Practising pre-modern, modern and post-modern biblical science under one South African roof

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Abstract

Three different paradigms of Bible interpretation are currently in use in South Africa, namely the pre-modern, the modern and the post-modern. In the pre-modern paradigm the Bible is seen as ‘Word of God’; modern scholars take the Bible as ‘God’s word in human language’; the post-modern point of departure is that the Bible is ‘words written about God’. Meaningful and honest dialogue between the biblical science and the church is necessary, not only to narrow the communication gap, but also to benefit our current torn apart society. This conversation already exists among biblical scholars, but is to a large extent lacking between biblical scholars and the church. Proposals are being made here to enhance this communication by taking the post-modern challenges seriously.

A. INTRODUCTION

The problem I wish to address in this article is the issue of poor communication between people of different paradigms of interpretation within the sphere of biblical scholarship and the church. Analogical to the tension filled situation between grand parents, parents and youngsters under one roof due to their paradigm differences, we very often find that the dialogue between biblical scholars and the church has stagnated. The institutional church to a large extent still functions within a **pre-modern** way of thinking, while the biblical science primarily works from a **modern** or a **post-modern** paradigm of biblical interpretation. While dealing with these differences, two issues should be kept in mind:

- One can only speak about God in metaphorical terms. In this regard Holladay (1995) is right when he states: “It would not be too extreme to say that studying theology is learning how to say the least wrong thing about God. All God-language is wrong to some degree; the trick is to reduce the wrongness to a minimum.”
- Althusser (quoted by Aichele et al, 1995:5) said that “[a]s there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we must say what reading we are guilty of.” Any reading of the Bible is ideologically tinted.

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1 Inaugural lecture as professor in Old Testament Studies in the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies at the Rand Afrikaans University, March 13, 2002.
The problem, however, is that our metaphors, approaches to the reading and interpretation of the Bible, and our ideologies very often differ so much that a communication gap is created between the various paradigms.

B. PARADIGM SHIFTS IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Paradigm shifts are historical processes and the people involved are real humans, you and me. Knowledge always functions within specific paradigms or thought structures. A paradigm is a problem solving model or frame of reference or a closed mental system within which a scholar practises his/her science and within which a specific society or interest group legitimates its existence (Kuhn 1970). A specific worldview is maintained until new discoveries, information or events appear on the horizon, which make such a view untenable, introducing tension within the established paradigm. The tension is exorcised by elements of the established paradigm by emphasizing to a greater extent the well-known ideas, while they cast suspicion on those who cannot live with the established paradigm any more due to new information. A subsequent paradigm then comes into existence, forming its own closed system. Gradually a clearer formulation of this new paradigm brings peace in the minds of people (du Toit 2000:44-4). The old paradigm is, however, not totally replaced by the new, resulting in a parallel co-existence of paradigms.

In order to understand the development of the various paradigms in biblical interpretation with the related communication problems among these paradigms, it is important to obtain a brief survey of the historical process in this regard.

Christian thinkers from the second and third centuries A.D. held the study of the Bible as the *habitus*, that which one should possess, a kind of natural characteristic or wisdom. *Theologia* was the *sine qua non* for all understanding (Botha 2000:122). In this way the church established a firm hold for itself onto the understanding of nature and humanity. The notion of theology as an academic discipline or as a cognitive enterprise did not really feature prior to the Mediaeval period when the origination and development of universities entered the arena. From the twelfth century onwards the notion of *theologia* as a ‘habitus’ with a character formation component gradually changed into a full blown academic discipline (Botha 2000:122). Theology became *scientia* in the scholastic sense of the word, viz. a method to demonstrate conclusions. Under Thomas Aquinas and the scholastics theology gradually changed into a demonstrative enterprise in the Aristotelian sense of the word.

It is important to note that theology as *scientia* developed at universities and not through the church. This, of course, was one of the initial reasons for the distance between theology as a ‘science’ and the church as an institution. This gap remained and increased through the ages. In the
church, however, the notion of theology as *habitus* continued to exist during the twelfth to seventeenth centuries in order to maintain the grip on all knowledge.

Both the Enlightenment and Pietism had an influence on the scholastic discipline of *theologia* of the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment was situated in the modern university, while the Pietism, initially also part of the university, later moved out to church seminaries. With the coming of the Enlightenment theology as a science could finally be freed from all fetters of church dogma. The Enlightenment introduced “the ideals of autonomous cognitive science, scholarship, method, evidence, criticism and the like, and also a differentiation of the one *theologia* into various sub-disciplines” (Botha 2000:123).

The historical-critical approach to literature was introduced to the study of the Bible since the middle of the 18th century, which resulted in the Bible now becoming the object of autonomous academic study, while theology developed into a field of study with full and equal status to other sciences. From now on theology could not lay claim to its former *habitus* status any more. During this phase a gradual shift was made away from the pre-critical treatment of the Bible to a more critical way of thinking. In pietistic circles, however, the notion of theology as *habitus* or personal development was continued, especially at church seminaries. This was part of the reaction against the rational and liberal approaches to theology by institutions of the Enlightenment. At church seminaries individual spiritual development gradually changed to practical knowledge/wisdom and then to technical training for candidates to enter the ministry.

In terms of paradigm shifts in the biblical sciences during the period from the Reformation in the 15th-16th centuries until today one can distinguish three basic movements (Spangenberg 1995). Biblical scholars working within the paradigm of the Reformation see the Bible as “Word of God”. In this **pre-modern paradigm** the literal interpretation of the Bible is a priority. This paradigm normally receives the label of ‘fundamentalist’. The second or **modern paradigm** functions within the framework of the historical-critical approach and sees the Bible as ‘God’s word in human language’. This paradigm normally carries the label ‘liberal’. A third paradigm, the **post-modern paradigm** of biblical interpretation, originated from the modern literary theory (structuralism, narratology, rhetoric, and deconstruction). Within these circles the Bible is held as ‘human words about God’ (Spangenberg 1995:5).

In practice on the one hand those who approach the Scriptures from the traditional, pre-critical view very often unwittingly implement the results of the modern, critical paradigm without integrating these scientific methods with their own hermeneutic model. However, for the pre-critical paradigm it is usually impossible to make use of the results of post-modernism. On the other hand scholars from the post-modern paradigm might also implement the methods and results of the modern (critical) paradigm, but are not interested at all in the methods and results of the pre-modern
paradigm (Van Deventer 2000:389). Thomas Kuhn is of opinion that the various paradigms do not necessarily exclude each other, but they may co-exist in a relationship of corrective influence. However, where interaction between the various paradigms does take place it normally does not happen on a theoretical level (Fiorenza 1999:38). And this, I believe, is what hampers the communication between the various paradigms.

The different paradigms are a given fact and they seem to be irreconcilable. This implacability of course stimulates growth among agnostics and protest atheists on the one hand, but on the other hand also among fundamentalists. In the latter case it very often results in a modern ascetism and a return to church bound dogmatism due to their intolerance towards the development of scientific research and knowledge.

In the present debate on these issues in our country intolerance and exclusivity will not bring us anywhere. The ultimate danger of such an approach is the enhancement of the breach in communication between the house partners to the detriment of those who are the responsibility of both the church and the academic world, viz. the South African society at large. Both the church and biblical academics operate not for their own sake but to the benefit of the society. This is why biblical science is challenged by post-modernism to take the lead in contextual research.

C. THE CHALLENGE OF CONTEXTUALITY IN THE CURRENT MODERN/POST-MODERN SOCIETY

Already at the end of World War II, Leroy Waterman of the University of Michigan declared that biblical scholars should take note of the deep moral confusion their world finds itself in. According to Waterman the natural sciences created a society that is well aware of the welfare science brought for humankind, but also of the destruction thereof. In contrast biblical scholarship has taken for granted the public and structuring influence of the Bible in western culture. Biblical scholarship mostly restricted itself to organized religion, thereby neglecting the improvement of the society at large. This reluctance to operate on the socio-political level is of course rooted in an ethos of scientistic positivism and value-neutrality (Fiorenza 1999:25-26).

It is evident that secularization is here to stay and that the traditional form of religion, which still presupposes religion to be the structuring principle of society, is increasingly becoming irrelevant. The fact that religion has to a large extent lost this structuring function, urges us to reassess the role of religion in society (Botha 2000:137). Being deprived of its structuring function, religion still has and should have a social function to fulfil by acting as a critical principle with relation to society (Davis 1994:46). Its exclusion from the institutional sphere has released it as a permanent critique on society. Therefore the new socio-religious role of biblical science in our
pluralistic society has to be researched and properly communicated to both the society and the church.

That both the church and biblical science are threatened by irrelevance for various reasons is indisputable. The primary reason for this is that neither of these bodies meaningfully addresses the life-questions of our society because they are trapped and have stagnated in certain paradigms of Bible interpretation. One realises the reason that this paradigm crisis has arisen in biblical science as it is practised today when Fiorenza’s critique (1999:42) of the modern, scientific-historical, positivistic paradigm, into which many of the South African biblical scientists as practitioners can be included, is taken account of. Commenting on current modern critical biblical scholarship, Fiorenza is of opinion that:

Because they are rooted in the individualistic and relativistic discourses of modernity and share with fundamentalism a positivist and technological ethos, liberal biblical and religious studies discourses are in no way equipped to address the crisis of justice and well-being brought about by the globalization of inequality. In spite of their critical posture, academic biblical studies are thus akin to fundamentalism insofar as they insist that scholars are able to produce a single scientific, true, reliable, and non-ideological reading of the Bible. Scholars can achieve scientific certainty as long as they silence their own interests and abstract from their own socio-political situation.

However, modernism, according to Fiorenza (1999:42.43), has already been successfully destabilised by post-modern hermeneutics, which does not see the biblical text as a direct divine revelation or as a window on historical reality and also lacks a truth theory that goes together with this. Historical sources are not seen as data and proof, but as discourses from particular perspectives that can give rise to a variety of interpretations. There is thus also not only one definitive meaning of a matter, and interpretations are not simply right or wrong. Competing interpretations establish different ways of reading and construing historical and religious meaning. In this regard feminist and liberation theologies have played a large role in the process of transforming biblical science.

Although the post-modern hermeneutic has successfully destabilised scientifically objective biblical science, post-modernism nonetheless still clings to its own scientific value-neutral and atheological character without becoming involved in the socio-historical situations that either generated the Bible text, or that determine the function of this text today. Therefore Fiorenza believes that even post-modernism does not address the increasing uncertainties of worldwide inequality. Post-modernism can also not accept the limitation on the relativisation of meaning imposed by the ethical imperative of emancipatory movements like feminism and other liberation theologies.
For these reasons Fiorenza identifies a further paradigm of Bible interpretation, namely a rhetorical-political paradigm that has brought about an ethical-political about-face (Fiorenza 1999:44). The task of biblical science is now, according to her, defined in ethical, political, cultural, emancipatory terms. The chief purpose of this paradigm is to overcome dominating structures to the benefit of all people. Bible texts are seen as rhetorical discourses whose persuasive power and argumentative function must be investigated in specific historical and cultural situations. The ethical and transformational aspects therefore form the basis of this. This paradigm thus uses both the theories of rhetoric and the rhetoric of enquiry to show how Bible texts and their contemporary interpretations involve the objectives of the author and authorial strategies as well as perceptions and constructions of audiences during the process of reading. It investigates and reconstrues the discursive arguments of a text, its socio-religious situation and its diverse interpretations to highlight the text’s possible repressive as well as its liberatory values and possibilities in each changing historical-cultural situation. This paradigm urges an ethically radical democratic imperative that obliges biblical science to make a contribution to the creation of a society and religion that are free from all forms of dominance and oppression.

The primary task of biblical science today is to equip the users of the Bible contextually with the necessary skills and to empower them to turn the decadent society into one that is ethically acceptable. In this enterprise the Bible takes a central position. The biblical scholar should implement a “market philosophy of interpretation” (Clines 1997:91) by becoming public dialogue again. Conversation on these issues in the daily newspapers, for one, should therefore be encouraged. The role of academics in the field of biblical science has changed from ‘transmitters’ to ‘facilitators’ (Vorster 1998:233, 236). The implication is that we have to realize that texts do not ‘contain’ set meanings that must be discovered, but that readers confer meaning to a text, also to the text of the Bible. It remains our duty to facilitate the readers in the process of reading and not to dominate them. Without a reader a text has no meaning what so ever. Biblical scholars should not only stick to the literary and historical elements and contexts of the Bible in their research, but should also reflect critically on the kind of role the Bible plays in the composition and development of the present society.

Public dialogue implies that there is a variety of readers of the Bible out there. For a long time the church controlled the reading and interpretation of the Bible within dogmatic frameworks. Nowadays various readers decide for themselves what meaning biblical texts have within their specific contexts. This should make us aware of the fact that biblical texts can have a variety of meanings. No church, no institution, no scientific approach can or may try to control all the possible meanings that the Bible might have. Our knowledge about texts and the theories on how interpretation works, as well as the growing knowledge of ordinary church members in this regard,
will make it increasingly difficult for the church to control the interpretation of the Bible. Should the church accept this idea of a plurality of interpretations, it will release the creative potential of its members and the Bible will become increasingly meaningful to our society (Clines 1997:88).

Is this not what we learn from the history of biblical interpretation and from the process of the origin of the Bible? The New Testament writers, for example, have realised that a text from the Old Testament does not have one specific meaning, but that their own context provides them with the opportunity to give new meaning to an existing text. This process of contextual ‘rewriting’ therefore forms an integral part of the Bible itself, and this process did not stop after the Bible had been canonized. The process continued through oral and written comment on the contents of the Bible. The post-modern paradigm again makes us aware of this open process within which the canonized Bible text acts as but one of many contexts and sources in the enterprise of interpretation.

The liberation of South Africa since 2 February 1990 brought about a new consciousness of the diversity of social issues, which is enhanced and strengthened by a post-modern approach (Lötter 1995:56). This means that we cannot follow a post-modern approach to politics, social and cultural issues but remain on a pre-modern religious path! Religious issues, like political issues, have to diversify faster by accommodating various methods of interpretation of the Bible like liberation theology, feminist theology, gender theology, eco-theology et cetera. These various theologies are at present in the process of exposing the flaws in the traditional ways and practices of theology and biblical science in South Africa, proving them to be to a large extent irrelevant for the time we live in. I am of opinion that the post-modern paradigm opens up numerous opportunities to practise biblical science much more meaningfully and in a relevant manner by developing new approaches of reading and interpretation of the Bible and by becoming socio-religiously involved. In addition biblical science should engage in honest dialogue with the church and religions other than Christianity in this regard.

At this point it would be appropriate to briefly sketch the agenda of the post-modern hermeneutics in order to sense what the latest paradigm shift in the field of theology/biblical science is about. One should keep in mind that the post-modern worldview is strongly influenced by the ‘new science’, which was introduced in the 1980’s and in which foreign concepts like systems thinking, chaos theory, evolution, non-determinism, quantum mechanics, uncertainty principle, relativity theory, etc. play a major role. Although it is not easy to define post-modernism, one can identify a number of theological common factors. In general one can also say that the purpose of post-modernism is not to nullify the achievements or methods of modern positivistic science. Rather the aim is to point at the restrictions of positivism and to rectify those restrictions. Within post-modern thinking different and even opposing explanations should have status in our society (Rossouw 1995:159).
The following are aspects that relate to a post-modern approach to the Bible according to Herholdt (1998:467-469). The post-modern thinker views texts as an interrelated network, while contextuality is traced back to systems thinking, holism and a relational perspective on reality. The Bible is not approached as if it contains truth that needs to be discovered. Truth rather lies within the relationship of the reader with the text. Truth is not static but dynamic and co-determined by the needs, presuppositions, religious background and cultural heritage that the person brings to the Bible. The post-modern person is also a post-critical person who will rely intuitively on spiritual experience as well to guide the reader into relevant meaning. Post-modernism points away from a book religion only because biblical truth in a post-modern sense is contextual and ecological, i.e. has a bearing on everyday life and worldly issues. Salvation, liberation and preservation are equally important. The Bible tells a story, not of God in heaven or people on their way to heaven, but of God coming to this world to dwell amongst his people. The Bible does not serve as a fixed record of God’s communication, but as an example of the way in which people experienced and understood God in the past. The metaphors of the Bible, like Jesus as the resurrection and the truth, God as father and friend, and the good shepherd all serve an explanatory purpose. This leaves room for the possibility of new metaphors like God as mother, for example, that are congruent with that of the Bible because the concept “God” is not exhausted by certain metaphors. The post-modern reader lives in an integrated world where spiritual reality and worldly reality are part of the same multi-levelled reality. Consequently, spiritual matters are not approached as an esoteric realm. There are no clear boundaries or final statements, and consequently the God who speaks in the Bible, speaks again when we speak into our own situation on the basis of what we read in the Bible.

Post-modernism is still a relatively new and dynamic development, which in its essence is ethically based. It makes us aware of our responsibility to deal with society in a heterogeneous manner (Lötter 1995:47-48). It is post-modern approaches like liberation theology, feminist theology and gender theology that muddled up our stagnating household, confronting us with real practical ethical questions as problems that can no longer be ignored by biblical science and the church. This heterogeneity of society with its practical ethical questions compels biblical science and the church to engage into dialogue with each other as well as with other religions.

D. THE CHALLENGE OF INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Part of the shared agenda for dialogue between biblical science and the church should include dialogue with other religions. In this regard I am of opinion that the basic philosophy of RAU and other universities where Biblical Studies departments still exist should change. The new situation in South Africa demands from the scientific study of religion at the university level a significant adjustment away from a one-sided, Christian-oriented objective. This implies at the very least that
Biblical Studies as a bibliological discipline no longer has the right of existence and that it must not be further expanded.

What I am advocating is a better-structured, overarching approach to religious studies at the university within which Christianity as a subject will, on an equal basis together with other religions like Islam and Judaism, play a collective role as joint meaning-giving subjects in the modern/post-modern South African context in order to facilitate change. Old and New Testament studies, the current Biblical Studies, will then function under Christianity as its major field. This does not therefore relate only to the broader framework of the post-modern paradigm, but also to a logical structure of which we are already part and which has been established by the Department of Education, but which has not yet been fully put into practice by many universities, including RAU. This still leaves ample room for subjects like Semitic Languages, Greek and Latin Studies, and Semitic and Classical Culture also to function as subjects within the larger complex of religions insofar as these subjects are presented as supplementary to the study of religion. At present, these subjects all fall (theoretically?) within RAU’s overarching programme Religious, Classical and Near Eastern Studies which, incidentally, would be an outstanding name for a more fixed structure within the Faculty of Arts at RAU.

E. IN DIALOGUE WITH THE CHURCH

Is dialogue among biblical scholars of different paradigms on the one hand and between biblical scholars and the church on the other hand at all possible today in the light of the methodological and epistemological leaps made by modernism and post-modernism? Meaningful communication between the three paradigms discussed above seems to be impossible because of the fact that any new paradigm tends to threaten an existing one.

I believe that the answer to the communication problem lies in honest dialogue and real action. However, this is only possible if the church and biblical science are both prepared to make certain concessions to each other in advance. Here I am thinking about concessions like the following:

1. That all discussions about God are provisional.
2. That both parties have to admit that no reading of the Bible is an innocent reading and that “we must say what reading we are guilty of”.
3. We must see each other as equal discussion partners.
4. There must be mutual trust in each other’s integrity because we all have the same objective in view, namely the honouring of God and the well-being of people in society and creation as a whole.
5. ‘Church’ and ‘biblical science’ are two broad concepts which are both very varied and loaded. We must all acknowledge this to each other and also negotiate this during the dialogue. Generalisation reflects ignorance and frequently leads to mutual suspicion and the construction of caricatures of each other.

With this as a basis an honest discussion must be initiated, or enhanced where it already exists, among biblical scientists themselves and between biblical scientists and the church about their paradigm differences and about epistemology and praxis as it is developed and used today (Botha 2000:136).

A good example of pioneering work in contextualisation is the work being done by Gerald West of the School of Theology at the University of Natal with enculturation hermeneutics as a point of departure. He is of the opinion that structured Christendom is declining, but that the Christian belief is alive and well and is functioning particularly in the margins (West 1995:445-458). Enculturation hermeneutics reminds us that theology is also cultural. The biblical scientist’s involvement here does not entail a ‘speaking for’ and ‘listening to’, but a ‘speaking with’, a process that means that the biblical scientist is involved in a reading process together with ordinary indigenous readers of the Bible and is not an outsider in this process (West 1997:333).

A similar approach is that of Rathbone (1999), who uses Derrida’s post-modern ‘open-critical hermeneutic’ model to include the ordinary Bible-reader in discussions about the Bible. However, he warns that post-modernism itself places a damper on the throwing-open of the discussion in that post-modernist thinking is dominated by academics who demand that the discussion must only be scientific. An inclusive dialogical process is advocated in which the hermeneutics and context of the ordinary reader are also seen as a critical function of interpretation which can produce creative interpretations that contribute to the academic discussion and critical investigation.

But let us now finally focus more directly on the dialogue between biblical science and the institutionalized church. Certain channels already exist by means of which dialogue can be carried on and these channels should be expanded. Le Roux (1994) is right when he states that ministers and pastors for the church should be trained within a scholarly climate. The university acts as the laboratory also for the scientific field of theology. Here different paradigms meet and influence one another on a daily basis. The university is the environment in which various scientific fields like theology, biblical science, sociology, African languages, anthropology, psychology etc. could collaborate in mutual research and practice, while various paradigms of thinking make a contribution. An initial research project could be to establish the influence of pre-modern, modern and post-modern thinking on the various cultures (including church denominations, synagogues, and mosques) in cohabitation in South Africa. Knowledge and understanding of the basic thought
structures, differences, and similarities among various research objects could form a firm basis for further research to enhance meaningful dialogue between the variety of cultures, church denominations and religions in our country. Biblical science and theology could play a major role in such a project from a religious point of view.

On a more direct basis dialogue between biblical science and the church is successfully stimulated and enhanced when, on the one hand, ministers and pastors receive continuous theological education, thereby being exposed to the most recent research on methods of interpretation of the Bible and other aspects of biblical science. This is practised by a number of theological faculties throughout the country and should also be expanded to church seminaries where such practices do not exist. On the other hand academics should experience the heartbeat of the church by involving themselves in ecclesiastical activities in order to safeguard them from approaching and judging the church from a clinical (and sometimes cynical), scientific point of view only.

Bible schools and internet conversations by means of which ordinary church members are drawn into dialogue situations and are being introduced to the results of biblical research also play an important role. Of course this should be handled sensitively, but honest dialogue is essential.

The last issue I would like to mention is the official Church/University colloquium held at the Rand Afrikaans University twice a year, during which issues of mutual and actual interest are discussed. It is not the task of the university to establish yet another forum for the church to discuss and resolve church related problems only. Numerous such church forums already exist. As this forum has shown itself in the past, its aim is to a large extent to address the existing paradigm crises between the church and biblical science, an enterprise which should be extended. In this regard I am advocating an expansion of this dialogue to Black churches in and around Johannesburg on the basis of ‘speaking with’ and not ‘speaking for’ or ‘listening to’. We have not as yet successfully incorporated the religious and moral dilemmas of these churches in our dialogue, although we, logistically spoken, have an exceptional opportunity to do so.

**F. CONCLUSION**

I have tried to address the problem of poor and distorted communication between different paradigms of biblical interpretation in order to expose the reasons for this deficiency and to propose possible existing and non-existing activities that might further stimulate dialogue to the benefit of our society and to the glory of God. I am of opinion that biblical science and the church should take the post-modern paradigm with its ethical, political and ecological consequences much more seriously in order not to be totally marginalized. This does not mean that everything biblical science and the church have created up to now should be swept from the desk, but routes should be
explored to incorporate existing and new ideas into a process of collaboration within specific contexts (Hollinger 1994:186). Furthermore we should endeavour to avoid the potholes of nihilism practised by many philosophers and theologians. It is the responsibility of biblical science and the church to take hands in order to fulfil our duty towards one another, God, the society we live in, and towards the entire creation in the processes of searching for and ascribing meaning to life.

With reference to our own institution, the Rand Afrikaans University, and its contribution to this dialogue, it is my conviction that an interdisciplinary discussion group should be called into life in order to give the opportunity to all the faculties of the university to mutually reflect and do research not only on the post-modern paradigm, but also to address the communication gaps between the pre-critical, critical and post-critical paradigms existing in each and every scientific field taught at our university. This would increase the relevancy of not only biblical science and theology, but of the entire university as an educational institution within the broader South African context.

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