



Sin No More

Liberty, the West, and the Judeo-Christian heritage.

by Rémi Brague

IN 1877, THE BRITISH HISTORIAN Lord Acton wrote two essays on the history of liberty in ancient times and in Christianity. They were meant to be the germinal cell of a general History of Liberty that he never wrote. By Christianity, he meant the Christian area, which we would rather call Christendom, meaning mainly medieval Europe as it developed in the wake of the Emperor Constantine's conversion. Lord Acton's insights remain extremely valuable, so valuable, as a matter of fact, that, even if I possessed the necessary competence, I could hardly wish to replace them with a deeper or more accurate account.

Instead I should like to supplement Acton's insights by studying religion rather than culture, i.e., Christianity rather than Christendom. Moreover, I will focus on the common ground of Christianity and Judaism: on the books known to the Jews as the Tanakh (an acronym for "Torah, Prophets and Writings") and to the Christians as the Old Testament. These books remain the core of what we call, rather clumsily and for want of any better term, the

"Judeo-Christian" heritage. I will deal with the New Testament in a more summary way.

Two Assumptions

I WILL TAKE MY BEARINGS from two basic assumptions. The first is that liberty is not a merely *political fact*. It strikes its roots in a deeper soil, in the very conception of man and of God that underlies a religion, and even in the way each religion conceives of the interplay of God and man in history. People who considered themselves Jews or Christians may not have been faithful to the claims and obligations of their religion. In examining the Judeo-Christian inheritance, therefore, it will not be enough to describe the concrete activities of Jews and Christians in giving institutional expression to the idea of liberty. We shall also need to understand the principles that governed their conduct, and the ideals to which they aspired.

Hence I will not discuss the passages from both Testaments that deal with social phenomena in which liberty and the lack thereof were involved,

e.g., the laws on slavery. Slavery was in the ancient world a common practice; it was part and parcel of the economic system and few people ever thought of criticizing it, let alone abolishing it. In the city of rebellious slaves led by Spartacus, there were still slaves. Little wonder that the Bible does not say anything totally revolutionary about it, but contents itself with advocating a more humane treatment of slaves.

My second assumption is that the idea of liberty was not a sudden invention, springing into existence as part of the great intellectual revolution that we know as the Enlightenment. Although the call for liberty is regularly conceived as some kind of break with Christian ideas and ideals that allegedly held sway over the Middle Ages, this conception is far from the truth. Western liberty is a far older tradition, the sources of which are to be looked for first and foremost in the medieval period. Lord Acton already could point this out. More was done after him by students of the medieval legal tradition and of the conflict between the papacy and the empire, in which both sides, interestingly, chose as their catchword *libertas*, i.e., “freedom.”

I would like to go further back, to the very foundations of the medieval worldview, i.e., to the sacred books of the Bible. I will take them in chronological order. From time to time, I will compare their content with what matches it in the Koran, which draws upon some biblical stories, and underline the peculiarities of the two sets of texts.

The Old Testament

WE SHOULD NOT EXPECT TO FIND in the writings of the Old Testament anything resembling a philosophical concept of freedom. First, because there are no concepts in the Bible. Ideas appear there under the guise of narratives. Second, because, wherever liberty is mentioned, it means a social status, viz. the status of people who are not slaves.

The same holds true of Greek philosophers, for whom freedom meant the condition of a self-governing city, and also that of their citizens who, unlike slaves, were owners of themselves. The metaphysical

idea of free will is hardly older than the Fathers of the Church, and owes its first clear statement to St. Augustine. At the same time, an important idea of freedom is implicit in many Old Testament passages. We have only to make it explicit, in order to perceive its closeness to our thinking today.

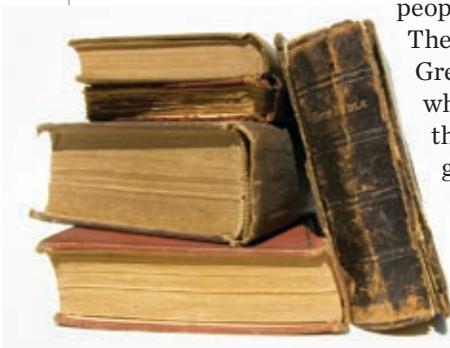
Creating Free Beings

WHEN ANCIENT ISRAELITE SAGES REFLECTED on the absolute beginning of all things, they put freedom at the center of the relationship between God and the world. The first narrative of the creation tells us that “on the seventh day God ended His work which He had made; and

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He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it He had rested from all His work which God created and made” (Genesis 2:2-3). This way of explaining the legitimacy of the weekly day of rest is grounded on the story according to which God, too, rested after His work: “It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever: for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He rested, and was refreshed” (Exodus 31:17). The Sabbath is free time, time for leisure, for activity, i.e., for the activities that become a free man. The ancient thinkers, who lived in societies of slaveholders, drew a line between what becomes a free man and what we are compelled to do in order to keep things going: tilling the soil, building houses, weaving garments, cooking meals, etc. They named the latter servile, i.e., slavish activities, whereas the former, which alone were worthy of free people, deserved the name of “liberal studies” or “liberal arts.”

Now, the biblical narrative of creation makes possible a leisure that encompasses everybody, not only slave-owners. The Bible stresses the fact that the servants, too, are to be granted a day of rest: “The seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, *thy manservant, nor thy maidservant,*



nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates” (Exodus 20:8-11). This is the social dimension of the Sabbath, which became the thin wedge whereby ancient societies were opened to the pursuit of liberty.

Yet there is more to it. The Sabbath has another, deeper dimension, that we could call a metaphysical one. When the Bible describes God as withdrawing

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from His work in order to enjoy rest, God is described as free. But the world is, so to speak, free *from* God’s action, too, and is allowed to rest. God does not interfere any more with what He has created. On the contrary, He somehow sets His creatures on a free footing. His providence gives them whatever is required for them to be able to “shift for themselves” in the pursuit of what is good for them. The necessary outfit that enables a creature to reach its own good is what we call its *nature*. The biblical God does not create bundles of independent properties that He arbitrarily puts together or asunder; He creates things that are endowed with natures of their own. To be sure, God keeps whatever exists in being, for without His continuous will to maintain them, they would disappear. But He respects the nature of the things He has created.

By this token, something like freedom already exists at an elementary level, even before it becomes conscious of itself in man. Human freedom expresses in a human key a property that belongs to each creature: the property of existing and acting according to a nature of its own. Interestingly, the Koran, which repeatedly praises God’s creative activity, does not mention the rest of the seventh day. As a consequence, it does not contain any law on sabbatical rest. A verse even discreetly criticizes the idea that God could get tired (L, 38). Mainstream Islamic apologetics (Kalâm) later built a whole world-view in which things, and even time, consist of indivisible units or properties that stick together because God creates them afresh, out of nothing, in every instant. Such properties don’t belong together because they express the nature of a thing, but merely because God is accustomed to combining them. No created thing, not even a human being, has a nature of its own, from which it can, as it



were, enter into free relations with its maker. All are forever subject to His will.

To be sure, the biblical worldview agrees in putting God above any fatigue (see Isaiah 40:28). Moreover, the New Testament insists that God does not stop “working” (John 5:17). But the world that God works to maintain is composed of things that are endowed with a stable nature and which spontaneously act in accordance with it.

God’s Activity as Liberation

THE GOD OF THE BIBLE does not only *leave* freedom to His creatures. If those creatures lead a historical life, He *sets them free* by stepping into history. Liberty comes to the fore right at the beginning of Israel’s history, such as the Israelites understood it. Liberty is the very definition of the people of Israel as the people of the Exodus. Israel is not the only people that a divine being is supposed to have led from a former abode or state of nomadic wandering to its present place of permanent residence. On the contrary, this was considered to be a common phenomenon; migrations were seen as the work of God’s hand.

Yet the history of Israel is *the story of a liberation*. The conquest of the Promised Land is the last episode in a process that leads the people to an independent life. The people are said to have been freed from a state of captivity they suffered in Egypt. Whether this matches a historical fact is scarcely relevant. What is important is the kind of experience of God that is implied in such a narrative. When God introduces Himself to His people, He does what we do when we first tell our name, then the trade that we

ply: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2). God’s job, so to speak, consists in setting people free.

Now, this introduction explains the meaning of what follows, i.e., the famous “Decalogue,” which we commonly translate as “ten commandments.” But the word means more exactly ten utterances, for the very first one, which I have just quoted, is not a commandment but a self-description. Yet it provides us with the key to a proper understanding of the so-called “commandments.”

The Code of Free People

THOSE COMMANDMENTS, be they positive or negative, are not expressed with the imperative particle (“do this,” “don’t do that”), but with the particle that invokes or negates a future tense (“thou shalt do this” or “not do that”). They describe the logical consequences of the liberation wrought by God. We have to understand: Because you are now free people, you won’t have to do anymore what slaves do, i.e., you won’t kill, you won’t steal, etc. The word “commandment” has a ring of submission. But the Decalogue is not about submission at all. What we call the laws are the codification of liberty. They don’t limit freedom by setting rules that we are not allowed to trespass. Abiding by the law is nothing more than remaining faithful to the logic of liberation, taking one’s freedom seriously and drawing whatever consequences it might have. In fact, the “commandments” are something like the code of honor of free people, of gentlemen who are aware of “what is not done.” They connect the gift of freedom with the responsibilities that naturally flow from it.

With some irony, we could interpret many features of the Ten Commandments in the light of aristocratic ethics: A gentleman does not bow down to a graven image nor serve it (Exodus 20:5); a gentleman does not tell fibs (v. 7, 16); he does not toil all the time but grants himself and his manservants a day of rest (v. 8-10); he honors his lineage (v. 12); he does not mingle in dirty business like killing, betraying his wife, or pilfering (v. 13-15); he does not even stoop to look at other people’s property (v. 17), etc.

On the other hand, the liberty that the people of Israel enjoy is not that of the aristocratic libertine. The trouble with born gentlemen is that even if they indulge in the most shameful vices, they will do so with perfect grace and propriety, like Mozart’s Don

Juan, never losing their exquisite distinction and manners. As a consequence, they won’t be particular about morality. Even if they “play the game,” they won’t take such things too seriously when none of their peers are watching. On the other hand, people who retain the gnawing consciousness of being, at the end of the day, mere upstarts will normally react by behaving in a more gentlemanly way than “real” gentlemen. They will even slightly overdo things, just to be on the safe side. We can spot something like that in ancient Israel, especially among the prophets.

Liberty for the Slaves

ISRAEL’S PAST LIBERATION FROM EGYPT is constantly brought to memory as a gift, so that liberty cannot be separated from the consciousness of a former bondage. This unpleasant remembrance is almost harped upon: “And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the Lord thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day” (Deuteronomy 5:5). This has consequences for the behavior that is expected of the Israelite towards foreigners: “Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 22:21; see Deuteronomy 10:19).

Israel’s past liberation from Egypt is constantly brought to memory as a gift, so that liberty cannot be separated from the consciousness of former bondage.

Because liberty is nothing natural, but something that was vouchsafed by God, being born a free man loses its relevance, and the difference between true-blue Israelites and the others is played down: “But the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you *as one born among you*, and thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). Also “thou shalt not oppress a stranger: for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9).

Hence biblical liberty is not peacefully enjoyed by a privileged caste. It exists in a dynamic dimension: it must be shared with other people and expanded to the whole of mankind. Freedom introduces a dynamic of liberation. —>

The Bible generalizes aristocratic ethics to a people in its entirety. This may have something to do with a fact that had momentous consequences in Western political theory: The legitimacy of monarchic rule was always implicitly qualified, and often explicitly attacked. Such a critical stance towards

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monarchy was a new phenomenon. In the ancient world, we find from time to time critiques leveled at this or that concrete ruler. More than one Roman emperor was portrayed by Tacitus as a bloodthirsty tyrant and lampooned by Suetonius because of his deviant sexual practices. We find reflections on the respective value of the various political regimes, e.g. in Herodotus, who reports in his *Histories* (III, 80-82) the discussion that allegedly took place between the supporters of those regimes, after a revolution did away with an impostor. The upshot was the choice of monarchy.

The Bible is the only ancient text that contains a critique of monarchy as such, not of this or that concrete king, not as pitted against another political system (I Samuel 8:10-18). The only legitimate rule is supposed to be God's direct rule. This is not a claim in favor of theocracy, if we mean thereby the rule of priests over lay people. It is an appeal to everybody to behave as a priest, as Israel is "a nation of priests" (Exodus 19:6).

Free Discussion with God

THE WAY IN WHICH GOD BEHAVES with His people shows that the Lord Himself respects the freedom of His creatures. This comes to the fore in a scene that several prophets, among the most ancient, repeatedly put on stage: the God of Israel is supposed to have with His unfaithful people a lover's tiff, and even to bring a lawsuit (Hebrew *rîv*) against them. Thus Hosea, a prophet of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century, declares: "Hear the word of the Lord, ye children of Israel: for *the Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land*, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth

blood" (Hosea 4:1-2). Likewise Isaiah, a prophet of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the same period, announces that "the Lord standeth up to plead, and standeth to judge the people. *The Lord will enter into judgment with the ancients of His people, and the princes thereof*: for ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord God of hosts" (Isaiah 3:13-15).

The reasons for God's wrath and desire to litigate with His people have nothing to do with God's own "interests" (supposing this could make any sense), but very much to do with the good of those who most urgently need protection, i.e., the poor.

There is a particularly revealing passage in Micah, another prophet from the eighth-century Kingdom of Judah: "Hear ye now what the Lord saith; Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. Hear ye, O mountains, the Lord's controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for *the Lord hath a controversy with His people, and he will plead with Israel*. O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee? Testify against me. For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Micah 6:1-4).

The powers of nature are called to witness. They are described according to the worldview that prevailed at that time: the earth is seen as a flat surface posited on pillars. But discarding this as obsolete would let an important element go: God and the people are not facing one another. There is a third character in the drama, before which their dispute is being judged. In this case, the part is played by mountains, hills, and the primeval abyss. We would call this character by a name that is lacking in the Old Testament: "nature."

In short, we have entered the realm of law. The dimension of the juridical begins where two litigants contend in the presence of a third, neutral person. God argues with His people on the basis of commonly received moral principles. Those principles are not simply what God happens to *will*. They exist by what later thinkers will call "nature." There is a common ground of basic decency between God and man, a ground on which man can stand even without an explicit knowledge of the God of Israel. This is what Hosea calls "knowledge of God" in the passage quoted above: the "god" there has capital



letters for the translators only. “Knowing God” or “fearing God” means hardly more than abiding by the rules of common decency (see Genesis 20:11).

The Koran does not mention such scenes. The recurrent pattern is: God sends a prophet to a human group and commands that something should be done or avoided; He is not obeyed; the disobedient group is utterly destroyed by some device: a strong wind, an earthquake, a flood, etc. (XXIX, 40.) To be sure, many contradictory discussions between the prophets and their people are reported, but none takes place between God and the prophets whom He sends. Exchange takes place only between beings that exist on the same level. God does not admit any bargain with Him. Little wonder that Abraham’s famous haggling with God about the fate of Sodom (Genesis 18:22-33) should be quickly alluded to, but not told (XI, 74).

Expecting

THE FIFTH CHAPTER OF ISAIAH OPENS WITH a well-known song: “Now will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What

could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?” (Isaiah 5:1-4).

The allegory is quickly explained. God’s vineyard is the country of Israel, the vine is the people, the fruit stands for the latter’s deeds, good or bad. The whole passage belongs to the literary genre of the lawsuit between God and His people: the Israelites are summoned to judge between God and the vine, viz. themselves. Their guilt is, as always, moral in nature: They have denied justice, taken bribes, and so on. The interesting point, however, is the attitude of God. He does not command the vine to produce good grapes. This is what the vine is expected to do (God “looks that...”), because this is what a vine, when it is properly looked after, normally and spontaneously does. To use a non-biblical word, it is the *nature* of the vine to produce grapes. In the same way, God does not, properly speaking, *command* righteous moral behavior. How one should behave is already a matter of common knowledge, which can be brought back to the memory, but not taught. God expects moral behavior to spring forth from human nature, and to spring forth *freely*.

The New Testament

THE NEW TESTAMENT TAKES FOR GRANTED the whole content of the Old. But it was written in cultural surroundings that, unlike ancient Israel, were familiar with conceptual thought. The Greek in which it was written knows the word for “freedom” (*eleutheria*). Nevertheless, freedom is there not only where the word is present, but also where it is not. Jesus’s death, which took place on Easter eve, and his resurrection are thought of on the model of the former Easter, Israel’s liberation from Egyptian bondage, hence as a new exodus. When Luke’s Gospel tells us about the Transfiguration on the Mount (9:31), it explains that Jesus spoke with Moses and Elias about his “departure.” The word used is the Greek *exodos*, in a clear allusion to the first exodus. Jesus’s passion is conceived of as setting man free from a captivity that affects man more deeply than the one the people experienced in Egypt, the captivity of sin.

Sin has been conceived by philosophers and religious people in various ways: as offending God, as trespassing against a rule, as sullyng the purity of our soul, as increasing the burden that chains us to the wheel of *samsara* and condemns us to reincarna-

tion, etc. The New Testament sees sin first and foremost as a weakening of our own liberty.

Liberty is the goal of the liberation wrought by Christ. “Stand fast therefore in *the liberty wherewith*

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Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” (Galatians 5:1). The Revised Standard Version has, more literally: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” The ultimate aim of such a liberation is not leaving one master and falling prey to another. It is the full expression of what we naturally are. The ultimate goal of salvation, mankind’s ultimate hope, is conceived as total freedom: “the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

History as the Realm of Liberty

A PASSAGE FROM PAUL draws the whole picture of the way in which God respects freedom in His dealings with man. It is the grandiose



beginning of the Epistle to the Ephesians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings *in heavenly places* in Christ: According as He hath chosen us in Him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself” (1:3-5). The originality of the New Testament outlook becomes still more spectacular when we compare this passage with a verse from the Koran: “And (remember) when thy Lord brought forth from the Children of Adam, from their reins, their seed, and made them testify of themselves, (saying): Am I not your Lord? They said: Yea, verily. We testify. (That was) lest ye should say at the Day of Resurrection: Lo! of this we were unaware, or lest you should say: It was our fathers who associated partners with Allah” (VII, 172).

The common point is the fact that the scene is supposed to have taken place before the creation of the world, or at least of mankind, in the highest heavens. The big difference lies in man’s answer. In the Koran, it is given immediately afterward by Adam’s posterity, miraculously put in its entirety in front of God. The whole of mankind has pledged allegiance to its Creator, and accepted, even before mankind’s existence, the fundamental doctrine of the Koran, that God is one, without partners. This has positive and negative consequences. Positively, every son of Adam, i.e., each and every human being, has submitted to God from the outset. Islam (submission) is therefore the original and “natural” religion of mankind, whereas, according to a frequently quoted utterance of Muhammad (*hadith*), the other religions are foisted upon children by their parents. Islam is the religion into which each child is born. This explains why no formal act of joining the community of believers, such as the Christian baptism, is required.

On the negative side, disobedience cannot be excused. The lack of submission to God’s will is not tough luck, or an error, nor a simple moral failure; it is kind of a treason. It involves falling away from a religion that was implanted in all of us by the Creator. Not only does Islam forbid apostasy, therefore, as an inexcusable offence; it has a tendency to regard the adherents of other faiths as already apostates, guilty of the primary sin against God.

In the Epistle to the Ephesians, a question is implicitly asked: Will mankind accept God’s benediction, and the whole plan of salvation that it

implies? But the answer is not given. Of course, God expects that man will react positively and accept the offer. But in the time that stretches before the creation of the world nothing whatsoever takes place, except God's initiative. What actually happens, including any possible answer of man, does so in history. History is the very answer. But it is an open one; nobody knows whether the answer of mankind will be, in the long run, positive or negative. We can only hope that "all manner of things will be well." History is the stage on which the drama of liberty is played.

Conclusion

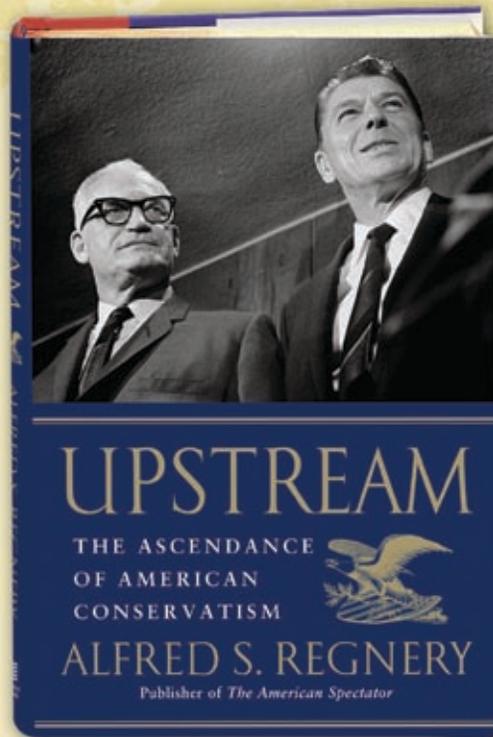
WHAT CULTURES THAT WERE INFLUENCED by the Jewish and Christian religions made of the ideal of liberty that I have been finding in both Testaments is a task for historians. Impartial historians will observe how miserably the ideal and its realization often jarred with one another. On the other hand, they will have to acknowledge that free institutions hardly ever developed in places that were not influenced by Jewish and Christian ideas. Outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, it has been rare for thinkers to suppose that God endowed us with a nature of our own, that freedom is part of that nature, and that it is through the exercise of freedom, and the errors that inevitably stem from it, that we fulfill God's plan. The mainstream tradition of Islam has certainly regarded freedom, both personal and political, as valuable—but valuable largely as a means to submission. And when Lord Acton tells us that "liberty is not a means to a higher political end; it is itself the highest political end," he is echoing voices that can be heard in all the sacred books of our tradition, from the Torah to the Epistles of St. Paul. ❧

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