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## The Bible, the Economy, and the Poor

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### 13. Luxury

#### Sign of the Beast, or of the Blessing?

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#### Introduction

Though poverty and riches are a common theme in Christian theology, “luxury” seems to have evaporated as a category for Christian reflection (Cloutier). Earlier Christian history did reflect on luxury, usually considering it a vice. But in recent times, Christians seem to accept the economic definition of luxury as the fine products and services that are available to those who succeed in the marketplace. Some contemporary Protestant preachers accept this view, and claim that luxuries are a sign of the favor and blessing of God.

In this paper I examine the use of the term luxury as it appears in the Bible, and then turn to the writings of contemporary preachers, especially Joel Osteen, to see how luxury is viewed by each. My aim is to see of what luxury is a sign on the map of Christian faith. I conclude with a brief note on the relation between teachings about luxury and global poverty.

### Luxury in Revelation

It may not be surprising that “luxury” is rarely addressed by contemporary theologians<sup>1</sup> as it is also rarely addressed in scripture. In fact, Revelation 18 is the only passage in scripture that uses the Greek term for luxury (*strenian*). Other words for wealth or riches are used widely in the Bible, but only in John’s description of Babylon is *strenian* used.<sup>2</sup> In this apocalyptic text, the term or its variants is used three times in quick succession – Revelation 18:3, 7, 9. In addition, terms for “wealth,” “splendor,” and “commerce” round out John’s vocabulary in this passage.

Throughout the book of Revelation the luxurious whore of Babylon is contrasted with the pristine bride of Jerusalem. The whore is dressed in purple and scarlet, and wears glittering gold, precious stones, and pearls (17:4). The bride, in intentional contrast, wears fine linen, bright and clean (19:8). John adds that “Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints” (19.8b).

Though some feminists have argued that John has misogynist tendencies, evidenced by his use of the metaphors of the whore and the bride, I believe that idolatry and luxury are at the heart of his message, not prostitution itself.<sup>3</sup> In the Old Testament the critique of an unfaithful partner included a strong economic aspect. Ezekiel, for example, condemns Judah saying, “You multiplied your whoring with Chaldea, the land of merchants; and even with this you were not satisfied (16:29). Isaiah refers to Tyre as a prostitute, though this Phoenician city was never close to the status of an empire. It was, however, the mercantile capital of the eastern Mediterranean for a millennium.

From that day Tyre will be forgotten for seventy years, the lifetime of one king. At the end of seventy years, it will happen to Tyre as in the song about the prostitute:

Take a harp,  
go about the city,  
you forgotten prostitute!

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<sup>1</sup> The question of luxury’s morality or immorality has, however, been a theme throughout the church’s history (see Weinrich; Cloutier; Brook and Gwyther).

<sup>2</sup> It appears in the LXX in II Kings 19:28 and is translated as “fierceness.” In I Peter 3:3 Peter warns against luxurious clothing, but with other terminology.

<sup>3</sup> By using the term “whore,” John was picking up an Old Testament metaphor for serving other gods. The covenant people were, in effect, married to YHWH, but nonetheless had intimate relations with the gods of the surrounding nations. Rome, like unfaithful Israel of old, had given itself over to other gods, the principal among them being the city’s patron goddess Roma. Prostitution is thus a metaphor for religious infidelity. The prostitutes who appear in the Old Testament are rarely, if ever condemned for it. In fact, the well known examples of Tamar and Rahab are not only not condemned for their prostitution, but are praised for their faith. Tamar and Rahab go on to become mothers of Israel who take positions of honor in the genealogy of Christ (Matthew 1:3, 5).

Make sweet melody,  
sing many songs,  
that you may be remembered.

At the end of seventy years, the Lord will visit Tyre, and she will return to her trade, and will prostitute herself with all the kingdoms of the world on the face of the earth (Isaiah 23:15-17).

The common theme between prostitution as idolatry and prostitution as wealth seeking is the reliance on, and love for something other than YHWH. Political power and mercantile power were and are inseparable, and reliance on either constituted unfaithfulness to God. Following this overall contrast between pristine and modest Jerusalem, and self-indulgent, idolatrous Rome, John provides a very specific critique of the luxury of Rome.

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendor. He called out with a mighty voice,

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great!  
It has become a dwelling place of demons,  
a haunt of every foul spirit,  
a haunt of every foul bird,  
a haunt of every foul and hateful beast.  
For all the nations have drunk  
of the wine of the wrath of her fornication,  
and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her,  
and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her  
*luxury*.”

Then I heard another voice from heaven saying,

“Come out of her, my people,  
so that you do not take part in her sins,  
and so that you do not share in her plagues;  
for her sins are heaped high as heaven,  
and God has remembered her iniquities.  
Render to her as she herself has rendered,  
and repay her double for her deeds;  
mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed.  
As she glorified herself and lived *luxuriously*,  
so give her a like measure of torment and grief.  
Since in her heart she says,  
‘I rule as a queen;  
I am no widow,  
and I will never see grief,’  
therefore her plagues will come in a single day –  
pestilence and mourning and famine –

and she will be burned with fire;  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.”

And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in *luxury* with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning . . . (Revelation 18:1-9, emphasis mine).

This passage depicts the judgment of God on Babylon. The message is given by a mighty angel, and modulates between descriptions of the judgment and the reasons for it. Verse two, for example, describes Babylon as a haunt for all kinds of foul creatures with verse three providing the reason for it: harlotry. The nations and their kings have committed fornication with her, and merchants have grown rich with her luxuries.

Imperial Rome was well known for basking in luxury. The emperors and aristocrats of Rome were notoriously self-indulgent.

One special passion was the desire to have luxurious pearls, but then dissolve them in vinegar and drink them for the sheer pleasure of spending a fortune in one gulp. Pliny relates that it was a source of pride to serve the first plate of a dinner party from India, and the following from Egypt, Cyrene, Crete and other places. . . At the head of this luxuriant lifestyle were the emperors themselves. In one day, Caligula spent the equivalent of the rents from three provinces of the empire. For one of his banquets Nero brought roses from Egypt at a cost equivalent to over \$100,000. Nero dressed luxuriously, and never wore the same clothes twice. He never went out with less than a thousand chariots whose mules were gilded with silver. The emperor Vitellius, who reigned for less than a year, managed to spend the equivalent of \$20,000,000 from the public funds, largely in food. Such gluttony was all the more condemnable when in other parts of the empire, workers suffered from hunger and many thousands in the capital city survived on the periodic distribution of Egyptian grain (Stam).

Stoic philosophers and even Roman noblemen criticized Rome's excess. Dio of Prusa, an aristocratic Roman and near contemporary of John the Seer, laments that Rome seeks after luxury rather than virtue.

For in proportion as courage, justice, and temperance increase among you, in that degree there will be less silver, and gold and furniture of ivory and of amber, less of crystal and citron and ebony and women's cosmetics and embroideries and dyes of many hues; in short, all the things which are now considered in your city precious and worth fighting for, you will need in smaller quantities, and when you have reached the summit of virtue, not at all. And the houses in which you live will be smaller and better, and you will not support so great a throng of idle and utterly useless slaves and – the most paradoxical thing of all – the more god-fearing and pious you become, the less frankincense and fragrant offerings and garlands there will be among you, and you will offer fewer sacrifices and at less expense, and the whole

multitude that is now being supported in your city will be much smaller (Perry: 485).

Seneca ironically asks whether nature had given the Romans stomachs that were more insatiable than the largest and most voracious of animals. He goes on to critique the luxury of Rome as “an extremely conspicuous and ostentatious exhibition of the spoils that have been taken from conquered and exploited nations” (Stam).

The price for this luxury was indeed paid for from the provinces. Trade, taxes, and conquest made the luxurious splendor of Rome possible. Richard Bauckham writes of Rome’s harlotry, “Rome is no ordinary harlot: she is a rich courtesan, whose expensive clothes and jewelry indicate the luxurious lifestyle she maintains at her lovers’ expense (347). He follows more ancient commentators such as Caesarius of Arles, who comments, “The harlot is the life of luxury that is lived by plunder and pleasures” (Weinrich: 282).

In the following verses John goes on to give an extensive list of the luxury goods that flow into Rome from its conquered peoples and provinces.

And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo anymore, cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves – and human lives (Revelation 18:11-13).

This condemnation is derived in form from that of Ezekiel’s prophecy against Tyre. The ordering of the list of goods in Ezekiel is based on their place of origin, whereas John’s list is ordered on the type of product (Stam). John uses six categories: precious stones and metals, luxurious cloths, expensive construction materials and decorations, spices and perfumes, foods, and animals and slaves. Numerous commentators have noted that this is a list of actual commercial goods that flowed into first and second century Rome.

Commentators have also noted that John mentions slaves last in his list of “goods.” But John adds a clarification that is significant; these are not only bodies, but the souls of men (*psychoi*). In this way John shows that bodies are not merely another commodity for sale in the ancient marketplace, but persons, whose lives count.

Bauckham provides an extensive commentary on each of the articles of merchandise mentioned, showing their point of origin, and the nature of each of the goods (352-63). He notes that gold, at the top of the list, shows the heart of Roman interest. He cites Eumolpus’ account of the insatiable desire for wealth and luxury which motivated Roman imperial expansion: “if there were . . . any land that promised a yield of yellow gold, that place was Rome’s enemy, fate stood ready for the sorrows of war, and the quest for wealth went on” (352).

Indeed this provides John with the charges in his devastating condemnation. He is outraged by the fact that the Romans luxuriate in goods derived from their oppressed subjects, and condemns the whole violent, imperial system that makes this possible. The military might of Rome subjugated provinces, whose wealth was forcibly stripped from them

and then sent to Rome for consumption by its gilded plutocracy. The religious system, military system, and economic system of Rome provided mutual support for one another. Its luxury was seen as the sign of success by the Romans, but of harlotry, oppression, and violence by John the Seer. John's ultimate cry to the faithful is thus:

Come out of her, my people,  
so that you do not take part in her sins,  
and so that you do not share in her plagues;  
for her sins are heaped high as heaven,  
and God has remembered her iniquities (Revelation 18:4-5).

For John it was impossible that Christians could participate in this idolatrous, violent, and gluttonous imperial system. The system was rigged and it was Satanic. Behind the harlot of Rome sat the beast, whose power, greed, and violence were apparent in every act of the whore of Babylon. Of course, by extension, Rome is not the only city that this passage critiques. Indeed, it critiques any empire throughout the ages that has enriched itself at the expense of their conquered or colonized peoples. John's critique is thus not only aimed at ancient Rome or ancient Babylon, but toward any and all self-aggrandizing human power centers.

South African theologian Allan Boesak sums up the character of the wealth of Rome:

. . . the wealth Rome is so proud of is not a sign of God's blessing on Rome's hard work, it is directly related to the oppressive military might and economic exploitation that are the hallmarks of that society . . . The wealth of Roma Mater was built on the continued exploitation of weaker nations, on the robbing of the colonies, and on slave labor . . . It was the power of the beast that made possible the wealth of Rome (110).

John's Revelation not only pronounces judgment on Babylon, but declares that he has actually seen the sentence carried out – "Fallen, fallen is Babylon." He does so at least two hundred years before the actual fall of Rome. He can claim that it is already fallen because Rome, for John, is a false reality. The Roman Empire had a wonderfully adept marketing department; it depicted scenes of glory through its public processions, showed great honor to its heroes in its statues, and bestowed divine blessing through its temples. Lest there be any doubt about the source of Rome's wealth, the face of the emperor was minted into every coin (Brook and Gwyther: 252). The ostentatious public display of luxury by the wealthy served as the capstone of their advertising program. "See: this is what Success looks like!" But John the Seer would have none of it. Though the Roman Empire in all its glitzy glory was viewed as the unrivaled power of its day, it was unreal. The world's real power was unseen by most, a heavenly throne, on which seated the most modest of creatures – a Lamb. And those who overcame Rome's seduction and persecution by remaining faithful to that Lamb would rule with him.

John sees. He is the seer who recognizes the lavish spectacle, the ephemeral scenery, and the demonic power of Rome. He knows that the Lamb has already conquered, and is now enthroned. John's call to Christians in that day, and in similar days, is to come out of any false, violent, and oppressive imperial system, and instead confide in the Lamb who truly

reigns. John is blind, however, to the possibility that luxury can be a sign of one's goodness, or of God's blessing. There is no indication that John believes the accumulation of wealth and luxury can be the result of honest work, or of justice, let alone the favor of God.

### Luxury for Joel Osteen

Another John, and his son Joel, however, interpret the presence of wealth and luxury in just that way – as signs of God's "favor and blessing." The John and Joel I refer to are John and Joel Osteen.

John Osteen founded Lakewood Church in Houston, TX. His son Joel has taken over the ministry and made it into the largest church in the U.S. Joel has numerous best-selling books including, *Your Best Life Now* (2004) and *Become a Better You* (2007). His television ministry reaches approximately 100 million homes in the U.S. and tens of millions more in 100 other nations. His weekly podcasts are regularly among the top five or six podcasts downloaded in the world.

It is not only Lakewood Church that is growing; Pentecostalism broadly conceived is the fastest growing part of Christianity. "The major strands of the renewal movement (classical Pentecostals, Charismatics, neo-Pentecostals) account for a quarter of the world's 2 billion Christians, second only to Roman Catholicism in number. These 'Spirit-filled,' communities represent the fastest growing branch of world Christianity" (Attanasi: 2). Joel Osteen is one among many preachers of the "Word of Faith," including Creflo Dollar, Kenneth Copeland, Joyce Meyer, and Bennie Hinn. All have international followings. By evaluating Joel Osteen's views on luxury and blessing, I also address the views of this global movement.

Joel Osteen posthumously published his father's work, *Your Words Hold a Miracle*. John Osteen describes God's Word as a weapon to be used against the world (101). Christians must agree with the Word, believe the Word, and confess the Word. Christians are saved in Christ, born again in Christ, made a new creation in Christ, delivered in Christ, redeemed in Christ, redeemed from the curse of the law in Christ, and then blessed in Christ (101-15). All this deliverance finally makes Christians "Overcomers in Christ" (122), who overcome evil men, the powers of Darkness, the circumstance of life, worldly attractions and satanic powers at the end of the age.

John Osteen believed that God desires to bless us, but that Satan often stands in the way of that blessing. When Christians declare the truth of God's Word, however, they overcome Satan's hindrances, just as Jesus showed power over demons. Osteen writes, "I boldly declare that whatever I do shall prosper. I confess what your word says. I am prospering – spiritually, physically, mentally and financially" (161). And, "I will prosper wherever I go" (162). Still further, "I will not talk of sickness and weakness and problems. I will talk as though You were with me, because you are with me. . . I am blessed of the Lord my God. . . I am living in prosperity and victory!" (163). To his credit, when speaking of the blessing of Abraham, he does say, "God is implying that we will not be blessed simply so we can live lavishly or self-indulgently. We will be blessed to be a blessing (177).

John Osteen believes the Word of God provides us with divine right to those blessings. He writes, "Don't give the enemy on thing God has given you. It does not belong to him.

You have a legal document. It is written in the Word of God. This legal document says abundant life is yours” (214). The Bible is thus seen as a contract. The believer has a claim to the benefits described in that contract, and may lay hold of them by speaking the Word of God in faith.

Joel Osteen follows his father’s system of beliefs in his preaching and his writings. He says that we must agree with God and to expect good things from him. We will then be surrounded by God’s favor.

Favor means “to assist, to provide with special advantages and to receive preferential treatment.” In other words God wants to make your life easier. He wants to assist you, to promote you, to give you advantages. He wants you to have preferential treatment. . . I’ve come to expect to be treated differently. I’ve learned to expect people to want to help me. . . He has crowned me with favor; therefore, I can expect preferential treatment. I can expect people to go out of their way to want to help me (2004: 38).

I must assume that Joel Osteen understands “luxury” in its current economic sense, as a high degree of favor and blessing.

Like his father, Joel Osteen believes that the power of the spoken word can enact the terms of the biblical contract.

If you will trust in Him and start speaking words of faith, your circumstances will begin to change . . . If you want success, if you want wisdom, if you want to be prosperous and healthy, you’re going to have to do more than meditate and believe; you must boldly declare words of faith and victory over yourself and your family (2004: 128, 132).

The belief that we will be prosperous is based on God’s promises. Joel writes, “God promises us good, and God keeps his promises. We may have trials and temptations, but these serve to purify us. He [God] wants every generation to be increasing in happiness, success, and significance” (2007: 3). And, “God has promised if we will put our trust in Him, He will pay us back for all the unfair things that have happened to us (2004: 132). “When you live an obedient life, God’s blessings will chase you down and overtake you” (2007: 313). “God’s plan for each of our lives is that we continually rise to new levels” (2007: 301).

Clearly, Joel Osteen has had a different life experience than John the Seer, or for that matter the Man of Sorrows, his mother Mary, Ruth, or the 12 Apostles, to mention but a few. In contrast to the call of Jesus, who calls each disciple to deny himself, take up his cross and follow him, Osteen’s disciples are called to a life of favor and blessing. Whereas Jesus’ disciples follow him onward to Golgotha, Osteen’s disciples follow him into perpetually preferential treatment.

Blessing and curse are an important theme for the Osteens. It is God’s will that we live under his blessing, and to do so we must get out from under the curse. Joel simply states, “Live under the blessing, not the curse” (2007: 87). If you live under the curse, Satan is exercising power over you. Thus exorcism and healing are appropriate treatments for overcoming the curse.



Given the tremendous reach of modern media, the teachings of the Prosperity Gospel are far better known today than are those of John the Seer. Today, 66-68% of Pentecostals in the U.S. believe that God grants believers prosperity and health. This percentage rises to the 90% range among Pentecostals in places such as Nigeria, South Africa, and the Philippines (Attanasi: 4).

In Ghana, for example, “Archbishop” Nicholas Duncan Williams<sup>4</sup> picks up on the theme of demonic interference as the principal cause of poverty. In much of the global south, it is well recognized that there is a spirit world, and that world includes not only the Trinity, angels and demons, but various spirits and powers who can and do interfere in human life. Williams and others believe that a lack of prosperity is likely due to the obstructive power of such invisible forces or curses. Much of Williams’ ministry is dedicated to overcoming the evil powers that keep his parishioners from prospering. He does, indeed, prosper, and lives in a home that is upscale by American standards and luxurious by Ghanaian standards.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, a Johanine passage is one of Williams’ most frequently cited texts “Dear Friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (3 John 1:2). For Williams, this generic ancient salutation serves as proof positive that God desires to bless us. For Williams, the absence of blessing is a likely indicator of a lack of faith. Williams does not celebrate Good Friday in his church, finding it too laden with pain and suffering.<sup>6</sup>

In its defense, the Prosperity Gospel recognizes that God is the Lord of all things created. It is certainly not a dualistic/Platonic belief that souls will one day be liberated from their bodies to enjoy peace in an ideal future world. Rather, the Prosperity Gospel believes that all of creation belongs to God, that God is good, and that God desires to prosper his people here and now.<sup>7</sup>

## **Conclusion**

What do I make of the contrast between John the Seer’s view of luxury, and the Prosperity Gospel’s view? They may well be different gospels. Or, more likely, the Prosperity Gospel is a heretical or truncated form of Christianity, which ignores significant parts of the confession, such as “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into Hell.”

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Williams has no formal theological training. Nonetheless, he promoted himself from Mr. to Rev. to Dr. to bishop and, finally, Archbishop.

<sup>5</sup> The story of Williams is told by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu.

<sup>6</sup> I should note that I did not find a single reference to Good Friday or the crucifixion in the writings of the Osteens either, though Lakewood Church’s belief statement provides an orthodox statement about the crucifixion.

<sup>7</sup> Compare this view which celebrates the benefits of capitalism with that of Liberation Theology, which strongly critiques the system. In my readings, the Osteens did not question any aspect of the capitalist system.

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas defines heresy as:

A species of infidelity in men who, having professed the faith of Christ, corrupt its dogmas. The right Christian faith consists in giving one's voluntary assent to Christ in all that truly belongs to His teaching. There are, therefore, two ways of deviating from Christianity: the one by refusing to believe in Christ Himself, which is the way of infidelity, common to Pagans and Jews; the other by restricting belief to certain points of Christ's doctrine selected and fashioned at pleasure, which is the way of heretics (I-II:11:1).

On this definition the Prosperity Gospel must be considered heresy. It clearly restricts itself to certain points of Christian doctrine, while ignoring or misrepresenting others. It omits the humiliation, crucifixion, and death of Christ. It ignores the continuing reality of sin in the world, as well as in the life of the believer.

I grant that the Bible shows that God loves his people, and that this love is for their whole beings, but only in a few instances in the Bible did God's love result in wealth and luxury for his children. Perhaps we have the irony of history here, i.e., that history is written about an infinitesimally small percentage of the world's population who were typically rich and powerful. The other 99% or more of the world's population has lived in obscurity, as subsistence farmers or herders. By pointing to figures such as Abraham or Solomon, the Prosperity preachers take these rare exceptions and make them the norm for all believers. Salvation is indeed the restoration of the whole person from sin and evil, but there is no guarantee in scripture that salvation is sealed with physical signs of "favor and blessing." Rather, it is implied and even guaranteed that Christians will have trouble and suffering in this lifetime because of their faith. Jesus says that men will revile us and hate us for his sake, throw us out of synagogues. Paul says that if it were for this life alone that we became Christians, we are much to be pitied.

The Osteens seem as oblivious to the possibility that blessing, favor, and luxury can be the result of arrogance, violence, and greed as John the Seer was to the possibility that luxury could be a sign of blessing. But since it is John the Seer who is the canonical biblical writer, I believe the prosperity preachers must adjust their doctrine to comport with John's, not the reverse. John the Seer sees luxury as a sign of an evil empire whose violence, idolatry, and rapaciousness threatened the very existence of the Church. Prosperity preachers would do well to ask whether they are building media empires, and churches<sup>8</sup> that placate and mesmerize the masses as did Babylon/Rome of old.

The outstanding question is: what actual effects does the Prosperity Gospel have on the world's poor? In fairness to Lakewood Church, they offer many ministries that seek to alleviate poverty. But my question is: what is the result of the Prosperity Gospel's teaching, not whether its proponents perform charitable works. This question must be answered by the observations of social scientists. I will briefly report on two of these observations.

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<sup>8</sup> Lakewood Church meets in the former Compaq Center, once the home of the NBA's Houston Suns.

In one study, a Prosperity Gospel church in Hollywood taught its member that when they seek a blessing they are fulfilling God's mission in the world, and tying their own identity and goals to that mission (Marti: 133-37). God, in effect, becomes the best investment that they can make, and it usually pays off. In such Pentecostal churches, a renewed sense of self and vocation does help new believers find prosperity.

On the other hand, as Ghanian Asamoah-Gyadu asks: what about the poor in the global south who remain poor, even after attending a prayer vigil or healing camp? I, too, wonder whether such people are now inured to the true gospel, centered on self-denial. If the Prosperity Gospel seems not to have "worked," will the poor now give up on a God who was preached as powerful and desirous of blessing them, only to find that nothing changed? In my own experience in the global south, it seemed that many people floated from congregation to congregation; leaving one for another when they did not find the solution or blessings they had sought. Many finally left all churches and gave up on Christian faith altogether. This is my fear for the Prosperity Gospel.

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