

CIRCUMCISION

“the sign of the Abrahamic promise”

Key question

What is the meaning and significance of circumcision?

Key text

Genesis 17:10-14

“This is...the covenant you are to keep.” Every male was to be circumcised, and this physical rite was to be “the sign of the covenant” with God, and it was “an everlasting covenant.”

Key Definition

Circumcision

Male **circumcision** was a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham and also became a sign of the Jewish people’s allegiance to the Law of Moses as an extension of the promise to Abraham.

Introduction.

1. Male **circumcision** is the removal of some or all of the foreskin (prepuce) from the penis. The word “circumcision” comes from Latin *circum* (meaning “around”) and *cadere* (meaning “to cut”).
2. Circumcision was practiced outside of Israel and before the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants were made.
3. Circumcision may have been a reminder to Abraham and his descendents that the promised son could not have been conceived in a natural way but that God had to superintend the conception so as to underscore the importance of faith.
4. What follows is an excellent study summary of circumcision by Michael Morrison. Additional studies on O.T. law can be found by Morrison on www.wcg.org/lit/law/SCT/index.htm

Circumcision:

A Test Case for Evaluating Old Testament Laws

Circumcision was an essential part of religious practice for the nation of Israel. Is circumcision a required practice for Christians today? This paper examines the biblical

evidence and explores the validity of arguments concerning old covenant customs.

Abraham

In the first biblical mention of circumcision, God made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. God said to Abram, "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless." God then explained his part of the covenant – he would be the God of Abraham's descendants and give them the land of Canaan (Genesis 17:1-8); God then further explained Abraham's part of the covenant (verses 10-14). "This is...the covenant you are to keep." Every male was to be circumcised, and this physical rite was to be "the sign of the covenant" with God, and it was "an everlasting covenant."

Every male in Abraham's household was to be circumcised immediately, and from then on every new baby boy was to be circumcised on the eighth day. Whether they were Hebrews or whether they were purchased as slaves, the men had to be circumcised. If they were not, they would be cut off; they had broken the covenant.

Abraham did what God told him to do (verses 23-27; 21:4). The practice of circumcision became the defining characteristic of the Abraham-Isaac-Jacob clan. Many years later, the sons of Jacob used this custom to get revenge on Shechem (Genesis 34:14-29). As they said, they could cohabit and intermarry only with people who were circumcised (verse 16).

Moses

The custom was probably continued when the Israelites lived in Goshen. But Moses, reared in the court of Pharaoh and later a refugee in Sinai, did not circumcise his own son. Zipporah had to do it (Exodus 4:24-25). Under the leadership of Moses, the entire nation of Israel did not circumcise their male infants in the wilderness. Joshua had to reinstitute it (Joshua 5:2-8).

It is not clear why these lapses under Moses occurred, but it *is* clear that the omission had to be corrected before the plan of God proceeded. God could call Moses even when he was a covenant-breaker, but his son had to be circumcised before Moses could do his job. Nor would God allow the Israelites to live in the promised land unless they were faithful to the covenant God had made with Abraham.

Since circumcision was already a requirement for the Israelites, it is natural that it was included within the old covenant laws (Leviticus 12:2-3). Also, people had to be circumcised to participate in the Passover (Exodus 12:44, 48).¹ Even gentiles had to be circumcised if they wanted to worship God by means of this festival.

However, circumcision was not merely a physical and external practice. It symbolized something internal. God described idolatry and disobedience as a result of an uncircumcised heart (Leviticus 26:41); he described repentance as a circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6). Of course, this spiritual meaning did not eliminate the need for the physical practice; the Israelites were to obey both the letter of the law and its symbolic meaning.

History and prophecy

The Israelites apparently faithfully continued the practice of circumcision. Even in the lawless period of the judges, the Israelites were distinguished from others by the fact that they were circumcised (Judges 14:3; 15:18; 1 Samuel 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Samuel 1:20; 1 Chronicles 10:4).

When Samson and David called the Philistines "uncircumcised," it was not a mere medical description – it was an ethnic, earthy insult. It was probably impolite then, just as it is impolite today, to make references someone's sexual organ. But this use of the term illustrates how definitive the practice of circumcision was for Israelite self-identity, and the depth of emotion involved in this ethnic tradition.

The prophets used the term "uncircumcised" as a synonym for gentiles (Isaiah 52:1). When Ezekiel predicted death for the ruler of Tyre and the Pharaoh of Egypt, he said they would die the death of the uncircumcised and be buried among the uncircumcised (Ezekiel 28:10; 31:18). This conveyed not only a gentile death, but a death in opposition to God; the connotation was that these rulers were ungodly. This was developed further in Ezekiel's lament for Pharaoh in Ezekiel 32. In verses 19-32, Pharaoh was said to have his fate with other uncircumcised soldiers who are now buried. Throughout, the implication is that they were all enemies of God.

Ezekiel criticized those who permitted uncircumcised people into the temple (Ezekiel 44:7). The prophets elaborated on the *spirit* of circumcision, too. Jeremiah exhorted his people, who presumably were already physically circumcised, to circumcise their hearts (Jeremiah 4:4). It was a metaphor for repentance. Indeed, God said he would punish both Israelites and gentiles who are circumcised in the flesh only and not in the heart (Jeremiah 9:25-26). Physical circumcision was not enough; spiritual circumcision was also necessary.

Isaiah emphasized the importance of circumcision in one of his prophecies of God's glorious rule. He predicted a time when only circumcised people would be allowed to enter the new city of Zion (Isaiah 52:1-2). In Isaiah's culture and time, that meant people who were physically circumcised. Isaiah may have also meant those who were circumcised in heart as well. This was part of his prophecy of redemption (verse 3) – when good tidings of salvation are preached and God rules (verse 7) when the Lord returns to Zion (verse 8) and reveals salvation throughout the world (verse 10). Ezekiel also prophesied that only people who were circumcised in both the flesh and the heart could worship properly (Ezekiel 44:9).

Controversy in the early church

The Law and the Prophets consistently upheld the need for circumcision, and the intertestamental period did, too. Circumcision was one of the Jewish customs forbidden by Antiochus Epiphanes (1 Maccabees 1:48). Hellenizers who tried to surgically reverse their circumcision were considered to have "abandoned the holy covenant" (verse 15).

Circumcision was so important to Jewish self-identity and worship that faithful Jews were willing to die rather than abandon this physical reminder that they were God's covenant people. The books of Maccabees record their eventual victory. Circumcision and other Jewish customs were enforced and were emphasized as religious obligations for Jewish people.

John the Baptist and Jesus were circumcised (Luke 1:59; 2:21). Jesus' only comment about circumcision was favorable: It was part of "the law of Moses," and the Jews were willing to circumcise children on the Sabbath. Since it was a religious rite, it could be done on the Sabbath (John 7:22-23), just as priests could "desecrate" the Sabbath to perform sacrifices (Matthew 12:5).

Stephen mentioned the covenant of circumcision that God had given Abraham

(Acts 7:8), but he criticized the Sanhedrin for having uncircumcised hearts and ears (verse 51). They were physically circumcised, but not obedient to what God had told them through Jesus. Physical circumcision should have been followed by a circumcision of the heart.

The biggest controversy about circumcision came when the gospel began going to gentiles. Circumcised believers (i.e., Jews) were astonished when the Holy Spirit was given to Cornelius (Acts 10:45). Circumcised believers criticized Peter for going to the house of an uncircumcised person and even eating with gentiles (Acts 11:2-3).

The problem surfaced again when more and more gentiles began responding to the gospel by believing in the Lord Jesus (verses 20-21). Later, some Jewish believers came to Antioch and taught that the gentiles had to be circumcised or else they could not be saved (Acts 15:1). They also said that the gentiles should obey the entire law of Moses (verse 5). In Antioch, this would not have included sacrifices (unless they were to travel to Jerusalem), but it would have included other Jewish customs traceable to the five books of Moses. By "circumcision," these messianic Jews meant full proselyte status, since circumcision implied all the other laws (Galatians 5:3).

Argument of the Judaizers

The Jerusalem conference concluded that circumcision was not required for gentile believers. They did not have to obey "the law of Moses." Today, we understand that circumcision is not required for gentiles, and we take it for granted. But perhaps we will better understand the significance of this decision if we try to argue the case *for* circumcision. Luke does not report the actual arguments used by the Judaizers, but they could have made a strong case:

"Circumcision goes back to God's eternal covenant with Abraham, in which God promised to be the God of his descendants. These gentiles are claiming Abraham as their spiritual father. He is the father of the faithful, and Genesis 17:12 tells us that *all* who are his descendants, whether physically or otherwise, fall under the covenant of circumcision. If they really have the faith that Abraham did, they will be willing to do what Abraham did. If they really have a covenant with the same God, they will gladly accept the sign of that covenant. The covenant was revealed as everlasting, not a temporary arrangement. It was commanded by God himself.

"God has called these people, and that is good. But just as our ancestor Israelites could not inherit the promises until they were circumcised, so also these gentiles cannot inherit the spiritual promises (salvation) unless they are circumcised. Until they are circumcised, they are strangers to the covenant of promise. We should not allow them to participate in the bread and wine with us until they are circumcised; even though they have believed in Jesus our Passover, they should not partake of the meal or receive the benefit of his sacrifice unless they are circumcised. There is solid scriptural precedent and support for this. The example of the ancient Israelites was written for our admonition.

"Circumcision is not only a physical command from God; it also has important spiritual symbolism. It pictures repentance, but this symbolism doesn't eliminate the need to obey God physically, too. In fact, if these people really were obedient to God, they would not want to spiritualize away God's command to be circumcised. Isaiah clearly said that when the good news of salvation is preached, only circumcised people

will be able to enter the daughter of Zion, which is the Church today. These gentiles are being grafted into Israel, and they therefore need to keep Israelite laws.

"What advantage is there in being circumcised? Much in every way! It is our nation that has the promises and covenants, and our Lord said that salvation is of the Jews. The only thing Jesus said about circumcision was positive. And he said that if something causes sin, we ought to cut it off. Circumcision helps us picture that important truth, but we lose its symbolic value if we abandon the practice. Circumcision has value if a person observes the law, and we certainly don't want to encourage these new converts to be lawbreakers. Our Messiah specifically said that he didn't come to do away with the law, and none of it would pass away. He fulfilled the symbolism of sacrifices, but that doesn't do away with our need to obey the plain and clear commands of God.

"God justifies people by faith, but the faith isn't genuine if these people aren't willing to obey clear commands of God in the God-breathed Scriptures that are able to make us wise for salvation. No one should rely on circumcision as a guarantee of salvation, of course, but neither should we reject it. Abraham believed first, and then he obeyed. That's what these gentiles need to do to be saved. Keeping God's commands is what counts."

Would we be able to answer such an argument without the writings of Paul? We'd have, of course, the conclusion of the Jerusalem conference, but then right after that we would read that Paul circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:3). Paul was accused of teaching against circumcision (Acts 21:21), but that was clearly a false accusation. From Genesis to Acts, the Scriptures are supportive of the rite of circumcision except for one chapter. Although Acts 15 gives us the overall conclusion that circumcision is not required for gentiles, it does not answer all the specific arguments that the Judaizers could have had.

However, Peter, Barnabas and Paul radically reinterpreted the law of circumcision by keeping the spiritual meaning but rejecting the physical rite. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they explained that Abraham received the promises by faith before circumcision; therefore the circumcision of the most-respected patriarch, although commanded as an everlasting covenant for his physical heirs and extended household, cannot be a requirement for salvation. Why? Because Peter, Barnabas and Paul saw a dramatic *discontinuity* between the old and the new. Even a ritual confirming the promises, a ritual given hundreds of years before Sinai, could simply be swept aside, as a requirement for salvation, by the new situation that Jesus had inaugurated.

Few among us would have been so bold.

Many Jewish Christians could have been deeply troubled by the conclusion that circumcision was simply not required. An ancient and culturally important religious law was rejected without even a hint that Jesus was against it in any way. Why was this necessary? Let us now see what Paul later wrote, and understand his rationale for the discontinuity between old and new.

Circumcised in and by Jesus Christ

"Circumcision has value if you observe the law," Paul writes (Romans 2:25), but he does not explain what that value is. After all, if a person observes the law he is counted as circumcised (i.e., in Abraham's covenant) whether or not he is actually circumcised

(verse 26). A gentile who obeys is better than a Jew who disobeys (verse 27); mere circumcision cannot guarantee salvation. If a person is Jewish only externally, in physical circumcision, but not in the heart, such a person is not one of God's people, since real circumcision is not "merely" physical (verse 28). Paul's comments so far would be agreeable to a messianic Judaizer who advocated that both physical and spiritual circumcision were necessary. But Paul's next comment would be too sweeping: A man is one of God's people if he is inwardly circumcised, since the real circumcision is a spiritual matter, of the heart, "not by the written code" (verse 29).

But what value is there in being circumcised? Or, in synonymous terms, what advantage is there in being a Jew? Much, replies Paul (Romans 3:1-2). He does not extol any health benefits, but he mentions that circumcised people have in their community the words of God (verse 3). That is a great value, but it is all for naught if they do not obey — and that brings Paul to the crux of the problem.

There is none righteous, no not one. No one keeps the law perfectly; we all fall short. How then can we be saved? By faith. "There is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (verse 30). Justification by faith is the central reason that the physical rite of circumcision is no longer necessary.

Paul examines the example of Abraham again, and notes that Abraham was accounted righteous even while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-10). Even though he later received a physical sign or seal of his righteousness, his righteous status before God did not depend on circumcision (verse 11). He is the father of all who faithfully live as he did before he was circumcised (verse 12) — and that was an exemplary faith, since Abraham packed up and moved without knowing where he was going.

To the Corinthians, Paul made it clear that if a person was called while uncircumcised, he should not attempt to change his anatomy (1 Corinthians 7:18). And his reason is surprising: "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts" (verse 19). The surprise is that circumcision *had been* one of God's commands, and yet it doesn't count. The law of circumcision was a religious rite that had nothing to do with our moral responsibilities to our neighbors.

Paul explained circumcision in greatest detail in his letter to the Galatians. They were being misled by a Judaizing heresy that demanded that gentile believers follow up their faith with physical compliance with old covenant commands. But Paul explained that it is wrong to view physical circumcision as *necessary* because that would imply that faith in Christ was not enough. "If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all" (Galatians 5:2).

Paul himself did not forbid circumcision; we have already noted that he circumcised Timothy, whose mother was Jewish. But he explains that Titus, a gentile, was not circumcised (Galatians 2:3). It was not a requirement for salvation, nor a requirement for leadership within the Church. Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it should not be taught as a requirement. It does not enhance anyone's standing before God. It should not be done as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the issue in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

Circumcision was only the beginning of the messianic Judaizers' demands. What they were really insisting on was the whole law of Moses as a requirement (Galatians

5:3). They were insisting on the Mosaic covenant. Faith in Christ is great, they probably said, but we have to add to our faith some works as specified by the authoritative writings of Moses. Not so, said Paul. "In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (verse 6).

Paul had to state that he was *not* preaching circumcision (verse 11). Why was this necessary? Probably because the messianic Judaizers were making the claim that Paul was actually in favor of circumcision. Like other Jewish preachers seeking proselytes, Paul taught morals and virtues. Once people had accepted the morals, the Judaizers claimed, Paul would add circumcision as the capstone requirement. Not so, said Paul. He was not going to add requirements to what he had already taught the Galatian believers. He was so vehement about the Judaistic agitators that he exclaimed, "I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (verse 12). Moreover, if the Galatians submitted to this work of the law, as if it were required, they could not be saved (verse 2)!

The Judaizers, he said, had selfish motives. They wanted to look good by bringing in converts for messianic Judaism, and they didn't want to be criticized by fellow Jews regarding the shameful death of Jesus (Galatians 6:12). They talked about obedience, but they themselves were sinning and in need of the cross they were ashamed of (verse 13). Circumcision is obsolete, Paul said, since it has been replaced by the cross of Christ and all that the cross symbolizes (verse 14). Through faith in our Savior's death on our behalf, we are acceptable to God on the basis of faith, and we do not need a physical sign of the covenant we have in Jesus' blood.

"Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (verse 15). If we are born anew in Christ, if we have faith that works itself out in love, then we are acceptable to God. We do not have to observe this ancient rite in order to be saved.

Because the gentiles were uncircumcised, they were once considered excluded from the covenants of promise and cut off from God. But now, through the blood of Christ, they have been brought near to God (Ephesians 2:11-13). In Jesus' own flesh, by his own obedience to old covenant rules, he has abolished the commandments and regulations that had separated Jews from gentiles (verse 14-15). He gave all ethnic groups access to God and made them fellow citizens with each other; it is in Christ that we are being built together as a spiritual temple for God (verse 19-22).

Paul also warned the Philippians about the circumcision advocates. "Watch out for those dogs," he said, using Jewish slang for gentiles in reference to the Judaizers (Philippians 3:2). They are evil men, "mutilators of the flesh" – a Greek view of the rite of circumcision. But the Spirit wars against the flesh; Paul emphasizes that the physical rite, at least to the Greek mind, takes away from its spiritual meaning. It is *believers* who are the true circumcision – all "who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh" (verse 3). Paul himself was circumcised (verse 5), but he counted it as loss for the sake of Christ (verse 7-8). His righteousness did not come from the law, but from faith in Christ (verse 9). Justification by faith has rendered the rite of circumcision obsolete. The principle of salvation by faith, which Abraham received before his circumcision, gave Paul the logical foundation for saying that obedience to a clear command of Scripture was not necessary for salvation. A

physical requirement cannot supersede a promise of God given through faith.

Paul told his gentile converts in Colosse that they were circumcised in Christ (Colossians 2:11). Since he is our righteousness, and we are in him, we have been given fullness in him (verse 10). We can be accounted righteous because he himself is righteous. Therefore we are as good as circumcised if we are putting off our sinful nature – if we have repented and have begun to live holy lives. Our circumcision is therefore not done by humans, but by Christ himself. How so? Through baptism (verse 12). That is how we express publicly that we have faith in Jesus as our Savior, that our old life is ended, that we – now circumcised in the heart – intend to live from then on in his service and that we have faith that we will live again with him.

When we were separated from God in our sinful nature, we were spiritually uncircumcised. But God has now made us alive again with Christ (verse 13). He forgave our sins, canceling our spiritual debts (incurred through transgressing the written code that was against us), including the regulations that concerned the symbolic forgiveness of sins (verse 14). He likewise canceled the regulation of circumcision, which symbolized repentance and sanctification. Since the fullness of those regulations has come, the symbol is no longer required. Christ has given us the fulfillment.

The eternal validity of God's law

The conclusion is clear: Physical circumcision, which was once commanded by God, is no longer required. How can this be? God, the perfect and unchangeable Lawgiver, changed a fundamental aspect of his law – not only circumcision, but also sacrifices and temples and priesthoods. The infallible Scriptures contain commands that are obsolete.

But didn't Jesus say, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Matthew 5:17-18).

Jesus was talking about the entire Old Testament – the Law and the Prophets. So how can his statement be reconciled with the fact that some commands of the Old Testament are not required today? Perhaps the best approach to explain this is to understand that the laws are valid in their intent, but changed in their application. Laws regarding sacrifice continue to be valid, but we actually obey them through faith in Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for us. The law required sacrifice, and Jesus confirmed its validity at the same times as he made it unnecessary for us to perform it.²

When God commanded animal sacrifices, he commanded an administration of the law that was perfectly appropriate to the times. When David said that God did not want animals (Psalm 51:16), that was also a perfectly appropriate administration of the law of sacrifice, because David was inspired to understand that contrition was the real command (verse 17). When Christ sacrificed himself, he rendered all animal sacrifices unnecessary (Hebrews 10:8-10). The administration of the law shifted to faith in the efficacy of Jesus to atone for our sinfulness. When we have faith in him, we are effectively obeying the laws regarding sacrifice.

Likewise, we are obeying the law of circumcision when our attitudes are circumcised. The real law – allegiance to God – is eternally valid; the physical

administration of it has changed. We live in a different age, needing a different administration.

God's law is to be written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. This does not mean the physical details regulating specifics of worship practices, but it means the intent behind those regulations, especially faith and love and other fruits of the Spirit.

God's law did not originate with Moses – since sin existed before Moses and sin does not exist without law, law existed before Moses (Romans 5:12-14). God's law existed, and the people transgressed it. God's law does not depend on its Mosaic administration. There is a law *behind* the law of Moses. The Mosaic administration was a valid expression of God's holy, spiritual, righteous law, and it was perfectly appropriate for its situation, but it is not appropriate after the death of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, to impose or to attempt to combine the Mosaic administration into Christian faith and practice can cause many problems. New wine makes old wineskins burst (Matthew 9:17). The old covenant is obsolete. However, many of the Mosaic rules, especially those concerning the way we should treat other people, are still valid applications of the spiritual purpose. Jesus explained them in the Sermon on the Mount, for example.³ But many other laws of Moses, especially those concerning worship, are not valid practices because we have been given the spiritual fulfillment that those rites only symbolized. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for paying too much attention to those rules and not enough on human relationships (e.g., Matthew 23; Mark 7:11-13).

In summary, laws can remain on the books, and remain valid in purpose, and yet we may no longer be required to keep them in the letter. A simple citation of Matthew 5:17 does not automatically prove that an Old Testament law must be administered in the way it was under Moses. The law of circumcision illustrates the new covenant approach to old covenant laws.

Endnotes

1 Since the Israelites did not practice circumcision in the wilderness (Joshua 5:5), and uncircumcised people could not partake of the Passover, only the generations that left Egypt kept the Passover. There may not have been enough lambs in the desert to keep an annual slaughter for the whole congregation (Numbers 11:13).

2 " 'The law' was a comprehensive term for the total divine revelation of the Old Testament. None of it will pass away or be discarded, he says, not a single letter or part of a letter, until it has all been fulfilled.... The law is as enduring as the universe....

" 'The law and the prophets,' namely the Old Testament, contain various kinds of teaching. The relation of Jesus Christ to these differs, but the word 'fulfillment' covers them all.... Jesus 'fulfilled' it all in the sense of bringing it to completion by his person, his teaching and his work....

"The whole ceremonial system of the Old Testament, both priesthood and sacrifice, found its perfect fulfillment. Then the ceremonies ceased. Yet, as Calvin rightly comments, 'It was only the use of them that was abolished, for their meaning was more fully confirmed.' They were but a 'shadow' of what was to come; the 'substance' belonged to Christ" (John R.W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7): Christian Counter-Culture*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1978, 1985, pages 71, 73).

3 "The Old Testament contains ethical precepts, or the moral law of God.... Jesus fulfilled them in the first instance by obeying them.... He does more than obey them himself; he explains what obedience will involve for his disciples. He rejects the superficial interpretation of the law given by the scribes; he himself supplies the true interpretation. His purpose is not to change the law, still less to annul it, but 'to reveal the full depth of meaning that it was intended to hold.'...

"Christian righteousness is greater than pharisaic righteousness because it is deeper, being a righteousness of the heart.... The scribes and Pharisees...were trying to reduce the challenge of the law, to `relax' the [ethical] commandments of God, and so make his moral demands more manageable and less exacting.... They made the law's demands less demanding and the law's permissions more permissive. [They did this for laws about interpersonal conduct, but they had the opposite approach regarding the Sabbath!] What Jesus did was to reverse both tendencies. He insisted instead that the full implications of God's commandments must be accepted without imposing any artificial limits" (Stott, pages 72, 75, 79).

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