

*Back to Our
Hebrew Roots,
or Back to Judaism?*

by

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Catalogue Data

Brueggemann, Dale A., 1949–
Back to Our Hebrew Roots, or Back to Judaism?

Includes bibliographical references

1. Biblical Theology.

I. Title. II. Brueggemann, Dale A.

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A few years ago, I received a flyer from a fellow minister issuing a call to return Christianity to “its Hebrew roots.” It read as follows:

Imagine that you are in a conference setting. It is the opening service and there is an attitude of expectancy in the air. As the lights dim, the audience begins to grow quiet. At the back of the auditorium four men dressed in Old Testament priestly garments enter the room bearing a replica of the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. A man in High Priestly robes blowing a long silver trumpet precedes them. They are followed by a band of worshippers blowing *shofars*. As the trumpets and *shofars* sound, the Presence of the Almighty immediately fills the room to a physically palpable level. A roar of praise and worship begins to well up from the congregation. Because God Almighty has been invited, many miracles are instantly manifested. Healings occur without the laying on of hands. There is wholesale deliverance of demonic oppression because darkness and light cannot dwell in the same house.

For the next two hours there is vibrant praise and rejoicing in the Presence of the Lord! There is no break in intensity as wave after wave of God’s Glory fills the room. For the next two days there is extensive teaching and hands on training on Biblical Restoration of Church Government & Restoration and Understanding our Hebrew Roots. Apostolic principles are taught, as well as transitioning from the Pastoral to the Apostolic. New Testament application and explanation of the Hebrew Feasts are given.

What has been described is the vision of HaShomer Ministries.... God has commissioned them to be a part of this end-times restoration ministry. They have dedicated their lives to see that this message is brought to the Church in a timely manner. Throughout the conferences there will be vibrant worship, anointed preaching and teaching, prophetic impartation, as well as dynamic manifestation of the Presence of God.

HERE IS HOW I RESPONDED to this back-to-the-Hebrew-roots call. I did a little more research on the idea, because it appeared to be a movement rather than just an isolated phenomenon. I wanted to respond to the general characteristics of the movement rather than just to individual ideas. Some of what I read is relatively innocuous; for example, Terril Litrell’s encouragement for wearing vestments can almost be taken as an extension of wearing our “Sunday best,”¹ and Bee Whitley’s encouraging the restoration of “biblical dance” might work well for some congregations.² Even the interest in the Jewish festivals can be

1. Terril D. Litrell, “Jewish Antecedents of Christian Vestments,” internet document <www.restorationfoundation.org/6_130.htm> accessed Nov 26, 2002.

2. Bee Whitley, “Restoring Biblical Dance,” internet document <www.restorationfoundation.org/6_120.htm> accessed Nov 26, 2002; cf. Dale A. Brueggemann, “Pentecostal Perspectives on Dance-Worship,” (Philadelphia, 1990; available from www.lulu.com, item ID #866910).

fairly safe, if the interest takes the form of explaining the Old Testament ritual then explaining how they're fulfilled through the work of Jesus Christ. But often the attempts at a Christian interpretation are riddled with arbitrary connections. For example, in connection with procuring the Passover lamb four days in advance of killing it (Exod 12:3, 6), one author says, "Eschatologically, these four days that the lamb was hidden³ is prophetic of the people's expectations that the Messiah would come 4,000 years from the creation of Adam as part of the 7,000 year plan of Gd [*sic*] to redeem both man and the earth."⁴ In another place, the same author makes an even more remarkable connection: He notes that those who couldn't have a lamb killed at the temple could have a substitute for a Passover lamb; then he continues, "That substitute was the shankbone [*sic*] of a lamb. It has a special name in Hebrew: *zeroah*, or arm. *Yeshua* was referred to as the *zeroah* or arm of the L-rd in Isaiah (*Yeshayahu*) 53:1." Of course, "arm of the LORD" is a figure of speech for God's might and power, not for his death in sacrifice.⁵ This same author continues, "The lamb was to be gutted, and its intestines were to be removed and put over its head. Thus, the lamb is referred to as the 'crowned sacrifice.' This is a picture of *Yeshua* in ([*sic*] Psalm [*Tehillim*] 22:13–18)"!⁶ All of this is considerably less than helpful exegesis, but not necessarily doctrinally threatening; however, much of what I do find runs actual risk of running off-track doctrinally.

Bryant-Abraham talks of a "Protestant Reformation Movement Phase III."⁷ But this "reformation" or "restoration" is clearly ignoring the Reformation's cry, *sola Scriptura*.⁸ My most immediate sense of uneasiness with a restorationist call for a return to the Hebrew roots of Christianity is that I would rather expect a genuine Reformation to call for a return to our *biblical* roots. Nonetheless, the

3. The Scriptures say nothing about the animal from the flock being hidden during this time; rather, it's under *watchful care*—probably to make sure that it is and remains, "without defect" (Exod 12:5).

4. Eddie Chumney, *An Overview of the Festivals*, internet document <www.hebroots.org/chap2.html> accessed Nov 26, 2002. We'll ignore the dubious dating of Jesus Christ's birth 4,000 years after the creation of Adam.

5. The "arm of the LORD" is a metaphor of the the Divine Warrior's power (Isa 51:9–10; 53:1; 63:5-6; John 12:38).

6. Unknown, *Raising Up the Prophets*. The Passover account says, "roast it over the fire—head, legs and inner parts" (Exod 12:9); however, the Scriptures say nothing about the entrails forming a "crown," providing absolutely no reason to speak of figurative crowning.

7. Charles Bryant-Abraham, "Protestant Reformation Phase III," internet document <www.restorationfoundation.org/volume_5_418.htm> accessed Nov 26, 2002.

8. The hallmark rallying cries of the Reformation were these: (a) *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), no authority for human ecclesiastical tradition; (b) *sola fidei* ("faith alone") and (c) "grace alone," no synergism of human works; and (d) "Christ alone," insisting that salvation was found only in Jesus Christ.

restorationist Howard Morgan insists that it's "important to say 'Jewish' instead of just 'Scriptural' or 'spiritual.'" Why?

It is important because of God's plan to use the church to provoke natural Israel to jealousy. The Lord desires to restore to the Christian church a mentality that causes her to be very self-conscious of the Scriptural fact that she has been grafted into a **Jewish** covenant, is believing in the God of *Israel*, is saved by the **Jewish** Messiah, and is believing and obeying the **Jewish** Scriptures.⁹

But the New Testament writers do not say, "Jewish teaching and practice say, ..." except perhaps in negative example;¹⁰ rather, they say, "the Scriptures say." Apostolic doctrine does not speak of being in error for not knowing Jewish ways, but for not knowing what the Scriptures say (Mark 12:24). Some of the restorationists appear well on their way to becoming amateur experts on where to find things in the extra-canonical Jewish sources. They would do well to heed Paul's counsel: "devote yourself to the public reading of *Scripture*, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim 4:13).¹¹ It seems to me that one *must* say "scriptural" instead of "Jewish/Hebrew" if we're talking about a genuinely Christian restoration movement.

Indeed, seems to come down to the issue of the Christian canon. The restorationist Bryant-Abraham asks, "How do ancient Jewish literary sources affect our view of Scripture?" Are they canon—or at least the most significant adjuncts to canonical literature?¹² For some, the answer to that question is yes. Certainly, they take the rabbinical sources to be more significant than the work of Christian theologians, whether the Greek and Latin fathers, or later theologians like the Reformers. According to the "restorationists," all of this Christian theology is too infused with Hellenism to do us much good. And what infused post-biblical rabbinical Judaism?

I think the real reason for preferring *Hebrew* for roots, rather than *Scriptural*, is that much of this restoration program can't be developed and sustained from the New Testament record itself—or for that matter, from the Old Testament. We don't see the churches of Paul's missionary journeys doing the stuff the "restorationists" call for. Indeed, the book of Hebrews' teaches fulfillment-based obsolescence for the Old Testament cultus. In Jesus Christ, we have the reality that

9. Howard Morgan, "Why Should My Church Learn from Its Jewish Roots?" Internet document <www.restorationfoundation.org/volume_3/31_28.htm>, accessed Nov 26, 2002. Emphasis in the original.

10. E.g., Mark 7:3ff; Gal 4:9f; Col 2:8, 16, 20–23; 2 Pet 1:18.

11. See the frequent use of "scripture" [*graphē*] in the NT (Matt 21:42; 22:29; 26:54; Mark 12:10, 24; 14:49; Luke 4:21; 24:27, 32, 45; John 2:22; 5:39; 7:38, 42; 10:35; 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 36f; 20:9; Acts 1:16; 8:32, 35; 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28; Rom 1:2; 4:3; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 15:4; 1 Cor 15:3f; Gal 3:8, 16, 22; 4:30; 1 Tim 4:13; 5:18; 2 Tim 3:15f; Jas 2:8, 23; 4:5f; 1 Pet 2:6; 2 Pet 1:20; 3:16).

12. Bryant-Abraham, "Protestant Reformation Phase III."

the old forms foreshadowed. We don't go back to the shadows once we have the reality. That would constitute apostasy.

This program threatens to return us to the Galatian Judaizing heresy. Some restorationists call for a “return to the **Rhythm of the Lord**,” which I take to mean a return to the season rhythm of the annual feasts, or a change “from the Christian calendar to the Jewish calendar for recordation purposes.”¹³ But the author of Hebrews treats this annual “rhythm” as ongoing evidence of the failure of the Old Testament cultus:

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (Heb 10:1–4)

What then should be our approach to the Old Testament festivals? Certainly, interpreting them messianically is not only in order,¹⁴ but it is our Lord's own order. On the Emmaus road, Jesus mandated a christological approach to the entire Old Testament (Luke 24). “Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets,¹⁵ he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (vv. 25–27, esp. v. 27). He continued, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (v. 44).¹⁶ I doubt if Jesus was referring only to select messianic texts, such as what we commonly call the “messianic psalms,” or to a catena of messianic prophecies. Rather, Jesus was declaring that the *entire* Old Testament pointed to him. By putting it *all* in a christological frame of references, “He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (v. 45).

So, to the degree that this call for a return to our Hebrew roots is calling for a return to the Old Testament background and foundation of New Testament faith, I applaud it as essential. Paul said, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–

13. Unknown, *Raising Up the Prophets*, emphasis in the original. By use of the expression “recordation purposes” he intends a reinstatement of annual observance of the Old Testament feasts.

14. More often termed *christological* interpretation.

15. Using a standard *twofold* description of the entire Old Testament canon (also Luke 16:29, 31; John 1:45; Acts 26:22; 28:23).

16. Using a *threefold* description of the OT canon, which names the third division after its lead component. The *Writings* comprised Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and 1 and 2 Chronicles (in that order in the Hebrew canon).

17). It was the Old Testament he was calling “Scripture” in that case, since the New Testament didn’t exist yet. Historically, ignoring the Old Testament has generally led toward outright heresy, like that of Marcion or the various Gnostic groups. But what about uses that go afoul of the hermeneutical principle I stated above? The so-called Hebraic restorationists seem to do that:

At the back of the auditorium four men dressed in Old Testament priestly garments enter the room bearing a replica of the Ark of the Covenant on their shoulders. A man in High Priestly robes blowing a long silver trumpet precedes them. They are followed by a band of worshippers blowing shofars.¹⁷

This doesn’t appear to be describing a mere attempt at historical reconstruction for instructional purposes; it continues, “As the trumpets and shofars sound, the Presence of the Almighty immediately fills the room to a physically palpable level. A roar of praise and worship begins to well up from the congregation. Because God Almighty has been invited.”¹⁸ This goes beyond an acceptable didactic device to a liturgical device not known in the New Testament church, but only in the old covenant congregation—and serving uniquely old covenant purposes.¹⁹

Another restorationist makes explicit claims for spiritual results from using the *shofar*:

[It] enables our prayers, praise, and worship to go directly to the third heaven unimpeded because it forces the spirits of the air to flee. What in fact happens is that we send our breath (spirit) together with the sounds of the Shophar, as a prayer to YHVH (God) Since this Breath exist [*sic*] in the body of mankind, we join with it and blow out that breath into his nostrils Divine Breath.²⁰

This sounds more like something from the occult Jewish practices of the Kabbalah than from the Christian church—whether Jewish or Gentile.

17. See letter at beginning.

18. Ibid.

19. On the Old Testament uses of the *shofar*, see the following [for clarity, standard reference abbreviations are supplied and the Hebrew is transliterated): 1 a) at a theophany of Yahweh Exod 19:16, 19; 20:18; Zech 9:14, cf. Isa 27:13; 58:1; b) on *Yom YHWH*, the day of the LORD Joel 2:1; Zeph 1:16.—2. Ceremonial occasions: a) year of Jubilee Lev 25:9 *shofar teruah* sounding the alarm); b) at the festival of the new moon Ps 81:4; c) at a general fast Joel 2:15; d) for the proclamation of a new king 2 Sam 15:10; 1 Kgs 1:34, 39, 41; 2 Kgs 9:13; e) at the exaltation of Yahweh, hauling up the Ark 2 Sam 6:15; Pss 47:6; 98:6, cf. Ps 150:3; 1 Cor 15:28; 2 Cor 15:14.—3. In the course of battle: a) to announce the approach of an enemy Jer 4:5 (textual emendation), 19, 21; 6:1; b) *Shofar* the means by which a watchman warns the populace Isa 18:3; Jer 6:17; Ezek 33:3–6; Hos 8:1; Amos 3:6; Neh 4:12, 14; c) for a signal before and during a battle Josh 6:4–6, 8f, 13, 16, 20; Judg 3:27; 6:34; 7:8, 16, 18–20, 22; 1 Sam 13:3; 2 Sam 2:28; 18:16; 20:1, 22; Jer 42:14; 51:27; Hos 5:8; Amos 2:2; Job 39:24f. From Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Johann Jakob Stamm, revised by Walter Baumgartner, Benedikt Hartmann, Ze’ev Ben-Hayyim, Eduard Yechezkel Kutscher, Philippe Reymond, 1994–2000, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1958).

20. Unknown, *Raising Up the Prophets*.

One restorationist says, “When doing a Passover Seder, you are supposed to see yourself as if you are personally being redeemed from Egypt.”²¹ Even in the Old Testament it was a historical memorial not an existential drama. And since fulfillment in Christ Jesus has come, I would say that you shouldn’t be doing a Passover Seder at all, unless for educational illustration. The Lord’s Supper is the fulfillment of what the Old Testament Passover could only foreshadow; and when you partake of that you see yourself as personally redeemed from *bondage to sin* (Rom 6:6, 16ff, 20, 22; 7:14, 25; Gal 4:7).

One restorationist even rejects the Christian teaching that there are no longer unclean foods, because of Acts 10:10–16. He says, “Acts 10 has NOTHING to do with clean/unclean foods.”²² This misses the point: The text has to do with no longer viewing Gentiles as unclean; however, it was precisely the food laws that signaled that clean-unclean distinction between Jew and Gentile until the mystery that drove Paul’s ministry to Gentiles was made manifest (Rom 16:25; Eph 1:9; 3:3–9; Col 1:26f).

Bean even thinks it possible to learn positive things from the Pharisees.²³ Remarkably, he claims, “Jesus never uttered a negative word about the teachings of the Pharisees.”²⁴ That’s hardly the case.²⁵ And it just won’t do to argue like Bean that Jesus approved of their teaching and just rejected their hypocrisy. The Gospels equate their teaching and their hypocrisy: in Matthew, “the yeast of the Pharisees” is their *teaching* (Matt 16:12); in Luke, it’s their *hypocrisy* (Luke 12:1). Likewise, Bean says, “It was never the theology of the Pharisees which Jesus criticized. It was their concept of the Letter of the Law.” Well—that letter-of-the-law business was their theology. Bean is finally reduced to the following inanity: “In essence, it was not the Pharisees, it was the Spirit [*sic*] of the Pharisees which Jesus addressed.”²⁶ Bean even indicates that although Jesus was not a card-carrying Pharisee, he represented the very essence of their theology and beliefs.²⁷ Wow! Why is Bean working so hard to rehabilitate Pharisees? Because “they were the fathers of orthodox Judaism.”²⁸ Indeed, but Pharisees just won’t clean up very

21. Chumney, *Overview*.

22. Eddie Chumney, *Acts 10: Unclean and Clean Foods* [e-mail available at <www.yeshuahua-donai.com/mail7.html>], 1998 accessed Nov 26, 2002. Emphasis in original. Chumney doesn’t cite Mark 7:19 and 1 Tim 4:1ff; however, I guess he would reject the conclusion drawn from those texts as well.

23. E. William Bean, *What Lessons Can We Learn from the Pharisees?* Internet document <www.restorationfoundation.org/volume_3/31_36.htm> accessed Nov 26:2002.

24. *Ibid.*

25. See Matt 16:6, 11f; 23:13, 15, 23, 25ff, 29; Luke 7:30; 11:39, 42f; 12:1.

26. Bean, *Pharisees*.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*

well, given Jesus' frequent and strong criticism of them.²⁹ According to Jesus, at their cleanest, you just end up with "whitewashed tombs" (Matt 23:27).

Morgan even makes the following novel argument: "A Jewish roots mentality also creates a barrier preventing demons from bringing their doctrines into the lives of your people."³⁰ In fact, that might be just the approach that opens you up to "deceiving spirits and things taught by demons," for example, by teaching you "to abstain from certain foods" (1 Tim 4:1-5).³¹ Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 4:3). Paul followed up with the following double argument: God created it all so it's all good; you blessed it so it's sanctified (cf. Titus 1:15; Rom 14:14).³² Any restorationist attempt to reverse that sovereign declaration of purity is wrong-headed and dangerous—potentially demonic.

One author even complains about the following three doctrines:³³ (1) The denial that the Christian Church is subject to Judaism; (2) the idea that the New Testament is higher than the Old Testament, which was a shadow of things to come; and (3) the assertion that the New Testament is the New Covenant in Christ's shed blood. Although these ideas seem to me to be central to Christian faith, he concludes:

Though not all Christian groups hold to these specific teachings, the three shown above represent the logical conclusion of Christianity. Simply stated; [sic] With regard to Torah, Christianity and Torah-based faith in Yeshua (Nazarene Judaism) are mutually exclusive. If Christianity with its anti-Torah doctrine (i.e., "we're not under the Law"), is God's truth, then Nazarene Judaism is promoting a lie. Conversely, if Nazarene Judaism, with its teaching that Torah is God's will for the believer in Yeshua, is God's truth, then Christianity's position on Torah is nothing less than that of the Whore of Babylon.³⁴

Well, that puts it strongly! But sometimes it's good to see the alternatives clearly set out. Just forget about Romans and Galatians. Or perhaps you would rather not and would take a pass on the "restorationist" movement that implies that advice.

In conclusion, the operative principles for understanding material in the Old Testament that foreshadows the work of Christ are twofold: (1) Fulfillment,

29. Matt 3:7; 9:34; 12:14, 24; 16:1; 19:3; 21:45; 22:15, 34; Mark 3:6; 8:11; 10:2; 12:13; Luke 5:17, 21; 6:7; 7:30, 36f, 39; 11:37ff, 42f, 53; 15:2; 16:14; 18:10f; John 7:32, 45, 47f; 9:13, 15f, 40; 11:46f, 57; 12:19, 42.

30. Morgan, *Why?*

31. *Contra Chumney, Acts 10.*

32. Possibly the consecrating "word of God" (1 Tim 4:5) is the gospel message of Mark 4:3; but more likely, it refers to the repeated "and it was good" of the creation week, since creation itself is the controlling context for this assertion of goodness (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

33. Unknown, *Signs of the Times: Growing Christian Anti-Torah Hostility*, internet document <www.yashnet.com/opinion/opi.htm> accessed Nov 26, 2002.

34. *Ibid.*

rather than restoration is a Christian understanding of how the Old Testament laws apply to the church's doctrine and practice. (2) In Christ the shadows have passed away into the light of fulfillment—and there's *no returning to shadow-land*.

If you would like to do a thorough study that provides an antidote to this Judaizing call, I would recommend careful studies in the Pentateuch,³⁵ Romans,³⁶ Galatians,³⁷ and a good dose of biblical theology,³⁸ Old Testament theology,³⁹ and New Testament theology.⁴⁰

35. On the five books in the Pentateuch, you won't go wrong with the volumes from the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary series: Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, 1982; R. Alan Cole, *Exodus*, 1973; R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus*, 1980; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers*, 1981; and J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 1974. If you want more on the book of Leviticus, with all of its cultic regulation, I would also recommend the more expensive but considerably more substantial Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1979).

36. The standard and accessible commentary is F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1985). One of the strongest theologically is John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965). A newer commentary from an outstanding exegete is Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman, 1995).

37. An accessible standard is R. Alan Cole, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*, 2d rev. ed., Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1989). And who can avoid mentioning Martin Luther, *Commentary on Galatians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel reprints, 1978).

38. For an outstanding approach to preaching typologically, see Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), 98–112. Clowney bases his work heavily on Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1963). Vos was a conservative scholar who was a master of the biblical theological method of dealing with symbolism and typology of tabernacle worship. For an outstanding record of covenantal development, climaxing in the work of Jesus Christ, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Philipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1981). For multiple views on how to approach Law and Gospel, see Willem VanGemeren, *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997). See also VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997).

39. For a good standard Old Testament theology that's quite readable and strongly evangelical, see Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1978).

40. The standard evangelical New Testament theology is George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, ed. Donald Hagner, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993). A briefer theology is Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1985). If you really want to get into this, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology: A Thematic Study* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1981).

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