

MALONE UNIVERSITY

“READING QOHELETH AND SONG OF SONGS CANONICALLY: A NEW APPROACH”

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Among the many curiosities included within the pages of what we would call the Protestant canon is the placement of the “Solomonic Corpus,” the three poetical wisdom books that have been traditionally ascribed to Solomon. In particular, the placement of these texts becomes even more intriguing when one begins to understand the methodologies used by the early Christians who formed the canon, simply because the placement of two of these books, Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) and the Song of Songs (Canticles), do not fit the pattern. As we shall see, the arrangement of biblical books was broadly chronological in the telling of the story of salvation history, and so Solomonic books would follow immediately upon books generally ascribed to David (for instance, the Solomonic book of Proverbs follows upon Psalms). Within the subdivisions of authorship, one would also expect to see an arrangement based on the chronological events. As Qoheleth is traditionally understood to be the final writings of an elderly Solomon, it would make sense for this to be the final book to appear in his corpus. Likewise, one would expect the Song of Songs—typically understood by tradition to be the musings of a much younger Solomon—to appear before Qoheleth; however, neither of these is the case.

Why, then, has our biblical account of the Solomonic corpus been so arranged? Are there alternative arrangements in various Jewish codices, or in Bibles from other Christian traditions? Did the church Fathers have specific reasoning for placing these two books back-to-back in the canon, or were they simply following an already existing tradition? This paper will serve as an introduction to the thought that Qoheleth and Song of Solomon were placed in their respective positions based on a *thematic reading*. While both are clearly attributed to Solomon in Judaism and early Christianity, each book serves a specific function in advancing the “salvation-history” theme by which the arrangers of the canon were operating.

Before progressing further with such an argument, it is first necessary to make a few initial statements about what this research is and is not concerned with. First and foremost, it is not primarily concerned with modern understanding of redaction theory, except where necessary to bring clarification or advance an argument. I do not seek to discover who the actual author of either book is; on the contrary, the traditional ascription of Solomonic authorship has, in my opinion, determined where the books fell within the canon and how they are to be seen in such a light. This leads to another affirmation: this paper is not primarily concerned with the date or location of composition for either book. As we shall see, both books had come to be considered authoritative by the time of any real canonical grouping, whether Jewish or Christian, and modern scholarship seems to indicate that the determination of an accurate date for either book is a losing battle. Instead, I will primarily concern myself with an examination of the history of interpretation of both books. As such, the paper will focus on the interpretive methods of Judaism and early Christianity, namely, the allegorical approach, although we will also examine the related typological approach, as well as the view that Solomon was functioning in the literal office of prophet.

Let us then proceed with a discussion of these two biblical books. I have separated my research on each book to provide evidence that the conclusions drawn can come from viewing these books apart from one another, as well as in the canon. The discussion of each book will include a brief sketch of background information, particularly the best understanding of the book's composition and function by modern scholarship (which can include dating, inclusion into the Jewish canon, etc.). As Qoheleth appears first in the progression of our canon, let us then begin our study there.

Qoheleth has been a historically difficult book to date. Its Hebrew is clearly indicative of a later date; and yet, it leaves out specific mention of an afterlife, a theme that began to be especially present in later Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern wisdom. Therefore, no conclusions as to its placement before Song of Songs can be drawn from its dating. That is to say, we cannot conclusively state that Qoheleth comes first simply because it was written first, because we ultimately cannot say with certainty when it was written.

What we can say about Qoheleth with certainty is that it had very specific cultic functions. In Judaism, Qoheleth is part of the five *megillot* (“scrolls”), a series of five sacred books that are read aloud in correspondence with a holy day that each book is assigned. The five *megillot* are ordered in a way that “corresponds to the sequence of their use in the liturgy,”¹ meaning that although we see them often listed in a different order in various codices, their use was primarily based off of the dates of the holy days each book was tied to. For instance, the Song of Songs was read “on the eighth day of Passover, Ruth at the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), Lamentations on the ninth day of Ab (mourning the destruction of the Temple), Ecclesiastes at the Feast of Tabernacles, and Esther at Purim.”² However, as Thomas Krüger points out, “the inclusion of the book of Qoheleth in the five *Megillot* goes back to German manuscripts of the Middle Ages.”³ Evidence such as this does little to help us understand any sort of tradition that early Christian thinkers may have been following, since the Christian Bible had long been canonized by the time this liturgical Jewish use began. Krüger adds that “according to older Palestinian tradition, the third part of the OT canon was ordered this way: Chronicles, Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Qoheleth, Lamentations, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah. The

¹ Marvin H. Pope, *Song of Songs* (AB 7C; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977), 18.

² Pope, *Song of Songs*, 18.

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Thomas Krüger, *Qoheleth* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 27.

five *Megillot* already stand here side by side, though not yet in the chronological order of the festivals to which they are assigned as readings.”⁴ This ordering is reflected in later Hebrew codices (tenth and eleventh centuries) such as Aleppo and Leningrad.

If we can discern no clues as to the placement of Qoheleth based on cultic function, might there be other historical evidence that can show a possible tradition of interpretation? Krüger argues that “in addition to these (and other) ‘liturgical’ orderings, ancient Jewish and Christian witnesses also document ‘literary’ and ‘chronological’ arrangements in which, as a rule, the three ‘Solomonic’ writings Proverbs, Qoheleth, and Canticles are cited in this order.”⁵ This is significant for our study, because it shows that from an early date, these three books were placed in a sort of Solomonic corpus that was passed down as a whole. While “redactional additions connecting the three ‘Solomonic’ books cannot be demonstrated,” the juxtaposition of the three books in this specific order “produces some threads of meaning that span the whole corpus.”⁶

How, then, are we to read Qoheleth in the small canonical setting of the Solomonic corpus? According to Temper Longman III, Qoheleth should be seen as “a canonical corrective” to an over-reading of the wisdom of Proverbs.⁷ The argument here is that one can easily misread Proverbs as advocating a sort of prosperity theology in which “the godly wise prosper and the ungodly wicked diminish,” and Qoheleth serves to show how misunderstanding wisdom leads ultimately to folly.⁸ Krüger agrees, adding that “one reads the book of Qoheleth after the book of

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Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 27.

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Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 27.

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Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 27.

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Temper Longman III, “Reading Wisdom Canonically,” in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (ed. Craig G. Bartholomew et. al.; vol. 7 of *Scripture and Hermeneutics Series*; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 360.

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Proverbs as a critical reflection of the ‘wisdom’ developed there, just as Canticles is the realization of the exhortation to enjoy life in the book of Qoheleth.”⁹ As we shall come to see, such an understanding—that each book of the corpus builds off the last—will help to shape our final arguments here, but let us not get too far ahead of ourselves. Instead, let us now turn a keen eye toward the even more complex history of interpretation of the Song of Songs.

The common scholarly consensus on Song of Songs seems to be that it was not intended to hold any allegorical or metaphorical meaning (other than those of images evoked by word pictures), but that it simply stands as an example of Ancient Near Eastern love poetry. In light of such a conclusion, many scholars, among them J. Cheryl Exum, wonder how “a poem celebrating human love and desire, a text that contains no religious teaching and in which God is not mentioned, come to be included in a collection of sacred writings?”¹⁰ The fascinating thing to realize about the Song is that its placement in the canon was not simply a given. “As far as the Song of Songs is concerned, clearly it was not the case that, suddenly, Jewish communities everywhere agreed, at the same time, that the Song was a sacred text.”¹¹

Furthermore, “there is no certain information about the date of the admission of the Song into the [Jewish] canon.”¹² We can again conclude that there can be no definitive statement indicating the placement of Qoheleth and Song of Songs based solely on the date of composition.

Longman, “Reading Wisdom,” in *Canon* (ed. Bartholomew et. al.), 7:359-60.

⁹ Krüger, *Qoheleth*, 28.

¹⁰ J. Cheryl Exum, *Song of Songs: A Commentary*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005, 70.

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Exum, *Song of Songs*, 70.

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Duane Garrett & Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations* (WBC 23B; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 14. Pope also offers insight here: “The dating game as played with biblical books like Job and the Song of Songs, as well as with many of the Psalms, remains imprecise and the score is difficult to compute. There are grounds for both the oldest and youngest estimates.” However, he does add that “the Song of Songs has quite recently (1973) been assigned to the time of Solomon by a distinguished Hebraist, Professor Chaim Rabin of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.” See Pope, *Song of Songs*, 27.

However, Duane Garret and Paul R. House argue that there are two common statements made about this matter are wrong, the first of which is the belief "...that the Song was not admitted into the canon until very late, possibly as late as the first century CE."¹³ While Exum's earlier statement regarding the debate of the Song's status by rabbis at this time is true, this does not constitute proof "that the Song was not already long regarded as canonical."¹⁴ The second false belief is that the Song was granted canonical status because it had been allegorized to fit there. We will treat this subject later; for now, let us focus on the first statement, regarding the canonicity of the Song.

According to scholar Roland Murphy, "the first certain comments on the Song's canonicity in Jewish tradition appear in the Mishnah and reflect some continuing debate among first-century sages regarding the full scriptural status of this book as well as Ecclesiastes."¹⁵ This affirmation is not mutually exclusive to the one just made by Garrett and House. We already know that there was some debate, but the extent of such a debate is unclear. Murphy concludes that although our current resources do not allow us to determine how, or even exactly when, the Song entered the Jewish canon, it is safe to suppose that "its position was secured by 100 CE."¹⁶

In early CE writings such as *b. Baba Bathra*, the order of the ketubim includes the Solomonic corpus--Proverbs, Qoheleth, Song of Songs—in that order. Again, we see the

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Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 14-5. It should be noted here that there were in all likelihood multiple canons in Judaism and early Christianity (though the latter is more evident). The inclusion of apocryphal books into the LXX could be construed as evidence of a number of canons. Lee Martin MacDonald's *The Biblical Canon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) treats this issue extensively.

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Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 14-5.

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Roland E. Murphy, *The Song of Songs: A Commentary on the Book of Canticles or the Song of Songs* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 6.

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Murphy, *Commentary*, 6. Again, this statement has been somewhat generalized. There certainly was not (so far as we can tell) a cut-and-dry canon that emerged from this period, as outlying non-rabbinic Jewish groups more than likely formed their own canons. However, in the mainstream of rabbinical Judaism and for our purposes, the dating of the Song's admission will hold at around 100 CE.

tendency to group the works of a single traditional author together. “The Song is thus grouped with the two other books (Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) traditionally ascribed to Solomon.”¹⁷ This ordering of Solomonic books was not, however, static. As we shall see, various Hebrew manuscripts take differing orders of the corpus, and no one seems to be normative. For instance, Lee Martin McDonald calls into question the validity of the *Baba Bathra*, stating that it may not have had widespread approval by even 200 CE.¹⁸

At this stage, though, we must acknowledge that such an ordering, regardless of the extent of its popularity, had a profound effect on how all three books were interpreted, particularly the Song. Jewish interpretation of the Song can be seen clearly in the Targum on the Song. Composed in or after the sixth century but drawing on material from as early as 200 CE, the Targum interprets Song of Songs as “an outline of the history of Israel’s sin and redemption in five movements: the exodus, Sinai, and conquest; the temple of Solomon; Israel’s apostasy and exile; the return and the rebuilding of the temple; and the dispersion and messianic era.”¹⁹ By interpreting what is commonly viewed as a simple Hebrew love poem in such a metaphorical manner, Exum concludes that “...the targum is unusual, possibly unique, in offering a sustained systematic interpretation with an overarching structure.”²⁰ The Targum thus represents an interesting development in our argument: proof that the text has historically been read in an

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Murphy, *Commentary*, 6, note 17. Murphy adds this qualifier: “a subsequent comment in the section attributes the ‘writing’ of these works as well as the book of Isaiah to ‘Hezekiah and his colleagues.’ However, Pope attests that “the Talmud, some Spanish manuscripts, and the Massora indicate that the older order was Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, putting the putative Solomonic compositions together” See Pope, *Song of Songs*, 18.

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Lee Martin MacDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission, and Authority* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 165: “That this tradition is classified as a *baraita* from the Tannaitic period and did not find a place in the Mishnah suggests that the text had not yet received widespread approval by the closure and codification of the Mishnah around 200 C.E.”

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Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 61.

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Exum, *Song of Songs*, 74.

allegorical or otherwise metaphorical manner. While Exum may argue that the Targum stands alone in this regard, we will see that such a reading is not uncommon,²¹ especially in early Christianity. What we should know at this stage, though, is that the Song was seen as describing “the relationship between God and Israel, starting with the exodus and concluding with the messianic age.”²² As such, it tells the whole story of the history of salvation, a fact which will become important as we examine its place in the canon.

It is not known when the allegorical interpretation of the Song originated,²³ but we can nonetheless be sure that “the interpretive perplexity of the book is even reflected by its original placement in the Hebrew canon.”²⁴ As a member of the five *megillot*, the Song was “read at the first Jewish festival of the year, namely, Passover. The connection with Passover, however, is not accidental.”²⁵ As we know, the Targum interpreted the Song as a telling of the history of Israelite salvation, including the exodus. Passover, then, was an appropriate time for such a reading. By the time of the Septuagint (LXX), the Song came to be placed after Ecclesiastes, as we have seen in some instances to this point. The best dating we can give the Greek translation of the song is

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See J. Paul Tanner, “The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *BSac* 154 (1997): 26-7: “Traces of the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs are found as early as the Jewish Mishnah (*Taunith* 4.8). This approach was also followed in the Targum, the Midrash Rabbah, and by the medieval Jewish commentators Saadia, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra. The Targum on the Song interpreted the book as expressing the gracious love of God toward His people manifested in periods of Hebrew history from the Exodus until the coming of the Messiah (these historical periods were supposedly discernible in the Song of Songs).”

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Exum, *Song of Songs*, 74.

²³ Roland E. Murphy, “Patristic and Medieval Exegesis— Help or Hindrance?” *CBQ* 43 (1981): 506. Treating this subject, Murphy concludes: “Suffice it to say that the official Jewish interpretation of the Song came to be the allegorical, even if we are not able to be sure when this began.”

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Tanner, “History of Interpretation,” 24.

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Tanner, “History of Interpretation,” 24.

before or by 100 BCE.²⁶ According to both Pope and Tanner, such a placement in LXX has “influenced its place in modern translations.”²⁷

Returning, then, to the two false statements about the Song we explored earlier, we should now touch briefly on the modern scholarly belief about the order of canonization and allegorization. It now seems to be accepted that the Song was not canonized as a result of prior allegorizing, but vice versa. According to Garret, the logic of the allegorizers of the Song was simple:

1) the Song of Songs is in the canon; 2) canonical books are holy; 3) therefore, the Song of Songs is holy; 4) but the Song of Songs appears to be carnal; 5) therefore, we must find an interpretation for the Song that saves it from its apparent carnality and shows it to be spiritual. If the Song were not already Scripture, it is hard to imagine why anyone would allegorize it in the first place.”²⁸

It seems that because of the lack of older Jewish documents indicating an allegorical reading, scholars by and large refuse to believe that any sort of interpretive tradition could have developed before the Mishnah or Targum. Murphy writes that although “the classical Jewish interpretation of the Song came to be ‘allegorical’...we are unable to trace the roots of this interpretation with any certainty or even to be sure that it began in pre-Christian times.”²⁹

If, then, we are to believe that such a reading arose concurrently with Christianity, we must ask ourselves why such a reading arose at all. Were the Christians, in fact, the first to utilize such an approach? Let us treat the subject of the Song in Christianity, first as a part of its canon,

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Pope, *Song of Songs*, 20.

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Tanner, “History of Interpretation,” 24.

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Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 15.

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Murphy, *Commentary*, 14.

and then its interpretive history. Daniel J. Estes writes that “because the Song was included in the Jewish canon, Christians adopted it as part of the Old Testament...None of the Church Fathers argued that the Song was of doubtful status.”³⁰ With no argument as to the canonicity of the Song, we can see a much clearer picture of its representation in early canonical lists (before the first ecumenical councils established these firmly). The Song is first mentioned in Christian texts in the “so-called Bryennios list of canonical works, which has been dated to the end of the first century CE.”³¹ Even at this early stage, the Solomonic corpus is ordered Proverbs, Qoheleth, Song of Songs, but again, this list is by no means normative. Later lists of books, including the proposed canon of Augustine, use differing orders.

As for the Song’s interpretation in early Christianity, some of its earliest interpreters include Hippolytus of Rome (d. 235), Origen, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory the Great, and Augustine.³² Hippolytus of Rome is the author of the earliest extant Christian treatment of the Song. His work, written in Greek and transmitted also in other languages, is largely fragmentary, and according to Murphy, “there is little echo of him in later Christian tradition.”³³ However, other scholars view him as a profound influence on Origen, who authored perhaps the most famous treatment of the Song.

Hippolytus’ approach has a profound impact on our final conclusions here, because he focuses, like the Jewish interpreters, on salvation history, albeit through a decidedly different lens. While Jewish interpretation looked forward to the Messiah, Christian interpretation saw

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Daniel C. Fredericks & Daniel J. Estes, *Ecclesiastes & The Song of Songs* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Nottingham: Apollos, 2010), 269.

³¹ Murphy, *Commentary*, 14.

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Garrett and House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, 64.

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Murphy, “Exegesis,” 507.

Christ as the fulfillment, and the longing for a return as indicative of the second coming of Christ. Thus, for Hippolytus, “the Song is seen as a prophecy by Solomon of the end of the Old Covenant, as Israel is replaced by the Church. This interpretation reflects a hermeneutical principle of the NT and the early Church: the OT is applied in a transferred meaning; Israel becomes the Church.”³⁴

Such an interpretation is vital to understanding the rich tradition of Christian allegory: “it facilitated construction and maintenance of a Christian worldview, providing the intellectual mechanism to effect a synthesis between Old Testament witnesses to God’s providential love for humankind and what was confessed to be the preeminent display of that love in the Christ event. Already in Hippolytus’ treatment of the Song, soteriology is the dominant concern; allegory supplied a hermeneutical technique which enabled him to read the erotic lyrics attributed to Solomon as a prophetic vision of the love that united God and the church through Christ.”³⁵

What does this mean, then, for the interpreters of the next few centuries, who ultimately shaped the Christian canon? First, it marks the beginning of such a typological interpretation. While later interpreters like Origen clearly geared their understanding of the Song toward an individualized encounter between the human soul and God (and therefore not so much the Church and Christ), there is no evidence that such a reading was lost on these Fathers.

If we can see Solomon functioning in the role of a prophet, then the placement of the Song in the canon makes even more sense: it is the last book in the Protestant canon before the major prophets. As such, it represents a perfect transition to the major themes of the prophetic

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Murphy, “Exegesis,” 507.

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Murphy, *Commentary*, 16.

books. The prophets are filled with images that have been interpreted as direct references to Christ, as well as typological fulfillments—one thinks of the “prince of peace” passage in Isaiah, for instance. Song of Solomon, being seen as a prophecy or a typology, would fit right in with these books.

What, then, can we do with the placement of Qoheleth before the Song? As we will recall, traditionally Qoheleth is thought to be the musings of an elderly Solomon. Its decidedly downcast tone and pessimistic outlook place it as a harsh reminder of the “end of wisdom.” If we are to view the Song as “Solomonic prophecy of the end of the ‘old’ covenant and the beginning of the ‘new,’”³⁶ might we not see this reflected in the very placement of these two final Solomonic books? As we well know, the story of Israel’s monarchy was doomed from its beginnings. The united kingdom of Israel fell apart after Solomon’s reign, and his life is traditionally viewed in a tragic sense. Solomon drifted away from God, and Qoheleth is seen as a reflection of a life without YHWH. Might the thematic interpretation contained therein not be to say that Qoheleth, apart from simply representing the downfall of Solomon, also portrays the folly and downfall of the monarchy?

In the history of salvation, God clearly decides to begin a new way of revealing himself to his people with the prophets. The kings of Israel and Judah continually thumb their noses at God, and in return, the monarchy as an office is destroyed when the people are put into exile. The Song of Songs, then, represents Solomon functioning in the very office that would replace his own: the prophet, a foreshadowing of what is to come both in the actual history of Israel and in the history of interpretation of the canon. In such a case, Solomon’s life becomes the

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Murphy, *Commentary*, 15.

fulfillment of his own prophecy: he forsakes God, and his writings as Qoheleth reflect the folly of such a decision.

This new approach to reading Qoheleth and the Song of Songs canonically merits further discussion and research. If we are to hold to such a reading, we would be giving the Christian interpreters more credit than they historically have been given. While most scholars simply think that the placement of these two books in their context and order is a holdover from the LXX, this reading may show that in fact, the Fathers were more intentional than we have accounted for.

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