

by Jewish communities throughout the Atlantic world. A book of that name, published in 1650 by the Amsterdam rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, had argued that the readmission of the Jews to England would pave the way for the end of history and the advent of a new era of perfection. While Christian messianism centered on Christ's return and rule, Jews imagined the resurrection of the dead, a return to the land of Israel, and the rebuilding of the holy Temple. In 1651, Curaçao's congregation, the leader in the Americas at that point, had chosen the name Mikveh Israel; Barbados's congregation, founded in 1654, called itself Nidhe Israel, or "dispersed of Israel," pointing to the eventual ingathering of the exiles in the world to come. Messianic expectations flourished during these years of upheaval and transformation, reaching an apex with the appearance in the Ottoman Empire of a suspected messiah named Shabbatei Zevi. His 1666 conversion to Islam had disappointed most Jews, and yet they continued to express messianic longings. New York's congregation, in operation since the early 1700s, chose the name Shearith Israel, or the "remnant of Israel" who would be saved at the end of days.

Sheftall eventually purchased a burial ground and received a shipment of a Torah scroll, a Hanukkah menorah, and a parcel of Jewish books from London.⁶³ The new Torah scroll was most likely used to facilitate multiple worship services. The menorah would allow for observance of the minor postbiblical festival celebrating Jewish persistence under foreign rule. The books may have facilitated Torah study among adult men or the education of the growing number of Jewish children in the colony. Although not all children survived to adulthood—in 1734 the Sheftalls lost a son after his nurse fed him poisonous acorns—in the first seven years of the community's existence, Sheftall recorded eighteen Jewish births in the city.⁶⁴

For Jewish women, the births—and deaths—of children must have been significant moments of religious reflection, as they considered the fragility of their bodies and the future of their community.⁶⁵ Among the initial Jewish settlers there were eight married women and seven girls, including Judith Olivera, married to Jacob, and their daughter Leah.⁶⁶ Sex and procreation were reliant on women's immersion in what

Jewish texts describe as “living water,” in concert with their menstrual cycles. Purifying their bodies was one of just three commandments designated for women, and also seen as a vehicle of Jewish messianism, a means by which women could help prepare the world for its redemption.⁶⁷ A designated *mikvah* opened in Savannah in April of 1738.

A little over a month later, Anglican minister George Whitefield arrived in the colony. On his way to Georgia, Whitefield had visited a synagogue on the island of Gibraltar:

I continued with them their whole Service and spent most of my Time there in secret Prayer to God. *That the Veil might be taken from their Hearts, and that blessed Time might come when his chosen people should again be engrafted into their own Olive-Tree and all Israel be saved.*⁶⁸

For Whitefield and other Protestant ministers, Jews remained a theological problem and a target of evangelism. While there is no record of Whitefield’s interactions with Savannah’s Jews, both the Lutheran Boltzius and Methodist John Wesley made unsuccessful attempts to evangelize them.⁶⁹ Notions of Christian supremacy continued to exert an influence in other ways as well. In 1738, “the Jews applied for Liberty to sign” a petition of “settlers, freeholders, and inhabitants,” but the organizers “did not think it proper to join them in any of our measures.” The petitioners requested more liberal land policies as well as “the use of negroes,” which they argued would “occasion great numbers of white people to come here.” The organizers operated within a clear hierarchy of race and of class; servants were prohibited from signing to avoid the appearance of duress, as were widows and orphans, because some might claim “that they were not proper judges.” No reason was given for the exclusion of Jews, although the organizers sought out the participation of Boltzius and the Lutherans.⁷⁰

In this moment Jews were excluded as non-Protestants from the social and political life of the colony, and yet their application demonstrates their own feelings of belonging and their commitment to being counted among white “settlers, freeholders, and inhabitants.” They worked in a number of capacities in support of the colony—for instance,

Abraham Minis supplied the colonial military fort at Frederica in addition to operating a popular tavern—and several joined the local masonic lodge.⁷¹ Boltzius wrote in 1739, “The German Jews have in Savannah the same liberties as any Englishman. They drill with a rifle, as all the soldiers do,” a rather remarkable sight given the enthusiastic debates that would soon be unleashed in Europe about the question of Jewish military service.⁷² The next year he elaborated,

The Englishmen, nobility and common folks alike, treat the Jews as their equal. They drink, gamble, and walk together with them; in fact, let them take part in all their fun. Yes, they desecrate Sunday with them, a thing that no Jew would do on their Sabbath just to please a Christian.⁷³

Jews were contrasted here with Englishmen and with Christians, who treated these national and religious others equally, to their own moral detriment. As in Carolina three decades earlier, Jews served as a point of contention between dominant Anglicans and dissenting Protestants. Anglicans might occasionally include Jews as part of a white society, but dissenters were quick to recast the community in Christian terms. In Boltzius’s view, Jews were deniers of Christ who led good Christians astray. And yet, by 1741 one of the trustees who had been against Jewish settlement was arguing that Jews “behaved so well as to their morals, peaceableness, and charity, that they were a reproach to the Christian inhabitants.”⁷⁴ These writers agreed that Jews were a distinct and identifiable group, although they came to different conclusions about their character and influence.

In 1740, Parliament passed the Act for Naturalizing such Foreign Protestants, and Others therein Mentioned, as are Settled or Shall Settle, in any of his Majesty’s Colonies in America. Thus classified, Jews in the British colonies, along with Quakers, were now eligible to obtain a form of naturalization that would transcend any one colony, and they could do so without making an oath “upon the true Faith of a Christian.” Jewish naturalization would remain restricted in England proper, but the colonies operated by different rules. As one British official put it in 1753, “The discouraging of [Jews] to go and settle in our American

colonies, would be a great loss, if not the ruin, of every one of them.”⁷⁵ Few among those understood to be “professing the Jewish religion” took advantage of the new form of naturalization—between 1740 and 1753, only one Carolina Jew did so.⁷⁶ And yet this new law was a sign of increasing centralization across the British colonies and of the utility of Jews to the imperial project.

By 1740, however, most of Georgia’s Jews had departed. The year before, the War of Jenkins’ Ear had begun, a conflict between England and Spain apocryphally instigated by the severed appendage of an English ship’s captain. Fear of the approaching Spanish—who might subject Jews to the Inquisition—led most of Savannah’s Jews to flee over the course of the next two years; a number of families, including the Nuneeses and the Oliveras, moved to nearby Charleston. The German Sheftall and Minis families would remain, but the congregation—their “hope of Israel”—disbanded.⁷⁷ Historian Alan Gallay has argued of the colonial South, “Monarchy, colonial proprietors, the church, merchants, colonists, *and* indigenous peoples all contributed to the construction of ideologies of imperialism through their thoughts and actions.”⁷⁸ As merchants and colonists, and through interactions with other groups, so too did Jews. They brought their knowledge, their networks, and their God to the Americas and to the corner of it that would one day come to be known as “the South.” Although they contributed enthusiastically to the project of British colonization, Jews still retained an ambiguous position. Seven decades after the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, it was still unclear whether they were equivalent to “dissenters,” or if their difference would be interpreted as something more troubling.

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