

Lesson 8: Synagogues of the Diaspora (Acts 13:13-52)

Telling the Story (Evangelism in the Early Church)

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Now Paul and his company set sail from Paphos, and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem; 14: but they passed on from Perga and came to Antioch of Pisidia. (13:13-14a).

Rather than "Barnabas and Saul," Luke speaks of "Paul and his company," which actually reads, "the ones around Paul," i.e. those with Paul. Here John Mark leaves the company and returns to Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas land on the shore of Pamphylia, then go north into the region the Romans called "*Gallia* [Galatia]," because it was made up of Galls and Greeks, this was the land resulting from the migration of the Celts in 380 BC. Paul and Barnabas enter the city of Antioch of Pisidia where they search out a Jewish synagogue, as was the case in Paphos on the Isle of Cyprus. Here we are beginning to see a pattern of evangelistic activity, which will be seen through the remainder of Luke's account of the beginnings of early Christianity.

They Went into the Synagogue

And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15: After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it," (13:14b-15).

Paul's evangelistic agenda was to go from city to city throughout the Mediterranean world, searching out the synagogues of the city, entering into the service and when the opportunity

presented itself, he would address the people. A practice of the synagogues of the Diaspora was to recognize visitors who wore the prayer shawl (*tallit*) of a rabbi or *maggid* (pron. ma-geed, a traveling storyteller or preacher), and ask him if he had any word from Jerusalem or invite him to speak to the congregation. Paul's pattern was to read from one of the messianic texts of the OT Scriptures and announce to the congregation that the text read had been fulfilled by a messianic figure who appeared in Palestine; then tell them the story of Jesus of Nazareth. His scenario was similar to that of Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30).

As was the custom of the leaders and the men of the synagogue, a discussion would ensue concerning what was read or the interpretation given to it; this is a tradition very much alive today in Orthodox synagogues throughout the world. The discussion with the leaders of the synagogue usually resulting in Paul and those with him being asked to leave or, in some cases, being thrown out of the synagogue. But in many cases, a number of the godfearers and some Jews from the synagogue followed him wanting to hear more.

Concerning Paul's invitation to speak at this service, the invitation would have been offered by the *archisunagogos* (leader or ruler of the synagogue). Hilary Le Cornu and Joseph Shulam, *The Jewish Roots of Acts*, give a possible explanation as to why Paul was invited to speak:

A *baraita* [a collection of rabbinic teachings not found in the *Mishnah*] giving the order of the day on public fasts states that those addressing the people should encourage them to repent: 'Our Rabbis have taught: If there is an elder present, he addresses them; if not, a scholar addresses them; and if there is no scholar present then a distinguished looking man addresses them . . .' (*Jewish Roots of Acts*, p 721).

Following this scenario, the ruler of the synagogue took Paul to be an elder, a rabbi or scholar, or a distinguished or educated person. As mentioned, Paul was probably wearing his *tallit'* (prayer shawl),

and, according to Matt 23:57, the scribes distinguish themselves by the particular type of *tallit* they wore. In all probability, Jesus himself wore a *tallit* and what the woman touched in Matt 9:20, was the *zitit* or tassels on the edge of his *tallit*. Matthew's text says that the woman touched the "edge [*kraspedon*]" of his garment. The word *kraspedon* means "tassel or fringe," which is what the *zitit* on the prayer shawl or *tallit* was called. The fact that Jesus was called "*rabbi*" makes it likely that he wore a *tallit*; it was very probable that Paul did the same, which is reinforced by his words, "to the Jew I became as a Jew," in 1 Cor 9:20. What ever the case, Paul was asked to speak and that invitation resulted in the first sermon we have from Paul.

The Speech in the Synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia (13:16-41)

So Paul stood up, and motioning with his hand said: "Men of Israel [the Jews assembled], and you that fear God [the godfearers present] listen," (13:16).

The Jews Are God's Chosen People (13:17-21)

The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm he led them out of it [reference to the deliverance of the children of Israel, the exodus from Egypt in Approx 1212 BC], 18 and for about forty years he bore with them in the wilderness [1212-1172 BC], 19 And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance for about four hundred and fifty years [from the exodus to the destruction of Israel in 722 BC-from 1212 to 722 BC = 450 years], 20 and after these things [i.e. the conquest of Canaan] he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet [Approx 77 years]. 21 Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years [1095-1055 BC], (Acts 13:18-21).

Paul prepares for an introduction to one of the major arguments for the messiahship of Jesus; i.e. the kingship of David and God's promise of the continuation of David's heirs to claim the throne of the kingdom of David would establish and sustain. Paul calls attention to the rejection of the Jewish hierarchy to the messiahship of Jesus.

The Promise God Made to David
(13:22)

And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king [1055-1015 BC] of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will (13:22).

The promise Paul refers to is that made in 1 Samuel 7:8-17, spoken to David through Nathan the prophet. In verses 12-13, God says,

When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house from my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever (2 Sam 7:12-13).

Solomon was the immediate fulfillment of this promise; he died and his heir took the throne. This lasted until 586 BC and the loss of the throne when Babylon captured Judah, then the line of David was broken. When the Jews were allowed to return to Judah around 510 BC, they began to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, but there was no palace or throne for the heir of David. So, where was the Messiah to reign when he assumed the throne in fulfillment of 2 Sam 7:12-13?

The Jews, however, continued to speak of a "Son of David" who would someday return to Judah and reclaim the throne on his father, which is what God had promised, "I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." So, "forever" means "forever" and there must be another to come else God had broken his promise. The one who was to come would be anointed king as was his father David (2

Sam 7:12-13); hence, they began to speak of this one to come as “the Anointed One,” in Hebrew “*Ha Mashiach*,” which in Greek becomes, “*Ho Christos*.”

The Fulfillment of the Promise to David
(13:21-24)

Of this man's seed has God brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised [God's promise to David was fulfilled, but with a 582 year gap, from 586 to 4 BC] 24 Before his coming John had first preached a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel [this would be, historically speaking, around 29 or 30 AD], (13:23-24).

Here Paul mentions John the Baptist, about whom he must have had some knowledge (Acts 19:1-7), as a fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3, “A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the LORD (*Yahweh*); make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.” The oral tradition concerning the forerunner of the Messiah is from Isaiah 40:3-5. Paul is also well aware of John’s call for repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sin.

The Coming of the Messiah
(13:25-27)

As John was fulfilling his course, he said, “What do you suppose me to be? I am not the one. But he is coming after me, the shoes of his feet I am not worthy to unloose.” 26 Men, brethren, sons of the family of Abraham, and the godfearers among you, to us is the word of salvation sent out. 27 For the ones that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know him, nor the voices of the prophets read every Sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him (13:25-27).

Here in these words Paul builds to the climax of his presentation. John was the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, who was believed to be the return of Elijah, an interpretation in first century Judaism drawn from Malachi 4-5-6. Paul calls attention to

the rejection of Jesus by the Jewish hierarchy; a theme found in most of the speeches of Acts. Such a theme was important in explaining why Jesus wasn't held to be the Messiah by the Jerusalem hierarchy. Paul's answer to this was that "they did not know the voice of the prophets, which were read in Jerusalem just as they were read in this synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia.

And though they found no cause of death in him, they yet asked of Pilate that he should be slain. 29 And when they had fulfilled all things that were written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a tomb (13:28-29).

Here again, Paul roots his claims in Scripture; it was the case that Jesus had fulfilled what was written of him concerning the suffering and death of the Messiah (e.g. Isaiah 52:13-53:12; Psalms 22:1-2, 6-8, 12-18; 69:21; 1-9:21-29).

*But God Raised Him Up
(13:30-31)*

But God raised him from the dead: 31 and he was seen for many days of them that came with him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are now his witnesses to the people (13:30-31).

Here are the most significant of Paul's words, "but God," but God raised him out of death. To these people of the synagogue of Pisidia, the concept of a resurrected Messiah would have been given a hearing. To the Jews the Messiah would not have died; rather, he would have called for an insurrection of the Jews against the Roman occupation of the land of Israel. To claim that the Messiah was put to death by crucifixion would have perked their attention, but the claim that God had raised him from death would have filled their imaginations; especially, those who were familiar with the apocalyptic literature of Judaism (Daniel 12:2-4, and the writings of Enoch). Paul adds that the Messiah's resurrection was witnessed by the very ones who were his followers in Galilee; the ones who knew him best were the ones who saw him.

The Fulfillment of the Promise to David
(13:32-37)

And we bring you good news of the promise God made unto the fathers, 33 this he has fulfilled to us, their children, in that he raised up Jesus; as it is written in the second psalm, You are my Son, this day I have begotten you [Psalms 2:7]. 34 And as concerning that he raised him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption, he has spoken on this wise, "I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David," [Isaiah 55:3 LXX]. 35 He says also in another psalm, "You will not let your Holy One to see corruption," [Psalms 16:10 LXX]. 36 For David, after he had in his own generation served the counsel of God, fell asleep, and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption: 37 but the one whom God raised up saw no corruption (Acts 13:32-37).

It is significant that this argument is the same as that made by Peter in Acts 2, which would suggest that it had likely become an oral tradition used in the argumentation presented to other Jews in proof of the messiahship of Jesus. Paul says that he and the storytellers of Jesus bring good news of the promise God made to the fathers [of Israel]. The word Paul uses for "bring good news" is *evangelizo*, meaning a public announcement of great importance. It is often translated in English as "to preach the gospel," but the present-day connotation of preaching does not quite catch the significance of this word in the Greek language. Preaching can be simply a public presentation of a forceful nature, but the word used by the NT writers meant a heralding or public declaration of something that brings great jubilation to the people who hear it. The fact that Peter and Paul's proclamations have much similarity would indicate that this argument concerning the flesh of David was common to the apostolic apologetic of the early church.

A Deed You Will Never Believe
(13:38-41)

Be it known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man that forgiveness of sins is proclaimed, 39 and by him every one that believes is justified from all things, from which you could not be justified by the Law of Moses. 40 Beware therefore, lest that come upon you which is spoken in the prophets: 41 "Behold, you scoffers wonder, and perish; for I do a deed in your days, A deed you will not believe if one declares it to you (13:38-41).

It is Paul's argument that it is through Jesus' death and resurrection that forgiveness of sins may be received, which Paul develops in great detail in his letters (e.g. 1 Cor 15:1-8, 12-28). This is also a major part of Peter's preaching (Acts 2:38; 10:43). If Paul had stopped here, his message would have had a better chance of acceptance to these disciples of Moses (John 9:28). This is the only reference in Acts to freedom from the Law of Moses, and it is from the lips of Paul. These words, without doubt, drove a spear through the hearts of any orthodox Jews present.

Verse 41 is a very provocative statement as it concerns the will of the orthodox Jew to believe as set over against the will not to believe. The major issue concerned the will of many Jews to believe that God had chosen to deliver the human race through faith in the Messiah/Christ rather than obedience to the Law of Moses. This is the meaning of verse 41, *the Will to Believe verses the Will Not to Believe*.

The Reaction of the Jews and Godfearers (13:42-43)

*And as they went out, they besought that these words might be spoken to them the next Sabbath. 43 Now when the synagogue broke up, **many of the Jews and of the godfearing proselytes** followed Paul and Barnabas; who, speaking to them, urged them to continue in the grace of God (13:42-43).*

The reference to "many of the Jews" would have meant the Hellenistic Jews of the Dispersion, "the godfearing proselytes"

would have been the gentile godfearers who had been converted to Judaism, becoming proselytes. For our understanding of the evangelistic activity of Acts, we need to know who these Greek-speaking Diaspora Jews were. The word "Diaspora" is a Greek word meaning "dispersed," which is a reference to the various scatterings of the Jews throughout the Greater Mediterranean world and the eastern land of Mesopotamia; i.e. the land into which the Jews were carried in the sixth century BC.

The northern ten tribes of Israel had been carried away into captivity by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world as slave laborers and craftsmen. The Jews of the Diaspora had learned to live within the Greek-speaking (Hellenistic) culture of their captivity. Those of the first century had been born in this culture; consequently, they did not have the same concerns and commitments as the Judeans of Palestine. Thus Paul, a Greek-speaking messianic Jew, schooled as a rabbi, was well suited to go to the synagogues of the Mediterranean world with the message that the long awaited Messiah had come to redeem Israel; but it was not only a deliverance of the homeland of Judaism, but a deliverance of the whole of the human race through a recreation of the human race.

Because the majority of the Jews of the Diaspora had been born into the Hellenistic culture of the Greco-Roman world, their interpretation of Judaism was not the same as that of Palestine; their synagogues were the major center of the Jewish community, the Greek Septuagint was their book of Scripture, the language of worship was Greek, and their interpretations of the covenant given to them by *Yahweh* (*Adonai/Ho Kurios*) was different; especially, their beliefs concerning the coming and the mission of the Messiah.

The second group were not Jews at all; rather, they were *ethnoi* - of the nations (gentiles) who had been attracted to the religion of Judaism; especially, their monotheism and their system of ethics (the ten commandment). We have seen them already among the fifteen different nations in Jerusalem for the Pentecost feast (Acts 2), the Ethiopian nobleman (Acts 8), and the Roman Centurion Cornelius

(Acts 10). These proselytes and the godfearers were not Jews born of Jewish mothers and were not fully recognized as Jews but were always identified as gentile proselytes. Further, these proselytes and godfearers would not likely have understood things as did those who were born Jews, especially the Palestinian Jews. To them the Messiah would be a militant figure, anointed as a warrior king; to the gentiles, as the Greek word *christos* indicates, he would have been someone anointed for a special purpose.

Someone “anointed” (*Meshiach*) was just that, “someone anointed for a special purpose,” which was its meaning in the Hellenistic world. The christological terms Paul uses in this text would suggest that he was not limited to the Palestinian concept of the Messiah. Paul does identify Jesus as David’s offspring (v 23), and the one that the voice in the wilderness was calling forth (v 27), but he also speaks of him as a Savior or Deliverer (v 23), God’s Son (v 23), one who was crucified (v 29), was raised from death (v 30, 33), who was begotten of God (v 33), the one who did not see the corruption of death (v 35), the Holy One (vv 35-37), and “a man” (v 38), indicating that Jesus of Nazareth was a historical figure, not some mythological figure of man’s creative imagination; but the most significant title for Paul is the very title the Jews used to speak of *Yehweh* without uttering the ineffable name, in Hebrew, *Adonai* and in Greek, *Kurios* – Lord (vv 47-49).

Application

Several applications may be drawn from this text; however, the most telling is that this story of Jesus of Nazareth and the depth of conviction of those who believed he was the Messiah appeared to have become very powerful when believed. What must be believed was presented here in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia in Southern Galatia.

This is the first and only speech we have from Paul in which he presents his case for the identity of Jesus. The greatest area of appeal or intrigue for Paul appears to have been the question “Who was he?” First, to the Jews of the Diaspora, he was the long awaited

Messiah, the heir to the throne of David in fulfillment of God's promise of 2 Sam 7:8-16, (Acts 13:23). To Paul he was more than the son of David, he was the fulfillment of the Daniel 7:13-14 imagery, the one called "the son of man" who appears before the Ancient of Days and receives everlasting authority over the human race (Dan 7:13-18), interpreted in the intertestamental Jewish literature as the messianic kingdom. He was also the one who was portrayed in Isaiah 52-53, as the Suffering Servant who was to die because of the iniquity of the people of God. Jesus' suffering of crucifixion and death was in fulfillment of this prophetic image. He was the Holy One (13:35-37), a title used in Psalms 16:10; 17:22; 78:41; 89:18; Isaiah 5:19, 24; 10:17, 20; 12:6; 29:9; 30:15; 43:14; 47:4; 48:17; 49:7; 54:5; 55:5; and 60:14, in which the title is used for both God and his special servant or servants.

That Jesus of Nazareth was a man who came from Galilee in Palestine and was believed to be a prophet sent from God was acknowledged by many (Luke 24:17-21), but he was more as Paul presents in verses 23-38, he was sent by God as a Savior of mankind (v 23); but the title Paul used most frequently for Jesus is the very title used to speak of *Yahweh* - *Adonai* or *Kurios* - Lord (vv 47-49).

Declarations of the identity of Jesus made up the most essential part of most of the speeches of Acts. The power of this message is still the essential appeal of our faith. Why are we not seeing the kind of response to this message today as we see in the first century AD? Perhaps, the reason is that the wonder isn't there any more. Or is it?

Is the identity of Jesus of Nazareth simply a curiosity or is it the most important question ever entertained by the human race? Paul calls his message "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom 1:16). Is this true, or is it only true for those who still have the ability to be filled with wonder?

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Excursus on the Synagogue

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And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. 15: After the reading of the law and the prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it," (13:14b-15).

They Went into the Synagogue

We have here an excellent glimpse of an ancient synagogue service. That the synagogue originated during the Babylonian captivity is the claim of most conservative Jewish scholars. During the three generations the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, especially after the Persian conquest of Babylon, they were given privileges one would not expect for a slave population. This is reflected in the books of Daniel and Esther. When Ezra returned to Jerusalem he was in possession of the *Torah*, from which he read before the people from dawn to dusk. This reading was primarily for the people who lived in Jerusalem, who considered themselves Jews. How did Ezra come by these scrolls of the Law? And further, where did the Jews of the first century come by their copies of the Prophets (major and minor) and the Writings (Psalms - Ecclesiastes)?

The House of Scrolls

The fact that one of the earliest names for the synagogue was (*Beth Ha Sepherim* - House of the Scrolls), which is consistent with the view that the synagogue was born out of the necessity to keep the Jewish faith alive during their captivity in Babylon. It was the lack of knowledge of the word of God that had resulted in Israel's captivity (Hosea 4:6); the restoration of Israel was contingent upon the restoration of God's word in their lives.

The consensus of conservative scholars is that the synagogue came to the homeland along with the Scriptures, and the synagogue was to be the instrument of restoring the Jews to their God through the knowledge of *Torah*. This account of the origins of the synagogue is the tradition of the rabbinic community as evidenced in some of their later writings.

The House of Study

After the return of the Jews to Palestine and also for those dispersed (Diaspora) throughout the Mediterranean world, such "gathering places" could be found in the Jewish sections of cities as well as towns where there were ten men (a *minion*) who would gather to read *Torah*. It was here that those who did not know the Scriptures or could no longer understand Hebrew could have the Scriptures read and 'targumed' [interpreted or translated] to them from Hebrew into Aramaic. Thus, the synagogues were called the *Beth Midrash* - house of study.

By the time of the return from Babylon the language of the Jews was Aramaic, the language of Babylon. On the Jewish Holy Days, the synagogue was a place where prayers were offered at the same time of day that sacrifices were offered in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the place for the reading and hearing of Scripture since the time of Ezra (Nehemiah 8), devotion to the Scriptures was essential to faithfulness to God. There was always a lectionary reading of the *Torah*, as they would read through the *Torah* once every year. Then there may be a reading from the Prophets, which was usually followed by an address in which the leader of the synagogue, a rabbi, or local scholar would discuss the meaning of the reading.

The synagogue was the official and unofficial place where the Jews gathered (from the Greek word for "gathering" - *sunagogue*); on the Sabbath, then on Feast Days, and on other days for other purposes (to be heard by the elders of the synagogue if there was a wrong done to someone); so, it was essentially the "Social Center" of the Jewish community. The non-holy days of were called "the days of congregation" or 'the days of gathering," (*Yom Ha Kenisah*); but

from earliest times the synagogue's association with the study of *Torah* gave it the character of an instructional institution, and this was especially so of the synagogues in the Hellenistic world. In the historical writings of both Philo and Josephus the synagogue was portrayed a place of instruction; in fact the Hebrew word *torah* does not mean law, rather, it means "instruction."

The educational institutions of the Jews have always been closely connected with the synagogue. According to the rabbinic tradition of the third century there were 480 synagogues in Jerusalem, each of them housing a *Beth Ha Sepher* "House of the Scroll," for the reading the Scriptures, and then a "House of Study" (*Beth Ha Talmud*), for the study of the *Mishnah* (Tractate *Megillah* 3.1).

According to some rabbinic sources, the synagogue was the place where the male children received their elementary instruction; perhaps, in an adjoining room or in the courtyard of the synagogue location. "The House of Study," was the place of instruction for the more advanced youth, which in the third century was considered a parallel institution to the synagogue, rather than a part of it.

The Architectural Design of the Synagogue

The most important piece of furniture in the ancient synagogue was the *Torah* chest Ark of the Covenant (taken from the ancient artifact of the Israelites, in which one or more *Torah* scroll and usually some scrolls of the prophets and wisdom writings were kept to be used for Sabbatical and festival lessons.

Next to the *Torah* chest and closely connected with it was the bema, which was a raised platform with a lectern, used for the reading of the lesson and the recitation of certain benedictions. Its name, as well as its use, is generally traced to the scene of Ezra's reading the *Torah* "on a wooden pulpit" (Neh 8:4-5).

There is no mention of the bema in the NT, although some scholars are inclined to consider that "Moses' Seat" of Matt. 23:2, as a bema, serving the same purpose of the elevated chair called the

kathedra (the Greek word for "chair"). But the bema was a raised where one spoke in a public assembly, which was also the place from which the reading of the *Torah* took place. In the excavated remains of ancient synagogues discovered there were one or two rows of stone benches running along the walls on each side of the room.

As an example of the interior of a first century Palestinian Synagogue, Edersheim gives the following description of the Synagogue at Capernaum:

In the ground plan of the Synagogue at Capernaum, which seems the most fully preserved ruin, two pillars in the colonnade are wanting. The so-called 'Ark' would be at the south end; the seats for the elders in front of it, facing the people with their back to the Ark. The lectern of the reader would be in the center . . . the women's gallery was at the north end, where [there were] two columns and pillars of peculiar shape, which may have supported the gallery.

At the south end, facing north is a movable Ark, containing the sacred rolls of the Law and the Prophets. It is called the Holy Chest or Ark, *Aron Haqodesh*, but chiefly the *Tebhah*, Ark. It was made movable so that it might be carried out, as on public feasts [days]. Steps generally led up to it. In front hangs the curtain, [and] a Holy Lamp [was kept burning], in imitation of the undying light in the Temple. Right before the Ark, and facing the people, are the seats of honor, for the rulers of the Synagogue and the honorable. The place for him who leads the devotion of the people is also in front of the Ark . . . In the middle of the synagogue (so generally) is the *Bima*, or elevation, on which there is the *Luach*, or desk, from which the Law is read . . . Those who are to read the Law will stand, while he who is to preach or deliver an address will sit. Beside them will be the *Methurgeman*, either to interpret [when the text is read in Hebrew], or to repeat aloud, what is said [in the case that

the speaker cannot be heard], (Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, pp 434-433).

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