

*Review Essay***Slavery, Historiography, and Theology****Jennifer A. Glancy***Le Moyne College*

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In *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions*, J. Albert Harrill,<sup>1</sup> author of *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, returns to the topic of slaves in early Christianity, primarily but not exclusively the New Testament. While much of this material was already available as articles and chapters in edited volumes, Harrill succeeds in pulling the material together into a coherent and compelling volume. The whole is more than the sum of its already worthwhile parts, which is not always, or even typically, the case. The range and maturity of this learned work guarantee that it will be widely cited in work on early Christian slavery, as it should be. The publication of *Slaves in the New Testament* is a noteworthy event for students of early Christian social history.

Therein lies the rub, or at least, a rub. (I'll point out a few other rubs along the way.) In *Slaves in the New Testament*, Harrill provides ample material toward a social history of early Christian slavery, yet he resists writing such a history. The reader looks in vain for early Christian slaves and slaveholders, finding instead literary creations. Harrill writes, "I find that most slaves in the New Testament and early Christian literature are *literary* products, drawn from classic stock scenarios that reflected the conventional Roman value of *auctoritas*" (p. 196). He does indeed establish that many slaves in the New Testament are literary

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<sup>1</sup>) HARRILL, J. Albert, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006. Pp. xiv + 322. ISBN 0-8006-3781-X.

products, and we could adduce further evidence, e.g., the slaves (*douloi*) in Jesus' parables, on whom Harrill comments only briefly. (The parable that most engages his attention, the parable of the dishonest manager [Luke 16:1-8], does not employ the term *doulos*.) Yet in other cases, for example his treatment of household codes, Harrill's focus on literary typology results in neglect of evidence regarding actual Christian slaves, some living in Christian households and belonging to Christian masters.

We could call this "The Case of the Disappearing Slave" and line it up next to parallel mysteries elsewhere in contemporary scholarship on Christian origins: The Case of the Disappearing Body (storyline—references to bodies, however putrescent and just plain smelly, are actually "about" something else, often power relations in the community); The Case of the Disappearing Woman (storyline—references to women in literary texts do not constitute sound evidence regarding the history of women in antiquity). I caricature. Shelly Matthews says it better. She writes, "I have argued that the best feminist historiography pays close attention to representation in texts while still attempting to reconstruct a history of women. In the words of Gabrielle Spiegel, one needs both to 'reject the reduction of literature to a reflection of the world' and to 'reject the absorption of history by textuality.'"<sup>2</sup> In *Slaves in the New Testament*, history is absorbed into textuality. Slaves are absorbed into stock characters.

Matthews concludes her article with a reference to a 2000 vote by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) to disavow women pastors. Harrill's epilogue revolves around two votes by the SBC, a 1995 vote repudiating its historical support for slavery and apologizing to African-Americans and a 1998 vote stipulating that a wife should "submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband" (p. 195). Is it coincidence that both Matthews and Harrill conclude with references to SBC votes? I don't think so. Historiography in the field of Christian origins is complicated by the powerful role that invocation of biblical authority plays in American political discourse, both past and present. Even today the

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<sup>2</sup> Shelly Matthews, "Thinking of Thecla: Issues in Feminist Historiography," *JFSR* 17 (2001), pp. 39-55, esp. p. 54.

acknowledgement that the New Testament countenanced slavery has political dangers; how much more so in the nineteenth century.

Stanley Stowers argues that New Testament critics sometimes proceed as though interpreters of Pauline teaching on slavery fall into two camps, with social conservatives discovering a socially conservative Paul and social progressives discovering a socially progressive Paul. Stowers suggests a third category, that of "social progressives who find a conservative Paul and who want to expose the problem of teachings that have often been used for reactionary purposes."<sup>3</sup> Harrill, I take it, belongs to this third camp, the camp where I am also at home. My acknowledgement of the complicity of early Christian discourse and practice in the history of slavery is politically motivated. As I've learned from friends and family members who work with survivors and perpetrators of physical violence and sexual coercion, we can't begin to undo traumatizing damage until we acknowledge it.

In reading *Slaves in the New Testament*, I wondered repeatedly whether Harrill's recent work constitutes a repudiation of his dissertation, which I would characterize as a work of social history. In the end, I don't think so. Harrill does not so much deny as sidestep the possibility of writing social history. At times he is convincing. At other times not. I'm curious about his recent estimate of his earlier work: Do Paul and Ignatius draw on stock scenarios about slaves in their comments about manumission? If so, and I think it would be hard to deny altogether that they echo stereotypes about slaves, does this obviate their usefulness for social history?

When I began to write about slavery in the New Testament, the usual response of biblical scholars who learned of my interest was, "Oh, you're writing about Philemon." That I had little interest in Philemon puzzled them—what else was there to say? (A verdict that some, reading my book, still hold.<sup>4</sup>) Perhaps Harrill has had similar experiences. He writes, "But there were real slaves among the early Christians, and we know one of them by name—Onesimus. Surely, one might think, in this case we can avoid stock figures and types and get some actual historical information

<sup>3</sup>) Stanley Stowers, "Paul and Slavery: A Response," *Semeia* 83-84 (1998), pp. 295-311.

<sup>4</sup>) Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

about a flesh-and-blood Christian slave" (p. 6). I share his skepticism. The stories told about the Onesimus-Philemon-Paul triangle are just that. Stories. Telling such stories can be a useful hermeneutical exercise. The stories have more or less historical plausibility. In the end, however, we are unable to *know* what events motivated the letter.

Harrill introduces another story into Philemon scholarship, but I can't tell how seriously he wants us to take the story. "This reading identifies the letter's genre (its style, contents, and function) in a particular kind of document. That document was the 'journeyman apprentice' contract" (p. 14).<sup>5</sup> Harrill notes that Paul's vocabulary and themes in Philemon overlap with vocabulary and themes of apprentice contracts. This reading of Philemon focuses not on the letter's prehistory, how Onesimus found himself in Paul's company to begin with, but on its future. Harrill invites us to read the letter, that is, as a proposal that Philemon agree to apprentice Onesimus to Paul for service in the gospel. Harrill's argument is loose. "Apprentice contracts end," he notes, with "the promise to return the slave, using the language of receipts ([verse] 12)" (p. 15). Problem: Verse 12 appears not at the end but in the middle of Philemon's twenty-five verses. Harrill admits that there are likely to be doubts about his "journeyman-apprentice" hypothesis, and he cites some of the reasons for those doubts. He acknowledges, for example, that parallels in language extend not only to apprentice contracts but more broadly to documentary evidence pertaining to slavery. My central doubt is this: The Epistle to Philemon is not a contract. The letter does not detail who is responsible for providing Onesimus with food and clothing or who will pay taxes on Onesimus. The letter does not indicate whether Paul will pay Onesimus wages or whether Philemon will pay Paul for transforming a useless slave into a useful slave. The letter does not list days off or specific penalties (e.g., additional workdays) for failing to deliver stipulated service—all matters I would expect to be addressed in an apprentice contract. The letter is not countersigned or dated. Why

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<sup>5</sup> Although Harrill suggests at one point that "the Epistle to Philemon is a letter of reference" (p. 15), his wider argument seems to be that the structure and vocabulary of Philemon are best understood in the context of apprenticeship contracts, what he terms "the journeyman-apprentice hypothesis" (pp. 14-16).

would ancient readers interpret it within the genre of apprenticeship contracts?

Harrill is tentative in proffering his apprentice contract hypothesis. I raise these criticisms in detail because my reservations recur about Harrill's understanding of how genre and stock characters actually function for writers and readers. Harrill writes, "I talk less about real slaves and more about stock character types that the ancient writers created. One might object that literary conventions are conventions precisely because they reflect real life. Such claims, however, are more often asserted than proven" (p. 16). Fair enough. By the same token, Harrill is vague throughout the volume about how the genres and stock characters he analyzes at length would have informed the composition and reception of Christian texts. Harrill writes, for example, "This exegesis suggests that Paul used stock formulae of slaves in apprentice contracts, probably familiar from his manual labor associated with the weaving industry, to 'think with,' perhaps without realizing the wider cultural habit in which he participated" (p. 15). Is this sufficient to suggest an identification of the letter's genre in the journeyman-apprentice contract? Or, has Harrill simply shown that Paul uses some terminology and concepts related to the practice of apprenticeship of slaves, terminology and concepts familiar to us from the genre of apprentice-contracts? Rather than demonstrating that references to slaves in New Testament text dissolve into ancient literary convention, Harrill shows that an ancient practice, the practice of apprenticing slaves to increase their value, leaves traces on a Christian text.

Harrill's treatment of Philemon appears in the introduction to the volume. What is wanted, especially given Harrill's diffidence concerning the viability of his apprentice contract hypothesis, is not only more consistent and precise articulation of the particular question of the epistle's relationship to the apprentice contract. What is wanted, especially in the volume's introduction, is a broad and coherent treatment of the ways that literary convention, especially genre and stock characters, imbue meaning.

Chapters one and two argue that Paul styles himself as a slave in his literary self-representation. In chapter two, Harrill's argument concerns Paul's admissions in 2 Corinthians 10-13 about his weak bodily presence. I have elsewhere signaled significant disagreement with Harrill's argu-

ment in chapter two, which is based on previously published material.<sup>6</sup> (I will not rehearse that disagreement here except to comment that the difference between Odysseus' self-inflicted whipping and Paul's presumably-public beatings at the hands of Roman and synagogue authorities is non-trivial.) Chapter one analyzes Paul's slave persona in Romans 7. Harrill argues rightly that appreciation of the rhetoric of ancient slavery is crucial to understanding Paul's self-styling in Romans 7. "The question that I bring to the text is how an ancient *Roman* audience would have most likely heard Paul's discursive 'I,' especially in a letter whose opening words assert a slave persona: 'Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ' (1:1)" (p. 18). The story that Harrill tells in chapter one is compelling, even moving. The force of that story is contingent on audience recognition of the actual, non-rhetorical suffering of those who were sold into slavery and even of those already enslaved who were sold to new owners.

Why does Paul choose a *slave* for his persona, Harrill muses early in chapter one. In responding to that question, Harrill does not refer to the Philippians hymn, a text to which he alludes, according to the (excellent) index, only obliquely, in his final chapter on the use of the New Testament in the American slave controversy. Just as Paul begins Romans with a self-designation as slave of Christ, he begins Philippians with the designation of himself and Timothy as slaves (*douloi*) of Christ (1:1). Paul's discursive I, including his self-styling as slave, bears some relation, I believe, to the representation of Christ-as-slave in Philippians.<sup>7</sup> In Galatians, another letter where Paul calls himself slave of Christ (1:10), Paul even claims that it is no longer Paul who lives but the crucified, hence servile, Christ (cf. Philippians 2:6-8) who lives in him (Galatians 2:20).

Paul's corporal hosting of the abased and crucified slave Christ is key, on my interpretation, to his self-designation as *doulos Christou*. In chapter four Harrill posits agricultural handbooks as a relevant context for thinking about the early Christian household codes. I'm convinced.

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, "Boasting of Beatings (2 Corinthians 11:23-25)," *JBL* 123 (2004), pp. 99-135, esp. p. 129 n. 113.

<sup>7</sup> Discussion of ancient slavery as a context for the Philippians hymn would usefully begin with Sheila Briggs, "Can an Enslaved God Liberate? Hermeneutical Reflections on Philippians 2:6-11," *Semeia* 47 (1989), 349-357.

He argues, "The warrant common among the Christian domestic codes identifies the believing householder as an elite slave, called the *vilicus* in Roman culture, who 'knows' his and her own subordination to another Lord" (p. 103). I will say more about chapter four later, but I am, with some reservations, convinced. Reflection on Paul's self-designation as *doulos Christou* links chapters one and four, and here I disagree with Harrill, who, following Dale Martin, avers, "Key is taking seriously the metaphor 'slave of Christ' as a title of Christian leadership" (p. 103). Harrill argues that the householder serves as *vilicus*/slave of Christ, subordinate to the Lord and therefore responsible for ordering the lives of those subordinate to him.

But is this what Paul means by slave of Christ? I have suggested an alternative reading. At stake are competing readings of "slave of Christ," either as a "title of Christian leadership" (Martin, Harrill) or as a self-designation of humility and self-abasement. *Tapeinophrosunē*<sup>8</sup> is the way Paul refers to the novel virtue he espouses, "the voluntary abasement of the self and one's body" (see Philippians 2:3).<sup>8</sup> Harrill makes a telling slip. He lists four uses of the phrase "slave of Christ": Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Galatians 1:10, and Mark 10:43 (emphasis added; p. 103). In Mark, however, Jesus does not use the phrase "slave of Christ" (how peculiar if he did). Jesus says, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all" (10:43b-44). Jesus does not name his followers "slaves of Christ." Rather, he tells them to serve one another as slaves. He does not tell them to claim the position of *vilicus* but the position of "slave of all," the slave who ranked beneath other slaves. Paul does not quote this saying of Jesus, yet he paraphrases its sentiment in Galatians: "Through love become slaves to one another" (5:13). No one is called to be *vilicus*; rather, the community is called to reciprocal mutual enslavement. Harrill's assimilation of Jesus' disorienting mandate in Mark 10:43 to the Pauline self-designation of "slave of Christ" allows him to elide the self-abasing reading of "slave of Christ" that I think does greater justice to the fullness of Pauline discourse, a self-abasing reading that centers not on authority (qua *vilicus*) but on mutual service and even embrace

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<sup>8</sup>) Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: The Passions of the Martyrs," *JECS* 4 (1996), pp. 269-312.

of the role of slave of slaves. My disagreement here is not based on historiography or methodology but on theology.

In chapter three, Harrill argues that recognition of the context of Roman slave comedy helps us understand the function of the slave Rhoda (Acts 12:13-16) and parable of the Dishonest Manager (Luke 16:1-8). My critique, which centers on the story of Rhoda, a story Harrill characterizes as “a slapstick bit of situation comedy” (p. 59), questions Harrill’s understanding of how genre and stock characters actually function for readers. Harrill argues that Rhoda typifies “the *servus currens*, the comic ‘running slave’ familiar from Greek New Comedy, its adaptation in the Roman *palliata*, and its iconography in artifacts such as frescoes, mosaics, and terra-cotta figurines” (p. 60). All the examples that Harrill develops, however, are from Roman comedy, and all involve male slaves. My questions: Since Acts of the Apostles is not a theatrical comedy, would readers and auditors of Acts recognize a stock character primarily associated with comedy-on-stage? Does genre affect audience expectations and reactions? If not, why bother invoking genre?

I don’t think that readers and auditors of Acts would recognize Rhoda as a *servus currens* who wandered in, lost, from a play by Plautus. Perhaps it would be helpful if Harrill said more about the *servus currens* in “mosaics, frescoes, and terra-cotta figurines,” although such artifacts seem likely to lack the narrative structure he argues the audience of Acts would presume. Moreover, not only are all the “running slaves” Harrill cites male, but Harrill even suggests that the comedy derives in part from their “unmanly lack of emotional control” (p. 61). Females, too, can be typed as unmanly, but female unmanliness is not that funny. Part of the stock routine of the *servus currens* is that he (Harrill’s choice of pronoun) announces the urgency of the news he is to deliver and drools over the reward he anticipates for delivering the news. Rhoda does not have such a monologue, but Harrill suggests, “An ancient audience familiar with the *servus currens* stock figure would have likely seen Rhoda’s flighty delight as a sign not of her faith but of her lust for a reward” (p. 64). Harrill owes his readers some larger theory of how genre and stock characters shape expectations. We have a *female* slave, who is not in a comedy, who does not announce her expectation of a reward, but somehow the auditors of Acts of the Apostles are supposed to recognize her as a *servus currens* and laugh at her greediness. I’m not convinced.



Harrill offers this reading of Rhoda as a rebuff to New Testament scholars who see Rhoda as a realistic and liberating figure. He does not explore the work of other New Testament scholars who have argued against the contention that "Rhoda's genuine, assertive behavior to speak her mind 'breaks down' the oppressive hierarchy between master and slave—revealing Luke's supposed subversion of slavery as a social institution" (p. 60). In this journal, for example, F. Scott Spencer argued that, despite Peter's dramatic reading of Joel—"Even upon my slaves, both male slaves and female slaves, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophecy" (Acts 2:18)—the voices of female slave characters in Luke-Acts are trivialized and effectively dismissed. Although the high priest's female slave (Luke 22:54-62), Rhoda, and the fortune-telling slave (Acts 16:16-28) all speak the truth, their voices are spurned by Peter, by the Christians gathered in Mary's house, and by Paul. "Rhoda's witness," Spencer concludes, "is stifled and stigmatized as surely as that of the other slave-girls."<sup>9</sup>

Rhoda marks an episode in our mystery, *The Case of the Disappearing Slave*. Is Rhoda a historical figure? Perhaps, perhaps not. Representation of the community's contempt for the female slave is literarily inflected. I'd still try to glean an insight for social history: What evidence we have suggests that Christian communities (at least by the time Luke wrote) treated slaves as lesser members of the Church.

In chapter four Harrill convincingly argues that agricultural handbooks help us locate the moral discourse of at least some household codes, that is, those household codes that address both masters and slaves (Colossians, Ephesians, *Didache*, *Doctrina Apostolorum*, and *Epistle of Barnabas*), though not necessarily those addressed only to slaves (1 Peter, 1 Timothy, Titus). Agricultural handbooks assign a central role to the *vilicus*, the elite slave manager/bailiff who exercised authority over the slaves beneath him while subordinating himself to the authority of the slaveholder. Harrill argues that the householder of the household codes, at least of the household codes that address slaveholders, serves in a parallel position to the *vilicus*, guaranteeing the orderly conduct of subordinates while submitting to a higher authority. Harrill concludes, "The use

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<sup>9</sup> F. Scott Spencer, "Out of Mind, Out of Voice: Slave-Girls and Prophetic Daughters in Luke-Acts," *BibInt* 7 (1999), pp. 133-155.

of the figure as a metaphor for freeborn masters expands the legitimacy of slavery as a totalizing ideology and implicates early Christianity more deeply in the social reality of the institution" (p. 107). Harrill emphasizes the "theological triumphalism" (p. 85) of many New Testament scholars who claim the household codes subvert hierarchical values of the Roman Empire. He gives less attention to other New Testament scholars who reject such triumphalism. John Barclay, for example, cautions against a benign interpretation of the Colossians household code. Noting that the slaves of Colossians are subject not only to the optic supervision of their owners but also to a spiritual panopticon, always observed by God, Barclay concludes that the Colossians household code "comes extremely close to sanctioning the present hierarchical structures as if they were supervised and supported by the ultimate Master, Christ."<sup>10</sup>

Instruction to treat slaves justly and fairly is not a Christian innovation. I've yet to see an ancient pagan or Jewish work that advises treating slaves unjustly and unfairly. What constitutes just and fair behavior (as what constitutes fair and balanced news treatment), however, is open to question. As Harrill demonstrates, and the demonstrations could be multiplied, on an ancient view, just and fair treatment of slaves was understood to include and at times even demand physical violence and coercion. The agricultural handbooks supply an important route for reaching this conclusion. Moreover, I am convinced that the role of the householder of (some) household codes is illuminated by examination of the role of *vilicus* in the handbooks.

My disagreement with Harrill in this chapter is a question of emphasis, of the place of the chapter in the argument of the book, and ultimately of historiography. I have noted that Harrill concludes that "most slaves in the New Testament and early Christian literature are *literary* products, drawn from classic stock scenarios that reflected the conventional Roman value of *auctoritas*" (p. 196). Harrill directs his treatment of the household codes to highlight the treatment of the Christian master in light of the construct of the elite slave, the *vilicus*. By this insight, however, Harrill deflects attention from the *actual* slaves addressed in Colossians, Ephesians, the extra-canonical household codes, and even

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<sup>10</sup> Barclay, John M. G., "Ordinary but Different: Colossians and Hidden Moral Identity," *Australian Biblical Review* 49 (2001), pp. 34–52, esp. p. 48.

more, 1 Peter, 1 Timothy, and Titus. If one minimizes attention paid to those Christian slaves, some owned by Christian slaveholders and living in Christian households, then it is easier to conclude that most slaves in early Christian literature are *literary* products. The Case of the Disappearing Slave. History is absorbed into textuality.

Chapter five focuses on the significance of the inclusion of the slave trader in 1 Timothy 1:10. Harrill's treatment is authoritative. As Harrill argues, condemnation of the slave trade was common in the Roman Empire as it was, in differing circumstances, among many supporters of slavery in the Americas. Harrill's comparison of ancient criticism of slaver traders to contemporary stereotypes about used car dealers is apt. In both cases, the concern of the criticism does not arise from concern for the well-being of the merchandise but for stereotypically bamboozled buyers.

I find chapter six, which treats the representation of slaves as domestic enemies in post-canonical sources, the strongest of the book. Harrill argues that Christian apologetic works perpetuate widely held Roman caricatures of slaves as potentially destabilizing intruders within the household. Slaves were spies, surveying every activity of the household. Slaves "betrayed" the owners to whom they owed, on the slaveholders' view, obedience and silence. At times they invented false tales to impugn their "betters." Their violations of trust were taken as evidence of their weak character, even when those betrayals were coerced by torture. (How chilling to recall, at the start of the third millennium, the barbarity of Greco-Roman practice of relying on torture to interrogate slaves, in an era when non-citizen bodies are perceived to lack the rights of citizen bodies, in an era when the indignities visited on "alien" bodies extend from suspension of *habeas corpus* to torture, e.g., waterboarding and beatings so severe they sometimes lead to death.)

Slaves betray, but the Roman literary tradition also relies on the image of the faithful slave. The mirror images of the slave-as-traitor and the faithful slave color early Christian martyrdom accounts. Harrill analyzes the representations of slaves in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*. Martyrdom accounts are often taken to exemplify a putative early Christian transcendence of distinctions between slaveholder and slave. Harrill rightly argues that, far from subverting stock representations of slaves, the account of Blandina's martyrdom

reinforces such stock representations. Harrill might extend this argument by comparing the representation of Blandina's suffering with the representation of the deaths of Perpetua, *domina*, and the slave Felicity. Far from dissolving the distinctions between freeborn woman and slave, the martyrdom account reinforces the distinctions between the two brave women. When Felicity was crushed in the arena, Perpetua lifted her up. The narrator tells us that, in the end, Perpetua took the frightened hand of the neophyte gladiator and guided it to her own throat. She died by the sword like the aristocrat she was. Or, more accurately, an aristocratic code informed narration of her death.

Harrill treats the use of the New Testament in the American slave controversy in chapter 7. The chapter reminds the reader of the urgency of the questions raised in the volume. That urgency underscores my insistence on the importance of working toward a history of early Christian slavery, a project that would emphasize ancient practices rather than ancient literary convention. Such a history would be a partial history in more than one sense; we must acknowledge that our sources do not permit naïve or positivist appropriation. Such a history would focus on Christian slaveholders as well as on Christian slaves. Twenty-first century Christians (and non-Christians) are not scandalized by the presence of slaves in the first churches. They are scandalized by the presence of slaveholders and the practice of slavery in the first churches. Neither Christian slaveholders nor the practice of Christian slaveholding can or should be dissolved into literary convention.

I offer these comments as an invitation for further elucidation by Harrill. I learned a great deal about ancient representations of ancient slavery from *Slaves in the New Testament*. Despite Harrill's demurrals, I also learned a great deal about the practice of ancient slavery, about ancient slaves, and about ancient slaveholders. I expect I will learn still more from his response to these remarks.

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