

# BEWARE the Leaven of the Pharisees

By Jamie McNab

Jesus told His disciples to “BEWARE of the leaven of the Pharisees,” Matthew 16:6.

But that warning was for 2,000 years ago wasn't it? There aren't any Pharisees around today, are there? And they certainly wouldn't represent a DANGER to us in the Church of God, would they?

The answer may surprise you!

In fact, we'll find that there is MUCH DANGER from the teachings — or leaven — of the Pharisees TODAY! Jesus' warning applies to you and me!

There are three good reasons for studying into the life and teaching of the Pharisees.

Firstly, there are *whole chapters* of the New Testament that record Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees. Knowledge of who, and what, they were can help us to better understand many New Testament episodes.

Secondly, it wouldn't do us any harm to review the ATTITUDE of the Pharisees, and make sure we don't share some of their worst attributes!

But perhaps most importantly, we need to be vigilant about the actual TEACHING of the Pharisees. We will come across it from time to time in the Church of God. And it is not always easy to spot. Quite a number of people in the Church have already been led astray. Often, it is presented as “drawing near to our Hebrew roots” to help us better understand the plan of God.

The position of some teachers in the COG is as follows:

“Jesus, our Sovereign Lord, taught us TO FOLLOW the teachings of the Pharisees. In Matthew 23:2-3, Jesus said, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: ALL therefore WHATSOEVER they bid you observe, *that* OBSERVE AND DO.’ So Jesus told us we must heed, and follow, the teachings of the Pharisees. Well ... the Pharisees teach that Passover

is on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Abib. The Pharisees teach that we must observe Pentecost on Sivan 6 every year. We must do the same.”

What about this Scripture then? If we are to do WHATEVER the Pharisees tell us — and they teach and keep the Holy Days at different times to those we were given through Herbert Armstrong — then perhaps we have been IN ERROR all these years?

And that is *precisely* what some in the Church of God do teach!

As one well-known COG author puts it: “Jesus plainly showed the Pharisees had authority which came down from Moses' time and authority. They were the official, sanctioned interpreters of the Law. Therefore, when it comes to God's Law, the dates of holy days, and the calendar, their rule was the official word -- except where their determinations clearly differed with and conflicted with the words of Christ Himself! This passage (Matthew 23:2) would clearly imply that the Pharisees are the ones WE SHOULD FOLLOW when it comes to observing the date of Pentecost!” And the author goes on to explain why we should always keep Pentecost on Sivan 6 — just like the Pharisees.

Closely associated with the teaching of the Pharisees is a movement among many in the Churches of God to lean on JEWISH UNDERSTANDING and PRACTICE, in an attempt to draw nearer to the Truth of God. The underlying belief is that THE JEWS have a greater knowledge and understanding of the Old Testament than WE could have — “after all they speak Hebrew, don't they, and are God's special people.” This teaching is also in error. Jewish teaching of today is largely based on the doctrine of the Pharisees.

So let's look more closely at the Pharisees. Let's find out WHO they were, what they taught, and see WHETHER we should indeed obey their teachings.

### **How Religious Were the Jews?**

At the time of Jesus, the overall population of Palestine is estimated to have been 2-3 million. There was NO SINGLE RELIGION which all Jews adhered to. There were various groups such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Essenes, Zealots, Herodians and the Qumran Sects — not unlike our countries today with their Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Quakers, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and 250-plus other “Christian” denominations.

The people of Palestine were, for the most part, NOT RELIGIOUS. Around 95% of the population didn't belong to any of the religious groups.

Very few Jews ever attended synagogue. The synagogue in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, is estimated to have had a capacity of only 75 people! Even if there were two or three services on a Sabbath, there would only be a couple of hundred people who could have attended. We don't know the exact population of Nazareth at that time, but Josephus tells us that the SMALLEST city in Palestine had 15,000 ... so even if Nazareth was a small city, that meant that only around 200 out of 15,000 would have attended Sabbath services. That's not many! Or consider Capernaum, which was the *chief city* in the Galilee. It had only one synagogue and had a capacity of only 500.

MOST Jews were not religious. Only a very small minority, of around 5%, were active in religion — and they basically disagreed with each other, at times violently! And one thing is for sure: **their religion was not the one given to them through Moses!**

As Dr Ernest L Martin put it in his Good News articles of 1960, entitled *Is Judaism the Law of Moses*: “Judaism is the religion OF THE JEWS — not of Moses or God! It is a man-made religion.”

And those in the Church of God who today want to go to the Jews “for insight” ought to pay great attention to that statement!

### **The Pharisees**

The Pharisees were the biggest sect among the various Jewish religions but, even so, Josephus recounts that there were only about 6,000 Pharisees in total (out of the population of almost 3 million). They were, however, very influential, since they had direct control over the synagogues and the schools. They also “looked” very religious! Because of their influence in society, they frequently came into contact with Jesus during His ministry. They were virtually always HOSTILE to Jesus and His teaching.

Was there one agreed set of religious beliefs that set the Pharisees apart? No. As Dr Martin explains: “They were a group of men, and even some women, representing many different walks of life — teachers, ministers, businessmen and politicians. They had voluntarily bound themselves

together in a covenant ... best described as a religious fraternity or association. The object of their association was two-fold (1) to observe in the strictest manner ... all the ordinances concerning Levitical purity and (2) to be extremely punctilious in all connected with their religious dues. THEY HAD NOT BOUND THEMSELVES TO ACCEPT ANY CREED OR SET OF DOCTRINES. AT NO TIME WAS IT REQUIRED OF ALL PHARISEES TO BELIEVE ALIKE. The Pharisees represented a group of men with unlimited differences of opinion.”

This is an important point to grasp. There was NO AGREEMENT ABOUT DOCTRINE among the Pharisees. There were many disagreements. They did not all teach the same thing. There were many RIVAL SCHOOLS of thought among the Pharisees, two of the best known being the schools of Hillel and Shammai. There was often bloodshed between the different “varieties” of Pharisees. Dr Martin states: “The points over which they DISAGREED were practically innumerable.”

The “Orthodox” Jewish teaching that we come across today is essentially the teaching of the school of Hillel.

So what did the Pharisees teach in the synagogues? Virtually anything! Dr Martin states: “The majority of the synagogues’ rulers were the Pharisees because of their Levitical purity and observance of religious dues — not because they taught a unified creed. Each taught what he thought was proper. Almost every opinion was tolerated in the synagogue. The scribes and Pharisees never taught with authority. So Christ and the apostles were able to teach in the synagogues without molestation. Each Pharisee taught as he pleased and allowed the congregation to express their opinion if they wished.”

Dr Martin continues, “The *popular religion* therefore, SO FAR AS IT WAS ENTITLED TO BE CALLED JUDAISM, might be described as more or less ‘DILUTED PHARISAISM.’”

### **WHERE Did the Pharisees Come From?**

We may remember that the Jewish nation was carried off into captivity in Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem fell in 586 BC.

Decades later the Jews returned to their homeland. They had powerful and influential teachers in the early years of their return, such as Ezra and Nehemiah. But it wasn’t to last.

Around 330BC, Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world, including Palestine. History shows that the Jews were absolutely infatuated with Greek ideas and philosophy (often referred to as *Hellenism*). Complete freedom of thought was permitted, even encouraged. And at that time, MANY PAGAN IDEAS — such as the immortality of the soul — were absorbed into Jewish religious thought.

Real Bible Truth almost disappeared from view. For a time, there was NOT ONE person teaching the Truth. As Dr Martin records, “Jewish tradition knows of no religious teacher who taught any form of religion from the death of Simon the Just until about the year 190 BC. For a period of nearly 100 years ... there is no record of ANY religious activity among the Jews ... There prevailed a state of RELIGIOUS ANARCHY!”

And it was OUT OF this religious anarchy that *the sect of the Pharisees* appeared, about 200 years before Christ.

The Pharisees REFUSED to accept the authority of the Priests as educators. They deemed the priests to be untrustworthy stewards. They claimed to be superior to the priests, and took authority TO THEMSELVES. They claimed to be REPLACING the priests.

Dr Martin explains: “The Pharisees came to believe God actively revealed present truth TO THEM through their hearts and consciences. They began to make more laws and commandments OF THEIR OWN, without appealing to the Scriptures. They claimed the Holy Scriptures were NOT SUFFICIENT to give the complete truth of God, and had to add the so-called traditional law. They viewed the Scriptures as OUT OF DATE. They reasoned that the CURRENT will of God may be COMPLETELY DIFFERENT from His past will!” They taught hundreds of commandments without the slightest backing of Scripture!

### **The So-called “Oral Law”**

As the Pharisees looked around their society, and considered their own beliefs, they realised they had MANY CUSTOMS that they could not find in the Bible (many of which were from PAGANISM though they would not admit this of course). Their logic was as follows: “since we are a good and holy people, these various customs of ours must also be good and holy — but since we can’t find them in Scripture, we must have got them from Moses in some other manner.” They decided that these customs “must” have been passed down “by tradition of the elders,” from

generation to generation, all the way from Moses. This became the so-called Oral Law — the concept that there were many teachings of Moses that were NOT RECORDED IN SCRIPTURE but were passed down by word of mouth only.

Dr Martin says: “These traditional laws — the Oral Laws — were NOT from Moses, nor any of the prophets. There is not a single reference in the Scriptures that Moses gave the Israelites any Oral or Traditional Laws that were to be handed down with the written Word. THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS AN ORAL LAW OF MOSES.”

That final point is worth repeating: **THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS AN ORAL LAW OF MOSES! It is a complete FABRICATION!**

It is amazing that so many people — even in the Church of God — accept all sort of Jewish teachings WHICH ARE NOT IN THE BIBLE, because they have allegedly been “handed down by tradition of the fathers” and are part of the “oral law.” We need to realise that much of what is taught by the Jews is simply MYTH and FAIRY TALE!

The Pharisees created MANY THOUSANDS OF THEIR OWN COMMANDMENTS. The *Talmud* contains much of their teachings: it runs to 34 volumes in size!

Dr Martin points out that on many occasions the Pharisees actually ANNULLED an EXPRESS COMMAND in the written Law of God, and replaced it with one of their own laws! And they were quite aware of what they were doing. They maintained that the commandments which they enacted were of MORE IMPORTANCE than the Scripture itself! According to their own Talmud, “the sayings of the elders have *more weight* than those of the prophets!” This is a shocking level of arrogance when we bear in mind that the prophets were inspired by GOD HIMSELF.

To summarise our history of the Pharisees and the day-to-day religion of the Jews:

- The Jews as a whole were NOT INTERESTED in religion
- Very few went to synagogue
- The Pharisees were the most prominent of many sects, and numbered around 6,000
- There were numerous splits, divisions and disagreements among the Pharisees

- They did not teach one set of doctrines
- They arose out of religious anarchy
- They were “lay persons” with no Biblical authority
- They MADE UP the so-called Oral Law
- They claimed their teachings WERE SUPERIOR to God’s Law!

### What Does the NT Say?

Let’s now take a look at what the New Testament has to say about the Pharisees, and whether we should — or should not — heed and obey them.

Firstly, how does John Baptist describe the Pharisees? Does he refer to them as great examples that we should look up to and follow? “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O GENERATION OF VIPERS, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Matthew 3:7. Calling the Pharisees a “bunch of snakes” is STRONG LANGUAGE, but indicates that John did not think much of their lifestyle and example!

Jesus shared the same view point as John. “Then the Pharisees went out, and held a council against Him, how they might DESTROY HIM. But when Jesus knew *it*, He withdrew himself from thence: and great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them all ... And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard *it*, they said, This *fellow* doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them ... All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy *against* the *Holy* Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the *world* to come ... O GENERATION OF VIPERS, how can ye, BEING EVIL, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh,” Matthew 12:15-15, 23-34. Notice how Jesus not only called the Pharisees a “bunch of snakes,” but also plainly said they were EVIL. He said they COULD NOT SPEAK good things (true doctrine). Are these people that we should be listening to? Are their teachings important to understand in this 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are we likely to learn a great deal about God’s purpose and plan by putting ourselves under the teaching of the Pharisees?

In Matthew 15:1-14 we see Jesus making it clear that the Pharisees were OPPOSED to God's Laws and taught AGAINST THEM. "Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, which were of Jerusalem, saying, Why do thy disciples transgress THE TRADITION OF THE ELDERS? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread. But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also TRANSGRESS THE COMMANDMENT OF GOD by your tradition? For GOD COMMANDED, saying, Honour thy father and mother ... But YE SAY, Whosoever shall say to *his* father or *his* mother, *It is* a gift, by whatsoever thou mightest be profited by me; And honour not his father or his mother, *he shall be free*. Thus have ye made the commandment of God OF NONE EFFECT by your tradition. *Ye* hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with *their* lips; but their heart is far from me. But IN VAIN they do WORSHIP ME, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men ... Then came his disciples, and said unto Him, Knowest thou that the Pharisees were offended, after they heard this saying? But He answered and said, Every plant, which My heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone: they be BLIND LEADERS of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch." Notice that Jesus describes the Pharisees as BLIND LEADERS. They can't see where they are going, and they are not fit to lead anyone else. Jesus does not want us to follow BLIND LEADERS. That's dangerous, and can be FATAL!

Jesus re-emphasised the danger to His disciples. "And when His disciples were come to the other side, they had forgotten to take bread. Then Jesus said unto them, Take heed and BEWARE OF THE LEAVEN of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread. *Which* when Jesus perceived, He said unto them, O ye of little faith ... How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that He bade *them* not beware of the leaven of bread, but OF THE DOCTRINE of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees," Matthew 16:5-12. Or as the Amplified Bible puts it, "He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but OF THE TEACHING of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

But isn't this puzzling? Here Jesus WARNS about the teaching that the Pharisees give (as blind guides, remember?) yet we are told that Jesus said elsewhere that WHATEVER the Pharisees bid us to do we are to OBEY and DO? Seems rather a contradiction?

In Luke 16, we read about the parable of the unjust steward, and those who love Mammon. The Pharisees didn't think much of Jesus' teaching. "And the Pharisees also, who were COVETOUS, heard all these things: and they DERIDED HIM. And He said unto them, Ye are they which *justify yourselves* before men; but God knoweth your hearts: for that which is highly esteemed among men is ABOMINATION in the sight of God," verses 14-15. We can see here that the Pharisees derided — scoffed at and mocked — Jesus. They didn't share His views at all. They were OPPOSED to what Jesus taught. They were highly esteemed by men, because they looked good on the outside, but God and Jesus knew the truth — they were an abomination on the inside. So, again, we might ask — WHY would Jesus want us to heed and obey men who opposed everything He stood for, and who were an abomination to God?

### **Matthew 23: Jesus Gives the Facts!**

Let's look now at Matthew 23. This is a very long passage in which Jesus deals with the Pharisees IN DETAIL.

"WOE unto you, scribes and Pharisees, HYPOCRITES! for ye devour widows' houses, and FOR A PRETENCE make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation (what does this tell us? That the Pharisees were HYPOCRITES — and that even their religious lives, their prayers, were only a PRETENCE!). Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, YE MAKE HIM twofold more the CHILD OF HELL than yourselves (WOW! It seems anyone who listens to the teaching of the Pharisees — who submits to their guidance and direction — becomes a CHILD OF HELL — *Gehenna* — rather than a child of GOD). Woe unto you, ye BLIND GUIDES, which say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but whosoever shall swear by the gold of the temple, he is a debtor! Ye FOOLS and BLIND," Matthew 23:14-17. Hypocrites, fools, blind, pretenders, who convert sincere students into children of HELL? Does this sound like Jesus is describing individuals we should look up to and follow?

Carrying on in verses 27-28, we read, "WOE unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful OUTWARD, but are within full of dead *men's* bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly APPEAR RIGHTEOUS unto men, but within ye are FULL of hypocrisy and INIQUITY." The Pharisees LOOKED GOOD — dignified, educated,

well-spoken — but inside they were ROTTEN and LAWLESS, full of INIQUITY. These were NOT men to listen to!

In verse 33, Jesus said, “Ye SERPENTS, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?” There was only one place these men were going — and it wasn’t the Kingdom of God!

So, what can we conclude? Does Jesus really want us to take *our instructions* from men whom He describes as hypocritical, blind, lawless FOOLS who lead people into becoming children of HELL?

Should we accept the Pharisees teachings, today? Should we keep Passover as a joyful feast on the 15<sup>th</sup> Abib, as they teach, rather than as a *solemn observance* of the death of Jesus Christ on the 14<sup>th</sup> Abib? Should we keep Pentecost on the same date every year — Sivan 6 — rather than counting 50 days as we’ve been taught by Herbert Armstrong from the Bible. Should we wear prayer shawls with tassels on the fringes as the Rabbis do? Should we seek to become more and more JEWISH in our customs to be “nearer to the Truth”?

### **Matthew 23:2-3: WHAT did Jesus Mean?**

Let’s now take a closer look at Matthew 23:2-3.

This is the very chapter where Jesus repeatedly castigates the Pharisees for being hypocrites, pretenders, blind, blind guides, full of iniquity, serpents and vipers. Does He really command us to “observe and DO” whatever they tell us?!

Notice firstly that the Pharisees sat “in Moses’ seat.” “Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to His disciples, saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat,” verses 1-2. Question: WHO put them there? Was it God? Or did they USURP a position not given to them?

The New American Standard Bible translates verse 2 as, “The scribes and the Pharisees have SEATED THEMSELVES in the chair of Moses.” Jay P Green’s Literal Translation puts it, “The scribes and the Pharisees have sat down on Moses' seat.” Oh, so it seems they took this position themselves! This shouldn’t be a surprise to us considering what we read earlier about the history of the Pharisees. They had earlier reasoned to themselves that had taken the place *of the priests*. They claimed the Holy Scriptures were NOT SUFFICIENT to give the complete will of God, and maintained that the commandments they enacted were of MORE

IMPORTANCE than Scripture itself! The Talmud claims that the sayings of the Jewish Elders have more weight than those of the prophets! Yes, they may have been sitting in Moses' seat — his position of authority — but only because they arrogantly PLACED THEMSELVES there! It didn't have God's support! Jesus said they were FULL of hypocrisy and LAWLESSNESS, verse 28.

It is perhaps not dissimilar to the situation we see in the Churches of God today, where a number of individuals make claims to be “sitting in the seat” of Herbert Armstrong. They want to lay claim to his work, share “his authority,” and be considered as his “moral successors.”

Now notice verse 3 in the KJV, “All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, *that* observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.” More hypocrisy here, of course, for the Pharisees don't do what they say anyway, but are we really commanded by Jesus to “observe and do” what they hypocritically tell us to do in their blindness and lawlessness?

### **Imperative or Indicative — WHICH?**

This is where a little bit of knowledge *of grammar* is of help! It may be a few years since most of us left school, and perhaps grammar wasn't one of our favourite topics, but let's see if we can follow what's happening in Matthew 23:3.

I am indebted to Dr E W Bullinger for making the following point clear in his book, “How to Enjoy the Bible,” first published in 1916 (Dr Bullinger is also the author of the well-known ‘Companion Bible’).

Dr Bullinger explains that there are TWO WAYS to translate the expression “observe and do.” The Greek text is IDENTICAL, whether we are dealing with “observe and do” in the *Imperative Mood* or the *Indicative Mood*. WE have to decide WHICH of the two translations to use.

In grammar, the IMPERATIVE mood is often known as the COMMAND MOOD. For example, “KEEP the Sabbath holy” is not a suggestion! KEEP is in the *command* or *imperative mood* in this sentence. Another example might be, “BRING me a glass of water.”

The other mood, the INDICATIVE MOOD, merely expresses that an action is taking place. It INDICATES what is happening at the time. For

example, “She was KEEPING the coffee nice and hot.” This is not a command; it merely tells us what was taking place. Likewise, “He was BRINGING her a glass of water,” tells us — or INDICATES — what was happening.

In looking at Matthew 23:3, the Greek allows for us to translate EITHER in the imperative or in the indicative. What is the difference?

Well — if we translate in the imperative (as has been done in the KJV and other translations) — we get a COMMAND from Jesus, “Ye MUST observe AND DO whatever the Pharisees tell you.”

If we choose the other alternative, however, and translate in the indicative, then we get a simple statement OF FACT from Jesus. In talking about the influence of the Pharisees, Jesus notes that “whatever the Pharisees bid you to do YE ARE OBSERVING AND DOING.” But then He continues, “BUT DO NOT YE after their works!”

Given all that we’ve studied so far about the Pharisees, only the second alternative makes sense. The Pharisees made a pretence of being godly men. They looked good on the outside, but inside were lawless and an abomination. They were hypocrites, and were unable to guide people safely because they were spiritually BLIND. Their students became children of HELL. They made the Word of God of NO EFFECT by their traditions. But because they appointed themselves to Moses’ seat, people foolishly listened to them, and “observed and did” whatever the Pharisees pronounced on. Jesus’ command, however, was “DO YE NOT” — the very OPPOSITE of what Matthew 23:3 seems to say!

To quote from Dr Bullinger:

“We must translate the passage as follows: ‘The Scribes and Pharisees have seated themselves in Moses’ seat: all things, therefore, whatsoever they bid you, *ye observe and do*: but *do not ye* according to their works.’”

Dr Bullinger continues, “The word ‘therefore’ is very significant. It is *because* ‘they have taken their seat in Moses’ seat’ that ye observe and do whatever they bid you. But the injunction is ‘Do them not.’ And then in verses 4-33 the most weighty reasons are given why they should *not* do them. How then can we go out of our way, gratuitously to create a difficulty, by taking the Mood as being the Imperative, and make the Lord COMMAND them to do the very things He was about to CONDEMN,” (emphasis added).

Jesus had already said in Matthew 16, “Take heed and BEWARE of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. And they reasoned among themselves, saying, *It is* because we have taken no bread ... [Jesus said] How is it that ye do not understand that I spake *it* not to you concerning bread, that ye should beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees? Then understood they how that He bade *them* not BEWARE of the leaven of bread, but OF THE DOCTRINE of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees.” Jesus was CONSISTENT. He wanted His disciples to beware of the Pharisees’ teaching AT ALL TIMES.

### **Conclusion**

The WARNING is fully applicable TO US, today. We do not need to pursue the teachings of the rabbis, or Judaism or the modern-day supporters of the Pharisees.

God has already sent a messenger to us in our day, who has left us a legacy of truth. Let’s HOLD FAST to what we HAVE BEEN TAUGHT, and not look to the Jewish religion to show us how to prepare for the coming KINGDOM OF GOD.

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