The Pauline Project: Christ Universalized

Nick Covaleski
Philosophy Department
University of Wisconsin, La Crosse
1725 State Street
La Crosse, Wisconsin 54601 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Sharon Scherwitz

Abstract

The New Testament, of course, is a compilation of multiple authors, the most prolific being the Apostle Paul: his epistles make up almost half of the books in the New Testament, far more than any other author. The central components of Evangelical Christianity—universalism, salvation through love, justification by faith—are primarily associated with the teachings of Jesus Christ. But this belief seems to be misguided. Paul departs from the conservative Jewish theology that Jesus himself endorsed and inaugurates a universal ministry, one that is radically different from that of Jesus and the Twelve Disciples. Paul universalizes the teachings of Christ, making them much more palatable for citizens in the Greco-Roman world, thus leading to the steady expansion of Pauline Christianity. This same ministry is what serves as the foundation for contemporary Evangelical Christianity today, and has been doing so for the past two thousand years. A complex historical and philosophical approach to Pauline universalism will reveal that it is Paul—not Jesus—who has had the greatest religious influence on the Western world.

Keywords: St. Paul, Christian Origins, Universalism

1. Part One: Jesus The Zealot

Martin Luther wrote that Paul's Letter to the Romans is "in truth the most important document in the New Testament, the gospel in its purest form." Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other hand, wrote of Paul in *The Antichrist* as the "dys-evangelical," that is, the proclaimer of bad news; and the playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote in 1913 that Paul's theology is "the monstrous imposition upon Jesus" (Taylor 3). Clearly, Paul has been a subject of debate among thinkers over the centuries. In the last few decades, though, more historians and New Testament scholars have dug deeper into the context of Paul's writings and suggested the heavy implications of his epistles. For instance, James Tabor, author of *Paul and Jesus: How The Apostle Transformed Christianity*, argues that a close look at Paul and his relationship with the twelve disciples in Jerusalem could reveal that "the entire history of early Christianity, as commonly understood, has to be reconsidered" (4). As for Paul's theology, some scholars, such as Reza Aslan, graduate of Harvard Divinity school, argue that it is "so extreme and unorthodox, the only way he can claim to justify it is by saying that [it is] from Jesus directly himself" (Aslan 188). What is it, then, about this apostle—this disciple of Christ—that has caused such a sundering of opinion; that has caused scholars like Tabor, Aslan, and more to draw such bold conclusions?

   First, in order to answer these questions, we need to know a little bit about Jesus of Nazareth—not Jesus the Christ, but Jesus the man, the historical Jesus, the man in charge of a small but zealous group of Jews roaming around the Galilean countryside in first century Palestine. This is the Jesus that Paul never knew—Paul did not follow Jesus around Galilee for three years listening to his sermons, he was not in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, his fate sealed; the simple, historical fact that Paul never knew Jesus has profound implications. Paul promises that he "received" his gospel not through men or from men, but through a direct revelation from Christ (Galatians 1:11-12). Paul had had the privileged and supreme experience of meeting the *divine* Christ, certainly

surpassing the experience any of the original twelve apostles could have had with Jesus the person. God, after all, according to Paul, had set Paul apart before he was even born, so that he might preach Jesus among the gentiles (Galatians 1:15-17). But those original twelve in Jerusalem—the "mother assembly"—thought otherwise, and so begins a steep conflict between two opposing interpretations of Christ and his theological relevance. One group will largely be forgotten; the other will evolve into the most influential religion of all time.

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword," says Jesus (Matthew 10:34). The messianic fervor that encapsulated first-century Palestine was palpable. The Holy Land had been under Roman occupation since 37 B.C.E., when Herod the Great, governor over Judea, marched into Jerusalem and expelled the city of its Parthian control (Aslan 20). By the time of Jesus' birth, around 4 B.C.E., the pagan Roman Empire had made a mockery of God's chosen people for some thirty-plus years, and there was no end in sight: Herod Antipas would soon become the new client king, sure to enforce Roman rule just as rigorously as his father. The Jews were eager for change, for divine intervention; they were seized with apocalyptic expectation. The different perspectives on what the messiah, or "anointed one," exactly entailed were multivalent among first-century Jews. Some thought that he would be a king, others a priest, some both. But out of the muddled ancient prophecies of Jewish tradition emerges a common consensus about what the messiah was supposed to do: he is the descendant of King David; he comes to restore Israel and free the Jews from Roman occupation, and to establish God's rule in Jerusalem (Aslan 28). There also emerges another consensus: the messiah is human, not divine. As Aslan writes, "Belief in a divine messiah would have been anathema to everything Judaism represents, which is why, without exception, every text in the Hebrew Bible dealing with the messiah presents him as performing his messianic functions on earth, not in heaven" (32). Indeed, it is this conception of messiah that Jesus must, and does, take on—one that is quite different from the Jesus Paul eventually writes about, and, therefore, quite different from the one that is commonly depicted in Evangelical churches across the world.

There are two common historical facts known about Jesus: that he was a Jew who led a popular movement in first-century Palestine and that he was crucified for doing so. But these two facts can lend plenty of insight into the historical Jesus—the Jesus that Paul never knew. Jesus was charged with the crime of sedition (Luke 23:38), for striving for kingly rule, as was almost every other aspiring messiah in the time (and there were many). He came to establish the "Kingdom of God,"—in short, to defy the will of Rome (Aslan xxx). Contrary to popular belief, Jesus did not preach of a celestial kingdom, distinct from earthly affairs. The reason for this inaccuracy comes from the Gospel of John: to Pontius Pilate, Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world" (18:36). As Aslan points out, however, in the original Greek, this is perhaps better translated as, "My kingdom is not apart of this order/system of government"—in other words, my kingdom is unlike any other kingdom on earth (117). In fact, the immanent coming of the kingdom of God is probably *the* central unifying theme of Jesus's brief ministry; it is, after all, one of the first things he preached: "Repent," Jesus says soon after John baptizes him, "the Kingdom is near" (Mark 1:15). Jesus declaring a new king is coming to establish his reign on earth is audacious, to say the least. Jerusalem, as mentioned earlier, was under strict and violent Roman occupation; by Jesus saying the Kingdom of God is near, he is essentially saying that the end of the Roman Empire is near—the end of Caesar is near.

From a Roman perspective, it is see how those in charge could have understood Jesus' message as a call for revolution (Aslan 118). As Obery Hendricks confirms in his lecture "What Jesus Shall We Teach?" "a sober, unsentimentally honest, historically informed reading of the gospels gives us another picture of Jesus, and he is a political revolutionary. Yes, Jesus was a political revolutionary" (4). Indeed, that is exactly what Pilate thought he was. Crucifixion was common for the Romans because it was a reminder of what happens when someone challenges the power of Rome; and that is why crucifixion was kept for the most treacherous of crimes: rebellion, sedition, banditry—as Aslan states, "If one knew nothing else about Jesus of Nazareth save that he was crucified by Rome, one would know practically all that was needed to uncover who he was, what he was, and why he ended up nailed to a cross" (155-56). Perhaps Jesus' mission is best summed up in one line as he defied his executioners: "You have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). The Jewish God above—the God of Moses, the God of the Temple—this is the only God that Jesus ever knew. It was the God that he read about in the scriptures, it was the God he based his whole ministry on, it was the God he died for, and it was the God he urged his disciples to continue to follow.

One of those disciples happened to be Jesus's brother. Little is known about James the Just. This is in large part because James has been so intentionally marginalized by the Christian canon that even some of the most devout Christians might not be too familiar with James's *one* book out of the twenty-seven in the New Testament (recall

that Paul has thirteen). But we need look no further than Paul's letter to the Galatians for evidence of James's prominence in the early church. In chapter 1, verses 18-19, Paul says, "Then after three years [(three years after Paul's conversion)] I went up to Jerusalem to visit [Peter], and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles except James the Lord's brother" (Galatians 1:18-19). Already in the mid-30's, and it is evident that James is a major figure in Jerusalem, someone whom it was important for Paul to see. It may even point to James being the second most important man in the church (Butz 56; Bruce 89). In addition to Paul's letters, we can look outside of the Bible for evidence of James's early leadership role. Hegesippus, a Jewish-Christian writing in the early second century A.D., writes, "The succession of the Church was passed to James the brother of the Lord, together with the apostles" (*Church History* 2.1.2). Clement of Alexandria, writing in the late second century A.D., quotes Eusebius when he says, "Peter and James [the fisherman] and John after the Ascension of the Savior did not struggle for glory, because they had previously been given honor by the Savior, but chose James the Just as the overseer of Jerusalem" (2.1.3); again, "James…is recorded to have been the first elected to the throne of the oversight of the church of Jerusalem" (2.1.4). So, what does this say about James the Just, the brother of Jesus who is elected to take over this tiny sect of Jews? What are his beliefs about Christ, and how do those beliefs compare with what Paul taught?

Paul's preaching, as discussed above, was based solely on his spiritual meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus, while the twelve apostles and their new leader James had very much walked and talked with the physical, historical Jesus. It is these two groups that are fighting to spread the appropriate message that Jesus preached. But Jesus himself, in the Gospel of Thomas—a gospel found in Egypt in 1945, widely accepted among scholars as being as old as the canonical gospels, a "fifth" gospel, and providing invaluable insight into early oral gospel traditions—explicitly states that James is the one to continue the movement that Jesus founded: The disciples said to Jesus, "We know you will leave us. Who is going to be our leader then?" Jesus replied, "No matter where you go you are to go to James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into being" (saying 12). If James remained faithful to the Torah, as Paul did not, and Jesus and James were brothers in flesh and affection, then Jesus, too, must have wanted his followers to remain faithful to the Torah (Chilton 4). So, how does what James says compare to what Paul says, the self-proclaimed apostle (Galatians 1:15-17)?

> James says: "What does it profit, my brothers, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him?...So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:14, 17)
>
> *Paul says: "The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ all and on all those who believe" (Romans 3:22)*
>
> James says: "For whoever looks into the perfect Torah, the Torah of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing" (James 1:25)
>
> *Paul says: [the Torah is] "a ministry of death, chiseled in letters on a stone tablet" (2 Corinthians 3:7)*
>
> James says: "For whoever keeps the whole Torah but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it" (James 2:10)
>
> *Paul says: "Christ is the end of the Torah" (Romans 10:4)*

It is important to keep in mind that whether or not James himself wrote the letter attributed to him is up for debate. Still, James's letter lacks a single teaching that is characteristic of the Apostle Paul and it draws nothing at all from the traditions of Mark or John (Tabor 44). Further, the beliefs regarding Christ and his roll in Judaism found in James's letter aligns almost perfectly with the beliefs that James and the twelve disciples held onto following Christ's crucifixion: faithful adherence to the Law of Moses, the exaltation of James and the denigration of Paul, and a Christology of "adoptionism"—a belief that Jesus was the natural born son of Joseph and Mary and was "adopted" by God as his Son upon his baptism by John (Butz 131). If Paul's contradicting James isn't enough, there even times

in Paul's Letter to the Romans when he contradicts Jesus: Paul writes, "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13); Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Paul writes, "Christ is the end of the Torah" (Romans 10:4); Jesus says, "Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). Paul is taking much of what Jesus taught to his closest disciples, shedding it from Jewish tradition, and transforming it into his own teaching.

How was it, then, that Paul—a Diaspora Jew who converted to the Jesus movement almost ten years after Jesus's death—was able to transform this tiny Jewish sect anchored in Jerusalem, left in the hands of Jesus's brother, into a universal ministry? How was it that Paul's view of Jesus as the divine, pre-existing Son of God, who sacrificed himself on the cross for the sins of the world, resurrected to heaven—all anathema to traditional Jewish teaching— became *the* central message of Christianity? The answer is grounded in Paul's departure from Jewish theology— particularly those of the conservative Pharisees, the very theology that Jesus himself largely endorsed—and lay what will act for two thousand years as the foundation for what it means to be a Christian.

2. Part Two: Paul The Universalist

For Paul, the Torah's jurisdiction lasted from Moses to Christ, so one is no longer under the Torah, but released from its bondage (Galatians 3:23-4:10). A statement like this is inconceivable to James, Peter, and John; while these disciples certainly welcomed Gentile converts, the converts were still fully expected to be observant of Jewish custom—especially the Torah of Moses. But Paul makes a bold move: he moves everything—the entire Torah and Judaism as a whole—from literal to allegorical, from earth to heaven. Israel is no longer the physical nation, the promised land chosen by God; rather, the "true Israelites" are those who are "in Christ," having been "circumcised in heart" (Tabor 211; Philippians 3:3). The Torah of Moses has, in fact, been superseded: all of those in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile, are under a new Law—the Law of Christ (Corinthians 9:20-21). Paul does not want to say that the law is sin (although there are times where he seems to suggest it), but that the law administers a recursive system of transgression of law and subsequent guilt, confession, and shame—that the Torah of Moses enslaves of us to sin. As philosopher Alain Badiou writes, "The Christ event has purchased our freedom from the law and made us free, now children of God and no longer slaves of sin" (5). The "Christ-event" for Paul is an event that ushers in a new universality of truth, and he feels that it is his mission to let this truth known to all, especially the Gentiles, before Christ returns.

What kind of universalism, though, is it that Paul teaches? Among philosophers and historians, there are two common arguments as to how Paul envisioned his universal ministry: the process of grafting truth, or the process of subtracting truth. Did Paul believe that he was "grafting" the Gentiles onto the one tree of truth, onto "the tree of Israel," and that Christ is the fulfillment of an exclusively Jewish promise? Or did Paul see himself as "subtracting" truth from local differences or identities, implementing a universal truth where there is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor freeman? In other words, is there one universal tree of truth—or one true tree; one truth without identity or one true identity (Caputo 2)? It seems that Paul is not merely trying to advance Judaism, or graft Gentiles onto the root of Jesse; rather, Paul is subtracting particular, arbitrary identities in order to reveal a universal truth without identity, a universal truth that everyone can discover if they believe in Jesus Christ. "The Pauline project," says Caputo, "is the universality of truth, the conviction that what is true is true for everyone, and the proper role of the subject is to make that truth known" (2).

Indeed, Paul's universality is not the assimilation of Greek citizen into Jewish custom, or the Gentile in the truth, but rather subtracting the Jew and the Greek from the truth, a universal truth without identity. It is a truth that is true for all, a truth that collapses the prevailing paradigms of the period and ushers in an apostle who proclaims a universal order: it is a truth that transcends history and community (Badiou 8, 21). Slavoj Zizek, in his book *The Perverse Core of Christianity*, writes, "Paul's universe is no longer that of the multitude of groups, that want to 'find their voice,' and 'assert their particular identity, their way of life,' but that of a fighting collective grounded in the reference to an unconditional universalism" (130). This is all, remember, because of the Christ-event. As mentioned earlier, the disciples in Jerusalem did not see the crucifixion of Jesus to be emblematic of a whole new Christ-God, God made flesh. Rather, James, John, and Peter thought that Jesus's crucifixion was indicative of the God of Israel– –the God of Moses—soon establishing His reign on earth and freeing the Jewish people from Roman occupation.

But Paul, on the other hand, subtracts the universal truth from Jewish identity and instead shifts truth to a universalism without ethnic identity, separate from the Jewish community. Badiou writes, Paul wants to "drag the Good News out from the rigid enclosure within which its restriction to the Jewish community would confine it…and to never let it be determined by available generalities, be they statist or ideological" (13).

Paul, in fact, refers to his former Jewish life as "rubbish" (Philippians 3:8). Paul's prior Jewish beliefs—the same beliefs that he had been so zealous for, "blameless,"—were not "merely modified, updated, or amplified: they were wholly recast in the light of the 'mystery' of the gospel he received" (Tabor 181). Paul's move to suggest that there is a human that is God or that is worthy of worship, that transcends local differences and particularities and embodies a universal truth for all, is a move that, in itself, separates Judaism from Paul's version of Christianity. But he pushes farther. Paul claims that Jews who do not believe in Christ are living according to the flesh, and that they have been replaced by a new and true truth according to the Spirit: Paul says, "we are the true circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and put no confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3). Further, Paul believes that the Torah of Moses was not intended to be permanent, but rather has served its temporary purpose as leading both Jews and Gentiles to the universalism that the Christ event has ushered in (Tabor 181). "Now before faith came," writes Paul, "we were confined under the Torah, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So the Torah was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian" (Galatians 3:23-25).

"Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing," says Paul (1 Corinthians 7:19). Universality knows no bias: Paul does not care to make a distinction among his followers, between sympathizer gentiles and "true converts," circumcised and initiated. For Paul, truth is not a matter of degree—either one participates in truth, or remains foreign to it (Badiou 21). Christ's resurrection—the event—has declared the truth, rendering "prior markings obsolete," thus dissolving any previous privileged relation to the Jewish community; as Badiou writes, "although the event depends on the site (Jerusalem) *in its being*, it must be independent of it *in its truth effects*" (23; emphasis his). In other words, the event exceeds its contingent site (95). Paul's universal truth is one without content: ethnic and cultural differences, the opposition between Greek and Jew that was the prototype in Paul's time and in the empire as a whole, this is no longer significant in regards to the truth (57). Sure, there are differences, but in order for both Gentile and Jew to grasp truth, universality must elude particularity. "Differences," Badiou writes, "can be transcended only if benevolence with regard to customs and opinions presents itself as an indifference that tolerates difference" (99). The truth is without exception, tolerant of all, with no inscription of difference to the subjects which it addresses itself: the truth is only truth insofar as it is for all (76).

Unfortunately, however, Paul's universalism has at times been misrepresented and then attacked as such. For example, Paul is commonly (and unfairly) charged with being a primary source of hundreds of years of Christian misogyny. At times, this charge seems justified—how, then, can this reconcile with Paul's universality? Paul, of course, is writing in the ancient world, a time when the subjugation of women was the status quo. What we find, then, is Paul at once conceding to the status quo yet doing so in a way that will not hinder his movement of universalization. Badiou calls this technique "subsequent symmetrization": Paul initially affirms the common perceptions of the roles of female and male, then immediately neutralizes his claim by a subsequent mention of its reversibility (104). For Paul's universal mission to remain true, both the initial and subsequent passages must be cited; otherwise, it is evident why Paul has become the false target for the origins of Christian misogyny. We now turn to some examples.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, "The wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does" (7:4). A husband's authority over his wife was common knowledge in the ancient world, thus Paul gives us his initial, conceding claim; a claim that, certainly, is not appropriate from our current perspective. But the text continues: "And likewise the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Corinthians 7:4). Paul pushes forward his universal claim by reminding his audience of the reversibility—the arbitrariness—of the present order. In Badiou's words, Paul is "*making universalizing egalitarianism pass through the reversibility of an inegalitarian rule*" (104; emphasis his). It is this act of balancing that allows Paul to acknowledge differences—in this case between sexes—in order for those differences to become indifferent through the process of universalization, through the process of becoming one with Christ. Another example of Paul's subsequent symmetrization in 1 Corinthians: Paul begins, "I give charge…that the wife should not separate from her husband" (7:10)—this statement taken by itself implies that the husband alone reserves the power to separate from his wife. But the subsequent statement must also be cited, for Paul then says, "and that the husband should not divorce his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:10). Once again,

Paul neutralizes his initial inegalitarian claim with an egalitarian one, emphasizing the reversibility of the hierarchies that are present. Finally, in 1 Corinthians, Paul writes that "the chief of every man is Christ, the chief of a woman is her husband, and the chief of Christ is God" (11:3). A statement like this seems to have its roots in Genesis, where it is written, "man was not made from woman, but woman from man" (8). But Paul remains faithful to his binary creed. Only three lines later, he writes, "Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is not born of woman" (1 Corinthians 11:11). Through the resurrection of Christ, differences are now indifferent; the universality of truth has collapsed them.

Moreover, one of the most frequently cited passages in Paul's letters to support claims of inequality and misogyny is also found in 1 Corinthians, when Paul says "any woman who prays or prophesies with her head unveiled dishonors her chief" (11:5). But, as Badiou points out, a woman's long hair indicates a kind of natural character of veiling, and thus a woman's hair acts as an artificial symbol that emphasizes the acceptance of the difference between sexes: Badiou writes, "…she must veil herself in order to show that the universality of this declaration *includes women who confirm that they are women*. It is the power of the universal over the difference as difference that is at issue here" (105; emphasis his). Now, it will quickly be pointed out that if this constraint is applied only to women, then it is still obviously sectarian; but once again, without exception, Paul follows his initial claim with a subsequent claim that highlights its reversibility. Paul says, "any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his chief" (1 Corinthians 11:4)—thus, it is just as shameful for a woman to have short hair as it is for a man to have long hair. For universality to become actualized—for differences to become indifferent— differences between sexes must be testified to and traversed, culminating in "symmetrical, rather than unilateral, constraints within the contingent realm of customs" (Badiou 105). Recognizing differences and their ability to carry the universal that has come upon them enables the universal to corroborate its function in reality. Paul writes, "If even lifeless instruments, such as the flute and the harp, do not give distinct notes, how will anyone know what is being played on the flute or harp?" (1 Corinthians 14:7).

However, there are also other avenues of opposition to Pauline universalism. Returning to the original bifurcation of Pauline universalization—that of grafting or subtracting—historians such as Dale B. Martin, for example, argue that Paul is grafting Gentiles onto one truth rather than subtracting truth from a particular local identity. They, too, have solid ground for such a standpoint. In Romans chapter 1 verse 16, for example, Paul says that the blessings of the gospel are for "the Jew first" and only *then* to the Greek (Martin 98). Paul also regularly uses the terms gentiles or "nations" to refer to only those *outside* of the church (Martin 99). Paul, however, is not writing in a vacuum; indeed, Paul is a politician, synonymous, at that time, with a rhetorician. He knows his audience, and he knows that he is pushing fragile boundaries, dangerously close to becoming entirely ostracized by the Church in Jerusalem. It is not Paul that wants to graft truth, but James, John, and Peter. Jeffrey Butz clearly states: "it cannot be stressed enough that Jesus and his earliest followers were thoroughly Jewish in their beliefs and practices" (74). It is only natural, then, that those first believers of Jesus expected that anyone wishing to follow Jesus would become Jew— that they become a part of Israel, the one tree of truth. While Paul may appeal to Jews in some of his writing, he makes it abundantly clear that **"**as we all die in Adam, we all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:22)— Christ is the second Adam, Christ is the new Law; the law of faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

It is love, under the condition of faith, of a declared conviction, that gives the faithful subject his consistency; a literal law, "chiseled unto a stone tablet," is not the vehicle to arrive at a universal truth, addressing truth to everyone (Badiou 87). Faith deploys the power of self-love to others, to everyone. "Love," Badiou writes, "is pricelessly what faith is capable of" (90). For Paul, Jew and Gentile alike are imperfect, disobedient; but God, through the resurrection of Christ, will do what the apostle cannot: he will redeem the entire creation, both the physical and the cosmos (Sanders 86); the universality of truth will expose itself to local differences and identifies, and, through their division, show that they are able to embrace the truth that flows among them. For Paul says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3: 27-28).

3. Acknowledgements:

expand upon that paper, and also for the endless encouragement and advice through the many months of research and writing that this project demanded.

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