

Study 17: Acts chapter 12

Introduction

Luke is preparing to close the recorded ministry of Peter, and with the death of Herod he brings to a close the description of “the ministry in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria” in this chapter before he moves on to describe the ministry “to the rest of the world”.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Content: *What are the major events?*

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Body of the Study

Who was Herod (since there was a large family of them, which one)?

Why might Herod have attacked the leaders of the church?

What was notable about the death of James?

What happened to Peter, and why?

What was the church doing whilst Peter was in prison?

How was Peter released from prison?

What does vs 15, “It is his angel” mean?

How do the people react to Peter’s appearance?

How did Herod react to Peter’s disappearance?

Herod in Caesarea

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How did Herod die?

Barnabas and Saul return

Further discussion on the date:

Homework:

Read the notes as a review of the study.

- *Why did God strike down Herod at the festival at Caesarea, when he had not taken action for killing James and preparing to kill Peter?*
- *What were the Jews (with Herod’s help) trying to do to the church, and what was the outcome?*
- *What other king (in the Old Testament) received a similar fate to that of Herod, and for similar reasons?*

Read the outline for all of the studies in preparation for next week.(review of Acts part 1)

Notes for study 17: Acts chapter 12

Introduction

Luke is preparing to close the recorded ministry of Peter, and with the death of Herod he brings to a close the description of “the ministry in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria” in this chapter before he moves on to describe the ministry “to the rest of the world”.

Timing: *When did these events occur?*

Herod’s death occurred in AD 44, and is recorded in this chapter. Luke has already moved along in his narrative towards this time, and so the chapter is placed early AD 44 leading up to Herod’s death.

Content: *What are the major events?*

James is killed, Peter is imprisoned, Peter freed by an angel – then appears at Mary’s house. Herod is killed for not giving glory to God.

Cast: *Who are the major players?*

Herod, James (the brother of John) Peter, Mary.

Body of the Study

Who was Herod (since there was a large family of them, which one)?

The Herod that Luke refers to here is Herod Agrippa 1st, who was a grandson of Herod the Great, and the son of Aristobulus and Bernice. He was a brother of Herodius who asked for the head of John the Baptist, and was born around AD 10. This is the only place he appears in the New Testament. The whole family of Herod’s were cruel and brutal.

Herod the Great became suspicious that his son Aristobulus was plotting to overthrow him, and he had Aristobulus beheaded when Agrippa 1st was 10 years old. Agrippa was then sent to Rome where he was educated and became close friends with Gaius who was to become the Emperor Caligula. When Caligula eventually became Emperor in AD 37, he lavished Herod Agrippa with honours and gave him tetrarchies, and conferred him with the title King.

When Caligula determined to have a statue of himself erected in the Temple (as previously noted on p 87), Herod Agrippa used all of his influence with Caligula to deter him away from implementing it.

Herod Agrippa’s Kingdom was increased by Claudius when he became Emperor in AD 41, which made Herod effectively an independent sovereign over lands that included Judea and Samaria. On his arrival in Judea, he presented himself to the Jewish people as a devout worshipper, with characteristics that would resemble the Pharisees. As such, he gained much favour with the Jewish people.

The following quote applies mostly to Herod the Great, but provides considerable background on the family traits of the Herod family. The actions of Herod Agrippa I (the grandson of Herod the Great, described in Acts 12) are consistent with these characteristics.

Herod [HAIR-uhd]. The family name of several rulers mentioned in the Gospels and Acts. Four generations of Herods were involved in the government of Palestine.

Herod the Great The Idumean king of Judea, 37-4 B.C., who beautified the Jerusalem Temple, and ordered boy children in the Bethlehem area killed in an effort to destroy Jesus. **Father:** Antipater. **Scripture:** Mt 2; Lk 1:5

BACKGROUND

Herod became governor of Galilee in 47 BC, at the age of 25. By ingratiating himself to the Roman rulers, through a series of bloody civil wars, and murdering rivals, Herod achieved kingship in 37 BC.

The first dozen years of Herod’s rule were dedicated to consolidating his power. These years too were marked by bloodshed, including the execution of his favourite wife, Mariamne I, and all her male relatives. At the end of this period, no rivals of this cruel, paranoid ruler remained.

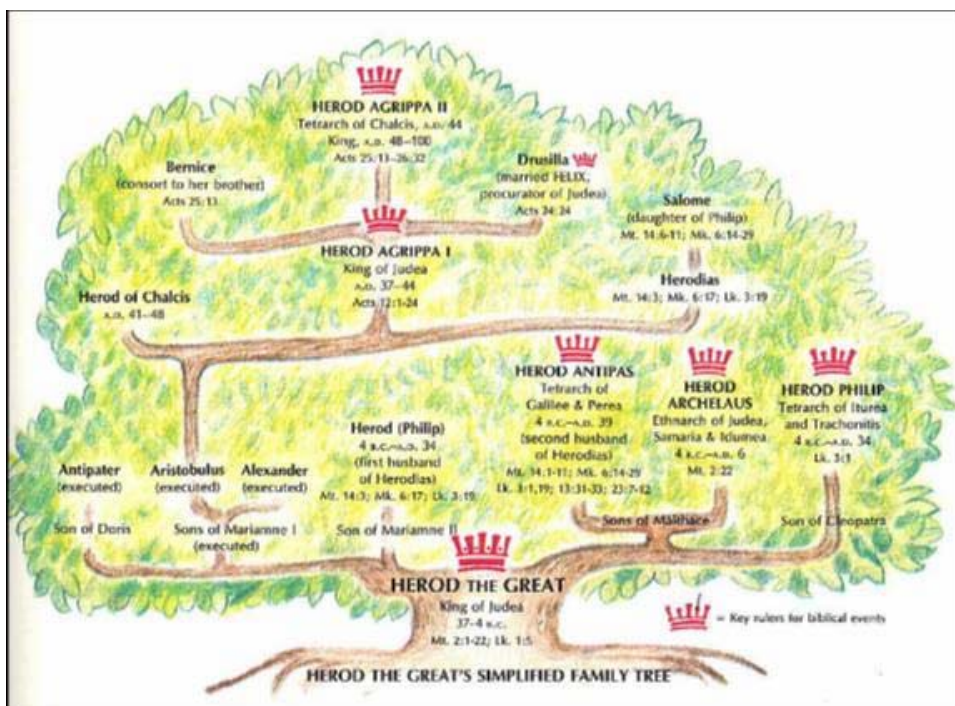
The years 25-14 BC saw unmatched prosperity in Judea. Herod undertook great building projects. He constructed Caesarea Maritima, a retreat at Masada, and most importantly, began his project to enlarge and beautify the Jerusalem Temple.

Family troubles dominated the years 14-4 BC. Rumours of plots by his various wives and their children led Herod to execute many of his sons, including his two favourites born to Mariamne I. Hostile, impulsive, dominated by morbid fears, the evil Herod lived out his last years hated by family and people alike. While dying from his last illness, Herod ordered the execution of boy children in the vicinity of Bethlehem in a futile effort to destroy one he was told had been born King of the Jews. However, Joseph, warned in a dream, had taken Mary and the young Jesus to Egypt (Mt 2).

Just five days before Herod died, he executed another son, Antipater, whom he earlier had designated as his heir. As the end drew near, Herod ordered prominent Jews from every part of the nation to appear in Jerusalem. When they arrived, he had them imprisoned, and left orders that they be killed the moment he died. Herod knew that only in this way could he ensure national mourning rather than joy.

LEARNING FROM HEROD’S LIFE

The Bible makes no observation about Herod. None is needed. Herod stands in stark contrast to the other King presented in Matthew’s Gospel – Jesus, the servant King. Herod dedicated his life to gaining power but found no peace. He gained not love but hatred and fear. Today, Herod is only a footnote in history, while Jesus, who gave life rather than took it, is known, loved, and worshipped.



Applied Bible Dictionary, Kingsway Publications, ISBN 0-86065-846-5 p. 482, 483

Why might Herod have attacked the leaders of the church?

Herod Agrippa's arrival in Jerusalem in AD 41 would undoubtedly have been in the middle of the "religious battle" that was still going on between the Jews and the Christians. Herod was in a position to "do the Jews a favour" by ridding them of the troublesome leaders of the "new sect", and by doing so he would achieve his aim of aligning himself with the Jews.

Whilst there had been some peace, we need to remember that this was not long after the Gentiles had become Christians. From the Jews' perspective (and at this time probably also that of many of the disciples), it was a prerequisite that people became Jews before they could become Christians. The "new sect" was admitting Gentiles, which would have greatly riled the Jews, and stirred up new vigour against the Christians.

The wording of the text supports the above conclusions – "...Herod tried to harass some of the church..." (12:1) "...And because he saw that it pleased the Jews, he also seized Peter..." (12:3). When Stephen was tried before the Sanhedrin for blasphemy and heresy, the sentence was death by *stoning*. The execution of James was done *with the sword*, which in similar circumstances to that of John the Baptist, was a civil pronouncement of punishment.

What was notable about the death of James?

Several years (8) had passed since the death of Stephen, and there had been a time of relative peace since the dispersion and the conversion of Saul. Most notable about the death of James is that he was the first of the apostles to die – and the only one for which there is a record in scripture.

There are three James' mentioned in the New Testament: James the son of Alphaeus, James the Lord's brother (although not one of the 12), and James the brother of John – and hence the son of Zebedee. James and John were two of the "chief apostles" (along with Peter). They had asked Jesus that one could sit on Jesus' right hand, and one on His left in paradise (Lk 5). Jesus' reply is that they indeed would suffer in such a way as He would suffer, but their request was not His to give. The James that is spoken about is the brother of John. He was the first of the apostles to die, and John was the last (around 100 AD at Ephesus).

Of particular note, is the way in which Luke describes the event. For such a great and prominent leader, and a prominent one in the church in Jerusalem, we might expect a great deal to be written about his death and its circumstances, and in particular the grief it brought to the church in Jerusalem. Yet Luke writes scarcely a dozen words about it – an explanation which strongly attests to his inspiration, with supernatural restraints upon the natural urges that he might have!

What happened to Peter, and why?

Peter was put into prison and guarded by four squads of soldiers – each of four men. These 16 soldiers would guard the prisoner around the clock. Two of them would be within the prison cell and chained to Peter, and two of them would be outside the prison door.

This is the third time that Peter has been in prison (c/f 4:3; 5:18). On the last occasion, the circumstances of Peter's release would have appeared (at best) *mysterious*, and severe efforts had been made to ensure that he did not escape again this time.

Peter was held in prison because it was close to Passover time. Herod's intention was to deal with Peter in probably the same manner as James, but not until the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread had passed. A public trial and execution would bring much rejoicing from the Jewish people, and do much good to Herod's reputation.

The translators of the KJV used the word *Easter* to describe this time – the only occasion (in most translations) that the word is used in scripture. The Greek word is *pascha* and in every other occurrence in the NT the same Greek word is translated *Passover*, and such should be the case on this occasion. The translators of the KJV (in 1611) allowed their theology to influence their work, and they introduced a word (*Easter*) into the translation that was based on the established practice of tradition at the time. There is no precedent in scripture for the

practice of “Easter”, and the text in this place clearly demands that it was the Jewish Passover that Herod had in mind. Remember that Herod wanted to appease the Jews, and having Peter executed during the Jewish feast would upset them rather than appease them!

What was the church doing whilst Peter was in prison?

The church was gathered together, and they were praying for Peter *fervently* – both intently and continuously. The venue where they were meeting must have been known to Peter (since he later found his way there), which suggests that the home of Mary might have been a regular meeting place for the church.

Peter was about to be executed the next day (12:6), and yet he was able to sleep peaceably. He knew his state with God, and the transforming power of Jesus’ resurrection and was prepared to face death. Whilst it meant the end of this life, it also meant that he would go to be with the Lord. Peter was calm in the face of whatever tomorrow was to bring – even death.

Peter was well aware of the fate that lay before him on the next day, since he says “...*Now I know for certain that God has ... delivered me from Herod and from the hands of the Jewish people...*” (12:11).

How was Peter released from prison?

Suddenly an angel just *appeared* and materialised in the room, and filled the prison with light. The angel awakened Peter, released him from his chains, and then told him to get dressed. Peter followed the angel out of the prison, past the first and second doors (and past the second lot of soldiers). The iron gate that led into the city opened by itself, and Peter was led into the street of the city before the angel departed.

Peter was not sure whether this was just a vision, or whether it was real, until he reached the street. Then he realised that this was real – “...*now I know for certain that God has sent His angel...*” (12:11 NKJV).

Peter *considered* the situation (ASV). Peter has to weigh up the circumstances and determine what to do. This is an interesting account, because here we have an apostle in a situation where God has directed his steps (of which there is absolutely no doubt), and yet he has to figure out what to do next! The revelation of God on this occasion (as on others) was only sufficient to guide him towards the conclusion that God wanted. We will see other examples of this in our studies.

Peter came to the house of Mary, who was the mother of John Mark (the author of the second gospel), and the aunt of Barnabas (Col 4:10). Prayer was continuing (as previously discussed), and Peter’s decision to go in that direction would suggest that this was a regular place where the brethren met – or perhaps it was a place close at hand where he knew he would be welcome.

Later, Luke tells us about Saul & Barnabas’ return from Jerusalem to Antioch, and it may be that they were both present in Jerusalem at the time that Peter appeared out of prison (although Paul did not see Peter at this time, since he does not refer to this trip to Jerusalem in his discussion in Galatians). The surprise arrival of a visitor (Peter) at the door may have caused the Christians to think the authorities had come to arrest them and carry them away to also be put to death.

Peter must have been a frequent visitor at this house, as the young servant girl Rhoda knew his voice. In her surprise, she forgot to let Peter in, but ran into the house with the good news of his (obvious) release. Peter continued knocking at the door, and was eventually admitted.

What does vs 15, “It is his angel” mean?

Many have concluded (largely from this passage) that there is a *guardian angel* that watches over each of us, and that the appearance at the door was Peter’s guardian angel. It may have appeared to tell some news about Peter, and have taken on Peter’s appearance and voice.

However, the word angel (Gk *angelos*) means *messenger*. Sometimes the messenger is a heavenly messenger (like the one who had appeared to Peter in the prison only a few minutes earlier), and sometimes it is just a messenger from one person to another. The context will determine whether it is a heavenly messenger, or an earthly messenger (and where the context does not allow this determination, then it is not important for us to know).

When Rhoda answered to door, she saw Peter. When she passed on the message to those inside, they said “...*don't be silly (he's in prison!) It must be his messenger...*”. (My paraphrase of 12:15)

How do the people react to Peter's appearance?

When the brethren “...*saw him, they were astonished...*” (12:16 NKJV) This perhaps gives some insight into what they were praying for. If they had been praying for Peter's release, then why would they be surprised at his appearance?

However, if they were praying for his spiritual welfare in the face of the trial that he was to endure, then the surprise at his release is understandable. We must also remember that this is the middle of the night, and loud noises coming from the house might bring the authorities and end up with Peter going right back to jail (and probably others with him).

Peter tells those gathered together to tell the news to James (the son of Alphaeus, since James the son of Zebedee had recently been put to death), and to the brethren. Although it is also possible that the James spoken of is James the Lord's brother. It is evident that not all of the church was gathered here, since those who were gathered were to go and tell the others...

Peter made a fast exit out of the city, as his escape would be noticed at the change of guard at daybreak. We do not know where he went, nor when he returned – but he was present in Jerusalem for the meeting between Paul and the rest of the apostles in chapter 15 (about 7 years later).

How did Herod react to Peter's disappearance?

The soldiers were perplexed. How could this be? How did he get out of the chains without *either* of the soldiers chained to him knowing it? How did he get out of the cell through the locked door? How did this happen without *either* of the soldiers guarding the door being aware of it? How did he get out of the prison through the iron gate into the city?

“...*there was no small disturbance... as to what might have become of him...*” (12:18). This is even more emphatic as far as the soldiers were concerned, since the Roman soldiers were charged with the same penalty that the escaped prisoner would have received (in this case, the death sentence). No wonder they looked everywhere for him!

Herod authorised a search party to go and find him, but he was no where to be found. He then put the guards on trial, as to why they had allowed the prisoner to escape.

McGarvey makes some interesting comments on such an examination:

When those standing in front of the gate were examined, we can see that the only answer they could give was, “We kept our post all night; we remained wide awake, and no one passed in or out of that gate!” When the man who kept the key of the iron gate was called, he truthfully said that it had not been out of his hand nor had it been placed in the lock. The two guards between the outer door and Peter's cell were positive that no one had passed by them during the night. And the two to whom Peter had been chained could only say, “When we went to sleep he was here with the chains all secure, and when we awoke he was gone, and that is all we know.” Of course, none of these statements could be true unless a stupendous miracle had been wrought; and there was absolutely no alternative, but to admit the miracle, or to hold that all of the soldiers had conspired together to voluntarily release the prisoner. The last horn of the dilemma could not be accepted by any sane man, seeing that the soldiers knew perfectly well that their lives would pay the forfeit of such a release. It seems, then, impossible to believe that Herod doubted the reality of the miracle, or

the truthfulness of the soldiers; but he was determined not to admit the miracle; and he deliberately chose in preference to murder sixteen innocent men.¹

Herod was not satisfied with no explanation (and was not prepared to admit to the miraculous nature of the event), and so “...*he examined the guards and commanded that they should be put to death...*” (12:19 NKJV).

Herod in Caesarea

Herod went down to Caesarea. Josephus relates this journey (Antiq 19:8:2), which occurred after Herod had reigned over all of Judea for a period of three years, dating it at AD 44.

The people of Tyre and Sidon relied on Galilee for their food, since they had large populations and insufficient land to grow their food. Herod was *very angry* with these people and was planning to go to war against them. It is possible that since Tyre and Sidon were seaports, they had placed economic sanctions against Herod’s kingdom.

The people of the city can see the writing on the wall, and petition one of the King’s assistants, Blastus. He was the person who was “*in charge of the King’s bedroom*”.

A set day arrives, and Herod made an oration to the people, in his royal clothing. Josephus tells us that this was the second day of the sport and games festival, which was held in Caesarea every fifth year in honour of Claudius – and at Herod’s insistence. Herod’s apparel was of woven silver which would have glittered with great brightness in the sun as Herod appeared and spoke to the people.

The people’s response

When the people saw Herod, and the bright array of his garments, they saw him as resembling a god. It is possible that his message was to announce the reconciliation between his kingdom and the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Such would be the great bearer of good tidings to the people. They kept shouting that this was “...*the voice of a god, and not of a man...*” (12:22 NKJV).

Herod was receiving the accolades that he longed to hear. As a professing Jew, he knew better. Immediately, the angel of God struck him for accepting the accolades and not giving the credit to God.

How did Herod die?

A simple reading of the text leads to the conclusion that he died immediately. However, Josephus tells us that he died five days later. He was in the 54th year of his life, and the 7th year of his reign, making it the year AD 44. This places the death of James at just before Passover in the year AD 44. The *appointed day* during the feast is generally placed at March 5th in the year of AD 44². This is near the time of Passover that was recorded earlier in the chapter, but is not consistent with that date. A further discussion is given later in this study.

Barnabas and Saul return

Note that it is still Barnabas and Saul, as Barnabas is still the more prominent person. Luke has placed the events of James’ death, Peter’s escape, and Herod’s death between the departure of Barnabas and Saul to Jerusalem from Antioch, and their return. Returning from Jerusalem, they brought with them John Mark.

¹ McGarvey, (2) p239.

² Bruce (2), p 241

2. Now when Agrippa had reigned three years over all Judea, he came to the city Cesarea, which was formerly called Strato's Tower; and there he exhibited shows in honor of Caesar, upon his being informed that there was a certain festival celebrated to make vows for his safety. At which festival a great multitude was gotten together of the principal persons, and such as were of dignity through his province. On the second day of which shows he put on a garment made wholly of silver, and of a contexture truly wonderful, and came into the theater early in the morning; at which time the silver of his garment being illuminated by the fresh reflection of the sun's rays upon it, shone out after a surprising manner, and was so resplendent as to spread a horror over those that looked intently upon him; and presently his flatterers cried out, one from one place, and another from another, (though not for his good,) that he was a god; and they added, "Be thou merciful to us; for although we have hitherto revered thee only as a man, yet shall we henceforth own thee as superior to mortal nature." Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery. But as he presently afterward looked up, he saw an owl sitting on a certain rope over his head, and immediately understood that this bird was the messenger of ill tidings, as it had once been the messenger of good tidings to him; and fell into the deepest sorrow. A severe pain also arose in his belly, and began in a most violent manner. He therefore looked upon his friends, and said, "I, whom you call a god, am commanded presently to depart this life; while Providence thus reproves the lying words you just now said to me; and I, who was by you called immortal, am immediately to be hurried away by death. But I am bound to accept of what Providence allots, as it pleases God; for we have by no means lived ill, but in a splendid and happy manner." When he said this, his pain was become violent. Accordingly he was carried into the palace, and the rumor went abroad every where, that he would certainly die in a little time. But the multitude presently sat in sackcloth, with their wives and children, after the law of their country, and besought God for the king's recovery. All places were also full of mourning and lamentation. Now the king rested in a high chamber, and as he saw them below lying prostrate on the ground, he could not himself forbear weeping. And when he had been quite worn out by the pain in his belly for five days, he departed this life, being in the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign; for he reigned four years under Caius Caesar, three of them were over Philip's tetrarchy only, and on the fourth he had that of Herod added to it; and he reigned, besides those, three years under the reign of Claudius Caesar; in which time he reigned over the forementioned countries, and also had Judea added to them, as well as Samaria and Cesarea. The revenues that he received out of them were very great, no less than twelve millions of drachme. Yet did he borrow great sums from others; for he was so very liberal that his expenses exceeded his incomes, and his generosity was boundless

Josephus, (Antiq 19:8:2), p. 412, 413

Further discussion on the date:

We know the year of these events, because it was the year that Herod Agrippa 1st died, which Josephus describes as "...the fifty-fourth year of his age, and in the seventh year of his reign..." This makes the year AD 44. The death of James, and the imprisonment of Peter occurred around the time of Passover. In the year AD 44, Passover fell on May 1st. Consequently there is a problem in ascribing the date of Herod's death. There are several theories as to the occasion (and hence date) of the festival described by Josephus and Luke.

- It might have been a celebration of the Emperor's birthday, which occurred on August 1st. Initially, this looks like a reasonable "fit" for the timeframe of the described events.
- It might have been the festival for the anniversary of the founding of Caesarea, however this occurred on March 5th. This is too early for it to have happened after the Passover, unless it was almost a year after Peter had escaped from prison. This does not accord with a casual reading of Luke's narrative, and it does not fit with the journey of Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (which Luke describes as starting before James was killed, and ends after Herod had died).
- It might have been for the quinquennial (5 yearly) sports and games festival, and Josephus is quite specific that it occurred on the second day of the festival. However, that still begs the question as to the date that it occurred.

In considering the date, we must remember that Paul's visit to Jerusalem was a brief one. In the Galatian letter (Gal 1:11-2:1) Paul makes the point that he did not receive his revelation of the gospel from man (and he has the other apostles specifically in mind). Consequently Paul

discusses his visits to Jerusalem as a proof of the fact that he did not get his information from the apostles whilst he was there. His first visit to Jerusalem occurred after the three years in Arabia, and lasted only 15 days (Gal 1:18). The next visit discussed in Galatians (2:1) is the one described in Acts 15. Paul does not include the Acts 12 visit to Jerusalem in the Galatians discussion. The purpose of this visit was to take a gift from the church at Antioch to help the poor saints in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). From this it must be concluded that during this visit he did not consult (or even see) any of the apostles. Paul's visit to Jerusalem must have been of a short duration for two reasons:

1. On a longer visit with the church it would have been difficult not to have had contact with the apostles, and
2. His visit would necessitate the church providing him with food and sustenance, and the very purpose of his visit was to provide relief to the brethren, so had the visit been longer rather than shorter, he would have been a burden rather than a relief.

Luke's narrative has the execution of James, the escape of Peter during Passover, and the death of Herod all occurring between Paul's departure from Antioch and his return. This is not consistent with a date of August 1st for Herod's death, which would have necessitated a visit to Jerusalem of 3 months.

In conclusion, a date of 5th March (in either AD 43 or AD 44) does not fit with the events described, nor does a date of August 1st. We are then left with a date probably around late May with the sports and games festival being held at a time that was away from the foundation day of Caesarea.

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