

AN INTERPRETATION OF 2 KINGS 5:1-19 AND ITS LESSONS FOR THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Living in good health is a legitimate concern of human beings from time immemorial. The Yoruba of South West Nigeria has a popular saying that *Ilera l'oro* which literally means health is wealth. However, the prevalence of various diseases and sicknesses in Nigeria is a threat to good living. Therefore, this paper examines 2 Kings 5:1-19 with reference to Naaman, a respected commander of the Israelite army, who had a serious skin disease. A historical- exegetical method is utilized. The exegesis revealed that absolute faith in God is required for healing, and that the use of means such as water is allowed for healing process. The paper postulates that the Church in Nigeria should educate her members to be conscious of various diseases and sicknesses in the society and seek for appropriate medical or spiritual assistance.

Keywords: I Kgs 5:1-19, Diseases/Sicknesses, Health/Healing, Church, Nigeria

Introduction

Living in good health is a legitimate concern of every human being and family as shown in the statements of David and Nabal (1 Sam 25:6). It is a popular saying among the Yoruba of the South Western part of Nigeria that *Ilera l'oro* which literally means health is wealth. God Himself is deeply interested in human beings living in good health as He declared His name *Yahweh rapha'* to the Israelites (Exod 15:26).

But unfortunately, human beings are confronted with diverse hazards which make living in good health almost impossible. Several individuals are suffering from one ailment or the other some of which are terminal in nature. The health challenge in the contemporary society is not limited to a particular class of people; it affects all- young or old, rich or poor, male or female, educated or illiterate, and various categories of people. In addition, the level of unemployment, poverty and security challenges in many African nations have aggravated the health challenges confronting many people.

The paper examines Naaman in 2 Kgs 5:1-15 who in spite of the fact that he was a respected commander of the army of the king of Aram yet, he had a serious skin disease. The paper aims at making recommendation to the contemporary Nigerian Church in the light of the principles from the narrative. A multiple methodology of historical and exegetical approaches is adopted. The paper has four major sections, namely: an

overview of sickness and diseases in the Old Testament; an overview of healing in the Old Testament; an exegesis of 2 Kgs 5:1-19; and lessons for the Church in Nigeria.

Sickness and Diseases in the Old Testament: An Overview

Health, according to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* is defined in four ways namely: the physical condition and how healthy the person is; the state of being healthy; the work of providing medical services to keep the people healthy; and of how successful an economy or organization is.¹ A good summary of the above is given in the *World Book Encyclopaedia* where health is defined as a state of physical, mental and social well-being. It involves more than just the absence of disease. It states further that a truly healthy person not only feels good physically but also has a realistic outlook on life and gets along well with other people. Good health enables people to enjoy life and has opportunity to achieve the goals they have set for themselves.² In other words, it is not possible to realise one's goals in life without good health.

Generally, good health is thought of as the expected normal condition in the Old Testament while disobedience to the covenant brings divine judgment resulting in terrible sickness and disease.³ Harrison notes that the general view of the Old Testament writers is that disease is sent by God as a punishment for transgression or as an expression of His wrath (Exod. 4:11; Deut 32:39).⁴ There are some Hebrew words that are connected with disease and sickness. The first word is the verb *halah* which means "to be or become weak" as in the cases of Jacob (Gen 48:1), Abijah (1Kgs 14:1, 5), Ahaziah (1Kgs 1:2), Asa (1 Kgs 15:23), Benhadad (2 Kgs 8:7), David (1 Sam 19:14), Elisha (2 Kgs 13:14), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1), Joram (2 Kgs 8:29), Nehemiah (Neh 2:2), Samson (Jud 16:7,11,17) and others.⁵ The verb *halah* is used about fifty-nine times in the Old Testament.⁶ Sickness may come as a result of physical injury such as beating (Prov 23:35), battle wounds (2 Kgs 8:29), and a fall (2 Kgs 1:2) among others. At times, the verb *halah* is used in the sense of sickness of the heart or mind (Song 2:5; 5:8; 1 Sam 22:8). The noun form of *halah* is *holi* which means sickness, disease or illness. Again, the causes of sickness may be physical as in the case of the fall of Ahaziah (2 Kgs 1:2) or disease as in the case of Asa's feet (2 Chro 16:12) or the bowels of Jehoram (2 Chro 21:15).⁷ Another Hebrew verb is *dawah* which means "to be ill, unwell."⁸ It shows that the individual is sorrowful, miserable and not physically clean as in Lev 12:2. The noun form of *dawah* is either *diwa* which means illness as it speaks of a person in the bed of languishing (Psa. 41:4; Job 6:7) or *madhveh* which means sickness (Deut 7:15; 28:60). The adjective form is *daweh* which means 'faint' or 'unwell' (Lev 15:33; 20:18; Lam 1:13; 5:17; Isa 30:22).⁹ The word *deber* is commonly used in reference to plague or pestilence in the Old Testament (Exod. 5:3; 9:15; Num 14:13; Lev 26:25; Deut 28:21; 2 Sam 24:13, 15; 2 Chro 7:13; 20:9; Psa 9:3, 6; Jer. 14:12; Ezek 5:12; Hos. 13:14; Amos 4:19; Hab. 3:5; etc.).¹⁰ It is obvious from the above references that the plague has come upon the people as a result of disobedience or breaking of the covenant with God.

The Hebrew word *sara'* means "to smite or strike" with leprosy.¹¹ Its noun form *sara'ath* is a general word for any form of malignant skin disease or leprosy cf. Lev 13:2; Deut 24:8; 2 Kgs 5:3, 6, 7, 27; 2 Chro 26:19, etc.¹² Four individuals that are named in the Old Testament as becoming leprous include Miriam (Num 12:10), Uzziah (2 Kgs 15:5), Gehazi (2 Kgs 5: 27) and Naaman, the Syrian (2 Kgs 5:1).¹³ Skin diseases include leprosy (Exod. 4:6); syphilis (Prov. 7:22-23), smallpox or boil (2 Kgs 20:7), anthrax (Exod 9:3), scabies (Deut 28:7), itch or ringworm (Lev 13:30), etc.¹⁴ Leviticus 13 treats the law concerning leprosy in men and garments where about 24 different cases of skin diseases are highlighted. Leviticus 14 contains the rites of sacrifice in the cleansing of skin diseases. Generally, skin diseases have the characteristics of discolouring of the surface of the body (Lev 13:3, 49; 14:37); affecting different parts of the body (Lev 13:9-13; 14:37, 42, 55); and at times spread fast to other parts of the body (Lev 13:7, 51; 14:44).

Several diseases are mentioned in the Bible. Some of them include abscess (2 Kgs 20:7), atrophy (Job 16:8; 19:20), blindness (Job 29:15; Mat 9:27), boils and blains (Exod. 9:10), consumption (Lev 26:16; Deut 28:22), deafness (Psa 38:13), delibility (Psa 102:23; Ezek 7:17), dumbness (Prov. 31:8), dysentery (2 Chro 21:12-19), emerods (Deut 28:27; 1Sam 5:6, 12), fever (Deut 28:22), itch (Deut 28:27), inflammation (Deut 28:22), lameness (2 Sam 4:4; 2Chro 16:12), leprosy (Lev 13:12; 2 Kgs 5:1), loss of appetite (Job 33:20; Psa 107:18), melancholy (1Sam 16:14), plague (Num 11:33; 2 Sam 24:15, 21, 25), scab (Deut 28:27), sunstroke (2 Kgs 4:18-20; Isa 49:10).¹⁵

Healing in the Old Testament: An Overview

Healing is the restoration to a state of health by physical means or by miracle.¹⁶ Healing occupies a prominent place in religious experience throughout the world.¹⁷ In the Old Testament, God himself says "I am the LORD, your healer." (Exod 15:26 cf. Psa 103:3). A substantial portion of the ministry of Jesus Christ was devoted to performing miracles of healing. Blomberg classifies healing miracles into three groups namely: exorcisms, physical healings and resurrections.¹⁸ For a good understanding of healing in the Old Testament, it is germane to examine some Hebrew words as discussed below:

a. *Shalom*- The Hebrew word *shalom* is a masculine noun and it is an important term in the Old Testament. It means completeness, safety, soundness in body (Psa 38:4; Isa 38:17; Job 5:24); welfare, health, prosperity (Gen 43:27; Exod 18:7 etc.); peace, quiet, tranquillity, contentment (Isa 32:17); and peace or friendship in terms of human relations (Jer 20:10) or peace with God (Isa 54:10).¹⁹ The word *shalom* is connected with healing in the sense of wholeness and wellbeing. In fact, the *New International Version of the Bible* translates *shalom* in 1 Sam 25:6 with 'good health'.²⁰ *Shalom* is the harmonious state of the soul and mind which encourage the development of the faculties and powers.

b. *Rapha*- The word *rapha* is a verb which literally means to heal or to restore to normal either by God (Gen 20:17; Psa 107:20) or by men (Ecc 3:3). Figuratively, it means to heal the hearts of a nation and thereby restoring favour and forgiveness (Exod 15:26; Hos 6:1,

11:3; Isa 19:22 etc). The word also speaks of healing of individual distresses (Jer 17:14; Psa 41:5; etc.).²¹ A careful analysis of biblical passages indicates that generally, *rapha* is used with reference to restoring a wrong, sick, broken or deficient condition to its original and proper state.²² Thus, in this connection we have to the healing of a body (2 Kgs 20:5), the restoration of a drought-stricken and locust-eaten land (2 Chro 7:14), the making wholesome of undrinkable water (2 Kgs 2:21-22)²³ among others. More significantly, the word *rapha* is used in Exod 15:26 in connection with Yahweh, who heal, fix, mend, restore and make wholesome or fresh of His people. The last part of the verse reads *ani Yahweh rope'eka* meaning I am the LORD your Healer.

c. *Gahah*- The Hebrew verb *gahah* means "to set free, cure or heal of sickness". Hos 5:13 speaks of the king of Assyria who was not able to cure Israel or heal him of his sores. Its noun form is *gehah* and it means healing or cure (Nah 3: 19). The word is used in Prov 17:22 to speak of a cheerful heart which is a good medicine.²⁴

d. *Habash*- The Hebrew word *habash* means to bind, bind on, bind up as in the case of saddling a donkey. (Gen 22:3) or to tie around a head-gear or turban (Exod 29:9; Lev 8:13; Ezek 24:17) or fetter (Job 40:13). The word is used in connection with individuals; Abraham (Gen 22:3), Ahitophel (2 Sam 17:23), Balaam (Num 22:1), Mephibosheth (2 Sam 19:27), Moses (Exod 29:9, Lev 8:13), Shimeil (1 Kgs 2:40) and others. The word is sometimes used in the context of healing as in the case of bandaging a wound (Isa 1:6; Hos 6:1); to bind up a set of fracture (Ezek 30:21; 34:4, 16) or to bind up, heal the broken hearted (Job 5:18; Isa 61:1).²⁵

The examination of the above Hebrew words shows that living in good health is of paramount importance to the Israelites. While sickness, which is a threat to life is regarded as a punishment for disobedience; living in good health is a blessing from Yahweh. Thus, healing in the Old Testament covers every aspect of one's life-physical, spiritual and material among others. Some of the cases of physical healing involves the healing of Abimelech (Gen 20:1-18), the healing of Miriam (Num 12:1-15), the healing of king Hezekiah (2 Kgs 20:1-11; 2 Chro 32:24-28; Isa 38:1-22), and the healing of Naaman which is the focus of this paper. Spiritually, the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (Neh 4:1) was a big relief for the Israelites. Everyone, particularly the younger generation was glad with the restoration (Neh 12:43). Yahweh alone is the sole agent of healing in the Old Testament (Exod 15:26; 2 Kgs 5:7). He is the main source of healing as noted in several Old Testament passages (Gen 18:11-14; 21:1-2; 20:17-18; 25:21; 30:22-23, etc.). Prophets are also used by Yahweh as His agents of healing and restoration. Two of the prophets are Elisha (2 Kgs 5:1-14) and Isaiah (Isa 38:21).

Exegesis of 2 Kgs 5:1-19

2 Kings is broadly divided into two sections, namely, the later history of the divided kingdom (chapters 1-17) and the history of the surviving kingdom of Judah (chapters 18-25). The healing of Naaman is located within Joram's evil reign in Israel (2 Kgs 2:1-8:15).²⁶ This section contains the accounts of the ministry of Elisha. Some of the

narratives include the purifying of the water, the raising to life of the son of the Shunammite, and the healing of Naaman among others. Several characters are involved in the story. They include Naaman, his wife, her maid, the King of Syria, the King of Israel, Elisha and Naaman's servants among others.²⁷ The actual word for leprosy used in this passage is *sara'ath* (vv.3, 6, and 7). It is a dreaded infectious disease of which the person who has it is not allowed to stay among the people (Lev 13: 1-11). Leprosy may be inflicted on individuals as punishment for sins such as jealousy (Miriam), anger and lack of full compliance with God's commands (Uzziah) and covetousness (Gehazi). Incidentally, there was no reason given for the leprosy of Naaman.

Structurally, different scholars have proposed different structures for the narrative of the healing of Naaman in 2 Kgs 5: 1-19. Thomas L. Constable proposed a three-unit division which includes Naaman's disease (5:1-6), Naaman's cure (5:7-14), and Naaman's gratitude (5:15-18).²⁸ C.U. Manus suggests a four-unit division which include: introduction of the recipient of the miracle (v.1), the advice of the Israelite slave girl (vv.2-7), Israelite royal Father's distress and Elisha's intervention (vv. 8-14), and Naaman's confession of faith to Israel's God (vv. 15-19).²⁹ There is no doubt that the above suggested structures are appropriate for the study. Yet, I would like to discuss the passage under the following structure:

- A. The health challenge of the commander (v. 1)
- B. The concern and advice of the slave girl (vv. 2-3)
- C. The healing of the commander (vv. 4-14)
- D. The appreciation and the conversion of the commander (vv. 15-19).

A. The health challenge of the commander (v.1)

Naaman was introduced as the commander of the army of the king of Aram, Ben-Hadad II (860-841 BC). He can be regarded as the Field Marshal of the king of Aram, the commander of all the army units of fifty, hundred or thousand, each of which is led by its own officers.³⁰ In the Nigerian context, Naaman will be regarded as the General Officer Commanding (GOC) who is held in high esteem by his Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, King and Head of State. Naaman was a successful and courageous warrior who enjoyed the respect of his master, the king of Aram. Again, he was highly regarded because the LORD had given victory to Aram through him. Unfortunately, the accolades about the great man ended with the fact that he was a leper. Obviously, if Naaman were to be an Israelite, he would not have been allowed to serve the people.

B. The concern and advice of the slave girl (vv. 2-3)

The slave girl mentioned in this section was one of those captured in Israel in one of the battles. Naaman gave her to his wife as a servant. The phrase *na'arah q'tannah* which means 'young girl' or a female attendant occurs only in this passage.³¹ *Q'tannah* is from the adjective *qaton* and it means small or insignificant. The word is sometimes used to describe a youth (1 Sam 20:35; 1 Kgs 3:7; 2 Kgs 5:2, 14; Isa 11:6).³² Obviously, the young girl was comfortable in the house of Naaman. This slave girl had concern for the health challenge of her master. She then told her mistress, who then informed her

husband that there is a prophet living in Samaria who could cure Naaman of his leprosy. Obviously, this slave girl did not hide her identity and her timely remark begins the process that would bring about healing and transformation in the life of Naaman.

C. The healing of the Commander (vv.4-14)

Naaman took the advice of the slave girl seriously. He promptly reported it to his master who gave him maximum support and even gave him a letter to the king of Israel. The term for letter is *sepher* is a masculine noun. Generally, it means missive document, writing, or book. However, in this context, it means a letter of instruction, written order, commission or requests usually from a king (2 Sam 11:14-15; 1 Kgs 21:8, 9, 11; 2 Kgs 5:6, 7; 10:1, 2, 6, 7; 19:14; Isa 37:14 etc).³³ The masculine noun *'ebed* means slave or servant. The king of Aram used the word in this passage to refer to Naaman as the officer of his army (2 Kgs 5:8 cf, 1 Sam 29:3; 1 Kgs 11:26; Isa 36:9).³¹ Writing on the importance of Naaman's healing to the king, Constable says:

The Aramean king was anxious for his valuable commander to be cleansed, not only because he was a trusted friend but because the dreaded disease would eventually rob the king of his top military commander.³⁵

In addition to the letter, Naaman took with him large gifts which include ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing (v.5). Unfortunately, the king of Israel was not comfortable with the letter from the king of Aram. He thought that the king was trying to pick a quarrel with him plus the fact that the power to heal belongs to God and not to him. Elisha heard of the provocative news from the king of Aram to the king of Israel. Hence, he requested that Naaman should be sent to him. But then, the man of God did not give Naaman the diplomatic reception. He simply directed him to bathe seven times in the Jordan River and he would be free of his disease. The word *y^erahasstah* is from the word *rahas* which means to wash off, wash away, and bathe. In this context, it is *qal* imperative masculine singular requesting Naaman to bathe himself in the Jordan River (2 Kgs 5:10, 12, 13 cf; Exod 2:5; 2 Sam 11:2; 12:20; 1 Kgs 22:38; Isa 1:16; Ezek 23:40).³⁶ It was a specific instruction that required obedience. Naaman was angry with the instruction given by Elisha. Perhaps he was expecting a kind of special cleansing ceremony from the man of God. The Hebrew word used here is *asaph* which means "to remove or take away" and it occurs over 200 times in the Hebrew Bible.³⁷ The verb on few occasions is used in the context of healing as in the case of Naaman whose leprosy was removed (2 Kgs 5:3, 6, 7, 11). The directive given to Naaman by Elisha did not go down well with him and thus he preferred better or cleaner rivers such as Abana and Pharpar in his area. Again, the servants of the commander persuaded him to do the simple thing which the man of God asked him to do. Eventually, Naaman humbled himself and carried out the instruction of Elisha. He bathed seven times and his flesh was restored. The Hebrew word *wayyit^ebbol* is the *qal* imperfect third person masculine singular of the word *tabel* which means to dip. In this context, the word is used of Naaman who dipped himself in the River Jordan for the purpose of healing. In another sense, the word is used in dipping something into water for the purpose of purification cf.

Num 19:18.³⁸ *Wayyif'bbol* is the *qal* imperfect third person masculine singular of *taher* and it means be clean, pure. Here, the word is used of Naaman who was miraculously freed from leprosy by washing in the River Jordan (2 Kgs 5:10, 12, 13, 14).³⁹

D. The appreciation and conversion of the Commander (15-19a)

Naaman returned to Elisha's house with a heart of gratitude and with gifts for the man of God which Elisha rejected (v.16). But most importantly, Naaman went back to Elisha to declare his confession to the God of Israel (v.15). He said "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel." As a confirmation of his conversion, Naaman then made two further requests. One, he requested for two loads of earth to take back to the land of Aram with the purpose of building an altar to worship Yahweh. Secondly, as the commander and right hand man of the king of Aram, he asked for forgiveness as he may have to bow down in the Temple of Rimmon, the god of thunder. Elisha dismissed Naaman with a simple blessing, asking him to "go in peace". In other words, Elisha did not question Naaman's loyalty. Naaman received both physical healing and spiritual restoration.

Lessons for the Church in Nigeria

Nigeria occupies an important place in Africa. It is generally regarded as "the giant of Africa and the black world." It has population of over 140 million, according to the 2006 census.⁴⁰ The recently published figure by the National Bureau of Statistics estimated the population of Nigeria as 163 million.⁴¹ Significantly, Nigerians are very religious as established in the statistical figures derived from the recently conducted research on proliferation of churches, mosques and shrines in the nation by Ade Odumuyiwa. It was discovered that within the 774 Local Governments in Nigeria, there are at least one hundred (100) locations for religious activities in each Local Government Area.⁴² There are some important lessons for the Church in Nigeria to learn from the narrative of the healing of Naaman as she makes her impact felt in the nation. These include:

1. **Living in peace with others** – One of the meanings of *shalom* is peace or friendship in term of human relations. One way of promoting healthy living in the community or neighbourhood is to relate well with people around us. It can be deduced that Naaman received his healing as a result of the good relationship that existed between his family and the slave girl. Naaman and his wife were kind to the slave girl who was dwelling with them. This may explain why the girl was so concerned about the health of Naaman, her master.
2. **Openness** - Naaman did not hide his health challenge. As a highly placed commander who was highly regarded by all including the king, the tendency was there for him to cover up his health challenge. Even though he did not allow the health challenge to weigh him down in his performance, yet, he was open to advice from people as to how to receive help. It is therefore recommended that Christians should not hide their health challenges. They should seek medical advice from medical practitioners.
3. **Available agents of healing** - Christians in general and medical practitioners in particular should make themselves available as agents of healing and restoration to

individuals that have health challenges. This is well illustrated in the role played by the slave girl who was at that time helpless and vulnerable. Commenting on the vulnerability of this girl, Konkel succinctly notes:

All the forces of intimidation are present for the young Israelite maiden. She has no support group of her own; she is in a household expected to be contemptuous of her faith; she is in the lowest possible social status; she has no right to express any of her opinions and might expect serious consequences for so doing. However, she cannot keep silent; in voicing her faith, she puts in motion, a chain of events that brings about an entire change of life.⁴³

In the same vein, Elisha has always made himself available as agent of healing. Apart from this passage, other passages where Elisha served as agent of healing and restoration include the healing of water (2 Kgs 2:19-24) and the restoration of the Shunammite woman (2 Kgs 8:1-6) among others.

4. God is the ultimate healer - One of the names of Yahweh is *Jehovah Rapha* (Exod 15:26). He is the ultimate healer. The prophets and kings in the Old Testament recognize God as the ultimate healer. The king of Israel exclaimed "Am I God?" when he received the letter of the king of Aram concerning the healing of Naaman (2 Kgs 5:7). Elisha himself recognized God as the ultimate healer and thus, he refused to receive any gifts from Naaman (2 Kgs 5:16). Incidentally, the popular saying among the contemporary nurses and doctors is "we care but God heals." In other words, all healing is of God, who may and often does mediate it through medicine and the skills of health care professionals.⁴⁴

5. Obedience to God/Faith in God - Obedience to God and faith in Him are the fundamental ingredients needed by the one seeking for healing even, in the face of terminal sickness. Elisha had no time for the diplomatic reception which Naaman planned for. He simply gave an instruction to Naaman and he expected him to obey. Initially, Naaman was outraged and he was ready to go back. But through the persuasion of his servants, he obeyed the man of God and he was restored back.

6. The Bible is not against the use of medicine for healing – Healing by means of medicines and surgical appliances is supported by the scriptures. One of such cases is the healing of Hezekiah on whose boil a lump of figs was applied (2 Kgs 20: 7). Reference is also made to healing balm of Gilead (Jer 8:22; 46:11; 51:8). In the case of Naaman, it was washing with water at the River Jordan that brought about his healing.

Conclusion

It is clear from this paper that living in good health is the desire of human beings. It is the only condition by which human beings can make meaningful developments and achievements. Unfortunately, the prevalence of various diseases is a challenge that needs urgent attention of which the Church must play an active role. Therefore, the Church in Nigeria must rise up to the responsibility of educating her members not only to be

conscious of various diseases and sicknesses but they should not hide to themselves whenever they have health problems. Individual members must make themselves available for medical advice and treatment. The Pastors and Church leaders must encourage their members to have absolute faith in God, the greatest physician. Besides, the Church must not shy away from the use of orthodox medicine to aid the healing process of whatever ailment that may be confronting the members.

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40. For detailed information on land and resources, people, arts, economy, government, history, etc. of Nigeria, see Microsoft Encarta Premium (2006) and S.S. Lawal, *The Unmerited Favour* (Abuja: Midianett Ltd. 2011), 97.
41. Ifeanyi Onuba, "112.5 million Nigerians live in Poverty" n. p. [cited 12 May 2012]. Online: <http://www.punchng.com/business/business-economy/112-5-million-nigerians-live-in-poverty-nbs>
42. E. Ade Odumuyiwa, "A Religious but Criminal Society—Any Remedy?" 19th Inaugural Lecture, Olabisi Onabanjo University, Ago-Iwoye. Tuesday, 27th February, 2001, 7.
43. Konkel, *1 and 2 Kings: The NIV Application Commentary*, 436-7.
44. See the note on Isa 38:21 in *The Nelson Study Bible: New King James Version*.

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