Brother against Brother: Covenant and Dispensational Eschatologies in the Context of Israeli Evangelicalism

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1. Introduction

One of the figurative pictures Christians have for Israel is a “Land flowing with milk and honey”. However, any citizen of this country can tell you that a better description would be a “Land flowing with hatred and revenge, wars, wounds and death”. People here became cynical about the possibility for a quiet and secure life, and they have become resigned to the sad fact that there is no solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. In the midst of this dark picture, God expects His body, Arab and Jews, “to stand in the gap” and reflect Christian peace and hope to the people around us.

I have worked/served in the ministry for 20 years, during which time I have worked closely with Messianic Jews, especially as the General Secretary of the Fellowship of Christian Students in Israel, and later on with the Bible Society, and as a pastor of local church in Nazareth. Presently, I lecture at Nazareth Evangelical Theological Seminary. Through all these ministries and all this time, I have found that one of the main challenges that divides the body of Christ in this country is the issue of the Land and the place of the State of Israel in the End Times.

In the context of Christianity in Israel/Palestine, this is not just some theoretical or academic issue. Rather, it affects the day-to-day ministries of churches and congregations here. For instance, once while working with the student movement during our preparation for a joint conference of Christian Arabs and Messianic students, one of the suggested speakers was rejected by the Jewish students in the committee. The direct reason for this rejection was “we do not want to get into politics, and this speaker holds amillennialist views.” In fact what they were saying was that any eschatological view that did not see the State of Israel as a fulfillment the Old Testament prophecies should be characterized as politically-oriented and unbiblical.

The problem, as I view it, is not having a different eschatological view, but making this issue a major condition that determines one’s relationship with one’s brother. That having been said, I will now outline the main teachings of both theories of eschatology, and then offer some critical remarks. I will then conclude with some practical steps we can take within the context of Palestinian Evangelicalism within Israel to improve communication and ministry.

One of the most popular questions in evangelical circles in the last 60 years has been: Is the existence of the State of Israel today a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies?
In answering this question, it is important to note that we deal here with two different approaches, which have a huge divide between them. We are not talking about two positions along a spectrum, as if there were a broad spectrum with each position at one end of it. What we have here is a deep fundamental gulf that separates these two positions. The dispensational view states that the promises about the Land in the Abrahamic covenant still stand and must be interpreted literally. The Jewish people therefore have a special God-given right to the Land today. Covenant Theology emphasizes that the Old Testament promises and prophecies have been fulfilled in the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus. Thus, the return of Jews to the Land and the establishment of the State of Israel have no special theological significance, and they are not fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

To be able to compare these two eschatologies, and to find out why each one holds such a different position, we must go to the heart of the issue between Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, which is hermeneutics. It is this one element, above all others, which distinguishes the two schools of theology. After doing this I will offer my own critique of Dispensationalism, and then conclude with some thoughts on how evangelicals in Israel of both persuasions can labor together in spite of our different opinions.

2. **Dispensationalism: Core Doctrines and Hermeneutics**

Dispensationalism is one of the most influential theological systems within the worldwide church today. It has increasingly shaped the presuppositions of fundamentalist, evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic thinking concerning Israel and Palestine over the past one hundred and fifty years. The word dispensation refers to an “order,” “arrangement,” “administration,” or “stewardship.” In his Reference Bible, Scofield defined the word as follows: “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.” Most Dispensational theologians claim that scripture presents seven dispensations in biblical history, if a literal hermeneutic is applied consistently.

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Although we can find some roots of dispensationalism in the teaching of the early Church Fathers, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and others, it is debatable if such concepts would have any connection with Dispensationalism as we know it today. There are several names in the last 400 years that we can point to, who helped in establishing this kind of teaching, including Pierre Poiret (1649-1719), Jonathan Edwards (1637-1716) and Isaac Watts (1674-1748). Nevertheless, the father of the systematized Dispensationalism is John N. Darby (1800-1882), a leader of the Plymouth Brethren. C. I. Scofield in his famous Scofield Reference Bible, published in 1909, made a great contribution to popularizing Darby’s teaching. Scofield’s student L. S. Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary (1924), followed in the footsteps of his teacher, and helped, through the seminary, to popularize it.

Charles Ryrie, one of the foremost dispensationalists in the last century, argues that in order to be a dispensationalist, one must hold to the *sine qua non* tenets of the system, which are as follows:

- Consistent literal interpretation of all Scripture, including prophecy.
- Recognize a clear distinction between God’s program for Israel and God’s program for the Church.
- Recognize that God’s ultimate purpose is doxological, to glorify Himself.

However, Boettner argues that simply by applying the first principle, the second inevitably follows, and the restoration of the Jewish nation in the Land of Israel should be seen as a fulfillment of the prophesies.

Dispensationalism is built upon a consistent literal hermeneutic for the entire Bible, especially when interpreting prophecy. This means that Dispensationalism applies no other method of interpretation than the literal method. God “means what He says and says what He means.” Scofield is very clear on this issue: “Not one instance exists of a ‘spiritual’ or figurative fulfillment of prophecy... Jerusalem is always Jerusalem, Israel is always Israel, Zion is always Zion... Prophecies may never be spiritualized, but are always literal.”

Ryrie explains this in the following way:

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6 Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995). P. 63-64
8 Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* p. 65-67
9 Ibid. p. 39-41
11 C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1907). P. 45-46
...literal interpretation gives to every word the same meaning... if God is the originator of language, when He communicates to man it can only be understood according to the received laws of language, which seem to require a literal understanding... and God should expect people to understand the language in its literal, normal and plain sense.  

Ignoring these rules of language and interpretation would make us unable to determine what a word means and would prevent God’s people from understanding his words: “The literal interpretation principle should be applied to the entire Bible. This means that the historical content, doctrinal and prophetic material should be taken literally... any other method of interpretation partially, if not completely, robs God’s people of the message that was intended for them.”  

While interpreting the OT books, especially the prophetic ones, the literal hermeneutic cannot be changed, for otherwise this will create instability in the meaning of the OT and will make God look deceptive: “After all, He promised land, and a temple. We should expect real dirt, and a temple made of stone and gold.”  

Following this approach of interpretation, dispensationalists argue that since all the prophecies of the First Coming of Jesus were fulfilled literally, we should automatically assume that the prophecies that have not been fulfilled refer to the Second Coming, and they in turn will be fulfilled literally. Based on this hermeneutical principle, dispensationalists believe that God has two separate but parallel means of working - one through the Church, and the other through Israel. “Thus there is, and always will remain, a distinction between Israel, the Gentiles and the Church”. The dispensationalist believes that throughout the ages God is pursuing two distinct purposes: one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives, which is Judaism; the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity.  

Ryrie says, “This is probably the most basic theological test of whether or not a person is a dispensationalist. . . The one who fails to distinguish Israel and the church consistently will inevitably not hold to dispensational distinctions; and one who does will”.

12 Ryrie, Dispensationalism p. 80-81  
13 Ibid. p. 82  
15 Keathley, “The Relationship of the Church to Israel.”  
17 Sizer, “Dispensational Approaches to the Land.” P.144  
18 Lewis Sperry Chafer, Dispensationalism (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1936). P.107  
19 Ryrie, Dispensationalism p. 39
Burge, who is not a dispensationalist, nicely summarizes this issue.\(^\text{20}\) First, God's covenant with Israel is eternal and unconditional. Therefore, the promises of land given to Abraham will never be overturned. The destiny of the Jewish people is to return to the Land of Israel and reclaim their inheritance promised to Abraham and his descendants forever.\(^\text{21}\) Secondly, God's plan has always been for the redemption of Israel. Yet when Israel failed to follow Jesus, the Church was born as an afterthought or “parenthesis.”\(^\text{22}\)

Clarence Larkin, in describing the ministry of John the Baptist as the forerunner to Christ, said, “Prepare the way of the Lord for what? Not for the Cross but for the Kingdom”\(^\text{23}\). Thus at the Rapture the church will be removed and Israel will once again become God's primary agent in the world. Thirdly, the prophetic books of the Bible are describing events of today and do not principally refer to events in Biblical times. Therefore, when we look at the State of Israel, if we possess the right interpretative skills, we can see how modern history is unfolding, while the modern State of Israel serves as the catalyst for the prophetic countdown. Malgo expresses this well:

One thing is for certain: the world is approaching a dark and terrible time … but we are not looking for signs, we already see the one and the only sign of the time: Israel. God indeed rejected Israel and the Jews were dispersed into the entire world, in the time of the church. But that time has begun to end with the return to Israel.\(^\text{24}\)

Lewis Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, sees the blessing of Israel associated only with the Land: “Israel can never be blessed apart from her land.”\(^\text{25}\) Accepting such teaching makes “modern Israel more theologically significant than other states.”\(^\text{26}\)

3. **Covenant Theology: Core Doctrines and Hermeneutics**

Covenant Theology is a recent system, as is Classic Dispensationalism. Neither the Apostolic Fathers nor the Post-Apostolic Fathers mentioned or spoke about it. The first mention of the ‘covenant theory’ was in the Westminster Confession of 1647. Cocceius, a German, was the first to systematize Covenant Theology. He developed the system primarily as a revolt against the Reformers’ strict predestinarianism. Cocceius was ambitious to avoid

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\(^{21}\) Sizer, *Christian Zionism: Road - Map to Armageddon?* P. 151


\(^{24}\) Wim Malgo, *In the Beginning Was the End* (West Columbia: Midnight Call Publication, 1983). P. 25-26


\(^{26}\) Katanacho, “Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz.” P. 427
the freedom of Arminianism and the determinism of Calvinism, especially in relation to the doctrine of predestination. Cocceius is often considered the “Father of Covenant Theology”, even though the Westminster Confession of 1647 outlined the ideas of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace in simple terms one year before Cocceius’ publication (1648).²⁷

As is widely known, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. Therefore, Covenant Theology describes God’s plan for the salvation of man by defining three overarching covenants that God made with Christ and with man in which God said, “If you do this, I’ll do this.” Although the Bible does not actually use the term covenant to describe any of the covenants that make up Covenant Theology, the idea of a covenant or agreement is understood as implied.²⁸ Covenant Theology’s main teachings, the sine qua non tenets of Covenant Theology, could be summarized as follows:

- The governing categories for understanding the Bible are the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace.²⁹
- The basic hermeneutical principle is reading the New Testament into the Old Testament.³⁰
- God has one ultimate purpose and it is soteriological (salvation).³¹

Covenant Theology puts the covenant of grace with Christ at the center of its hermeneutics. Christ is the heart of the covenant, and everything points to Him. The Abrahamic covenant and all OT promises and prophecies have to be interpreted in the light of the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus; the OT must be read through the lens of the NT.³² Keathley explains the difference between dispensationalist hermeneutics and Covenant theology hermeneutics:

> The real issue is the New Testament’s use of the Old. Reformed interpreters place more emphasis on the New Testament. They look at the New Testament and let it reinterpret the Old Testament. If a New Testament writer takes an Old Testament promise and applies it in a spiritual way to the church, then

²⁷ All the history information is summarized from this site: Thomas, “A Comparison of Classic Dispensationalism, Covenant Theology, and Progressive Dispensationalism”.
²⁸ Keathley, “The Relationship of the Church to Israel”.
²⁹ Ibid.
the Reformed interpreter concludes that the Old Testament promise was just a picture of the future spiritual reality which we are enjoying now.33

Stephen Sizer, an Anglican, supports what has just been mentioned, and he insists that this is the way we should understand the Old Testament prophecies. He shows, furthermore, that New Testament writers understood it in this way too:

The Old Covenant should be interpreted in the light of the New Covenant, not the other way round. In Colossians, for example, Paul actually uses a typological hermeneutic to explain this: ‘Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ’ (Colossians 2:16-17).34

When we look at the New Testament, we find out that it does not always interpret Old Testament prophecy in a literal way. Take, for example, Hosea 11:1, which reads: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” This oracle goes on to describe God's love for Israel, Israel’s apostasy, and God's continuing love for them.

Applying a strictly literal method of interpretation to this passage would lead one to conclude that there is no reference here to any event in Christ's life; rather, it is simply referring to Israel's exodus from Egypt. Yet Matthew 2:15 applies this verse to the Holy Family’s flight to Egypt. So here we have an Old Testament prophetic writing applied to the life of Christ in a non-literal way, contrary to dispensationalist assertions.35 Sizer makes a good point on this issue:

The question is not whether the promises of the covenant are to be understood literally or spiritually as Dispensationalists like to stress. It is instead a question of whether they should be understood in terms of Old Covenant shadow or in terms of New Covenant reality. The failure to recognise this principal is the basic hermeneutical error which Dispensationalists and Christian Zionists, in particular, make and from which flow the other distinctive doctrines that characterize the movement.36

So it is not a matter of black and white, literal or spiritual. We should seek to understand how the New Testament writers understood the text and derive the meaning according to that. Cox explains this issue nicely:

Some meant to be literal, others were meant to be spiritual; some historical, others eschatological…Our difficulties arise when students of the Bible attempt to force a literal meaning into a spiritual prophecy, or an eschatological interpretation into a prediction which has been historically fulfilled already.37

33 Keathley, “The Relationship of the Church to Israel”.
35 White, “My Shift to Covenant Theology and Amillennialism”.
37 Cox, An Examination of Dispensationalism. P. 26
To summarize this point we can say that Covenant Theology holds that the main purpose of God is the redemption of all people, “all of history is moving toward a goal: the total redemption of the universe.”\textsuperscript{38} Therefore, it makes no distinction between the church and Israel. On the contrary, it looks at “Israel” as the Old Testament Church, and “true Israel” as the New Testament Church.

God could not have two purposes, one for Israel and one for the Church. Nor can history be divided into dispensations. There is only one covenant, which is the covenant of grace, through all of history. Through this covenant God seeks to have one new man in Christ.\textsuperscript{39}

4. A Critique of Dispensationalism

The central theological question in comparing these two approaches is this: Does the possession of the Land by the Jewish people today and the existence of the State of Israel have any theological significance in terms of the fulfillment of biblical prophecy or the purposes of God? Or, should we believe that this understanding of the Land is inconsistent with the Gospel proclaimed by, and summed up in, Jesus Christ?\textsuperscript{40}

To answer these questions I will explore several passages from the Old and the New Testament:

First, the Abrahamic Covenant. The covenant promise to Abraham about the Land is unconditional. But the promise about the Land needs to be seen as one strand of the covenant and interpreted alongside the promises about the nation, the covenant relationship, and the blessing for all peoples of the entire world. An interpretation of the Land promise must therefore be closely related to the interpretation of the other three promises. In Geneses 12, 15, and 17, we have a package deal, in which all the four strands hang together: the people, the Land, the covenant relationship, and the blessing for all nations. It has been accepted that the blessing for all nations was fulfilled in Christ; if that is so, we have no reason to put the Land promise in a different category.\textsuperscript{41}

Secondly, the Temple. The Tabernacle and the Temple in Jerusalem are signs of God living among His people (Exodus 25:8; 40:34-35; 1 Kings 8:27-30; Deuteronomy 12:4-11; 1 Chronicles 23:25). In relation to the last verse, if we insist on taking Genesis 17 about the

\textsuperscript{38} Hoekema, “Amillennialism “. P. 187
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. p. 186
\textsuperscript{40} Sizer, “An Alternative Theology of the Holy Land: A Critique of Christian Zionism “.
Land as everlasting inheritance literally, this would mean that the descendants of Abraham have a divine right to the Land forever. How, then, do we understand this verse that “God had come to dwell in Jerusalem forever”? Sizer asks, “Is that being fulfilled literally now on earth or figuratively in Christ and the Church? Likewise in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, God promises that a descendent of David will sit on his throne forever. Is that being fulfilled literally on earth or figuratively in Christ?” We find here exactly the same principle; even the same words are used. How can we insist on taking the Land promise literally, but give spiritual interpretation to the temple promise?

Thirdly, conditional or unconditional promise. It is clear that the first two points are challenges regarding the promise of the Land, but the next question that we should ask is this: is the possession of the Land conditional or not? The answer to this question is yes, continued possession of the Land is conditional. Disobedience to the law of covenant means that the people lose the right to live in the Land and will be expelled from the Land (Deuteronomy 4:25-27; 29:22-28; Leviticus 18:25; 2 Kings 24:20). That is, the original promise of the Land being given to Abraham was unconditional, but the children of Israel can only continue to enjoy the Land and live in it if they are obedient to the covenant. They cannot continue to live in the Land without obedience to the covenant. The original gift of the Land was then, unconditional, but continued possession of the Land was not. Dispensationalists argue that the State of Israel is the fulfillment of biblical prophecies, that God gave Israel the Land, and that he is the one who is bringing the nation back according to His promises, regardless of their spiritual condition. “But what about many biblical passages that teach that Israel must obey God [like the above one] in order to dwell in land?” God promised punishment and not blessing for the disobedient, and for this reason I agree with Boettner when he writes, “no promise will be fulfilled to disobedient and rebellious people.”

Moreover, the promise of restoration to the Land is conditional on repentance. Because there is some kind of repentance during the Exile, God brings the people back to the Land in faithfulness to his promise (see Deuteronomy 30:1-5; Nehemiah 1:4-11; Daniel 9:1-19). The prayers in Nehemiah 1 and Daniel 9 are wonderful expressions on behalf of at least a remnant of the people in exile. They are confessing their sin and the rebellion of the people, so when God returns the people to the Land it is in response to the condition already laid out.

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43 Katanacho, “Christ Is the Owner of Haaretz.” P. 237
44 Boettner, “A Postmillennial Response.” P. 100
in Deuteronomy 30. There has been a measure of repentance among the people, for if there had been no repentance, God would not have brought them back.\textsuperscript{45} Having said that, why is this principle not applied by dispensationalists today when they speak about a Divine right to the Land for the Jewish people? Did God change his words? Why do they not, in this case, apply literally the words of God from these verses? I believe that we cannot expect God to keep his promises apart from the conditions that he demanded. Is there any other way to understand these promises?

Fourthly, Israel’s Restoration. Prophecies of a return to the Land are linked with the spiritual renewal of the nation and God’s plans for the nations. Since these prophetic dreams were fulfilled in a very limited way after the return from Exile, the people continued to look forward to a future national and spiritual restoration.

In the book of Ezekiel (36-37) we find that the return to the Land is not only a physical return, but is also associated with a spiritual revival and renewal for the whole nation. But the spiritual things described there were taken in the New Testament and associated with the coming of Jesus. If we want to believe that God is still dealing with Israel in a separate way from the church, because they belong to different dispensations, we must ask: do we see any spiritual revival and renewal of the Jewish people, based on the Old Testament model of restoring the people to the Land?

Furthermore, the New Testament tells us that this restoration has already happened. In Amos 9:11 the prophet speaks about the restoration of the people of God and describes their future hope. Yet when James quotes this verse at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:16), he says that this prophecy is fulfilled through the acceptance of the Gospel message by the Gentiles and through their fellowship with the people of God in the Church. God is building the “fallen tabernacle of David” in a spiritual rather than political way.\textsuperscript{46} This is an example of how the dispensationalists are interpreting the Bible in a way that the Bible does not interpret itself, unless the NT writers and Apostles did not know how to interpret Scripture!

Fifthly, Jesus and the Land. The Land, the covenant, the Torah, and the Temple were fundamental themes in Judaism at the time of Christ. Jews looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, who would enable the Jews to drive out the Romans and establish an independent state in the Land, so that the Jews could obey the Torah in the Land (See Luke

2:25-26 and Acts 1:6). This was how the majority of Jews felt at the time of Jesus, and this was the mindset of the disciples. This was the point of the disciples’ question in Acts 1:6. It is as if they were saying, “Jesus, now that you've been raised from the dead, surely it is the time for you to enable us to establish our independent Jewish state in the Land, right?”

But Jesus had little or nothing to say about the Land. The reason for this silence is not that Jesus took traditional Jewish hopes for granted and affirmed them, but that all these hopes are now to be understood in the context of the coming of the Kingdom of God in and through Jesus. It is not an accident that Jesus had so little to say about the Land.47 Instead of speaking about earthly land, we find that Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God as the hope not only for Israel but also for the whole world.48

Finally, New Testament writers and the Land. New Testament writers continued to use Old Testament terminology about the Land and the Temple, but they re-interpreted them in different ways in the light of the incarnation. Peter Walker picks up this issue, and based on Paul, Hebrews, John, Luke-Acts, and Revelation, he concludes that the Land is subsumed in the New Testament under God’s purposes for the whole world. In doing so, he connects the theme of land to salvation history.49 Philip Mauro, speaking about Acts 26:6-7, writes, “This is very definite. It proves that Paul, in preaching the gospel of Christ crucified and risen from the dead, was proclaiming to the people of Israel the fulfillment of God’s promise to that people…”50

In conclusion, if the authors and main characters of the New Testament were competent in interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures, then dispensationalism cannot offer a valid hermeneutic, and thus, its eschatology cannot be correct.

5. Conclusion and Practical Steps

Colin Chapman asks an insightful question: “What difference did the coming of the kingdom of God in the person of Jesus make to traditional Jewish hopes and expectations about the Land and the People?”51 I believe that the coming of Jesus should make a great difference. The incarnation of the Logos, his death and resurrection, and the birth of the Church are not a parenthesis or a plan B. The Church age is the fulfillment of the Old

48 Hoeckema, “Amillennialism “. p. 187
50 Quoted in: Larry Pechawer, Leaving the Rapture Behind (Joplin, Missouri: MIREH Publishers 2003). P. 37
51 Chapman, “One Land, Two Peoples — How Many States”.? P. 9
Testament prophesies, that through it Israel and the Gentiles will be blessed.\textsuperscript{52} And since the Old Testament promises and prophecies have been fulfilled in the coming of the Kingdom in Jesus, the return of the Jews to the Land and the establishment of the State of Israel have no special theological significance, and in the previous section the reasons why I find this position compelling were outlined.

Having said that, I do believe that holding the other view should not be an obstacle for us to work together as brothers in this land. A Jewish friend once said: “The issue of the Land is very important, but when it turns out to be more important than the people, this Land becomes a big Cemetery!” This, I believe, is a good description for a healthy approach to the issue of the prophecies and land. Adopting one or other of the two eschatologies is not in itself unethical. What is wrong is allowing that eschatology to separate us from our brothers and sisters who might hold another view and cause a division in the body of Christ. What is completely wrong also is to allow this doctrine to rob us of our prophetic role and voice as the children of God which must be directed against injustice, oppression, evil or any source of violence from any source. From the other side, what is right, absolutely right, is to come together, to accept each other with love and respect as appropriate to the body of Christ, and truly represent Him, His peace and His salvation. This requires humility, transparency, a willingness to listen, feel and understand the fears and challenges of the others. We might even need to change or sacrifice our priorities for the sake of a higher purpose, which is sharing and reflecting the Peace of Christ in this area. As I said in the beginning of this article, people of this land have lost hope for a real solution. I wonder: if we as evangelical disciples of Messiah truly believe that Christ is the Hope for Israel, are we really presenting this hope?

\textsuperscript{52} Pechawer, \textit{Leaving the Rapture Behind}. P. 34
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