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FAITH AND RESILIENCE OF WOMEN IN THE BIBLE

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ABSTRACT



In the intricate tapestry of human history, women have served as both silent architects and resilient pillars, contributing profoundly to societal development. As we stand at the precipice of a new era, the exploration of women's roles, their noteworthy accomplishments, the strides towards equality, and the enduring challenges they face takes on paramount significance. This paper endeavors to meticulously unravel the nuanced layers that constitute the experiences of women, shedding a discerning light on their historic achievements, their contemporary impact, and the persistent obstacles that impede their full participation across diverse spheres of life.

Keywords: *Women in the Bible, Faith, Accomplishments, equality, Challenges.*

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Throughout the annals of history, women have been the dynamic force propelling social and cultural transformations. From the suffragette movements advocating for the right to vote to the present day, where women wield influence in shaping political landscapes and breaking barriers, their indelible imprint on the narrative of progress is undeniable. This study seeks to not only recognize but also celebrate these achievements, delving into the diverse contexts that intricately influence the trajectory of women's empowerment on a global scale.

The narrative unfolds with historical milestones, such as the suffragette movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, symbolizing women's unwavering determination to transcend societal constraints and secure the right to vote. These movements marked a pivotal juncture, challenging entrenched norms and paving the way for greater gender equality. Yet, the struggle for women's rights extends beyond this, persisting into contemporary times.

In the present era, women continue to redefine progress as influential leaders across various domains. Their contributions in political arenas and corporate boardrooms challenge stereotypes and reshape societal expectations. This study aims not only to recognize and celebrate these achievements but also to underscore the resolute spirit of women who persistently strive for excellence and positive change.

However, the journey toward complete gender equality remains unfinished. The paper meticulously delves into the persisting challenges that obstruct women's empowerment on a global

scale, encompassing discrimination, gender-based violence, unequal access to education and economic opportunities, and systemic biases. By confronting these challenges head-on, societies can collectively work towards fostering environments that champion inclusivity, diversity, and equal opportunities for all.

Furthermore, the study acknowledges the imperative of considering diverse contexts shaping the trajectory of women's empowerment. Cultural, social, and economic factors intricately influence women's experiences across different regions and communities. By comprehending and respecting these diverse contexts, policymakers, activists, and communities can develop nuanced and effective strategies for advancing women's rights and cultivating sustainable pathways towards gender equality.

This paper meticulously unravels the intricate layers of women's experiences in the tapestry of human history. It not only celebrates their remarkable achievements and acknowledges strides towards equality but also confronts the enduring challenges they face. By illuminating the roles of silent architects and resilient pillars in societal development, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the pivotal role women play in shaping the course of history. As we navigate the challenges and opportunities of a new era, embracing and championing women's rights remains indispensable for cultivating a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of gender equality remains an ongoing challenge, marked by a myriad of obstacles persisting across diverse regions and



communities. Gender-based discrimination, disparate access to educational and employment opportunities, and ingrained systemic biases persistently impede the full realization of women's potential. This research endeavors to dissect these challenges, meticulously analyzing their origins and consequences, with the ultimate aim of identifying strategic policies that can contribute to a more inclusive and equitable future.

By delving into the intricate dimensions of women's experiences, this research seeks to foster a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding gender dynamics. It transcends a mere exploration of women as a demographic group, evolving into a profound inquiry into the forces shaping their lives, aspirations, and the formidable barriers obstructing their path towards equality. Through this comprehensive investigation, we aspire to contribute valuable insights capable of informing policies, catalyzing societal change, and paving the way for a future where the potential of every woman is duly recognized, nurtured, and celebrated.

The discourse revolving around the conceptualization of humanity, dignity, authority, roles, and the societal positioning of women has perennially sparked controversy. Across varied communities and cultures globally, entrenched practices and norms systematically marginalize women, depicting them as ostensibly inferior and lacking substantive influence in decision-making processes. Moreover, certain religious doctrines cast women as the quintessential source of malevolence, imposing prohibitions that restrict their involvement in religious services or

participation in mixed-gender congregational activities. This persistent socio-cultural and religious dichotomy underscores the intricate dynamics inherent in discussions related to gender roles and the status of women within diverse social frameworks.

The exploration of women in Biblical times necessitates a nuanced examination of the intricate interplay among cultural, social, and religious factors that intricately wove the fabric of ancient Near Eastern societies. The Old and New Testaments of the Bible, revered as both historical and theological documents, offer a distinctive lens through which we can glean profound insights into the lives of women within the diverse cultural contexts of their respective eras. This scholarly inquiry seeks to meticulously dissect the status, roles, and experiences of women in antiquity, unfurling the rich tapestry of their existence.

In the Old Testament, women emerge as central figures in narratives that lay the foundational stones for Judeo-Christian traditions. Matriarchs such as Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, intimately linked to the genesis of the Israelite people, and figures like Deborah and Esther, exemplify the influential roles played by women in the unfolding drama of salvation history.

However, it is imperative to acknowledge the deeply patriarchal nature of ancient Israelite society. Women's roles were often confined to prescribed cultural expectations, emphasizing their identities as wives, mothers, and stewards of the domestic sphere. Legal codes, prominently featured in the Torah, delineated specific duties



and constraints for women, thereby reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Transitioning to the New Testament, the role of women assumes further complexity. Jesus' interactions with women challenge prevailing societal norms, emphasizing the inherent dignity and worth of women. The writings of the Apostle Paul, though subject to critiques for apparent conservatism, also contain passages recognizing and affirming the leadership roles of women within early Christian communities. Nevertheless, interpretations of Biblical passages concerning women vary, sparking ongoing debates about the extent to which these texts either constrained or empowered women within their respective societal contexts.

The challenges faced by women in antiquity, ranging from marital concerns to issues of inheritance and societal expectations, underscore the intricate and evolving nature of gender dynamics. The study of women in Biblical times transcends a mere historical exploration; it serves as a platform for contemplation on the ways in which cultural and religious perspectives have historically shaped, and continue to influence, societal perceptions of gender roles. This academic endeavor prompts critical examination and discussion regarding the intersection of faith, culture, and the evolving understanding of gender equity in contemporary society.

The biblical persona of Esther emerges as a captivating embodiment of faith and resilience, deftly maneuvering through complex circumstances with steadfast courage and a reliance on divine providence. Positioned within

the Old Testament, the Book of Esther unravels a narrative fraught with political intrigue, considerations of cultural identity, and the transformative potential embedded in a woman's faith. Esther's odyssey commences in the opulent backdrop of the Persian Empire, where this orphaned Jewish girl finds herself entangled in a royal court teeming with political machinations. Despite the challenges of the palace, Esther remains tethered to her faith and cultural roots, showcasing resilience as she navigates the complexities of her new existence with a sense of self and purpose.

The zenith of Esther's narrative unfolds in her audacious endeavor to avert the annihilation of her people. Confronted with the genocidal plot devised by the king's advisor, Haman, Esther makes the life-threatening decision to breach protocol by approaching the king uninvited— an act punishable by death. Her renowned declaration, "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16), encapsulates the core of her resilience. Esther transcends her fear, believing that her actions are guided by a higher purpose, and even in the face of potential peril, she stands as a luminous symbol of hope for her people.

Esther's faith is not merely a private conviction; it becomes a catalyst for action. Leveraging her position as queen, she strategically influences the king's decision, underscoring her deep trust in divine guidance. The apex of her endeavors culminates in the deliverance of the Jewish people, underscoring the transformative influence of a woman who, grounded in faith and propelled by resilience, becomes an instrument of salvation. Applying a critical lens reveals the



intricate dynamics of power, gender, and religious identity at play in Esther's story, prompting an exploration of how her agency within a patriarchal context challenges and redefines prevailing norms.

Esther's narrative transcends temporal boundaries, imparting a timeless lesson at the crossroads of faith and resilience. Her story beckons individuals to confront adversity with an unwavering belief in a higher purpose, to navigate societal challenges without compromising one's identity, and to recognize that, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds, resilience fueled by faith can serve as a transformative catalyst. Esther emerges as a testament to the enduring agency of individuals, particularly women, whose unwavering faith and resilience can shape destinies and redirect the course of history.

The narrative of Esther not only accentuates her personal faith and resilience but also underscores overarching themes of providence and divine orchestration. In a unique departure from other biblical books, the Book of Esther does not explicitly invoke God's name, yet it permeates the narrative with a palpable sense of divine presence and guidance. Esther's ascent to the position of queen is portrayed as more than mere happenstance, hinting at a higher purpose orchestrating events.

The establishment of the festival of Purim, intended to commemorate the events of Esther's story, accentuates themes of deliverance and divine intervention. The name "Purim," derived from the Persian word for "lots," references Haman's casting of lots to determine the most propitious day for his genocidal plan. Yet, the lots

transform into a symbol of divine control, as what Haman intended for malevolence, God turns for benevolence. This aspect adds a layer of complexity to Esther's narrative, demonstrating how faith and resilience can align with a larger divine plan even when obscured by the contingencies of human events.

Esther's courageous approach to the king stands as a pivotal moment, challenging the traditional gender roles prevalent in her time. Her actions serve as a testament to the strength derived from overcoming societal expectations, illustrating how resilience rooted in faith can empower individuals to defy cultural norms for the greater good. A critical lens unveils the subversive nature of Esther's actions, disrupting prevailing gender norms and offering a profound commentary on agency and societal expectations within a patriarchal context.

Furthermore, Esther's narrative resonates deeply with those in positions of influence but constrained by external pressures. Her strategic use of wisdom and discernment in navigating the complexities of the royal court exemplifies how faith and resilience can find expression through deliberate and thoughtful action. Essentially, Esther's story weaves a multi-layered tapestry of faith, resilience, providence, and strategic acumen. It urges readers to perceive the guiding hand of the divine even in apparently mundane circumstances and underscores the potential for transformation when faith aligns with the resilience to act in accordance with one's convictions.

Esther's enduring legacy stands as an enduring source of inspiration for individuals



grappling with the intricacies of their own lives. It serves as a poignant reminder that faith, coupled with resilience, wields the power to become a compelling force capable of shaping destinies and influencing the course of history. Examining Esther's narrative through a critical lens invites exploration into the ways strategic agency, particularly when exercised by women in positions of influence, challenges and reshapes established power structures, contributing to a nuanced comprehension of gender dynamics and agency within the context of faith and resilience.

In the introduction to his commentary on the book of Ruth, Robert L. Hubbard describes it so: "Ruth is an absolutely delightful little book. Mention its name and Bible readers gently smile, warmly praise its beauty, and quietly tell what it means to them personally. . . . They quickly admire Ruth, her commitment, courage, and cleverness." It is a sentiment which is shared by a great deal of people, some of whom have read the story themselves and others who have been exposed to it through discussion or popular depiction. In whatever way one comes to know it, the household characterization of Ruth is one of a virtuous and praiseworthy young woman, and this for good reason. At its most basic, the story of Ruth deals with a pair of women down on their luck, who are saved by the virtuous action of the younger, and for whom loyalty and courage are the tools of survival. However, a closer look at the exact nature of this virtue and the actions which Ruth takes suggests that this positive reception is somewhat surprising. While she does appear to act selflessly with regard to caring for her mother-in-

law, Ruth's approach of her benefactor takes particular advantage of his vulnerability and carries a distinct tone of deviousness. This type of scene is common to other young women who take initiative within the biblical narrative, and the shared context of childbearing suggests a meaningful pattern of female agency in relation to their sexuality and fertility.

Ruth is introduced, with no reference to her own family or background, as a Moabite woman who has married a foreigner, Mahlon, an Ephrathite. He and his family came east into the kingdom of Moab as they were fleeing a famine in the kingdom of Judah, but his father died before the marriage. Mahlon's brother also took a Moabite wife, but both brothers have died and left their wives with their already widowed mother, Naomi. Following this development, Ruth decides to accompany Naomi in her return to Judah, and upon their arrival she becomes instrumental in securing a comfortable and happy existence for herself and Naomi. This she does by seeking out the fulfillment of a particular Israelite custom in which she marries a kinsman of Naomi's and bears him a son.

Throughout the story, Ruth is described in positive terms, almost to a fault, and with constant reference to her personal virtue. When her mother-in-law Naomi decides to return to Judah, she attests to the kindness of Ruth and her sister-in-law: "may the Lord act out kindness (*hesed*) with you, as you have done with the dead, and with me" (Ruth 1:8). The kindness with which Ruth acted towards her husband and his brother before their deaths, and towards Naomi, is undeniable.



However, this kindness does not appear to be the cause of her praise. When Naomi's kinsman Boaz later speaks to Ruth in the field, he explains to her the reason for his attention to her: it is specifically everything she has done "since the death of [her] husband" (Ruth 2:11), not before. Of interest, then, are the actions which she takes in the period between the death of her husband and her meeting Boaz.

The sequence begins with Naomi's decision to return to Judah. While her sister-in-law agrees to return home, Ruth chooses to follow Naomi, telling her: "where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your god will be my god" (Ruth 1:16). This pledge comes in three parts: the first states a personal loyalty to Naomi and a promise to remain close to her wherever she goes. The second refers to Naomi's 'people'. While this can be construed as a continuation of the first part of the pledge, it extends its reference to the whole nation to which Naomi belongs, or perhaps more important, to which Ruth's late husband belonged. And the third displays a certainty piety, a conversion of sorts, in which Ruth expresses her wish to worship a foreign god, that of Judah.

The set of actions which Boaz praises encompasses, then, Ruth's promise to remain with her mother-in-law, her decision to be part of her late husband's people, and her wish to worship the Israelite god. Of these, the latter two are more subjective in their demonstration of virtue. Loyalty to a living person is easily praised; loyalty to a dead person and his nation, if that loyalty is detrimental to the one still living, may be less so. It is, to be

sure, unselfish, but for whom exactly it is beneficial is an important point to explore. Likewise, worship of the god of Judah may be tagged as virtuous for the Israelite reader, but not necessarily for another. Beyond these promises, there are also more corporeal actions Ruth takes to display her loyalty and help Naomi. After meeting Boaz, for example, she returns to Naomi and shares the fruit of her labor with her: "she brought forth and gave to her that which she had left after she was satisfied" (Ruth 2:18). As a younger and more able-bodied woman, she takes care of her mother-in-law directly through the labor of her gleaning. Although this description occurs after Ruth's first meeting with Boaz, this might be an eventuality which he assumes and also includes in his praise. Afterwards, Naomi encourages Ruth to approach Boaz at the threshing floor in the hope that she can secure his help in rectifying their situation through marriage. When Ruth goes to him, he again praises her: "Blessed are you of the Lord, my daughter. You have been more pleasing in kindness (*hesed*) at the end than in the beginning, in that you did not go after the young men, whether poor or rich" (Ruth 3:10). This statement is surprising, given the circumstances. The nature of kindness associated with approaching the man for marriage, Boaz specifically out of all the men, is not immediately apparent. Ostensibly it is the way in which the arrangement helps Naomi which lends it the label of 'kindness'.

Later on, in the women's conversation with Naomi, Ruth is described as "better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). Certainly this can be a simple reference to Ruth's earlier care and her



increased ability to provide for Naomi following her marriage. However, Boaz's statement suggests that Ruth would not be demonstrating the same kindness, had she looked to marry a different man. It appears that it is Ruth's marriage and birthing a child to Boaz that particularly helps Naomi. The legal background of the story clarifies the significance of this situation. Throughout the story, Boaz is described as *gō'ēl*, a 'kinsman-redeemer' (Ruth 2:20; 3:12; 4:14). In the Israelite custom, this role was one of a close male relative, who took on the duties of *g e 'ullâ* ('redemption') in order to help a family member in need.⁷ Hubbard makes particular emphasis that it is this custom, not levirate marriage (in which a brother-in-law marries the widow of his childless brother in order to produce an heir for him⁸), which dictates the sequence of events in Ruth.⁹ In response to this, K. Lawson Younger suggests that it may not be an important distinction: in this case, the intent to fulfill the *gō'ēl* tradition necessitates the levirate marriage. In particular, he notes that the Hebrew levirate custom (*yā-bam*) may well have extended further than merely to brothers, despite what is connoted by the Latin term. With regard to the story of Ruth, the responsibilities that Boaz takes on as *gō'ēl* and *yābam* are the redemption (by repurchasing) of property sold out of economic need (Lev 25:24-34) and the redemption (by marriage) of the wife of a deceased man (Deut 25:5-10). These are the actions which Boaz outlines to the near kinsman and the ten elders of the city (Ruth 4:9-10) and completes at Ruth's request. A primary part of Ruth's kindness to Naomi, then, is her attention to the welfare of her mother-in-law by securing the redemption of her land by Boaz.

However, it also appears to be to Naomi's benefit that Ruth marries Boaz and has a child by him. Upon the birth of Ruth's son, the boy is described as "a restorer of life, a nourisher of [Naomi's] old age" (Ruth 4:15) and as "a son born to Naomi" (Ruth 4:17).

Ruth's ability to bear children is directly related to her ability to help her mother-in-law. Without this childbearing ability, Ruth would not be able to act out this *hesed* to Naomi in the same way, and so is her virtuousness tied up with her fertility. Moreover, the kindness which Boaz ascribes to Ruth on that very night is complicated by Naomi's instructions and the nature of Ruth's approach to Boaz. After learning of their first meeting in the field, Naomi directs Ruth in her next actions: And Naomi her mother-in-law said to her: my daughter, shall I not seek rest for you, so that it may be well with you? And now is there not Boaz our kinsman, with whose young men you were? Hinneh! He is winnowing barley at the threshing floor tonight. You shall bathe and anoint yourself and put your garment on yourself and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, you shall know the place where he lies, and you shall go in and uncover his feet and lie down there, and he will tell you what you should do. And she said to her: all that you say to me, I shall do. And she went down to the threshing floor and did according to all that her mother-in-law had instructed her. After Boaz had eaten and drunk, and his heart was joyful, and he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain, she came softly and uncovered his feet and lay



down. And at midnight, the man shook and turned himself, and there was a woman lying at his feet. And he said: who are you? And she answered: I am Ruth, your maidservant. Spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are a kinsman-redeemer. (Ruth 3:1-9) There is a certain ambiguity as to the events that occur. In both Naomi's direction and the description of the action, Ruth "uncovers Boaz's feet", a phrase which could defensibly be read as referring to his sexual organs. Throughout, terms are used which tend in Hebrew to connote sexual activity: to know (יָדַע), to go (בָּא), and to lie down (שָׁכַב). However, none of them is used with its typical context. For example, Ruth is directed to "know the place" (יָדַע תַּעַלְמָה), but Boaz does not "know her" (יָדַע תְּאֵהָ). Likewise, she "goes in" (תָּבוֹאָהּ), but he does not "go in to her" (יָבֹא אֶל־הָאִשָּׁה). (כָּבַד שֶׁל־וְיָתָּהּ, "her with lie "not does he but, (לִיָּהּ אֶל־וְיָבֹא,) "down lies "she and, (לִיָּהּ אֶל־וְיָבֹא,) The scene appears to evoke these parallels intentionally. Although the language may not imply that any particular sexual activity occurred, the arena is one which is typically occupied by sexual action, and the sequence of events is unmistakably one of seduction. Naomi marks Boaz as being isolated for the night, and Ruth seeks to find him alone in this private space. She waits until he has eaten and drunk and is happy, and approaches him when his guard is down, not just full and content but asleep. Consider also the structure of Ruth's request. Ruth urges Boaz to "spread your wing over your maidservant, for you are gō'el" (Ruth 3:9).

This presupposes that the gō'el responsibility extends to marrying her. Younger suggests that the duty to redeem Naomi's land

comes first, and 'triggers' the levirate duty. Certainly, Boaz presents it this way to the near kinsman (Ruth 4:5). Ruth, however, makes no reference to the redemption of Naomi's property, but appears rather to ask primarily for marriage (or whatever exactly is meant by שָׂפָר בָּנָהּ). She does not ask Boaz to redeem the land, only to marry her as part of g e 'ullâ, but neither is there any indication that he was planning to redeem it before this encounter. In other words, Ruth appears to be offering her marriage as a means of convincing him to do his part for Naomi. Naomi's original instruction adds even another slant. If Ruth asks only for marriage, and not repurchasing of land, Naomi instructs her to ask for neither. Rather, she tells Ruth to present herself, to "uncover his feet and lie down there" (Ruth 3:4), and wait for Boaz to tell her what to do. Here is even more emphasized that Ruth goes not to ask for anything relating to g e 'ullâ, but instead merely to offer herself with this sexually charged action, in the hope that it leads to the security (מְנוּחָה) (which Naomi promises (Ruth 3:1). In this context, the sequence—waiting for Boaz to be alone and in a good mood as a result of his meal, before approaching him and exploiting a general weakness of men for women (in terms of sex)—is highly reminiscent of seduction. It might be expected that these methods would be viewed negatively. However, there is little indication that it is. In fact, this series of events appears to involve a very standard agency for women of Ruth's age and status.

Mother Mary's resilience, as portrayed in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospels of



Luke and Matthew, unveils some profound narrative rich with implications for critical analysis within the realm of English literature. The Annunciation, where the angel Gabriel declares the miraculous conception, becomes a poignant instance of Mary's immediate and unhesitating acceptance of a divine plan that challenges societal norms. Her response in Luke 1:38, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled," encapsulates her resilience as she embraces her unforeseen and socially challenging role within the unfolding divine narrative, offering an opportunity for a feminist literary analysis.

The journey to Bethlehem, as depicted in the Gospel of Luke, adds another layer to Mary's resilience, providing fertile ground for examining the socio-cultural aspects of her experience. Pregnant and grappling with the hardships of travel, Mary and Joseph confront the challenges of finding shelter in a crowded town during the census. The lack of room in the inn forces Mary to give birth to Jesus in a stable, a symbolic experience underscoring her ability to withstand adversity with grace and humility, presenting a narrative ripe for socio-historical analysis.

The pinnacle of Mary's resilience, vividly portrayed at the foot of the cross during Jesus' crucifixion, offers an opportunity for a psychoanalytic literary interpretation. In John 19:25-27, Mary stands by her son in his final moments, enduring the agony of witnessing his suffering and death. This poignant scene exemplifies Mary's unparalleled resilience in the face of the greatest emotional and spiritual trial,

presenting a compelling case for delving into the psychological depths of her character.

Examining Mary's resilience through the lens of critical theory within English literature extends to the broader context of her life. The escape to Egypt, as recounted in Matthew 2:13-15, becomes a narrative ripe for postcolonial analysis. Following the Magi's visit and King Herod's sinister intentions, an angel directs Joseph to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt for safety, presenting an opportunity to explore the dynamics of forced migration and the displacement of the Holy Family.

Mary's role as a nurturing and supportive mother throughout Jesus' upbringing offers a lens for a bildungsroman analysis, delving into the complexities of maternal influence on the protagonist's growth and development. Despite everyday challenges and the lack of understanding from those around her, Mary's steadfast commitment to her role as the mother of the Son of God becomes a narrative of maternal resilience worth exploring through a literary lens.

Her presence in the early Christian community, as depicted in the book of Acts, suggests a continuation of her resilience post-Jesus' ascension. Acts 1:14 notes Mary among those who devoted themselves to prayer in the upper room, providing a basis for exploring her enduring strength and commitment within the socio-religious context of early Christianity.

In the realm of English literature, Mary's resilience becomes a narrative tapestry woven with threads of feminist, socio-historical, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, and bildungsroman



analyses. These critical perspectives illuminate not only the individual moments in Mary's life but also contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the broader socio-cultural and psychological dimensions within the biblical narrative. In examining the resilience of biblical women, such as Esther, Ruth, and Mary, through diverse critical lenses, the interplay of faith and resilience emerges as a profound theme that transcends time and cultural boundaries. This exploration extends beyond the confines of religious discourse and intersects with the realm of English literature, offering a rich tapestry for scholars to unravel and analyze the complexities of these enduring narratives.

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