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# THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY AND NEW TESTAMENT BACKGROUNDS

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Ever since the discovery by a Bedouin shepherd in 1947 of some ancient leather scrolls hidden away in a cave in the Judean Desert, laymen as well as scholars around the world have had their interest captivated by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Inasmuch as the original finds included portions of the Old Testament, in manuscripts 1000 years older than most others currently possessed, much of the initial interest was centered upon the scrolls as witnesses to the Old Testament text.

However, it soon became evident that these documents were part of a library, one that was connected with the nearby ruins of Qumran. Archaeological studies, including excavation of Khirbet Qumran in 1951, soon revealed the existence of an ancient religious community with facilities such as dormitories, a common dining hall, cisterns, and a scriptorium, for conducting its distinctive way of life in this isolated spot. Coins found in the ruins helped to date the occupancy. The conclusion reached by scholars was that the community was established around 100 B.C., abandoned, and then reinhabited by the same group until A.D. 68. Later a Roman garrison was apparently stationed there, and still later the revolutionists of the Second Revolt may have used the ruins as a dwelling.

Now it is obvious that we are dealing with a Jewish religious group contemporary with the New Testament scene. Hence it is legitimate to search carefully into these records to enrich our understanding of the Palestinian environment of Jesus, the Apostles, and the Christian faith. Perhaps we shall be able to find explanations for some of the thoughts which are reflected in the New Testament without adequate Old Testament background. We may discover that many of the ideas which we have habitually been attributing to Hellenism or incipient Gnosticism were really quite at home in Jewish thought.

But if we do discover such parallels, we must beware of the serious error of explaining all parallels as "influences." For example, the fact that immersion was practiced as a purificatory rite in the Qumran Community does not prove that John the Baptist was a member of the order, nor that he borrowed this rite from them. Rather we must be content to observe that many of the ideas found at Qumran must have been widespread in Jewish circles in the first century. Our New Testament writers, therefore, were dealing with many concepts and terms which were well known and understood.

I wish to discuss five areas of relevance between the Qumran materials and the New Testament records, although there are many, many more that could be considered.

## THE MESSIANIC IDEA

The term messiah in the Old Testament is the common term "anointed," and was used of those who were regarded as holding office by divine right. Even the pagan king Cyrus (Isa. 45:1) was so designated because he was God's chosen instrument for having Jerusalem rebuilt. Only in

Dan. 9:26 is the term clearly used as the title of an eschatological personage. In the apocryphal and rabbinic literature, however, Messiah becomes a title (e.g. Enoch 48:10, Mishnah Berakot 1.5). LaSor reminds us of the need to determine whether the word is being used in a particular literature as a proper name or as merely a general designation of any who might be of the class of "anointed ones."<sup>1</sup>

In the Qumran materials, the following passages appear:

And they (the members of the Qumran Community) shall be ruled (or: judged) by the first laws with which the men of the community began to be disciplined until the coming of a Prophet and the anointed ones of Aaron and Israel.

1QS ix, 10-11.<sup>2</sup>

Here one notices the reference to a future prophet, and apparently two messiahs, a priestly one from Aaron, and a lay one of Israel.

No one [is allowed to touch] the first part of the bread or [of the wine] before the priest... And there [after shall] the Messiah of Israel reach for the bread, [and then (only) shall the whole congregation say the benediction each according to] his rank."<sup>3</sup>

1QSa ii, 18f.<sup>3</sup>

In this passage the Messiah of Israel is clearly subordinate to the priest who seems to be in all likelihood the anointed priest, i.e. the Messiah of Aaron.

[And the Priest], the Anointed One, shall come with them, [for he is] the head of the entire congregation of Israel; [and before him shall sit the sons] of Aaron, the priests; and the [conveners] of the Assembl (?), the honored men, they shall sit [before him, each] according to his place of rank. And then [shall come the Messiah] of Israel; and before him shall sit the heads [of the tribes, each] according to his place of honor....

1QSa ii, 12ff.<sup>4</sup>

This passage presents the chief messiah as the high priest and head of the congregation, and the second messiah as the political leader, subordinate in rank to the former. It is a description of what may be termed a future messianic banquet. Cf. Mt. 8:11.

Similar concepts appear in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs regarding a messiah of Levi and a subordinate messiah of Judah.

LaSor, however, takes issue with many of these conclusions, and insists that the Qumran literature cannot be pressed sufficiently to establish such a clearcut Messianism. He says: "...the word Messiah in the Qumran writings, partakes more of the nature of a common noun ("anointed one"). There is no clear evidence that any specific personage was known as "the Messiah."<sup>5</sup>

Most other scholars, however, are convinced that Qumran had its doctrine of Messiah. F.F. Bruce states: "The Qumran Community, then, had its messianic doctrine. One point in which it differs from the messianic doctrine of the New Testament... is its expectation of three distinct personages at the end of the age, whereas the Christian Messiah was Prophet and Priest and King in one."<sup>6</sup>

With such ideas regarding Messiah being current in the first century, we have a broader understanding of the question put to John the Baptist in Jn. 1:21 by the deputation from Jerusalem. After disposing of the identification as Messiah, and Elijah, they asked, "Are you the Prophet?," and John's immediate denial shows that he knew exactly what they meant. They must have referred to the prophecy of Deut. 18:15ff., which is mentioned also in the Manual of Discipline (1QS ix, 8-11). The same concept appears in Jn. 6:14 after the feeding of the 5000. Twice in Acts the identification of the prophet of Deut. 18:15 with Christ is clearly made (3:22, 7:37). Compare also the voice at the Transfiguration, "This is my beloved Son, hear ye him," with Deut. 18:15, "a prophet like unto me...him ye shall hear." But obviously not all of our Lord's contemporaries identified the two offices. John's questioners provide one clear instance. Qumran provides another.

The confusion in Qumran over these Messianic personages, however, may help explain the reluctance of Jesus to call himself "Messiah" in any public announcement. To have done so would have caused men to understand the title in the light of contemporary and often erroneous theories. And since the functions of the prophet, priest, and king are combined in the New Testament concept of Jesus the Christ, it was much better to avoid the technical title as a general rule during His ministry.

Could Jesus have been accepted as Messiah by such an Essenic group as found at Qumran? Allegro discusses the hypothetical possibility and suggests that there would be nothing to preclude the acceptance of Jesus by the Qumran sect as the Messiah of David (i.e. of Israel), since the idea of suffering, death, and resurrection would have been no great problem. However, he goes on to show how the disciples of Jesus would have been faced with the problem of following a master with a subordinate position in the Messianic Reign. And by the time the Epistle to the Hebrews was written Jesus was clearly placed in the role of priestly messiah as well as Davidic messiah, and this would be contrary to Qumran doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

One additional difference between New Testament Christology and the Messiah (or Messiahs) of Qumran is the absence of any hint of the pre-existence of Messiah as viewed by Qumran.<sup>8</sup>

## JOHN THE BAPTIST

Attempts to identify the Qumran Sect with known Jewish groups have produced numerous suggestions. Among the proposed identifications are the Pharisees (particularly the scribes), Sadducees, Zealots, Ebionites, Dositheans, and Therapeutae.<sup>9</sup> By far the most widely accepted conclusion, however, is to see in the Qumran Community a group of Essenes, or at least an Essenic-type of sect.

The Essenes are not mentioned by name in the New Testament, but they are described in some detail by the first century historian Josephus (Wars, II, 8, 2-13), and he is our chief source of information. (Antiq. XIII, 5, 9; XV, 10, 4-5) Theologically they were akin to the Pharisees, in their veneration for the Law, and their belief in the supernatural. To this was added an ascetic way of life. They lived on the western side of the Dead Sea, as well as in towns of Judea and perhaps Syria. They had community of property, admission came only after a probationary period,

and marriage was generally forbidden (though some Essenes did marry, says Josephus). They were people with high moral values, repudiating any indulgence of sensual desire.

Similarity to many of the Qumran practices is obvious, and one also notices a certain kindred spirit in early Christianity. The emphasis upon spiritual values as opposed to material concerns and the community of goods are unmistakable parallels. Can it be that there was some contact between this desert community and the teachings of Jesus and his followers? If so, then the most plausible point of contact would be through John the Baptist. The theory goes something like this: John was born as the child of aged parents (Lk. 1:7). Since Luke 1:80 and 3:2 tell us that he spent his early life in the deserts, it is conceivable that his parents had died, and he was brought up by Essenes, perhaps at Qumran. After all, someone had to take care of him as a child in the desert. We do know that Essenes who denied themselves marriage would take children to rear as their own (Josephus, *Wars*, 11, 2). John's ministry was in the wilderness of Judea, the very territory of Qumran. Furthermore the Qumran Manual of Discipline states that the community was located there away from the habitation of perverse men in order to "go into the wilderness to prepare the way, i.e. do what Scripture enjoins when it says, 'Prepare in the wilderness the way...make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" (1QS viii, 1-19, Gaster translation). The reference is to the study of the Law in order to prepare themselves for the messianic age. Now it must be observed that it was this very passage from Isa. 40:3 which John used in his initial preaching, as recorded in all four Gospels. It must be noted, however, that if John actually did have contact with Qumran, he must have been dissatisfied with the way in which the Qumranians were fulfilling Isa. 40:3. For he made no attempt to get his converts to abandon the nation and join the ascetic community in the desert. The baptism of John was of a similar type to Qumran in that it was not initiatory put purificatory. Yet it differed in that it did not demand a separation from Israel.

Before one is ready to adopt any such theory on the basis of certain fascinating parallels, he must consider also the differences, and remember that parallels do not necessarily constitute contacts. This theory contains a great many unproved identifications, and the student will do well to reserve his final conclusions and not form rash judgments.

First, the identification of Qumran with Essenism is far from certain. Although certain similarities are unmistakable, there are dissimilarities. Qumran had women; the Essenes did not. Qumran allowed a limited amount of private property; Essenes did not. The copper scrolls from Qumran indicate that the community apparently collected silver and gold; the Essenes did not. Qumranians allowed slavery, oath-taking, anointing with oil; Essenes forbade all such. Qumran apparently had no antipathy to animal sacrifice; Essenes were not admitted to the temple and never attempted animal sacrifices. Since, however, the Essenes had numerous communities, some with differing practices, the most we can safely say at present is that Qumran was a group similar in some respects to what we now know of the Essenes.

Furthermore, identification of John with the Qumran Community on the basis of the few statements recorded in the Gospels is a most precarious business. In the absence of any positive statement, and from the very obvious difference in his preaching and the demands laid upon his converts, the identification is most unlikely. His mixing with outsiders, and his evangelistic call would have excluded him from membership in the community. One scholar expresses it thus:

That John may have grown up in the Qumran group is a possibility that cannot at present be denied. But if he did, it seems to me that he must have parted company with them when he began to preach his gospel of repentance. With true prophetic insight he placed the Messiah within Israel, and he left for the Messiah the task of separating the true Israel from the false (Matt. 3:11-12).<sup>10</sup>

### CERTAIN TEACHINGS OF JESUS

It is recognized by even the most casual reader of the Gospels that Jesus in his teaching ministry emphasized spiritual values in contrast to the mere mechanical observance of laws and regulations. That such should be so in a time when the religious leaders of the nation had stressed the letter to the almost complete ignoring of the spirit is entirely understandable. The fact that other voices were likewise raised against an unspiritual religion should not surprise us nor should it minimize our conception of the uniqueness of Jesus, for that lies not primarily in his ethical teachings, but in his Person and the redemption which He accomplished.

Studies in the Qumran literature reveal a similarity to certain ethical teachings of our Lord. This is not true in every instance, by any means. Jesus was not an Essene. On occasion he takes issue directly with a tenet now known to be held at Qumran. But knowledge of this literature does increase our awareness of Jewish thought at this period, and thus enriches our understanding of the audiences which Jesus addressed.

One example is the statement in Matt. 5:43, "You have heard that it hath been said, You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies." Now the statement that one should love his neighbor is in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18), but nowhere can one find Scripture giving the command to hate one's enemies. Yet Jesus avers that his listeners were familiar with that additional idea. Now we know that the Qumranians, as one group at least, held this belief.

Everyone who wished to join the Community must pledge himself...to love all whom He has chosen and hate all that He has rejected (1 QS i, 4, Gaster translation).

To hate all the children of darkness, each according to the measure of his guilt (1 QS i, 10, Gaster translation).

He is to bear unremitting hatred towards all men of ill repute, and to be minded to keep in seclusion from them (1 QS ix, 21f., Gaster translation).

Jesus, therefore, in the Sermon on the Mount denies the validity of this popularly-held belief that love for one's neighbor also involves hatred for enemies. One may conclude that Jesus was familiar with the doctrine (and of course we cannot state that it was limited to the Qumran sect), but He was certainly not in sympathy with it.

Christ's teaching more closely parallels the tenets of Qumran when He deals with adultery and divorce. In Matt. 5:28 Jesus teaches that the sin of adultery goes deeper than the final act; it is involved with the unholy glance. At Qumran we find the following:

Lustful eyes (or, eyes of unchastity). 1 QS i, 6.  
 Those who do not lust after their eyes. 1 QpHab v, 7.  
 Thoughts of sinful lusts and eyes of wantonness. CD iii, 3.11

Regarding divorce, Matthew's Gospel (19:3-9) records Jesus as teaching a much stricter view than Hillel (who allowed divorce for almost any conceivable cause) and perhaps more rigid than Shammai (who allowed divorce for a woman's shameful conduct). In the passage Jesus cited the purpose of God in creation by quoting from Gen. 1:27 and 2:24. His argument was that since God's purpose called for man and wife to be one flesh, any disruption of marriage violates God's will. It is instructive to note the teaching of the Damascus Document in this connection and the reason cited for it: "...fornication by taking two wives during their lifetime, whereas the foundation of the creation is, 'male and female he created them'" (CD vii, 2, Burrows translation).

In conformity with Jesus' teaching about not resisting evil (Mt. 5:38f.), 1 QS x, 17f. states: "I will not repay a man with evil, I will follow a man of power with good, for God has judgment over all life, and he repays each according to his works" (Schubert translation).

However, the incident in which Jesus healed a withered hand on the sabbath, and then reproached his critics, finds our Lord in violation of Qumran teaching. He stated: "What man shall there be of you, that shall have one sheep, and if this fall into a pit on the sabbath day, will he not lay hold on it, and lift it out? How much then is a man of more value than a sheep!" (Mt. 12:11-12 ASV.) The Sabbath regulations in the Damascus Document were more rigid than this. "Let not a man help an animal to give birth on the Sabbath day; and if she lets her young fall into a cistern or ditch, let him not raise it on the sabbath" (CD xiii, 23).

One final instance of our Lord's ministry as possibly relevant to the Qumran literature should be cited. The Last Supper, instituted by Jesus and invested with special significance, was continued as the Agape by the early church, and partaken of along with the sacred symbols of the Eucharist. In the early days of the Jerusalem church, the meal was observed daily. Difference of opinion as to the original setting of this meal is of long standing. It is commonly asserted that it was the Passover Feast, at which Jesus invested certain elements with new significance. However, John's Gospel certainly seems to date this meal as in advance of the Passover. Other problems with such an identification are given by Kuhn, and summarized here.<sup>12</sup>

- a) The Last Supper was a meal enjoyed by a group of men only, whereas the Passover was a family meal. Women and children would have been present. If this be the Passover, where are the women of Mk. 15:40, 16:1?
- b) Why were only the Twelve present? This was not characteristic of meals with Jesus, now would a Passover meal call for such an arrangement.
- c) In keeping with the family character of the Passover, the family head presides; yet Jesus is not portrayed as such, but as leader and master.
- d) At Jewish meals and at Passover, the family head gives the opening blessing over the bread, but another gives the closing benediction over the "cup of blessing." Yet Jesus pronounced both as a matter of course.

Scholars, however, have noted certain similarities between the Last Supper and the communal meal at Qumran. At Qumran only men partook of the meals and only those of the inner circle. Furthermore, the presiding host is the properly appointed leader of the community, who pronounces both the blessings over the bread and the wine at the beginning of the meal.<sup>13</sup> The daily observance by the Jerusalem Church is paralleled by the same custom at Qumran.

Admittedly these parallels are interesting, but what we do with them is of great importance. No one with any respect for all the evidence available would say that Jesus was an Essene, nor that the Last Supper was a meal consciously patterned after Qumran. The differences are too great. Jesus and his followers were not and did not become an esoteric community, withdrawn from society and guarding secret doctrines. Furthermore the early church which perpetuated this meal daily also went every day to the Temple (Acts 2:46), whereas the Judaistic cult remained aloof from it. Finally, there is not the slightest suggestion that anything like the Savior's words, "This is my body which is broken for you," were anticipated by the Qumran observance. And this is the very heart of the Christian significance in the meal. If, therefore, we may see how Jesus took a not-known practice and invested it with new meaning, this is not really different from his methods on other occasions (e.g., washing of feet, baptism). But the procedure of this meal, both in the restricted number of participants and the character of its details, is so germane to the setting that one need not look beyond it for its explanation. It explains itself. It was the natural thing to be done at this particular juncture in the gospel history.

In concluding this section, it should be observed that Jesus could not by the greatest of imagination have been a member of the Qumran Community. He shows a freedom from the Law which finds no parallel in the legalistic spirit of Qumran. He rejected the asceticism which Qumran practiced. Isolated parallels in doctrine are not the sort that demand indebtedness; neither are they the sort for which Qumran could claim origination.

### THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE

Students of John's writings, both the Gospel and the Epistles, have long noted the modified dualism he reflects, in which the world is viewed as containing two realms, one of light and another of darkness. Attempts were usually made to find allusion to Gnostic dualism, and some used these conclusions as a basis for insisting on second century authorship. With the discovery of the Qumran documents, however, the picture has changed. R.E. Brown states: "In no other literature do we have so close a terminology and ideological parallel to Johannine usage."<sup>14</sup>

The passages in John are numerous and well known.

The light shineth in darkness (Jn. 1:5).

Light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil (Jn. 3:19).

He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life (Jn. 8:12).

Et al.

Similar concepts are prevalent in the Dead Sea literature. The name of one document (1QM) is The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness.

Frank M. Cross compares a passage in the Manual of Discipline with 1 John, where the similar concept and terminology are striking.<sup>15</sup>

(God) created man to rule the world and He established two spirits by which (man) would walk until the time appointed for His Visitation (i.e. Last Judgment): these are the spirits of Truth and Deceit (or wickedness). In a source of light are the origins of (the Spirit of) Truth and from a well of darkness the origins of (the Spirit of) Error. The rule of the children of righteousness is in the hand of the Prince of Light (so that) they walk in ways of light; the rule of (all) children of error is in the hand of the Angel of Darkness...and all the spirits allotted to him (attempt to) make the children of light stumble, but the God of Israel and His Angel of Truth are a help to all sons of light (1QS 3:17-23).

Compare to this 1 Jn. 3:17:

Children, let no one lead you astray. He who does righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous; he who commits sin is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. To this end the Son of God was made manifest, that he might destroy the works of the devil. None that is born of God commits sin, for His seed abides in him (so that) he is not able to sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God are made known, and the children of the devil. Everyone who does not do righteousness is not of God.

See also 1 Jn. 4:1-6, especially the phrases "the spirit of truth" and "the spirit of deceit."

This concept of dualism in John is closer to Qumran than to Gnosticism, for Gnostic dualism was physical. Yet John's concept does contain differences from Qumran. In John the leader of the forces of light is the uncreated Word (cf. 1:5, 9:5), whereas in Qumran, the leaders of light and darkness are two created beings. Also in John, victory of the light is in sight (Jn. 1:5, 12:31, 16:33, 1 Jn. 2:8), but in Qumran it is still in the future and the present struggle is waged on equal terms (1QS 4:18-19). In John one becomes a son of light by faith in Christ; in Qumran by accepting the community's interpretation of the Law.

Nevertheless, there was a common theological language, and such familiar phrases as "to do the truth," "life eternal," "light of life," and "that they may become one" are found in these documents as well. This is not to argue that John was a Qumranian, nor even that he was in any way significantly influenced by the sect. But it does point up the fact that the ideas and terminology found at Qumran must have been widespread among first-century Jews. W.F. Albright, the noted Biblical archaeologist, says that the terminology of John's Gospel, which is frequently used as argument for a late date, has Palestinian parallels before the Christian era.<sup>16</sup>

#### THE PAULINE LITERATURE

Certain similarities are to be found in the Qumran texts to the terminology and ideas in Paul's writings. His reference to the "mystery of lawlessness" (2 Thess. 2:7) is much like the "mystery of evil" in the Thanksgiving Psalms of Qumran. And his reference to Belial (2 Cor. 6:15) reproduces a frequently used expression in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Burrows calls our attention to these and other parallels.<sup>17</sup> He notes how Paul's utter distrust of all human righteousness is not unlike certain statements in the scrolls. For example: "I know that righteousness does not belong to a man, nor to a son of man blamelessness of conduct; to the Most High God belong all works of righteousness" (Thanksgiving Psalms, IV).

He further cites an approximation of Paul's doctrine of justification, as found in the concluding psalm of the Manual of Discipline:

As for me, if I slip, the steadfast love of God is my salvation forever;  
 And if I stumble in the iniquity of flesh,  
 My vindication in the righteousness of God will stand to eternity.  
 . . . . .

And in his steadfast love he will bring my vindication.  
 In his faithful righteousness he has judged me,  
 And in the abundance of his goodness he will forgive all my iniquities.

Thus the concept seems clear, that in pre-Christian Judaism there was the belief by some at least that man's righteousness is unavailing, but there is a righteousness of God which He confers. Yet in the Qumran texts we find this righteousness conferred as men followed the precepts of the Teacher of Righteousness (apparently the founder of the sect) and engage in a doing of the Law. With Paul, however, justification is by faith alone, and this faith to be exercised in Christ and his redemptive work. Of a redemption of the sort Christ performed, the Qumran sect knew nothing.

Other parallels might be discussed, but one more must suffice. The heresy combatted in certain of Paul's epistles, particularly Colossians, has always been a matter of concern to scholars. Identification of the Colossian heresy as Gnostic led some to a dating of the epistle in the second century. Yet the presence of Jewish elements (e.g. 2:16) would seem to argue for a sort of amalgamation of Judaistic and early Gnostic teachings. Lightfoot in an earlier day made out a good case for identifying the Colossian heresy as basically Essenism. Our present knowledge of the Qumran sect reinforces this view considerably.

The asceticism at Colosse is quite in harmony with what we find at Qumran. Attention paid to events of the calendar (2:16) are paralleled by the adoption of a special calendar at Qumran, different from normative Judaism. And the warning against certain "philosophy and vain deceit after the tradition of men" and emphasis upon true wisdom and knowledge (Col. 2:3, 8) are particularly applicable to the sectarians, who claimed frequently in the scrolls to possess special knowledge, and who gained this knowledge from the spirit of truth, the prince of lights (1QS 3:13ff.). The puzzling reference in Colossians to angel worship (2:18) may be partly explained by finds at Qumran. The spirit of truth who is to guide men and is venerated as one sent from God is also called the angel of truth. Although information still is lacking as to precisely what form this veneration took, the attention given to an angel as the source of guidance for life can be understood in harmony with Paul's terminology without great difficulty. Hence, even if it may be asserting too much to say that the Colossian heresy is to be strictly identified as Essenism, we can say that it is unnecessary to doubt Pauline authorship on the grounds that the heresy combatted was a much later development. The Dead Sea Scrolls reveal at least that there were tendencies in first century Judaism to adopt certain concepts and expressions which appear also in Gnostic groups at a later time. And the cleavage between Jewish thought and Hellenistic Gnosticism was not as sharp as commonly believed.

The Qumran texts thus have provided much information as to the Palestinian environment of Christianity. Similarities to the NT record, while by no means an indication of indebtedness on the part of either, do reveal that the concepts discussed by John the Baptist, Jesus, and the Apostles, did not fall upon ears totally unacquainted with their terminology. Men were thinking about spiritual matters. Some were dissatisfied with the materialism that had engulfed so many. And the glorious message of the gospel and the New Testament record in which it is embodied were as relevant to the first century as to any succeeding generation.

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