Of Springs and Living Stones: Psalm 87 and the Memory of Zion in Christian Preaching

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Abstract

Central to Hebrew Scripture traditions of covenant fidelity is Zion: the holy city Jerusalem, chief locus of ancient Judean worship and a pilgrimage site for countless believers. In many biblical texts, Jerusalem is personified as Daughter Zion: beloved of YHWH, ravaged by enemies, awaiting God’s glorious restoration. This essay focuses on the act of remembering Zion as a sacred practice fruitful for the Christian homiletical imagination. Exploring Zion traditions with their congregations, preachers can deepen the capacity of their hearers to respond to historical and contemporary traumas, build up global communities in justice, and bear witness to the eschatological hope of the Gospel. Psalm 87 is a powerful resource for Christian believers learning to envision Zion as the joyous kin-dom of all who love the Holy One.

Keywords: congregational renewal; diaspora; lament; memory; trauma; Zion

We are this heap of dust, our bodies, our souls, all the words in our mouths, all hopes.

—Yehuda Amichai

Covenantal fidelity is at the heart of God’s purposes as articulated in the Hebrew Scriptures. Biblical halakhic material, narratives, prophetic oracles, poetry, and wisdom sayings shed light on the liturgical practices, theological claims, and ethical formation of those called to worship the Mystery known as YHWH (Gen 12:1–3; Exod 3:1–15; Isa 43:1–7) and commanded to obey the Holy One (Lev 19:2; Deut 6:4–9). For two millennia, Christian preachers have attended to covenantal fidelity in the Hebrew Scriptures, exegeting text and context to craft proclamation for the churches, studying the texts’ amplification and transformation in New Testament traditions, and speaking new learnings from the pulpit, framing theological...

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insights in the dictions—manifold and plural—of the new covenant Christians proclaim in Jesus Christ.

To take a metaphor from archaeology: the materiality of faith and communal formation is densely layered within Judaism and Christianity alike. There is much mixing of strata and migration of artifacts through sites of homiletical investigation over time, with treasures old and new moving up to the surface of each contextual preaching moment. Over time, the ground has shifted and settled. New structures have been built to meet the needs of emerging communities. Older formations have been excavated and held up to the light. So it is with Zion, understood as site and as living artifact: the city Jerusalem, with its storied past and its rich symbolic valences featured in narratives, poems, and prophetic visions across the Bible. God’s dynamic presence in the life of the world can be imagined symbolically as radiating outward from God’s holy hill (Ps 15:1), from the ancient mountain known as Zion.

I. Zion as Constructed and Contested

The truths and erasures of this sacred place—of Zion’s architecture and grounds, literal and figurative—may be explored, sifted, and cherished by all who claim as holy the memory of Jerusalem. In historiographical traditions inscribed in the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and elsewhere in Scripture, the city was originally Jebus, inhabited by a Canaanite group known as the Jebusites. This must be acknowledged. “Zion” as the heart of Israel’s territory has always been constructed and contested, politically and theologically. Contemporary preachers should not be unwittingly complicit with the militarist ideology that suffuses biblical narratives about ancient Israel’s dispossession and slaughter of Canaanite indigenes: families of Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaim, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and, yes, Jebusites (Gen 10:16; 15:18–21; cf. Josh 3:10; 9:1; 11:3; 12:8; 15:8, 63; 18:16, 28; 24:11). Nor should contemporary readers—Jewish, Christian, or other—surrender our ethical and moral norms when we encounter theological justifications for that narrated brutality. The scribes put into the mouth of YHWH a bloodcurdling command to Israelite invaders: “You must let nothing that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them,” that is, kill every Canaanite from newborn to elderly, noncombatants as well as combatants (Deut 20:16–17). We dare not be naïve about the force of that ideology, given the ways in which it has been taken up in political discourse to justify crusades and settler colonialism in many contexts. Every time we pick up a Bible, we choose how to hear these artistic witnesses in their layers upon layers of brilliant insights and distortions, their complicated claims and lacunae. Over the centuries, preachers have sought to discern, in every d’var Torah or homily, how best to attend to a particular stratum of witness:
how to sift a precious bit of ash from the “heap of dust”\(^2\) that constitutes the past and present of our theological understanding and our hope. It is important work, beautiful and difficult. Homileticians can be of help, theorizing how such moves can be made with hermeneutical clarity, intellectual depth, moral integrity, and rhetorical power.

2. Preaching as a Praxis of Formation
Preeminent among the purposes of Christian preaching has been the formation of hearers, both as individuals growing in faith and as covenant community. Ideally, Christians have been formed spiritually in solidarity with those in covenant with God from ages past and with Jewish believers in the present. Given the appalling distortions of Christian supersessionism and anti-Judaism throughout history, Christian preachers today should explicitly reject neo-Marcionism, honoring the sacrality of the Hebrew Scriptures as well as the New Testament. Alexander Deeg argues that sensitive Christian preaching on the Hebrew Scriptures is essential for renewal of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.\(^3\) Nuanced preaching on Hebrew Scripture texts can teach believers that the Christian life is rooted not only in the grace of baptism, but in the history of God’s redemptive love for creation enacted through a cascade of blessing known first to communities that preceded Christianity: ancient Israel and Judah (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Those belonging to that heritage continue to walk their own godly path alongside Christians. Angus Paddison rightly observes, “Jewish-Christian understanding challenges Christians to find a vocabulary of fulfilment that does not become a polemic of displacement.”\(^4\) Preachers must teach believers to claim God’s promises in Christ with an expansive joy that firmly declines supersessionism toward Judaism.

God’s gracious action catalyzes the creation of the cosmos (Genesis 1) and humankind (Genesis 2–3), then forms Israel through the calling of Abraham, the near-sacrifice of Isaac, the wrestling of Jacob, and other dramatic narrative moments that cannot be catalogued here. Through the gift of the Torah on Sinai and the teachings of Moses and the Aaronide priests, the covenant people were enculturated in ways of worship and lived obedience with deep theological power and ethical significance. God’s gracious action energizes the witness of the

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\(^2\) See the epigraph drawn from the poem of Yehuda Amichai.


Former and Latter Prophets: miraculous prophetic deeds and fulfillment of prophetic words in the Deuteronomistic History are joined by incendiary judgment, luminous promise, and dramatic symbolic actions in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. God’s gracious action percolates through narratives of kingship and the survival of communities, through poems of resilience and trust and lamentation, and through wisdom traditions that examine the coherencies and disjunctures of life in community.

Christian preachers speak to believers and to those on the margins of faith, to those within the Church and those beyond the bounds of our traditions. We offer a word to sustain not only those who are near but those who are far off (Isa 57:19), acknowledging that originally, we too had been far from the covenant community (Eph 2:11–22). Christians dare not lose sight of the truth that we have been grafted into God’s covenant people late and through no merit of our own (Rom 11:13–22). Through Jesus Christ, we have been joined to God in a new way (cf. Isa 56:6–8), and our way has its own integrity, but we must never forget our divergence from the originary locus of blessing within Judaism. Any ecclesiology worth the name will adjure Christians neither to boast over nor antagonize those of the First Covenant, instead walking in love (Eph 5:2) with utmost humility, relying on the gracious generosity of God (ἡ χρηστότης θεοῦ, Rom 11:22).

In myriad ways, preachers can strive to expand hearers’ grasp of crucial contours and defining moments in Israel’s covenantal history, learning wisdom for the contemporary life of faith. Preachers can catalyze eagerness in Christian believers to re-narrate their lives in light of who God has been in the experiences and discourses of ancient Israel and Judaism, a polyphonic divine truth narrated afresh “in these last days” (Heb 1:2) in our incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord. The Body of Christ is a covenantal body continually (re)formed in love. We are bound to Christ in love, bound to one another in love, bound to the stranger in love, and bound to testify to the love of the God who was known first through the witness of Israel, a people whose holy vocation is irrevocable (Isa 40:8–9; Rom 11:29).

In this essay, I offer hermeneutical and theological soundings in a topic neglected in contemporary Christian preaching: the memory of Zion. Imagery of Zion is lifted up and

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5 Heinz-Günther Schöttler writes, "Israel is not misled when it hears the word of the one and only God. The Church—in the past, today, and always—is the second one to hear the word of God which was addressed to Israel first. Christian preaching, catechesis, and religious education must never forget about this ‘first’ of the Jews especially when they deal with texts from the Old Testament.” See Schöttler, “Preaching the Hebrew Bible: A Christian Perspective,” in: Alexander Deeg/Walter Homolka/Heinz-Günther Schöttler (eds.): Preaching in Judaism and Christianity: Encounters and Developments from Biblical Times to Modernity, New York 2008, 155–174, 172.

elaborated in numerous texts in the Psalter, the Latter Prophets, and the New Testament. Focusing on Psalm 87, I show that this trope—remembering Zion—can be engaged homiletically as productive not only for prophetic visions of the heavenly Jerusalem, nor only for reflections on Jerusalem in the religious history of ancient Judah and contemporary Israel/Palestine, but also for the ongoing spiritual formation of Christian believers in the present. In what follows, I frame the memory of Zion as a multivalent concept that includes what the personified Zion is said to remember in Psalm 87 and ways in which Christian preachers may bring Zion into the foreground of communal memory. Then I trace the figure of Zion along three trajectories of interpretation with value for homiletics and the spiritual formation of the Christian believer: Zion as traumatized and lamenting mother, Zion as radically expansive community, and Zion as eschatological hope.

3. Jerusalem and Personified Daughter Zion

At the center of ancient Israel’s understanding of covenant holiness was Jerusalem, the central sanctuary for Judean liturgical worship, honored as a pilgrimage site by untold generations of believers. In many biblical texts, the city is personified as Daughter Zion: beloved of YHWH but left desolate after the Neo-Babylonian army devastated Judah. Babylonia’s brutal hegemony over the Levant included armed suppression of Judean resistance and the deportation of leading Judeans, including the prophet Ezekiel, in 597 BCE. In the years that followed, political unrest simmered in Judah and surrounding nations, including Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Phoenicia. Nebuchadnezzar responded by besieging Jerusalem beginning in January 588. What unfolded was a year and a half of sheer terror and unthinkable hardship for Judeans within and beyond the city’s walls. Babylonian troops breached Jerusalem’s defenses in July 587, plundered the Temple, slaughtered many Judean officials and noncombatants, and forced Judean priests and royal officials into captivity in Babylonia. The early decades of the sixth century BCE revealed a cultural landscape of ruination: military subjugation, trauma in the destroyed homeland, and disorientation and shame for those Judeans trying to survive in exile. Yet in days to come, Zion would be radiant once again, a sign of God’s eternal fidelity to a beleaguered and traumatized people (Isa 62:1–12; 66:10–14; Jer 31:31–34).

Exploring Zion traditions with their congregations, Christian preachers can teach about the historical Jerusalem and the militarized colonization that left such fractures in the biblical witness, particularly visible in Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel. Those sacred texts are relevant for communities grappling with grievous injuries done to the bodies and spirits of people in conflict zones today. In North America and elsewhere, the ongoing harms and ideological distortions of neo-colonialism include: the economic depredations of global
capitalism, with its brazen commodification of resources and its subterranean reliance on child labor, enslavement, and human trafficking; pervasive White supremacy and anti-black, anti-brown, and anti-Asian racism; erasure of the legal rights of indigenous peoples by institutions and juridical structures that privilege European colonial norms; and oppression directed at women, gender-nonconforming persons, and those who identify as gay or queer. Christian congregations need excellent preaching to help them identify and resist the global and local devastations wrought by capitalist exploitation. They need to see ecclesial leaders denounce the ravages of White supremacy with its lethal weapons of distorted education, suppression of dissent, mass incarceration, and extrajudicial executions of persons of color. They need to understand how the Gospel remains relevant for resisting the wounds to human dignity inflicted by authoritarian political regimes and repressive social contexts. The Psalms can be a vital resource for this work.

4. Christian Preaching on the Psalms

The Psalms have served as a locus for Christian homiletical reflection since the dawn of the Christian era, not surprising given that, as Robert Miller observes, “references to inclusion of Gentiles [in] the community of God are more abundant in the Psalter than anywhere else in the Old Testament.” Quotations from the Psalms leaven the witness of almost all New Testament texts, most richly in the Synoptic Gospels, Romans, and Hebrews. New Testament authors frequently enlist the Hebrew Scriptures—especially the Psalms and Isaiah—in rhetorical moves designed to amplify what would have been radical or perplexing claims about Jesus of Nazareth. In Luke 4, Jesus identifies his mission via public proclamation of texts from Isaiah; on the road to Emmaus, the risen Christ explains himself in terms of the Hebrew Scriptures: “Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). Jesus is portrayed in terms of the Suffering Servant songs in Isaiah (especially 52:13–53:12) in New Testament texts (Matt 8:17; Acts 8:32–35; 1 Peter 2:21–25).

Many prophecy–fulfilment formulae and quotations of Psalms can be found in Matthew, Acts, Hebrews, and other New Testament texts. Lines from the Psalms were regularly deployed in christological arguments made by early Church theologians; allegorical readings abounded. One example may suffice. Jerome (c. 347–420) offers a homily on Psalm 87 (Psalm 86 LXX),

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grounding his spiritualizing reading in the superscription’s designation of the poem as a “song” (ὡς ὄς), a genre Jerome says relates “to meditation and is speculative.” For Jerome, the city God has founded—which is “the Church gathered together from the nations”—has as its foundation the Trinity and the apostles, and the psalm explicitly “speaks of the calling of the Gentiles”; the gates of Zion beloved by God are the virtues, a move important for Jerome later when he resignifies the “true Church” as the “human soul,” the temple in which Christ dwells. Regarding “Rahab” in verse 4, which scholars read as a trope for Egypt, Jerome focuses his homiletical gaze instead on Rahab of Jericho, whose story is narrated in Joshua 2 and 6. Jericho is a “type of this world,” per Jerome; he lauds Rahab, as many early Christian interpreters do, for demonstrating sublime faith when she protects the reconnaissance team of the Israelite invaders who are coming to obliterate her community. Jerome’s typological reading proceeds: “We are the Philistines,” the island nation of Tyre represents those battered by waves of tribulation who find their way to the Church; Ethiopia represents the “blackness” of “our vices and sins.”

Reading “mother Zion” per the LXX of verse 5, Jerome suggests that all the baptized call the Church “mother”; in verse 6, the “princes” (ὑπηρέται) recorded as born in Zion include “the apostles and the evangelists.” Jerome’s final homiletical move is more surprising: “Rahab,” born in Zion-as-Church, can will to become a virgin, and if she does so, she “has the power to conceive and bring forth the Savior” daily through the practice of virtue.

In contemporary Christian hermeneutics, the frothing wave of christological readings of messianic and kingship psalms represents only one current within the tidal sweep of Christian interpretation of the Psalms. There are many ways of interpreting responsibly. We can listen for the melody of the original Sitz im Leben of the Psalms in the liturgical life of ancient Judah, while neither singing loudly over its cadences, as christological readings sometimes do, nor restricting our technique to strained reperformance of Judean theology as if that constituted hearing the Hebrew Bible “on its own terms,” something chimerical in view of the staggering religious, political, and social differences between Second Temple Judaism and congregational cultures in the twenty-first century. Every dimension of Christian life can be illuminated by attention to the Psalms, construed as living texts whose signifying is animated in homiletical praxis by the Holy Spirit.

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9 For an unambiguous identification of “Rahab” as Egypt, see Isa 30:7.

10 Jerome (note 8), 140. Preachers must reject Jerome’s racialized metaphorization of sin as blackness. Such thinking has done considerable harm throughout the history of Christian traditions poisoned by White supremacist ideology.

11 Jerome, (note 8), 141–142.

12 Jerome, (note 8), 144.
The preacher must give this homiletical praxis careful thought, for as Lance Pape insists, “It is the homiletician’s desire and duty to think and say more about how preaching participates in God’s living and active Word.” Preaching on the Psalms can be a complex endeavor. Significant challenges include the rhetorical violence of psalms of imprecation and the binarism of ideation of “the righteous” and “the wicked” in many psalms. Yet the Psalms are invaluable for Christian homiletical praxis. Thomas Long presses for “a steady diet of preaching on the psalms as a way of keeping their poetic power laced more firmly into the larger theological fabric of the faith.” Rolf Jacobsen avers, “The Psalms must be preached. Why? Because the Psalms literally give us the words to live all of life before God [...] so that the Lord’s people will not struggle to find the right words when they experience the inevitable highs and lows of the life of faith [...]. [The Psalms] are what a living faith in the living God sounds like out loud.” The Psalms matter for our understanding of Church—for wise ecclesiological reflection on the nature of the Church as gathered community rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and bearing witness to Jesus Christ. David Stark is right that Christian preaching on the Hebrew Scriptures must concern itself centrally with hermeneutics of power. Here I would emphasize the importance of ideology critique of the texts themselves, as well as unflinching examination of harms wrought throughout the history of reception. The Psalms are a treasure trove for theologically rich preaching that addresses imbalances of power, lifts up pastoral needs, sings holy dissent and emancipation for those on the margins, and more.

The preacher should pay keen attention to strategies of meaning-making operative in the sacred texts of ancient Israel and Judah, as best we can discern them. Without such attention, the risks of facile appropriation loom—not only for Christian homiletics but for Jewish preaching as well. Yet we may claim continuity with those who bore witness in ancient times. In his haunting poem, “At an Archaeological Site,” Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai ponders the detritus left in Jerusalem from centuries gone by. Amichai makes the bold claim that

contemporary persons, too, belong to “this heap of dust” sifted by archaeologists on God’s holy mount. In my view, all who hold Jerusalem and the Psalms sacred may preach about the holy city, honoring the ancient poems in their historical and theological particularity while not hesitating to embrace them as core to newer sacred traditions.

5. Memory as Constructive Theological Practice

Founded on a Canaanite site that predated the time of Abraham, Jerusalem is an iconic city cherished by many communities of conviction on spiritual and political grounds. Canaanite, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian worshippers have called Jerusalem home, have wrestled with their understanding of the Holy there, have experienced spiritual insight and joy in those sacred precincts. For Christians to cherish Zion does not constitute illegitimate appropriation. Our honoring of this holy place may be performed in many faithful ways.

The constructive practice of remembering is important for all communities, including groups organized around political goals, groups whose members share an artistic vision, and groups built on shared practices of spiritual identity. Memory as a constructive practice has powerful implications for theology. As postmodern theorists have argued, memory is never simple or neutral reconstruction of the past, an objective narrative of what happened framed in empiricist terms “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.” Memory is selective, partial, fluid, and contestable. Historicist pronouncements may function rhetorically as if they were natural, objective ways in which to organize our understanding of the past. But in fact, memory is always based on vested interests. Because memories can be constructed only on the basis of what is conceivable and intelligible to the one remembering, much may be elided or misunderstood. Memory is creative and always incomplete. Within religious traditions, everyone from credentialed historians to congregational leaders to disaffected or misinformed believers can ignore or suppress that which it may seem undesirable to remember, and construct events and meanings in ways that advance particular goals or support particular biases.

Remembered traditions inevitably diverge from one another and contest one another’s premises, yielding a spectrum of harmonies and dissonances that range from minor discrepancies to major clashes of ideology. One illustration involves the sequence of ten wonders (also known as plagues) performed by YHWH in Exodus 7–12 to compel the pharaoh to release enslaved Israelites. Recitals of the wonders differ in number and order in Psalm 78 and Psalm 105. These discrepancies were taken as significant by early Jewish and Christian theologians trained to see spiritual meaning in every detail. Widening the lens on the Exodus traditions: Israel’s deliverance from Egypt is a cause for jubilation and praise of God in much
of the Hebrew Bible, but the tradition is also used as a weapon in the savage irony of the prophet Amos: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?” YHWH taunts. “Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Arameans from Kir?” (Amos 9:7). In the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel, this salvation history becomes a history of the covenant people’s intractable rebelliousness (Ezekiel 20). Memory is a creative cultural act. Homiletical remembering is catalytic work that can bring transformation, not least by confirming what has been repressed or disrupting that which has become facile. As Deeg observes, “Christian preaching ... disrupts—theologically speaking—the circles which the self-imprisoned subject has drawn” around the self.  

The disruptive rhetoric of Amos and Ezekiel redraws the believing community and its theology in fascinating ways, and Psalm 87 stands in this venerable tradition.

6. Psalm 87: Structure and Voicing

The Psalms are creations of ancient liturgical memory that gather believers for worship and invite ongoing formation in faith. Some psalms lift up cries of the human heart and struggles of the community; others laud glorious moments of divine deliverance; still others express fierce resistance toward enemies or toward God. These poems provide artful views into the life of faith, some in ways congruent with what counted as established theology, some through articulations of dissent, and some through fresh reconfigurations of tradition. Psalm 87 falls into that last category. It represents a bold reworking of the Zion theology that had long celebrated God’s establishment of the political power of the Davidic monarchy and divine protection for Jerusalem, themes seen in full flower in 2 Samuel 7 and Isaiah 60–62.  

Psalm 87 is beautiful but unorthodox. Scholars have termed its syntax awkward and its conceptual underpinnings unclear to the point of incoherence. But from my perspective as a literary critic, this poem is brilliantly crafted and innovative in its poetic structure and voicing of the personified city Jerusalem.

Psalm 87 is built on a dialogical structure. The poet opens with a powerful verbless clause that intrigues the implied audience, drawing us in: “His foundation upon holy mountains.” This may signal that the subject of the poem, Zion, should be understood not just politically

but mythopoetically, as the cosmic mountain of God. The audience would have been rapt as the poet continues in verse 2, celebrating YHWH’s love for the “gates of Zion.” The Hebrew verb there, גֶּדֶנִי, can signal not only affective love but covenantal fidelity; it occurs often in covenantal texts in Deuteronomy. The gates of Jerusalem were, and remain, impressive architectural structures. Gates in large walled cities had space inside for chambers and corridors. These were public spaces for the gathering of elders and other community leaders, for business transactions, and for the administration of justice. YHWH cherishes the gates of Zion: its beloved walls and entryways, and, by implication, the political and cultural life of the community unfolding in that holy city.

In verse 3, the poet addresses Zion: “Glorious things are spoken of you.” In verse 4, Zion responds, emphasizing her global renown: she is known not only by age-old enemies Egypt [“Rahab”] and Babylon, but by local adversary Philistia and by countries as powerful and remote as Tyre and Cush. The named countries may represent all points of the globe, suggesting Zion is known in every land, the city of God standing radiant at the center of the cosmos. Notable in the populations of those countries near and far are the Judeans living there. Zion is known by her children, those born in Jerusalem but subsequently scattered across the globe: Judean diaspora families that have remained faithful to YHWH. The role played by reported discourse in this psalm is significant. Three Korahite psalms use discourse nested within discourse in artful ways: Psalms 42, 46, and 87. All three are liturgically focused; all three point to mythopoetic elements as central to the theology they articulate. We can trace a conceptual line from the disheartened speaker of Psalm 42, taunted by enemies in a location far from Jerusalem as he remembers with tears how he had walked in liturgical processions in Jerusalem, to Psalm 46, in which bellicose nations are routed by YHWH (Ps 46:3, 6), who is then “exalted among the nations” (46:110), to Psalm 87, in which the faithful offspring of Zion in diaspora are recognized by the nations.

In verses 5 and 6, the poet responds to Zion, expanding on her point. This demonstrates a well-known feature of Hebrew poetry known as heightening, characterized by James Kugel in the memorable catchphrase, “A, and what’s more, B.” The poet affirms, “of Zion it is said” that this and that person—diaspora Judeans—had been born in Jerusalem, born of the enduring

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lineage of those who love YHWH. One might recall the genealogical listing in Ezra 2 of names of diaspora Judeans authorized to return from Babylonia to the ruined Jerusalem. In Psalm 87, it is none other than YHWH writing in the cosmic register of the peoples the names of Judeans who belong to the covenant. Psalm 87 and Ezra–Nehemiah share as their compositional context Yehud in the Persian period, or perhaps even later. The promise in Psalm 87:5 is that God Most High—יְהוָֹה—will establish Jerusalem in the sight of the nations, and that is precisely what is envisaged when Cyrus addresses Judeans in Persia, saying, “Those among you who are of [God’s] people ... are now permitted to go up to Jerusalem in Judah, and rebuild the house of the LORD... and let all survivors, in whatever place they reside, be assisted by the people of their place with silver and gold” and other offerings to support the reestablishment of Zion (Ezra 1:3–4). The author of Ezra inscribes the names of authorized returnees by genealogy and Temple role: priests, Levites, Asaphite singers, gatekeepers, temple servants, and others (Ezra 1–2). Psalm 87:6 makes a bolder move: Judeans continuing to live in diaspora, too, are recorded as belonging to the covenant community, and their names are written by the very hand of God.

In Psalm 87:7, Zion speaks again, amplifying the point. Not only is Zion acknowledged by foreign nations. Diaspora Judeans who sing and dance (liturgically) affirm that wherever they are, the source of their joy and creative energy is the holy city of God. Even in exile, all their “springs” are in Zion. This is neither about conversion of the nations nor about Gentile proselytes individually. YHWH records the names of Judeans “born in Zion,” those who demonstrate their fidelity even in political domains far from Jerusalem. The precincts of God’s holy city now extend, as it were, to the ends of the earth! Zion’s response affirms another glorious thing said of her: the praise given her by liturgical singers and dancers, wherever they may live. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger rightly argue that this is “a postexilic new version of the preexilic Zion theology.”

Thus Psalm 87 frames a liturgical understanding of who God has been historically—Israel’s Redeemer enthroned in the Jerusalem temple—in a daring new way that claims the preeminence of Zion across the known world.

There are exciting possibilities here for preaching. I turn now to three trajectories that explore the trope of Zion for Christian homiletical praxis. The first trajectory emerges from the historical backdrop to this postexilic psalm.

7. Zion as Traumatized and Lamenting Mother

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24 Hossfeld and Zenger suggest that Psalm 87 may be dated between 500 and 300 BCE: “It could ... be taking up positive experiences from the Persian epoch, but on the other hand it could also be taken as an eschatological-utopian project that stands against the shattering experience resulting from the collapse of the Persian Empire, or perhaps the later fall of Alexander’s empire.” Hossfeld/Zenger (note 22), 582.
Considering ancient scribal memories of Zion requires that we take account of something of enormous consequence for the shaping of the Hebrew Bible: the fall of Judah to the Neo-Babylonian empire in 587. As the Assyrian empire weakened, Babylonia had grown more menacing, marching against small nations in the Levant. After Judah’s king, Josiah, was killed by the Egyptians in 609, Babylonia assaulted Judean sovereignty. Babylonia’s first forced deportation of Judeans, including officials and religious leaders, in 597, left a destabilized infrastructure and weakened social fabric in its wake. Political tensions and social conflict remained at a high pitch of intensity in the following years, as Judean kings Jehoiakim (608–598), Jehoiachin (on the throne for three months in 597) and Zedekiah (597–587) sought to keep Judah viable under the subjugation of the Neo-Babylonian empire. After years of political precarity, signs of Judean rebellion spurred a merciless response from the Babylonian commander Nebuchadrezzar. Jerusalem was besieged, the city wall was broken down, and Jerusalem fell in 587. Babylonian troops set many houses ablaze, executed Judeans in the streets, maimed Zedekiah, and slaughtered officials at the nearby administrative center in Riblah (Jer 39:1–8; 52:1–27). Countless Judeans would have endured terrible injuries, sexual violation, starvation, wrenching loss, and paralyzing fear in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem. Thousands of captives were forced into a long death-march to captivity in Babylonia.

Judean scribes in the Babylonian diaspora would have been wracked by horrific memories of the siege of Jerusalem and by reports of the suffering of those left in the rubble. Lamentations opens with the powerful image of Daughter Zion weeping bitterly in a desolate cityscape, with Judean survivors desperate for food (Lam 1:11; 2:11–12) and some driven to cannibalism (2:20). “The Lord has destroyed without mercy all the dwellings of Jacob,” the poet laments (2:2). Zion is taunted by enemies who delight in her ruination (2:16), while “the young and the old are lying on the ground in the streets” (2:21). The bodily trauma, deprivation, and destruction of sacred space that Lamentations describes are sheer horror. Jeremiah gives us the image of matriarch Rachel wailing inconsolably “for her children, because they are no more” (Jer 31:15). The denizens of Judah have suffered unspeakable violence; incomprehension and grief saturate the pages of the Hebrew Bible. The scribes’ fury flares against the enemy and against God (see, for example, Psalm 44).

Yet Zion has been remembered—by her scribes (Ps 137:5–6), and by Judeans who have been exiled to Babylonia or fled to other places. And they bear witness to their God. Joni Sancken writes, “God’s people survived these experiences not as shattered or hollow victims but as powerful witnesses and instruments for God in the world.”25 The promise of Psalm 87 is that

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Jerusalem will always be cherished by YHWH. Membership in the covenant established by YHWH can never be effaced by military violence or forced displacement. The city that had lain in ruins would become a resplendent icon of YHWH’s immovable presence once again. Psalm 102 lifts up this hope:

You, O LORD, are enthroned forever...
You will rise up and have compassion on Zion,
for it is time to favor it;
the appointed time has come.
For its servants hold its stones dear,
and have pity on its dust. (Ps 102:12–14)

Deutero-Isaiah hymns the future burgeoning of Zion’s family: “Sing, O barren one who did not bear; burst into song and shout!... For the children of the desolate woman will be more than the children of her that is married” (Isa 54:1). Multitudes of descendants will come from Mother Zion to “settle the desolate towns” (54:3) that had been laid waste by the Neo-Babylonian army. In Isaiah 60–62, the prophet envisions the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s city wall and defiled sanctuary. Tribute will pour in from subjugated nations—Isaiah is not as universalist in its ethos as some have hoped, for Egypt and Ethiopia will be in chains when they come to Zion (Isa 45:14). The invincible glory of God will make Zion more radiant than the sun.

Psalm 87 remembers all of it. “Babylon” is spoken in verse 4; what remains unspoken is thunderous. Christian preachers must remember, with lamenting Mother Zion, the suffering inflicted by patriarchal militarized colonialism. Where any Christian group has used its theology, including its notion of divine providence, to justify the exploitation of natural resources, diminishment of women or queer persons, or political control of indigenous groups, preachers must speak up. Preachers must spur the Church to hold itself accountable for the harms of racialized supremacy and colonial violence, striving for clarified theological vision regarding White supremacy, supersessionism, and intercultural violence. Preachers need to make audible the nuances of biblical passages such as Psalm 87 that promote the spiritual resilience, joy, dissent, and truth-telling needed in our communities.

Christian preachers can reflect on the history of trauma that shaped biblical literature, exploring the theological resources on offer in the Zion traditions for communities today. Standing within that history, we bear witness to our irrefpressible hope in the love of God in Christ Jesus from which nothing can separate those who believe (Rom 8:35–39). Christians have been indelibly formed by an incarnational theology that responds courageously to the brutalities of empire. Preachers can help hearers know Zion as bereaved mother lamenting incalculable loss, bewailing the ruination of the shalom of God’s people. Remembering Zion’s trauma can foster empathy in our hearers, deepening their capacity for pastoral outreach and activist outrage on behalf of the widow, the orphan, and the refugee, spurring them to minister to the hungry and thirsty, the dispossessed, the sick, the incarcerated, and all of Earth’s suffering creatures (Matt 25:31–46).

8. Zion as Radically Expansive Community

Preachers may consider a second dimension of the “memory of Zion”: Zion calls to mind יִנְפוּל those who know her. In verse 4, Zion says, “I remember,” voicing with authority the radical nature of her community of covenant believers. She accounts Rahab, Babylon, and other nations among those who know her. How is this possible? Because of the witness of diaspora Judeans who live in their midst.27 Nations know Zion because the testimony and halakhic practices of diaspora Judeans, such as sabbath-keeping, have made Zion known. It is the nations that are quoted in verses 4 and 5 (“this one and that one were born in it,” and “this one was born there”): they recognize the people of YHWH. Judeans have remained faithful in diaspora, making public their affiliation with the living God who called Abram from Chaldea and spoke to Moses from a bush ablaze in the desert. Judean witness may be global, the named countries representing not only specific political entities but, metonymically, all nations from west to east and from north to south.

I am not persuaded that Psalm 87 propounds a religious universalism in which the nations themselves are envisioned metaphorically as Zion’s children. That move is made in the ancient Greek translation of this psalm (Psalm 86 LXX), where “mother” is added in verse 5 as a title

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27 So, for example, Hans-Joachim Kraus, Psalms 60–150, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Minneapolis 1993, 188–189. John Goldingay objects regarding Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia, “Theses were not distinctively places where there were exile communities”; see Goldingay, Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89, Grand Rapids 2007, 636. But if the psalm has in mind the birth—perhaps literal, certainly figurative—of Judeans who bear witness to the glory of Zion in diaspora locales, one need not postulate large communities of Judeans in those places for the image to be intelligible.
for Zion, μυν Σιων, which the nations use in referring to Jerusalem.²⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger rightly assess that fascinating interpolation as “a deliberate interpretation of the Hebrew text (and certainly no ‘mistake in translation,’ or the like).”²⁹ There is no evidence in the Masoretic text of Psalm 87 that Egypt, Babylon, Philistia, Tyre, and Ethiopia are envisioned as belonging to the family of Zion.³⁰ The sense, rather, is that the renown of Zion will be established (v. 5) and will be known throughout the earth. The famous oracle shared by Isaiah 2 and Micah 4 about what will happen “in days to come” (כסאנווה נים) has the nations streaming to Zion to learn Torah, but there will still be divine judgment upon the nations ( Isa 2:4//Mic 4:5). In Isaiah, the nations will come to Jerusalem not as honored members of the covenant community but as prostrated vassals licking dust (Isa 49:23), and Zion’s offspring are promised that they will dispossess the nations (54:3). The witness of Isaiah is more difficult than many preachers seem to realize. But Psalm 87 offers something beautiful and entirely usable by preachers: the covenantal fidelity of Judeans who live permanently in diaspora has given glory to YHWH. Judean expatriates have not been forgotten, left unmourned and unburied as in Ezekiel’s terrifying vision of the valley of dry bones (Ezek 37:1–2). In the postexilic promise of Psalm 87, Judeans everywhere are recognized for who they are because their fidelity points to Zion as their mother. Even enemy nations can recognize the children of Zion. YHWH, too, sees Zion’s children in diaspora, and the hand of God writes their holy origin indelibly in the sacred book. This recognition is possible because the memory of Zion has been spread abroad. YHWH inscribes all peoples in their appropriate places in the heavenly registry, taking care to note the spiritual genealogy of faithful Jews scattered across the globe.

Zion knows her own, no matter the locations to which they may have been forcibly displaced or to which they have fled. That other nations recognize the offspring of Zion is to

²⁸Christl Maier sees a trajectory of tradition-historical development in the figure of Zion toward what we read in Psalm 87: Daughter Zion representing “peace and salvation” in earthly terms, then refracted through an eschatological lens in postbiblical literature. See Maier, Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel, Minneapolis, MN 2008, 205–210. Maier has argued that in Gal 4:26, Paul draws on the LXX tradition explicitly naming Zion as “mother” to portray the heavenly Jerusalem as mother of nations; see Maier, “Psalm 87 as a Reappraisal of the Zion Tradition and Its Reception in Galatians 4:26,” in: Catholic Biblical Quarterly 69 (2007): 473–486, and the comments of Hossfeld and Zenger on Zion as mother of nations (Hossfeld/Zenger [note 22], 379). The arguments are sound as regards Psalm 86 LXX, but the sense of the Masoretic text of Psalm 87 is less clear. Further, I am not persuaded that Gal 4:26 is about nations as such. It is Gentile Christians who constitute the children of the “free” heavenly Jerusalem, of which Paul says, “she is our mother.”

²⁹Hossfeld/Zenger (note 22), 387.

³⁰For refutation of the proposal of “mother of nations” ideology in MT Psalm 87, see Amzallag (note 20), 365–364. His theory, that the psalm foregrounds the renown of Korahite musicians in local music-making contexts in diaspora, is creative but founders on speculation at key points.
their credit, though they are not enrolled in the covenant community. It is radical of Zion to remember the nations in this regard, to call them to mind favorably, given that three are enemies roundly despised in ancient Israel’s history (Egypt, Babylon, and Philistia). This radical praxis of Zion may be taken as foundational for the renewal of communities of believers and their allies globally. Further, it can spur preachers to weave new visions of Christian community. Preachers can draw hearers into the particularity of Zion as a metaphor for radically expansive community, a community of faith and practice that extends outward in every direction, recognizable even far from the divine habitation as it has been understood in biblical tradition. Incarnational theology suggests that God’s dwelling place is “with us” (יהוה, Isa 7:14): with Israel first and foremost, and also with Christian believers, who have been grafted into the covenant community (Rom 11:17–24) and thus may dare to approach the throne of the Holy One to plead for mercy (Heb 4:16). God is with believers wherever they may be found, and especially with those who are vulnerable, humble, and contrite (Isa 57:15; Ps 34:18, v. 19 Heb.).

YHWH cherishes the gates of Zion, reestablishing it as a place of joyous habitation where there had been only violent erasure and desolation. How, then, might God reestablish Zion for those of us who live in diaspora, who find ourselves far afield—geographically and theologically—from that originary locus of covenant identity? Christian preachers may reach for 1 Peter 2, which offers stirring imagery of the rebuilding of Zion as the spiritual community of all believers. Deploying Psalm 34 with its invitation to “taste and see that the LORD is good,” the author of 1 Peter exhorts his audience, “Come to him, a living stone ... rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in scripture: ‘See, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame’” (1 Pet 2:4–6, quoting Isa 28:16). To be sure, the epistle veers into polemics, characterizing this cornerstone as a stumbling block for those who do not believe: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the very head of the corner,’ [Ps 118:22] and ‘A stone that makes them stumble...’ They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.” The Christian preacher should not reproduce those anti-jewish polemics, of course. We should interrogate and dismantle them, working to rebuild what has been rendered nearly unusable over centuries of virulent anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. But we can take up the artisanal intertextuality that 1 Peter models. Alexander Deeg calls for intertextuality at the heart of preaching praxis: “Homiletically it is a matter of staging an interplay of the text and contexts in the expectation that meanings are thus set free for the listeners and that the living God [Godself] intervenes in
the interplay and speaks the word." Cherishing Zion through Psalm 87, remembering her trauma and seeing how Zion calls to mind those in diaspora, preachers can guide struggling communities and alienated believers alike toward a renewed and intertextually rich Gospel joy.

9. Zion as Eschatological Hope
There is a third way Christian preachers can remember Zion: as eschatological hope. Psalm 87 stakes a claim for a transformed future made possible by the inbreaking realm of God. There are magnificent passages in the Hebrew Bible about Jerusalem’s restoration in time to come. Consider the luminous material in Isaiah 60–62. “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you” (Isa 60:1): the feminine singular forms are addressing Zion. Zion is to be glorious, her walls called “Salvation” and her gates “Praise,” with YHWH as her “everlasting light” (60:18–19). Ezekiel 40–48, too, offers a majestic vision of the renewed Jerusalem. Ezekiel genders Judah’s sin as shameful female sexuality worthy of homicidal punishment, so to celebrate Zion as loving mother or radiant bride might not have been thinkable for Ezekiel. But Ezekiel does cherish the walls, gateways, chambers, and vestibules of the holy city. Every beam and doorpost of the new Jerusalem matters to this priest; he delights in its measurements and level walls over against the moral chaos and spiritual abominations he had seen defiling Jerusalem. Ezekiel 47 shows us a lifegiving stream of water flowing from beneath the threshold of the Temple, becoming a deep river lined by fruit trees whose leaves are for healing. Others, too, have glimpsed this. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,” the Korahite poet sings; “God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved” (Ps 46:4–5; Heb. vv. 5–6). That beautiful and enduring vision infuses the theology of Psalm 87.

Early Christian eschatology shows Zion as a place in which God’s glorious justice is celebrated and the oppressed are consoled and healed (Heb 12:22–24; Rev 21:1–7; 22:1–5). Revelation makes explicit that the healing envisioned in Ezekiel 47 is not just for the originary covenant people but for the nations (Rev 22:2). Preachers should remember Zion from the pulpit, making visible for contemporary believers a powerful memory grounded in the

31 Deeg (note 18), 13; emphasis original.
Hebrew Scriptures and projected into a dazzling prophetic future: Zion, restored and cherished, envisioned as the joyous kin-dom of all who love the Holy One.

10. Congregational Renewal: Homiletical Springs and Living Stones

The memory of Zion can help reframe an important question that has long bedeviled church leaders: How might Christian communities thrive in cultures influenced by ideologies of secularization and market-driven capitalism? In mainline denominations in North America, rates of Christian affiliation and worship attendance have been dropping steadily for many years, as Pew Research Center analyses and General Social Surveys by NORC at the University of Chicago have shown. In White-dominant contexts in the U.S., some preachers address congregations in which just a handful of devout believers gather weekly. In African American church traditions, the demographic and sociological data may look a bit different than those pertinent to White-dominant mainline traditions, but church decline remains of concern. Attendance at church services in European countries is in a trajectory of decline as well. Over the past fifteen years, studies have analyzed broad trends and local variations in declining Protestant and Roman Catholic church attendance in Denmark, the Netherlands, Ireland, England, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, and other countries. One example may be taken as

33 Relevant here is the trenchant analysis of Kathryn Tanner, Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism, New Haven 2019, 7–9.198–219.
illustrative: per data from the Swiss Federal Statistics Office, the percentage of Swiss persons identifying as religiously unaffiliated has risen from 3.4% in 1990 to 26% in 2017. Anecdotally, my experience in 2015 in Hamburg might speak to the point about empty pews in European churches: I dashed into the Hauptkirche St. Jacobi in the Altstadt at the last minute on Christmas Eve, breathless with concern that I wouldn’t get a seat, only to find that barely two dozen people were scattered throughout the magnificent sanctuary.

Every congregation has its own ecology, which is fluid and changes over time. Each denomination has its own unfolding history of growth, change, and conflict, its catalytic times of renewal and its seasons of diminishment. Further, every cultural context is unique. What happens in a flourishing Baptist mega-church in Alexandria, Virginia is different from what happens in a tiny Episcopal church on the Connecticut shoreline or in a cathedral in Basel. But in this increasingly secularized world in which influential social-media platforms amplify toxic discourse and venomous “cancelling” of the Other, a Christian ethos of love has a vital role to play in every local context. Preachers can work with the memory of Zion to help believers yearn for a community that loves and laments and wrestles faithfully with God, a community that can be a beacon of light in every kind of exile in which people find themselves.

There are riches at multiple levels of the biblical Zion traditions for the homiletical imagination as preachers seek to respond to suffering, build up the beloved community, and celebrate eschatological hope. First, preachers can use the tradition of Zion as lamenting mother to show hearers that they are not forgotten, that God’s love uplifts the faithful who are traumatized, bereaved, displaced, or imprisoned. Zion suffers terribly, yet “the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob”! God’s love persists for all who lament, including those experiencing homelessness, those who have lost much to addiction or disease, those whose families have been decimated by violence, those whose sense of self is under assault because of incarceration or transphobia or racism, and those who are disoriented or trapped in liminal spaces due to forced migration.

Second, preachers can use the bold voicing of Zion in Psalm 87 to reconfigure community in expansive terms. Our spiritual homeland is not bounded territory to be guarded against outsiders. Nor have we lost God when we wander in diaspora, struggling to remember whose we are in an exile political, social, or spiritual. Psalm 87 teaches the notion of “Zion” as membership in a beloved community birthed without regard for borders or walls. Christians can claim our home in what God has done in Jesus Christ, sealed for us in baptism. That is

Dutch Parents,” in: Journal of Empirical Theology 26 (2013): 45–62; Stephen Bullivant, Mass Exodus: Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II, Oxford 2020, 1–84. It may be remarked that the growth of Christian congregations in some countries in the global South, notably within Pentecostalism and evangelical traditions, has drawn the attention of sociologists and ecclesiologists.
where we are born (reborn) and the locus from which we must bear witness, a Gospel mandate (Matt 28:18–20). The shorter additional ending of Mark underlines that the “imperishable proclamation” of the good news is to go out through Christian witness across the world “from east to west” (Mark 16:8b), that is, across the known world, or as the poet of Psalm 87 might say, “from Babylon to Ethiopia.” Luke 24 underlines that witnesses to Christ are to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins “to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem,” beginning from Zion. The entire cosmos should know, of us, that “this one and that one were born” in Zion—the Zion of Psalm 87 and the Zion of Revelation 21–22. We have been born into the radically expansive community of those who proclaim the redemptive power of God for all creation.37

Finally, preachers can draw on Zion to broaden and illumine the spiritual imaginations of their hearers about Christian community. Zion is a place of springs (Psalm 87). It is continually being built and rebuilt with the living stones of faithful believers who cherish the heritage of God, with Zion as the foundation stone (1 Pet 2:4–6). Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est38: Zion is the place in which our loving God resides. Zion is the source of the source of life-giving water through which theological witness can bubble forth in our ministry as preachers, artists, writers, activists, and spiritual companions. Zion offers nurture in every locale, whether we find ourselves in a beloved homeland, in exile, in a borderland, or in the wilderness. Zion is our source of rejuvenation in every walk of life, every way in which we strive for healing, justice, and transformation. “All my springs are in you,” singers and dancers say to Zion. Christians might reference John 4 as well: Christ tells the Samaritan woman that the water he gives will become in believers “a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (John 4:14). That water, too, has its origin in Zion: the throne of the one holy and living God.

Our broken world groans for transformation (Isa 24:4–6; Rom 8:22). Much work remains to combat the pernicious androcentrism, misogyny, and bias against gender-nonconforming persons that run like toxic streams beneath the surface of some liturgies and ordination processes within Judaism and Christianity. Many religious traditions have failed effectively to confront racism, systemic poverty, climate collapse, and the brutal exploitation of non-human creatures. The Zion who comes to voice in Psalm 87 can help us with urgently needed work of justice and theological revisioning, for Zion dares to articulate her bold understanding of a


38 This early Christian hymn may date to 796 and is traditionally attributed to Paulinus II of Aquileia (c. 726–802 or 804).
beloved community that flourishes across political borders, cultural boundaries, and social divisions.39

Zion can help us lament. Zion can motivate us to build expansive communities of witness. Zion can spur us to renewed hope for a future in which God’s kin-dom welcomes all who love the Holy One. Psalm 87 is only seven verses long, yet sustained attention to its radical vision will richly repay Christian preaching. This psalm offers imagery, diction, and theological conviction that can assist in the rebuilding and rejuvenation of faith communities for generations to come. Preachers might well join liturgical singers and dancers of every age in saying of Zion, “All my springs are in you.”

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