

# GNOSTICISM

(Outline)

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## GNOSTICISM

The term "Gnosticism" is derived from the Greek word, *gnosis*, meaning "knowledge." *Gnosis* in the New Testament was used by Paul as a function of the spiritual man (I Cor. 2:11), and it could come to some in special measure (I Cor. 12:4). Paul regarded *gnosis* as the discerning of the ways in which the divine purpose of salvation had led man, especially the people of the Covenant, and Scripture was the basis of this *gnosis*. Gnosticism is a degenerate form of the true *gnosis*.<sup>1)</sup>

It is a difficult thing to define Gnosticism satisfactorily, for the term has been used to cover a wide variety of speculative religious phenomena. These phenomena are encountered from Gaul in the West to Iran in the East, from the first century of our era to at least the ninth.<sup>2)</sup> Believers in *gnosis* were often self-designated as Gnostics and others may have only been called Gnostics by their opponents. Anyway, these Gnostics boasted "that they alone have sounded the depths of knowledge," and these "deep things" they pretended to have searched through a speculative process not founded upon Scripture.<sup>3)</sup>

Gnosticism may be described generally as the fantastic product of the blending of certain Christian ideas...particularly that of redemption through Christ...with speculations and imaginings derived from a medley of sources (Greek, Jewish, Parsic; philosophies, religions, theosophies, mysteries) in a period when the human mind was in a kind of ferment, and when opinions of

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1) Hermann Gustav Eduard Krueger, "Gnosticism," *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, IV, 496-497.

2) R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity*, p. 6.

3) Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 497.

every sort were jumbled together in an unimaginable welter. It involves, as the name denotes, a claim to 'knowledge,' knowledge of a kind of which the ordinary believer was incapable, and in the possession of which 'salvation' in the full sense consisted. This knowledge of which the Gnostic boasted, related to the subjects ordinarily treated of in religious philosophy; Gnosticism was a species of religious philosophy.<sup>4)</sup>

In the study of the origin of Gnosticism, we are confronted with several conflicting theories. Whatever theory is accepted depends on how the concept of "knowledge" is to be understood and just how much of the religious or philosophical elements are emphasized. But the case remains that Gnosticism is actually the product of syncretism. Modern scholars have advanced in turn Hellenic, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Iranian origins and every possible combination of these with one another and with Jewish and Christian elements.<sup>5)</sup>

The principal sources of Gnosticism are summed up by Mansel (in his work on *The Gnostic Heresies*, 32) as three...Platonism, the Persian religion, and the Buddhism of India. The first two have strong bases for acceptance as sources, but the third must be doubted. Mansel thinks that Buddhism gave to Gnosticism the doctrine of the antagonism between matter and spirit and also the germ of Docetism, but there is no reason to believe that Buddhist doctrines were so soon known in the West.<sup>6)</sup>

Turning back to the first two origins of Gnosticism which Mansel speaks of, we find that philosophical forms and tendencies came from Platonism. Philo, the great Alexandrian commentator, made

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4) James Orr, *The History and Literature of the Early Church*, p. 87.

5) Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p. 33.

6) John Rutherford, "Gnosticism" *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, II, 1241.

his mark as he tried to interpret the ancient Jewish Scripture by the aid of Greek philosophy. He drew a sharp line between God and the material world. To him, creation was a gradual molding out of matter and evil arose. Thus, Alexandrian philosophy sought to unite Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion, setting a trend toward Gnosticism.<sup>7)</sup>

The Zoroastrian or Persian system contributed to Gnosticism its speculation regarding the origin of evil and much of its teaching concerning emanations. The foundation of the Persian system was the assumption that there existed two original and independent powers of good and evil, of light and darkness, Ormuzd, the wise Lord, and Ahriman, the wicked spirit. These powers were believed to be equal, and each supreme in his own domain.<sup>8)</sup>

From the foregoing discussion we can conclude that Gnosticism gathered essential strains of thought from Hellenism and the Persian religion. But some have emphasized the philosophical side too much and tried to explain Gnosticism by the ideal of knowledge on the new religious forces which came to the front at that time such as Christian thought. In the higher type of gnostic speculation, there are some genuine theoretical aspirations which the early Church Fathers bear witness to, and this led Adolf von Harnack to his famous formulation that Gnosticism was "the acute Hellenization of Christianity," while the slower and more measured evolution of orthodox theology was to be regarded as its "chronic Hellenization." His view must be seen as only a half-truth. It treats Gnosticism as a solely Christian phenomenon, which research has disproved, and it falls short in both the terms that make up the formula, "Hellenization" and "Christianity."<sup>9)</sup>

Though more will be said later about the relationship of Gnosti-

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7) *Ibid.*

8) *Ibid.*

9) Jonas, *op. cit.*, pp. 35—36.

cism and Christianity, there seems to be need at this point to mention what essential elements, if any, went into Gnosticism from Christian thought as well as from Judaism. Lightfoot maintains a non-Christian basis of Gnosticism and is content to quote Baur (*Christliche Gnosis*, p. 52) on the matter, who says, "Though Christian gnosis is the completion of gnosis, yet the Christian element in gnosis is not so essential as that gnosis cannot still be gnosis even without this element. But just as we can abstract it from the Christian element, so can we also go still further and regard even the Jewish as not strictly an essential element of gnosis." <sup>10</sup> Lightfoot says in another place that his definition of Gnosticism presupposes only a belief in one God, the Absolute Being, as against the vulgar polytheism. This one simple element of belief then explains all its essential features as a speculative system. There was no need for the intervention of specially Christian or even Jewish doctrine, though two elements were added from Christianity... (1) the idea of Redemption and (2) the person of Christ. Gnosticism had a problem in explaining the former and finding a place for the latter, and in its attempt to find the solution underwent various modifications. It had to relate redemption in some way to the fundamental Gnostic conception of the antagonism between God and matter, and it had to find some place for Christ in the fundamental Gnostic doctrine of emanations. <sup>11</sup>

I tend to think that Lightfoot, just as Harnack, in attempts for simplification of Gnostic definition and origin, has an extreme view here that falls short of the whole truth. Further discussion in this paper should bear out this idea and show that Christian and Jewish elements were essential in Gnosticism.

Before a discussion of the nature and characteristics of Gnosti-

10) J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Note 1, p. 81.

11) *Ibid.*, Note 2, p. 81.

cism, it is appropriate to list some of the sources from which scholars have come to know about Gnosticism. The literary works of the Gnostics were of all kinds--Gospels, Apocalypses, Acts, hymns, odes, psalms, homilies, theological literature, dogmatic and philosophic treatises, critical investigations, commentaries on sacred writings and prophetic revelations, and mystery books. Not very much of this primary material has been preserved. In tact are (1) the letter of the Valentinian Ptolemaeus to Flora; (2) *Pistis-Sophia*, the two "Books of Jeu," and a Gnostic work of unknown origin, in Coptic, and also an English translation of *Pistis-Sophia*; (3) three Gnostic writings of the second century; "Gospel according to Mary," "Wisdom of Jesus Christ," "Acts of Peter," in Coptic.<sup>12)</sup> Mention should also be made of (4) the *Gospel of Truth*, one of the major books of the Valentinians and found about 1945 at Nag-Hammadi in Upper Egypt.<sup>13)</sup>

The secondary sources come from the polemical works of the early ecclesiastical writers, and though the views are defective in spots, this source is very important and it was the only source (apart from Plotinus' treatise) of our knowledge until the nineteenth century. The works of the Fathers Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Origen, and Epiphanius in Greek and Tertullian in Latin have their place here. Of importance also is an extremely valuable collection of Greek *Excerpts* from the writings of Theodotus, a member of the Valentinian school of Gnosticism, representing its Eastern branch. This collection is found among the works of Clement of Alexandria.<sup>14)</sup>

The nature of Gnosticism was determined by the questions it asked and the answers it found for these questions. The two questions on which they concentrated their energies and professed

12) Rueger, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

13) Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

14) *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

to hold the key are: How can the work of creation be explained? and, How are we to account for the existence of evil? The problem which all Gnostic systems set themselves to solve was how to reconcile the creation of the world and the existence of evil with the conception of God as the absolute Being.<sup>15)</sup>

Immediately the question arises in the study of Gnosticism, Is it a philosophical system or a religion? The first and most important point in defining Gnosticism, to quote Grant, is that "it is a religion of saving knowledge, and the knowledge is essentially self-knowledge, recognition of the divine element which constitutes the true self. To this recognition is added a bewildering variety of myths and cultic practices."<sup>16)</sup> Bultmann speaks of it generally as "a redemptive religion based on dualism"<sup>17)</sup>

The early combaters of Gnosticism recognized its philosophical characteristic to the exclusion of the religious and thought of it merely as a cosmological system instead of a soteriological one. But to the Gnostics, gnosis is religion. Redemption came through knowledge, and this was only possible for the spiritual man who has come from heaven and is prepared for eternity. Gnosis is the gift of grace which is imparted to the 'spiritual man' (a synonymous term to Gnostic), and it develops with his growth and enables him to solve the riddles about him. The means of solving these questions varied according to the spiritual elevation of the questioner: dualistic and pantheistic, mythological and pagan, Oriental and Hellenistic, mystical and profoundly thoughtful, speculations contributed their several strands to the composite fabric. But they always brought redemption back to the divine revelation as manifested in Christ.<sup>18)</sup>

15) Lightfoot, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

16) Grant, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

17) Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, p. 162.

18) Krueger, *op. cit.*, pp. 498—499.

That Gnosticism is a religion and not a philosophy can be seen in the effort of its advocates to form associations. It was hard to determine where the school stopped and the church began, and discrimination was necessary in classifying the various sects. Organization on a mystic basis was most distinct with the Oriental sectaries included under the designation of Ophites. In almost all Gnostic communities, it was customary to have a variety of mystic consecrations and symbolic rites at the beginning and end of religious services. There was also a moral aspect to the way of salvation, and it took one of two forms...asceticism or libertinism.<sup>19)</sup>

Further light may be shed on the nature of Gnosticism and its religious character by the following quotation of authoritative note:

These little gnostic sects and groups all lived in the conviction that they possessed a secret and mysterious knowledge, in no way accessible to those outside, which was not to be proved or propagated, but believed in by the initiated, and anxiously guarded as a secret. This knowledge of theirs was not based on reflection or scientific inquiry and proof, but on revelation. It was derived directly from the times of primitive Christianity, from the Saviour Himself and His disciples and friends, with whom they claimed to be connected by a secret tradition, or else from later prophets, of whom many sects boasted. It was laid down in wonderful mystic writings, which were in the possession of the various circles.

In short, Gnosticism in all its various sections, its form and its character, falls under the category of mystic religions, which were so characteristic of the religious life of decadent antiquity. In Gnosticism, as in the other mystic religions, we find the

19) *Ibid.*, p. 499.



same contrast of the initiated and the uninitiated, the same loose organization, the same kind of petty sectarianism and mystery-mongering. All alike boast a mystic revelation and a deeply veiled wisdom.<sup>20)</sup>

Before passing on to a listing of the main characteristics of Gnosticism, another question of its nature must be answered. Was Gnosticism a heresy of the Christian church, or not? Some scholars write on the assumption that a Gnostic was a heretic, and the Church Fathers usually viewed Gnosticism as a heresy. It seems that the question can only be resolved with the knowledge of who the Gnostic was and of what sect he was a member.

Robert Law in *The Tests of Life* (p.26) declares that Gnosticism should not be regarded as a heresy. It came from the outside into the Christian church and was not the perverting of the Christian truth. It worked its way into the church as an alien and then spread its corrupting influence.<sup>21)</sup> The question of Gnosticism as heresy is connected with the previous question of the Christian elements in Gnosticism; thus, the view of Gnosticism herein taken must be that of a heretical movement.

The characteristics of Gnosticism may be stated as follows: (1) Dualism, which was absolute in some systems. Matter and spirit were separated and matter was regarded as essentially evil, the source of all evil and not created by the Supreme Being. (2) Docetism.....A denial of the true humanity of Christ, whose body was only an appearance or else the Messiah made use of a human body only temporarily. Such resulted from the theory of the inherent evil of matter. (3) Emanations. The problem of the creation of matter and evil by the Supreme Being was solved by a series of aeons or emanations extending between God and the

20) Wilhelm Bousset, "Gnosticism," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, XII, 153.

21) Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p.1241.

visible world. The more remote the aeon from the Supreme Being, the more degraded it was. The Demiurge was one of the most degraded of the emanations and was the Creator of the universe as distinct from the Supreme Deity. (4) Hostility to Judaism, ..... Jehovah was regarded as an ignorant and imperfect being by some and by others as positively malignant and actively hostile to the true God. (5) Rejection of much Scripture-All the Old Testament and all the New Testament except the Pauline Epistles and parts of the Gospels were rejected. (6) Essentially a striving after system-Men were dissatisfied with detached truths and sought to bring all truth into absolute harmony. (7) An aristocratic system-The knowledge of supposed mysteries placed one in the highest category of existence. The Gnostics were 'ispiritual' (capable of apprehending the divine mysteries) while the great mass of humanity were 'sarkical' (fleshly, animal), though a part was 'psychical' (capable of reasoning about earthly matters). (8) Fatalistic-All the Gnostic systems saw man as helpless because of creation. He could do nothing good to free himself, but was absolutely dependent upon aid from without. (9) Great contempt for the flesh. Two results came from this...overcoming the flesh by rigid asceticism or an indifference to the flesh because of a dependence upon the spirit, which led to licentiousness. (10) Redemption through Christ, who was Divinely mediated to deliver the world from the dominion of evil.<sup>22)</sup>

The one Gnostic characteristic that especially offended orthodox Christianity was dualism. The dualism of the following subjects is significant: (1) Dualism in theology and cosmology-The supreme God (of the New Covenant) was separate from the creator of the world (God of the Old Covenant). This uprooted Christianity from its historical soil. (2) Dualism in Christology-Christ was the divine

22) Albert Henry Newman, *A Manuel of Church History*, I, 183-184.

aeon sent to redeem the spiritual that is in the material, but the supermundane Christ is distinguished from the historical Jesus. (3) Dualism in anthropology—There were spiritual men with material embodiment and there were material men whose deterioration into matter kept them from being an object of redemption. (4) Dualism in soteriology—Redemption was separation of spirit from matter. It began at the present and was characterized by asceticism or libertinism and was complete in the future, leaving no place for the resurrection of the body.<sup>23)</sup>

The classification of the Gnostic "sects" is a difficult task because of the general inclusion of Gnosticism. No single character marks all the Gnostics and no others, nor does a single character always bring together allied sects and no others. Various methods of classification may be used, but all characters must be taken into account if the classification is to be anything near satisfactory.<sup>24)</sup>

One method of grouping and classifying the Gnostics is as follows: (1) The Ophites; (2) the Judaizing Gnostics, chief among which were followers of Cerinthus, of Valentinus, of Basilides, and of Bardesanes; (3) the Anti-Judaistic Gnostics, who were followers of Saturninus, Cerdo, and Marcion; (4) the Gnosticizing pagans, which was mainly represented by the Borborites or Borborians; (5) and later the Manicheans and New Manicheans.<sup>25)</sup>

Although the limits of this study do not permit a discussion concerning Simon Magus (Cf. Acts 8), it is well to mention him before considering the generally accepted systems of Gnosticism. Nevertheless, some authorities class Simon Magus with Gnosticism. The Church Fathers regarded him as the father of all heresy.<sup>26)</sup>

23) Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 499.

24) H. M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History to A. D. 313*, p. 33.

25) Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

26) Jonas, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

He set up quite an elaborate system and associated himself with a disreputable woman named Helena. Many of the Samaritans worshipped them as male and female principles of deity. Menander was the most noted of Simon's immediate disciples.<sup>27)</sup>

A further discussion of Gnostic systems shall fall into six heads, each of which has some particular significance or special characteristic worthy of noting.

(1) Cerinthus-He really stands on the border line between Ebionism and Gnosticism. The authority of Polycarp gives us the story that the Apostle John fled from the baths when he learned that Cerinthus was also there.<sup>28)</sup> He is mentioned as the earliest of the Gnostics known to us by name. The preserved accounts indicate that he taught that the world was created not by the Supreme God, but by an inferior power, and he also taught a docetic theory of the Incarnation. Irenaeus testifies that the Gospel of John was written to oppose that form of Gnosticism taught by Cerinthus, and by the Nicolaitans before him.<sup>29)</sup>

(2) The Ophites-They chiefly represent a heathen Gnosticism before its full development. The ophite sects get their name from the word *ophis*, 'serpent,' and they honor it as the symbol of intelligence. They consider the serpent's part in the Fall of Man as meritorious act, since the Creator was an ignorant and imperfect being, Ialdabaoth, the Son of Chaor.<sup>30)</sup>

(3) Valentinus-"The greatest of the Gnostics,"<sup>31)</sup> and his system was the most elaborate and most popular of those developed in Egypt. He appeared in Rome as a propagator of his system about 135 A.D. Thirty aeons were supposed to have joined in projecting Jesus, whose Incarnation was apparent, and he was to aid the

27) Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

28) Gwatkin, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

29) Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p. 1246.

30) *Ibid.*

31) Gwatkin, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

spiritual nature in escaping into the *pleroma* (divine fullness), which meant redemption. The God of the Jews was the Demiurge.<sup>32)</sup>

(4) Basilides—He was an Alexandrian philosopher of powerful intellect. His view was that the world is continuously evolved from a *pansperma* or “seed of the world.” Two great Archons rule it. There are no aeons, but the highest “light” descends through the successive spheres till it rests on Jesus. The completion of the process is when the Divine element of sonship is drawn out and restored to God.<sup>33)</sup> His philosophy was fundamentally pantheistic and his favorite designation of God was the “Non-existent One.”<sup>34)</sup>

(5) Saturninus—He was the founder of Syrian Gnosticism, and is said to be the disciple of Simon and Menander.<sup>35)</sup> There is a strong dualism and gloomy asceticism in his system. Tatin, Justin Martyr’s disciple, became perverted to this sect, believing the usual theory of aeons and the idea of a Demiurge. His asceticism was very extreme, condemning marriage and animal food.<sup>36)</sup>

(6) Marcion—He was a native of Pontus and taught in Rome c. 140—155 A.D. He is like the other Gnostics in making a distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament, and he holds to the usual gnostic dualism and docetism. But his system has been described as an overstrained Paulinism. Instead of stressing knowledge, he stresses faith. His literary work is important. His *Anthitheses* contrasts the OT with the NT, and he also drew up a canon of Scripture. This canon only contained Luke in a mutilated form and ten Epistles of Paul. Marcion’s sect or “church” endured for several centuries.<sup>37)</sup>

“All the gnostic systems had one feature in common, viz. that

32) Newman, *op. cit.*, pp. 188—189.

33) Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p. 1246.

34) Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

35) *Ibid.*, p. 186.

36) Rutherford, *op. cit.*, p. 1246.

37) *Ibid.*, pp. 1246—1247..

they regarded the OT and the NT as revelations of two different Gods, and considered the mission of Christ to proceed from a higher power than the God of the Jewish religion, who was identified with the Demiurge, or Maker of the world' (Mansel, *The Gnostic Heresies*, 45).<sup>38)</sup>

Gnosticism made its appearance in the Christian church in the apostolic age, though it was hardly conceived other than in certain tendencies in some cases. Paul met up with it and several of his epistles verify this. The first of the Pauline Epistles wherein a distinct gnostic teaching is found in its attack upon the Christian faith is The Epistle to the Colossians. Peter and Jude indicate much trace of antinomian development of Gnosticism through their Epistles. References to Gnosticism are also found in the Apocalypse, the First Epistle of John and the Gospel of John. Concerning the First Epistle of John, it had a distinct polemical purpose; "there is no book of the NT which is more purposeful in its attack of error." It deals with the following aspects of Gnosticism: (a) Gnostic claims to "knowledge." (b) Its loveless nature; Gnosticism was distinguished by an unethical, loveless intellectualism. (c) Docetism, which was a denial of the Incarnation and the human life of Christ. (d) Antichrist, which is docetic Gnosticism. (e) Antinomian side (cf. 3: 7—10).<sup>39)</sup>

Christian doctrine finds its antithesis in Gnosticism in three main areas: (1) God and the World—The Gnostics think of God as the ultimate, nameless, unknowable Being, of whom they speak as the "Abyss."<sup>38)</sup> The dualistic theory sees the Supreme Being as perfect, but the material world is alien to the Divine nature. Therefore, the world was created by a flow of emanations or aeons from the fulness of the Deity. The gradation is numerous and each successive one becomes lower spiritually until at last the world of man and

38) *Ibid.*, p. 1247.

39) *Ibid.*, pp. 1242—1243.

matter is reached, the abode of evil. (2) Evil-Its origin follows from the doctrine of God and the world. God must self-limit himself, and this first brings forth Divine powers (the Pleroma), which were previously hidden in the Abyss of His being. The Pleroma becomes the principle for further development of life. As life unfolds and each grade seeks farther from the purity of God, it finally blends with matter and evil originates. (3) Christ and Redemption-There is no need for Christ in Gnostic systems and no room for redemption in the Christian sense. Christ is only the highest of the aeons, an originated being and not God. Sin to the Gnostic is only a quality inherent in the body and in matter everywhere, and redemption is each man's efforts to secure emancipation from the flesh...from physical evil.<sup>40</sup>

What were the results of the Gnostic attack upon Christian truth and what influence did it have on the development of Christianity? Three things may be said in answer to this question. (1) A polemical spirit developed which brought about a formulation of Christian doctrine. In a defense of the apostelic faith, Christian teachers had to study not only the writings of the false teachers, but they had to give diligent study to the Old and New Testament Scriptures and the writings of the Greek philosophers on which the teachings of the heretics so largely rested. This study led to the philosophical statement of Christian doctrines, and in general, this result was good. (2) The churches were stimulated to introduce into their services of worship rites and accessories similar to those of the Gnostics. (3) The Gnostic influence was greatly responsible for the amalgamation of Christian and pagan thought and life which changed the character of Christianity into that of the third century and following.<sup>41</sup>

The seriousness of the Gnostic attack upon Christianity with its

40) *Ibid.*, pp.1244 -1245.

41) Newman, *op.cit.*, pp.193-194.

antithetical spirit may be summed up as follows:

Gnosticism undermined Christian monotheism by its distinction of the Creator from the Supreme, Christian morals by its opposition of the philosopher to the unlearned, Christian practice by its separation of knowledge from action; and it cut away the very basis of the Gospel whenever it explained away its history. In every case it had got hold of truth on one side—the reality of evil in the world, the function of knowledge in religion, the difference between the letter and the spirit: but fragments of truth are not enough for a Gospel which is false if all truth is not summed up in Christ. Therefore there could be no peace between the Gnostic *illuminati* and the Christian churches.<sup>42)</sup>

Thus, the Church did right in opposing this dualism with all possible vigor. The crisis evoked by the assaults of Gnosticism was the greatest and most momentous in its consequences of all the convulsions to which Christianity was exposed in the course of its growth in the soil of antique civilization. Had Gnosticism not been overcome, then Christianity had forfeited its peculiar genius; torn loose from its historic foundation, it would have been drawn into the general vortex, thus perishing like the religions of collapsing paganism.<sup>43)</sup>

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42) Cwatkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 68—69.

43) Krueger, *op. cit.*, p. 499.



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