LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE LIFE OF A GENTILE DISCIPLINE OF CHRIST UNDER THE NEW COVENANT ESTABLISHED BY THE CHILD OF PROMISE**

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BY

SEAN E. HARRIS

LYNCHBURG, VIRGINIA

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The book of beginnings, Genesis, contains three (or four) significant covenants. In the Edenic covenant, God gave Adam and Eve instructions concerning life in the Garden and inferred a promise that they would not die as long as they did not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gn 2:15-17). Some deny that this was actually a covenant, but the language in Hosea 6:7 indicates that a covenant was established between God and Adam. Hosea believes that “like Adam they transgressed the covenant” (Gn 6:7). Those who believe four covenants are presented in Genesis normally refer to the first covenant as Edenic and the second covenant as Adamic. Although Paul Enns does not refer to Genesis 3:15 as a covenant, he does refer to it as a “Promise of Redemption.”\(^1\) In this way, he is acknowledging at a minimum the language of a covenant. This variance in understanding can lead to confusion when discussing the first or second covenants in Genesis. Then in Genesis 8-9, God establishes a unilateral covenant with Noah.\(^2\) The Noahic covenant is clear because the specific word “covenant,” bâriyth, is used in Genesis 6:18, 9:9, 11-13, and 15-17. In Genesis 9:11, God says, “I establish my bâriyth with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood to destroy the earth.” Then in Genesis 9:12-13, God confirms the promise with a “bow in the cloud.”

In Genesis 15:18, bâriyth appears again in the book with God establishing a covenant with Abram. However, the promises of the covenant are first communicated in Genesis 12:2 with a promise of blessing to all who will bless Abram and cursing for any nation or people who dishonors Abraham or his descendent. The Abrahamic covenant has three components: land, posterity, and blessing.\(^3\) Each component has an “already” and “not yet” aspect to it and has a

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direct reference to the New Covenant. Today’s student of the New Testament will struggle greatly at understanding Paul’s epistles and God’s plan for His people without a good understanding of the Abrahamic covenant. This paper will provide a foundational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant for the Gentile believer by examining each component of what God promised Abraham and how it relates to the church and the New Covenant. This according to Stott is “indispensable to an understanding of the Bible and of the Christian mission.” He writes, “These [Gn 12:1-3] are perhaps the most unifying verses in the Bible.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF ABRAHAM

One cannot appreciate the significance of the Abrahamic covenant without understanding the importance of Abraham in both Judaism and Christianity. According to Boice, “With the exception of Jesus Christ, Abraham is probably the most important person in the Bible.” No other individual from the Old Testament is mentioned more by name than Abraham in the New Testament. Although the name Moses is presented more times in the New Testament, this is only because of the references to “Moses” in the sense of what he wrote as opposed to him as a person. Abram is called “God’s friend” three times in Scripture (2 Chr 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jas 2:23). Matthew identifies Abraham as the first man in the historical record of the incarnate Son of God in Matthew 1:1.

Abraham is mentioned in each of the gospels and in the epistles by Paul, James, Peter, and the writer of Hebrews. There are seventeen specific references to Yahweh as the “God of

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4 Stott, 2009, 3.
6 Mark 12:26 is an example of this. The book of Moses is not the same as the person Moses.
Abraham” in the Bible which may not seem like many until the reader realizes that there is not a single reference to the “God of Moses” and only four references to the “God of David” in the Bible. Abraham’s faith in the promises of the covenant is presented throughout the New Testament as an example for all. The first mention of God promising something to Abram appears in Genesis 12, then in chapter 15 the promise is referred to as a covenant, and in chapter 17 the covenant is identified as everlasting.

**AN EVERLASTING COVENANT**

The significance of the covenant cannot be grasped without understanding that the promises God made to Abraham are everlasting promises. If they were not, then the importance of the covenant is not near as significant. The first everlasting covenant found in Genesis is the one God established with Noah. Christians can rest in the promise that God will never again destroy mankind with a global flood. Then in Genesis 17, there are three specific references to the fact that God’s promise to Abraham is without end. In Genesis 17:7 Moses records “And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” Because of the everlasting nature of this covenant, Stott believe there is a past, present, and future fulfillment of all that God promised Abraham.\(^8\) Whereas the rainbow was the sign of the everlasting nature of the Noahic covenant, God gave Abraham and his household a much different sign for the males.

As a sign of the everlasting nature of the covenant, God instructed Abraham that he and every man child among his household shall be circumcised (Gn 17:10). Elwell and Beitzel describe this act of circumcision as the way “God sealed” the covenant with Abraham and all the

\(^8\) Stott, 2009, 4-5.
“males in his household” (Gn 17:9–13). This everlasting sign was then carried on by all Jews desiring to be part of the covenant. Elwell writes,

Circumcision was to be an expression of faith that God’s promises would be realized. Because Abraham’s faith had lapsed (Gn 16) even after he had seen the awesome display of God’s majesty (Gn 15:9–17), a permanent reminder of God’s covenant promises was placed on his body and the bodies of his male descendants (Gn 17:11). This sign was so closely related to God’s covenant promise that the rite itself could be termed the “covenant” (Gn 17:10; Acts 7:8).

This helps a Christian ignorant of the sign understand why there was such a debate on this matter in Acts 15.

The debate in Jerusalem revolved around the issue of how Gentiles were to be accepted into the Christian fellowship. The more conservative Jewish Christians felt that they should be received on the same basis that Jews had always accepted Gentiles into the covenant community—through proselyte initiation. This involved circumcision of the males.

Gentiles in Abraham’s household were circumcised, so it only made sense to continue the practice as a sign of the New Covenant.

However, Paul explains that “no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit” (Rom 2:29-30). Elwell writes, “In the time of Christ, many Jews misunderstood the significance of circumcision, believing that the physical act was necessary for and a guarantee of salvation.” Spiritual descendents of Abraham may be circumcised as a medical procedure, but this is no longer a sign of the covenant. Instead, believers are “sealed


10 Ibid.


12 Elwell and Beitzel, 1988, 463.
with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13) as a permanent sign of the new covenant; however, Paul continually ties the New Covenant to the Abrahamic covenant throughout his epistles.

**THE CALL OF ABRAM**

Although the word covenant, bĕriyth, is not found in chapter 12, the one true and living Lord instructs Abram to leave his father’s house to a land that he will show him and then makes a series of promises in verses one through three. Beginning with a promise of land, God also promises to make Abram a great nation and communicates that Abram’s name will be great. God will bless Abram, and He will be a blessing to others. According to Stephen, in Acts 7, this call from the Lord occurred when Abram “was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran,” (Acts 7:2). Then Stephen reported that Abram’s father died and God moved him to “this land” which must be Jerusalem, and all the surrounding land that the Jews occupied at the time of Christ.

In Genesis 15:7, the text communicates that the Lord brought Abram out of the “Ur of the Chaldees” which Stephen refers to as the region of Mesopotamia. The city of Ur existed in what is presently known as An Nasiriyah, Iraq. An Nasiriyah is a large modern city located about 225 miles southeast of Bagdad. According to Elwell, “The modern site is known as Tell el Muqayyar, ‘The Mound of Bitumen.’” The results of archaeological investigations demonstrate that Abraham came from a great city, cultured, sophisticated, and powerful. The landscape was dominated by the ziggurat, or temple tower; and the life of the city was controlled by a religion with a multiplicity of gods.” 13 God’s election of Abram to be the recipient of this amazing covenant becomes even more significant when Abram’s past as an idolater is fully acknowledged. Stott writes, “Election is not a synonym for elitism.” 14 God found Abram when the Scripture does not

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give any indication Abram was looking for the Lord. Pink writes: “There was nothing whatever in the object of His choice which commended him to God. There was nothing whatever in Abram which merited God’s esteem. The cause of election must always be traced to God’s will.”15 Obviously, this is precisely how God wanted it.

A Promise of Land

The first promise God made to Abram deals with the land God would give Abram. This is “land” that God will show him only when Abram obeys God. There is no indication that God shows him the land in a vision or anything supernatural. God will show Abram the land when Abram arrives in the land, and this is made clear in verses 4-7. In obedience to God Abram Sarai, Lot and “the people that they had acquired in Haran” moved to the land of the Canaanites (Gn 12:4). When Abram arrived in Canaan, God appeared to him a second time to confirm that “this land” was the land God promised Abraham’s offspring (Gn 12:7). The vastness of this land is described in Deuteronomy 34:1-4.

And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, that is over against Jericho. And the LORD shewed him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan, And all Naphtali, and the land of Ephraim, and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, unto the utmost sea, And the south, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar. And the LORD said unto him, This is the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither.

In Genesis 13:14-15, God told Abram to lift up his eyes and look in each of the cardinal directions “for all the land that you see will I give to you and to your offspring forever.” The size of the land is also described in Genesis 15:18 where the river in Egypt is used for a southern boundary, and the river of the Euphrates is used as the northern boundary, and the land that ten people groups were currently occupying is used to further clarify the size of the Promised Land.

15 W. A. Pink, Gleanings in Genesis (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2005), 140.
With a remarkable degree of sovereignty, the Lord let Abram know that his descendents would not always remain in this land. For four hundred years, Abram’s offspring would be sojourners in a foreign land until “they come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites [was, at the time] not yet complete” (Gn 15:15-16). The Jews lived in this Promised Land for about 800 years until God’s judgment for their sin resulted in being forced off their land during the exilic period.

Israel would be given another opportunity to occupy the land of Abram prior to the coming of the Savior. At the time of John the Baptist, the children of Abraham lived in the same land but they were living with a Roman occupation force. This understanding of the significance of the land helps explain why some Christians saw such eschatological implications in the establishment of Israel as a Nation-State in the land of Abraham in 1948. Tan writes, “The year 1948 appears to have been a significant turning point in hastening the events of the last days. In that year, the State of Israel officially came into existence, a most significant event in the light of Biblical prophecy.”\(^\text{16}\) There is little agreement as to the true significance of this event. Stott points to Hebrews 11 as evidence that God has yet to fulfill his land promise to Israel.\(^\text{17}\) The author of Hebrews writes about “these [who] all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (11:13). In Romans 4:13, Paul speaks of those who inherit the world, and Hebrews 4:3 speaks of a “rest” that God’s people enter by faith. Ultimately, God promises spiritual descendents of Abraham a new heaven and new earth (2 Pt 3:13; Rv 21:1). Following Abraham’s example, as a man of faith, Christians should long to see


\(^{17}\) Stott, 2009, 6.
the land God has promised them. It is described as a “city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

THE PROMISE OF A NATION

Matthews writes: “After the promise of a land, the second promise is a numerous population base, a ‘nation’ (gôy). A nation is generally characterized as a political unit with common land, language, and government.” A nation requires people and, according to Genesis 11:30, Sarai is known to be barren—“she had no child.” This presents a significant obstacle to the fulfillment of the promise God made but also sovereignly creates an opportunity for Abram to have to trust in the promises of God. Walton makes the point that God is asking Abram to abandon his land and family “he has [in Ur], in favor of the family Yahweh promises against all logic, given Sarai’s infertility.” Through this covenant with Abraham, Yahweh will prove Himself to be an obstacle removing God in each component of the covenant. First, He will do that in Abraham’s life, then the life of the Israel over and over again and ultimately through the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Concerning the significance of the development of the covenant in Genesis 15, Alexander writes, “God’s conditional promise in 12:2 that Abram will become a ‘great nation’ is now guaranteed by a covenant.” Genesis 15:18 states that “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, ‘To your offspring I will give this land…’” So once again, land is a major component of the Abrahamic covenant. However, earlier in the chapter, the Lord took Abram outside and told him to look to the heaven and number the stars because that was (is) how


many descendants he would have. In Genesis 22:16, through the angel the Lord, Yahweh declared that He would multiply Abraham’s descendents to the point of the sand that is on the seashore. These numbers are beyond comprehension. Abraham is not Noah. Every human being ever to live on the planet is not a physical descendent of Abraham.

Much is said about Abraham’s faith throughout the Bible, so the reader must completely understand the depth of what Yahweh is asking Abram to believe. Abram has not grown up believing in the God of Israel. He does not have anything to base his faith on Yahweh on except present divine revelation. Although the Bible does not indicate how long Sarai and Abram had been married when Abram was seventy-five years old, it is more than reasonable to consider the idea that Abram and Sarai had been trying to have children for perhaps fifty years. Therefore, the idea of having enough descendents to create a large clan or tribe (a nation) must have seemed impossible. The reader of Genesis knows that both Abram and Sarai struggled with this promise of a natural born son because each laughed at the idea. Genesis 17:17 records, “Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, ‘Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?’” Likewise, Sarah also laughs at the idea of having pleasure at such an old age (Gn 18:12). In spite of the fact that each laugh at the promise, God comes through which is precisely the point of this “unilateral covenant” (Gn. 15:17-21; Heb 6:13).²¹ Everything about the covenant is contingent upon Abram having a son. The land promise was not just to Abram but to his offspring (Gn 12:7).

In addition to making Abram “a great nation,” Yahweh also promises to make Abram’s name great. Considering the context of chapter 12 in relationship to chapter 11, one sees the manner in which the author juxtapositions man making his own name great to God making a

man’s name great. Mathews writes, “‘Name’ (šēm) is another lexical item that brings the Babel story forward.” 22 It is not acceptable for man to make his own name great, but God is more than ready to make one of His servant’s name great. Pink agrees with Matthews. He writes: “The overthrow of Babel and the scattering of the nations was followed by the call of Abraham to be the father of a divinely governed nation which was to be a witness for God, the depository of His revelation, and ultimately, the channel through which His blessing should flow to all the families of the earth.” 23 Ultimately, it will be the exaltation of another “Name,” a Name above all other names, the name of Jesus which God will use to fully fulfill this promise to Abram (Phil 2:9).

In spite of Abram’s disobedience with Hagar (Gn 16:1-4), God came through for Abram and Sarai and provided them the child of promise Isaac (Gn 17:19). Isaac in turn would have two sons of whom God chose Jacob to reaffirm the covenant (Ex 2:24). Jacob (Israel) had twelve sons—the patriarchs—through whom God created the nation of Israel. In Exodus 19:6, Yahweh tells Moses to tell the people that they will “be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (gôy). These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.” This however is not sufficient to fulfill the covenant because in Genesis 17:4-5, God promises that not only would Abram be the father of a nation but nations (plural). Moreover, he would no longer be Abram but Abraham because Yahweh says, “I have made you the father of a multitude of nations” (Gn 17:5). Again, this promise, which is far greater than the promise of a single nation, was made even before Abram had a son. It is obvious how Abram became the father of a nation, but how he is the father of nations needs to be explained. Moreover, there is direct correlation between the promise of blessing, the making of Abraham’s name great, and the way Abram becomes the

23 Pink, 2005, 139.
father of nations. Bauckham helps his reader understand the difference between the election of Noah and Abraham. He writes: “Unlike the choice of Noah and his family, the singling out of Abraham is not at all to be understood as God giving up on the nations. In Abraham’s case, he is singled out precisely so that blessing may come to all the nations, to all the seventy nations God had scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

A Promise of Blessing

After a promise of much land and numerous descendents, Yahweh promises to bless Abram. “And I will bless you” is very clear (Gn 12:2). Matthew writes, “‘Bless’ (bārak) in Genesis describes primarily two benefits: progeny and material wealth. Here “bless” indicates material wealth for Abram, since the promise of a populous nation had already been made. This is the understanding of “blessing” given to Isaac’s remarkable agricultural success; both the narrator and Isaac’s neighbors attribute it to the Lord who ‘blessed him’ (Gn 26:12, 29; cf. 32:9). This helps the reader understand Abram’s success throughout the remainder of the narrative. The blessing is not limited to Abraham. Jacob brings blessing to Laban (Gn 30:27). Joseph is used over and over again to bring blessing and save much people alive (Gn 39:5; 50:20). The patriarch Jacob gives his blessing to the Pharoah of Egypt (Gn 47:7). Bauckham writes: “Blessing in the Bible refers to God’s characteristically generous and abundant giving of all good to his creatures and his continual renewal of the abundance of created life. Blessing is God’s provision for human flourishing. But it is also relational: to be blessed by God is not only to know God’s good gifts” but to know God Himself.”

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26 Bauckham, 2009, 38.
Certainly of all the statements in the pre-covenant promises, the closing promise must have been the most perplexing to Abram. Yahweh, the Lord, told Abram, “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gn 12:3, NKJV). Abram must have wondered how all the families in the earth would be blessed” through a seed he did not even have. The audacity of what God promised to do for Abram only serves to magnify the significance of His obedience and faith. It simple does not seem possible for a man who does not have any children to be able to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Perhaps in the twenty-first century one can conceive of inventing something or discovering a cure to cancer that would bless all the families of the earth, but it is certainly doubtful that Abram would have been thinking like that. Pink points out that not only would Abram be blessed, but he also would be “a medium of blessing to others.”

This thought helps the reader understand why the gospel of Matthew clearly establishes Christ’s lineage to Abraham. Stott emphasizes that Matthew is not just tying lineage back to Jesus but to the entire “gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Finally, the Lord states that those who bless Abram will be blessed and those who cursed him will be curse. In this way, the Lord promised Abram what could be described as the ultimate in divine protection. Walton writes, “When God blesses someone, he puts that person under his care and protection and in his favor.”

Today’s believer must recognize the immense security he or she has in the covenant (Abrahamic or New).

Paul is the Apostle that God used the most to help Gentile disciples of Christ understand their relationship to father Abraham. According to Romans 4:29, all (Jews and Gentiles) who

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27 Pink, 2005, 142
29 Walton, 2001, 394.
walk in faith (in the faith) are children of Abraham. Gallager and Hawthorne write about this extended family. They write: “Christ has opened Abraham’s family to all. We are now seeing people from every people, tribe, and clan being joined with Christ by faith and enfolded into the people of God.”30 It is the gospel that makes spiritual adoption possible into the family of God started through Abraham. In Ephesians 1:5, Paul explains that this adoption was predestined according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” [emphasis mine]. In Galatians 3:29, he writes “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

THE UNILATERAL COVENANT

Like the covenant God made with Noah, God’s covenant with Abraham is also unilateral. The fulfillment of the covenant is not a joint effort between Abraham and God. Through an elaborate ceremony performed with Abraham in a deep sleep (cf. Gn 2:21), God binds Himself unilaterally to fulfill the covenant. By walking through the animal halves alone, God “binds Himself to the ‘covenant’ to give Abraham’s ‘seed’ the ‘land’” previously described. Boice clarifies this well with, “The covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants is called a unilateral covenant, meaning that God alone sets the terms and that he promises fulfillment apart from the faithfulness or lack of faithfulness of his people. Yet we are not to suppose that the people were absolved from any responsibility at all.”31 Understanding this idea helps the Christian understand the unilateral aspects of God’s plan of salvation, yet there is clear biblical expectation to repent and believe the gospel (Mk 1:15; Acts 17:30; 20:21).


ABRAHAM’S FAITH

In spite of the fact that by all reasonable possibilities Sarai was far too old to have a son, Yahweh told Abram that he would have a biological descendent, “your very own son shall be your heir” (Gen. 15:4). Genesis 15:6 does not describe the time when Abram left idolatry and became a follower of the one true God. Instead, it describes Abraham’s faith in God’s promise. It is recorded as a watershed event and referenced four different times in the New Testament—Romans 4:3, 22; Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23. The fact that Abram believed God against all that he understood about child bearing and age was a declaration of amazing faith which is associated with the imputation of righteousness. Carson notes that Abram is confessing his frustration to the Lord when the Lord reassures him. He writes, “Abram accepted God’s reassurance, he believed the LORD (6). The verbal form suggests an ongoing activity, i.e. he kept believing the promise, he kept relying on the Lord. So God credited it to him as righteousness.”

Abram must be declared righteous in order to receive God’s favor. Since Abram is not a righteous man according to his own conduct, he must be declared righteous. Genesis is full of examples of the sins of Abraham. He laughs at the promise of God (Gn 17:17), lies in fear of losing his life and wife (Gn 12:19), and sleeps with a servant girl (Gn 16:4). This must be why Paul was led to write: “And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “‘In you shall all the nations be blessed’ (Gal 3:8).

CONCLUSION

Without a foundational understanding of the Abrahamic covenant, the Bible will not make sense as a comprehensive historical narrative of redemption beginning in the Garden of Eden and culminating with a new heaven and new earth (Rev 21:1-2). The depth of the

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Abrahamic covenant is beyond comprehension in many regards. Paul reminded his reader that “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor 2:9). This is blessing beyond belief! Essex summarizes, “First and fundamentally, the coming of Jesus is in accordance with the Abrahamic Covenant. Jesus is viewed as the one the Lord has sent to effect the deliverance of Israel from her enemies according to His promise Abraham (Lk 1:54-55).” The believer must understand that Jesus is the ultimate child of promise (Gal 3:16) and there is still much yet to be fulfilled in the promise of blessing to Abraham and his offspring. What makes Christ’s work most glorious is the truth that he became the curse (Gn 12:4) so that all who are in Abraham may be blessed and be a blessing to others through the gospel and the sanctified life each lives according to the power of the gospel. The unilateral aspect of the covenant assures the believer that his salvation is by grace through faith in the promise of the gospel (Eph 2:8-9; Rom 1:2). Following the example of father Abraham’s faith in the promises of God, all who are just live by faith (Rom 1:17). The unconditional nature of the covenant removes the curse of the law, provides the ultimate blessing of peace with God (Rom 5:1), and gives the believer a land to look forward to where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together” and “they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Is 65:25; 2:4). Finally, Peter reminds every believer that he or she is a part of “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pt 2:9). This is the nation that began when Abram placed his faith in a God who promised him land, a great name, and blessing to him and to all who would be called sons and daughters of Abraham.

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