

Images of Paradise and Hell in the Orthodox Tradition

by Fr. Symeon Kees

While many Americans acknowledge the existence of an eternal, heavenly Paradise and/or an undesirable Hell, contemporary movies and television programs have contributed to the erroneous popular vision of these realities. American misconceptions regarding Paradise and Hell likely find root, directly or indirectly, in the picture presented in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and religious ideas indigenous to the medieval Roman Catholic tradition of Western Europe. By teaching the true Orthodox vision of Paradise and Hell, in as much as we can comprehend it, within a culture that tends to compartmentalize knowledge and disconnect theological ideas from every-day life, we can help people to acquire an understanding that fits harmoniously within the whole Orthodox theological worldview, embodied in the comprehensive spiritual life of the Church.

The Book of Genesis offers the first description of Paradise found in Holy Scripture. According to this text, God planted "a garden eastward in Eden" (paradeison e[n] Ede[m]).¹ The Fall of man and subsequent expulsion from Paradise is also described in the narrative. From an Orthodox perspective, the goal of salvation may be described as the return to Paradise, not simply the Paradise of old, but a far greater Paradise than the first. Perhaps the Paradise to which all humans are called to attain is most beautifully portrayed in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse):

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.²

This image of Paradise is connected to the divine promise offered by Christ: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God."³ Paradise is a place where human beings find healing and dwell with God in His Uncreated Light.

¹ Genesis 2.8, LXX.

² Revelation 22.1-5; See notes on these verses in the *Orthodox Study Bible*. See also Revelation 21.9-22.5.

³ Revelation 22.7.

St. Isaac the Syrian explained Paradise simply: “Paradise is the love of God, wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness.”⁴ Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos affirmed that “Paradise, eternal life and the kingdom of God are the same thing.... The fact is that Paradise is eternal life in communion and unity with the Triune God.”⁵ Paradise may also be described as “participation in the life of God” and the experience of the vision of God.⁶ In Paradise, we will enjoy incorruptibility (of the resurrected body) and our deification, toward which we now struggle, will be complete.⁷ This participation in Paradise may be seen in terms of degrees. St. Gregory of Sinai wrote, “The differing degrees of ascent and advancement in the state of souls in heaven are called ‘many mansions’ by the Savior. The kingdom is one, but there are many distinctions with it – for so it is with things of heaven and earth –, according to both virtue and knowledge, and also according to the degree of the soul’s deification.”⁸

In Holy Scripture, Paradise is described as a *place*, but St. John of Damascus made the point that a theological understanding of place transcends our temporal conceptions. He wrote that

“by the *place of God* is meant that which has a greater share in His energy and grace. For this reason the Heaven is His throne.... The Church, too, is spoken of as the place of God: for we have set this apart for the glorifying of God as a sort of consecrated place wherein we also hold converse with Him. Likewise also the places in which His energy becomes manifest to us, whether through the flesh or apart from flesh, are spoke of as places of God.”⁹

St. John also emphasized that God, “being immaterial and uncircumscribed, has not place. For He is His own place, filling all things and being above all things, and Himself maintaining all things. Yet we speak of God having place and the place of God where His energy becomes manifest.”¹⁰

St. Ephrem the Syrian presented vivid images of Paradise through the words of his theological poetry. Sebastian Brock described the conception of Paradise, pictured as a mountain, offered by St. Ephrem in his *Hymns on Paradise*:

⁴ Metropolitan Hierotheos, 252, quoting St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies*, Hom. 46.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁶ Vasilios Bakogiannis, *After Death* (Katerini, Greece: Tertios Publications, 1995), 113; Athenagoras Cavadas, *The World Beyond the Grave or the After Life* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1988), 72.

⁷ Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis, *The Mystery of Death* (Athens, Greece: The Orthodox Brotherhood of Theologians, 1993), 546-548.

⁸ Constantine Cavarinos, *The Future Life According to Orthodox Teaching*, trans. by Hieromonk Auxentios and Archmandrite Chrysostomos (Etna, CA: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 1985), 33, quoting St. Gregory of Sinai, *Philokalia*, VI.

⁹ St. John of Damascus, “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” chapter 13, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 15. See also quote from St. Mark of Ephesus in Lazar, 10-11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* See also quote from St. Mark of Ephesus in Lazar, 10-11.

The Paradise Hymns provide us with a number of topographical details which, taken together, can give us some idea of how St. Ephrem conceptualized this Paradisiacal mountain. We learn that the mountain is circular (I.8) and that it encircles the "Great Sea" (II.6), enclosing both land and sea (I.8-9). The Flood reached only its foothills (I.4), and on these foothills is situated the "fense" or "barrier" (*syaga*), guarded by the Cherub with the revolving sword (II.7, IV.1, based on Genesis 3:24). This fense demarcates the lowest extremity of Paradise. Halfway up is the Tree of Knowledge which provides an internal boundary beyond and higher than which Adam and Eve were forbidden to go (III.3); this Tree acts as a sanctuary curtain hiding the Holy of Holies, which is the Tree of Life higher up (III.2). On the summit of the mountain resides the Divine Presence, the Shekhina (Syriac *shkinta*).¹¹

St. Ephrem revealed the beauty of Paradise, writing,

Such is the flowing brook of delights
that, as one tree takes leave of you,
the next one beckons you;
all of them rejoice
that you should partake of the fruit of one
and suck the juice of another,
wash and cleanse yourself
in the dew of yet a third;
anoint yourself with the resin of one
and breathe another's fragrance,
listen to the song of still another.
Blessed is He who gave joy to Adam!¹²

He also wrote,

Paradise delighted me
as much by its peacefulness as by its beauty:
in it there resides a beauty
that has no spot;
in it exists a peacefulness
that knows no fear.
How blessed is that person
accounted worthy to receive it,
if not by right,
yet at least by grace;

¹¹ Sebastian Brock, "Introduction," *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 52.

¹² St. Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, Hymn 9.6, trans. by Sebastian Brock (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 138.

if not because of good works,
yet at least through mercy.¹³

In addition to portraying Paradise itself, St. Ephrem also described the human being who inhabits Paradise:

Today our bodies grow hungry
and have to be fed,
but yonder it is souls,
instead of bodies, that crave food.
The soul received sustenance
appropriate to its needs;
it is by the Nourisher of all
that the soul receives its fill,
and not by any other
variety of food;
it pastures on His beauties,
full of wonder at His treasures.¹⁴

St. Ephrem certainly doesn't speak about a life in Paradise as a disembodied soul,

For bodies shall be raised
to the level of souls,
and the soul
to that of the spirit,
while the spirit will be raised
to the height of God's majesty....¹⁵

Although St. Ephrem offered poetic images of Paradise, He also warned that the imagery of Paradise is limited and should not be taken too literally as though mere language could describe the incomprehensible reality:

If someone concentrates his attention solely
on the metaphors used of God's majesty,
he abuses and misrepresent that majesty
and thus errs
by means of those metaphors
with which God clothed Himself for his benefit,
and he is ungrateful to that Grace
which stooped low

¹³ Ibid., Hymn 5.12,106.

¹⁴ Ibid., Hymn 9.18,142.

¹⁵ Ibid., Hymn 9.20,143.

to the level of his childishness;
although it has nothing in common with him,
yet Grace clothed itself in his likeness
in order to bring him to the likeness of itself.

Do not let your intellect
be disturbed by mere names,
for Paradise has simply clothed itself
in terms that are akin to you;
it is not because it is impoverished
that it has put on your imagery;
rather, your nature is far too weak
to be able
to attain to its greatness,
and its beauties are much diminished
by being depicted in the pale colors
with which you are familiar.¹⁶

As the reality of Paradise is much greater than any description contained within the metaphorical images of mere human language, images of Hell also suffer from the same limitations. As Bishop Athenagoras Cavadas of Boston explained,

It is true that the Holy Scriptures do not clearly define what kind of rewards the just and devout shall receive in the world beyond. They are merely called in general: "Paradise," "bosom of Abraham," "the throne of God and of the Lamb," "Communion with Patriarchs, or with the Saints or with the Holy Angels," "Kingdom of God," "Kingdom of Christ," "Kingdom of Heaven," "Reign of Christ," "Seeing God," etc. But these general titles of the Place of Comfort, just as the general titles of the Place of Torment...are not sufficiently enlightening. They merely indicate that in one place, there is unutterable happiness, and in the other, terrible torment.¹⁷

If Paradise is a place of blessedness and beauty, Hell can be apophatically described as the lack of what Paradise is. The soul will be apart from God (or at least will not positively participate in the deifying energies of God), yet demons and enemies will be companions.¹⁸ It could be described as a place where its prisoners experience tremendous shame caused by the remembrance of sinful deeds, but the pain and grief endured in Hell cannot adequately be compared to any experience in this life.¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., Hymn 11.6-7, 156.

¹⁷ Cavadas, 67.

¹⁸ Vassiliadis, 516.

¹⁹ Ibid., 515, 518. See also St. Basil the Great, On Psalm 33.4, 8 PG 29,360-361 & St. Gregory of Nyssa, "The Great Catechetical Homily," 40.

The Holy Scripture describes Hell as a place of punishment. It is called the “outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”²⁰ Both Matthew 5.22 and 18.9 record Christ as referring to “hell fire” (Gehenna), while 25.41 offers an image of “everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”²¹ In Mark, Christ is said to have described hell (Gehenna) as a place with unquenchable fire where “their worm does not die.”²²

Luke contains Christ’s parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” in which one man is comforted in Abraham’s bosom while another man is tormented in Hades. The two are separated by a great chasm preventing each one from crossing to the other. The rich man in Hades expressed his suffering, saying, “I am tormented in this flame.”²³

Why does the description of Hades, the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *Sheol*, reflect an image that corresponds to Gehenna? Perhaps Hades is described with imagery similar to that which described Gehenna because at the time of physical death, yet before the Final Judgment, the departed soul “simply experiences a foretaste of blessedness of Paradise or of the punishments of Gehenna.”²⁴ St. Mark of Ephesus wrote that “it is evident that neither are the saints in perfect enjoyment of those good things and of the blessedness to come, nor have sinners already received condemnation and been sent away to torment.”²⁵ Although humans will not reach Paradise or Hell until after the resurrection of the body,

As for now...the righteous abide in all gladness and rejoicing, already awaiting and only not holding in their grasp the Kingdom promised to them and those ineffable good things. But sinners, on the contrary, are in all straitness and inconsolable sorrow, like criminals awaiting the decision of the judge, and they foresee those torments.²⁶

²⁰ Matthew 25.15.30

²¹ Matthew 5.22; 18.9; 25.41, NKJV

²² Mark 9.43-48, NKJV

²³ Luke 16.19-31, NKJV

²⁴ Vassiliadis, 400-401; See also St. Athanasius the Great, *To Antiochos the Ruler*, Questions 20, cited in footnot 2, Vassiliadis, 401.

²⁵ Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, *On the Nature of Heaven and Hell According to the Holy Fathers* (Dewdney, Canada: Synaxis Press, 1995), 14, quoting St. Mark of Ephesus, “Ten Arguments Against Purgatory.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. While “Paradise” is often used as a synonym for the Kingdom of Heaven, the word may also be used to describe the place where souls destined for the Kingdom of Heaven go after death, but before the resurrection of the body. Met. Hierotheos offered this explanation concerning the souls who await the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgment: “The righteous live a comfortable and free life in heaven with the angels and God in the Paradise from which Adam fell, and the sinners are in Hades and live with affliction and inconsolable grief like those condemned who await the judge’s decision. Neither the righteous nor the sinners obtain the Kingdom of Heaven or Hell completely. Thus, we notice that there is a distinction between Paradise and the Kingdom of Heaven and between Hades and Hell. The righteous enter Paradise after their death and await entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven after the resurrection of their bodies. And the sinners enter Hades after death and will enter Hell after the resurrection of their bodies and the last judgment,” Metropolitan Hierotheos, 89-90. According to Holy Tradition, it is proper to refer to the Kingdom of Heaven as Paradise, but one must realize that bodiless souls will not experience the fullness of Paradise until the Parousia and the resurrection of the body.

A description of what kind of space the souls inhabit after death is difficult to define since, as Constantine Cavarnos indicated, "'space' in the spiritual world, where souls go and abide after death, is not the same as space in the physical world, where material bodies exist and move about; it is different than this."²⁷ It is an existence that does not constitute a physical place, but a noetic one.²⁸ This is a "spiritual place," an invisible, bodiless condition.²⁹

Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis stated that Hell is a place, "not just a condition," separated from Paradise. It is a place with unquenchable fire that burns eternally.³⁰ Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia stated that "Hell is not so much a place where God imprisons humans, as a place where humans, by misusing their free will, choose to imprison themselves."³¹ As the place of Paradise cannot be adequately comprehended by our minds or defined in temporal terms, neither can Hell be grasped by the intellect.

Like Paradise, Hell may be understood in terms of degrees. Bishop Athenagoras Cavadas wrote that "blessedness in the Place of Comfort is like an infinite ladder with innumerable steps, and naturally the rewards are proportionally given in an infinite number of ways."³² Likewise, "We are obliged to say the same concerning the Place of Torment in which, again, there shall be different and infinite degrees of punishment."³³ St. Makarios the Great wrote, "Some say that there is one kingdom and one hell; but we say that there are many levels and differences and measures, both in the kingdom and in hell."³⁴

In Western art and literature, Hell is often rightly associated with fire, an image in harmony with Holy Tradition. In the Orthodox Church, however, fire is associated with the experience of Paradise as well as Hell. In his "Homily on Psalms," St. Basil wrote,

I believe that the fire prepared for the punishment of the devil and his angels is divided by the voice of the Lord. Thus, since there are two capacities in fire, one of burning and the other of illuminating, the fierce and scourging property of the fire may await those who deserve to burn, while illuminating and radiant warmth may be reserved for the enjoyment of those who are rejoicing.³⁵

Therefore, fire may either scourge and burn or illuminate and warm. Saint Isaac the Syrian indicated that both the delight of Heaven and punishment of Hell are accomplished by God's Love. He explained

²⁷ Cavarnos, 35.

²⁸ Metropolitan Hierotheos, 90.

²⁹ Vassiliadis, 399-400.

³⁰ Vassiliadis, 523.

³¹ Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church*, second edition (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 262.

³² Cavadas, 68.

³³ *Ibid.* Bishop Athenagoras cites Luke 12.47-48 here to support his statement.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33, quoting St. Makarios of Egypt, "Homily XL."

³⁵ Archbishop Lazar Puhalo, *On the Nature of Heaven and Hell According to the Holy Fathers* (Dewdney, Canada: Synaxis Press, 1995), 9, quoting St. Basil the Great, "Homily on Psalms," 28.6; See also Met. Hierotheos, 257.

that those who are suffering in hell, are suffering in being scourged by love.... It is totally false to think that the sinners in hell are deprived of God's love. Love is a child of the knowledge of truth, and is unquestionably given commonly to all. But love's power acts in two ways: it torments sinners, while at the same time it delights those who have lived in accord with it.³⁶

Alexander Kalomiros commented on the eternal fire that is God's unceasing Love:

Paradise and hell are one and the same River of God, a loving fire which embraces and covers all with the same beneficial will, without any difference or discrimination. The same vivifying water is life eternal for the faithful and death eternal for the infidels; for the first it is their element of life, for the second it is the instrument of their eternal suffocation; paradise for the one is hell for the other. Do not consider this strange. The son who loves his father will feel happy in his father's arms, but if he does not love him, his father's loving embrace will be a torment to him. This also is why when we love the man who hates us, it is likened to pouring lighted coals and hot embers on his head.³⁷

Hell is commonly described as an existence without God's presence, but if God is "everywhere present and fillest all things," how can the Uncreated God be absent from anywhere in creation?³⁸ Metropolitan Hierotheos explained, "Hell is not the absence of God, as is usually said, but the presence and vision of God as fire."³⁹ Instead of being absent from God, the experience of Hell may be described in terms of the inability to positively participate in God and commune with Him.⁴⁰ Hell may be seen, then, as a negative experience of God's energies.⁴¹ In medical terms, "those who are cured and those who are purified experience the illuminating energy of divine grace, while the uncured and ill experience the caustic energy of God."⁴² Metropolitan Hierotheos wrote that

according to St. Gregory the Theologian, God Himself is Paradise and Hell for man, since each man tastes God's energy according to the condition of his soul. Thus in one of his doxological phrases he can exclaim: "O Trinity, Whom I have

³⁶ Alexander Kalomiros, *The River of Fire*, presented at the 1980 Orthodox Conference, sponsored by St. Nectarios American Orthodox Church, Seattle, WA (Seattle: St. Nectarios Press, 1980), quoting St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 48. The text of *The River of Fire* is available at <http://www.stnectariospress.com>. See also Lazar, 8-9.

³⁷ Kalomiros, *The River of Fire*.

³⁸ The complete words of the prayer quoted follows: "O heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things, the Treasury of good things and Giver of life: Com, and abide in us, and cleanse us from every stain, and save our souls, O good One." *The Liturgikon: The Book of Divine Services for the Priest and Deacon*, second edition (Englewood, NJ:Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America/Antakya Press, 1994), 57.

³⁹ Metropolitan Hierotheos, 269.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 265.

been grated to worship and proclaim, Who will some day be known to all, to some through illumination and to others through punishment!" The same God is both illumination and hell for men. The saints' words are clear and revealing.⁴³

As the fire of Hell can be understood as God Himself, the fire can also be considered a product of the inner human person. In his "Letter to Publius," St. Ephrem the Syrian noted that "the gehenna [hell] of the wicked consists in what they see, and it is their very separation that burns them, and their mind acts as the flame."⁴⁴ He explained that "the hidden judge which is seated in the discerning mind has spoken, and has become for them the righteous judge, who beats them without mercy with torments of contrition" and "saliently accuses and quietly pronounces sentence upon them."⁴⁵ The "inner intelligence has been made the judge and the law, for it is the embodiment of the shadow of the law, and it is the shadow of the Lord of the Law."⁴⁶ Metropolitan Hierotheos explained that "it is not God who punishes, but a person punishes himself because he does not accept the God's gift. In any case the lack of communion with God is man's punishment, especially when we think that man was created in the image and likeness of God, and this is the deepest goal of his existence."⁴⁷ If the human person experiences the Love of God as Hell and is also tormented from within, Hell seems to involve an experience completely opposed to the synergy, cooperation with God, that brings healing and deification.

How do we avoid the experience of Hell and attain Paradise? As Metropolitan Hierotheos wrote, to avoid Hell we need to be cured and purified through the spiritual therapy found in the sacramental, ascetical life of the Church, whereby we experience the healing accomplished by the Church: "The deepest work of the Church is to cure man, to purify the nous and the heart. After being purified the man must acquire an illuminated nous in order to see God and in order that there may be Paradise and the Kingdom of Heaven for him."⁴⁸ Metropolitan Hierotheos affirmed, "In the Orthodox Church precisely because God becomes Hell for the impure, we feel that the primary task is to purify our souls. The purification is connected with the cure of the man, and of course the cure is the attainment of selfless love."⁴⁹

St. Ephrem's *Hymns on Paradise* reveal that the Church both experiences the reality of Paradise now and provides the way to the eternal enjoyment of Paradise. The Church was planted by God as a Paradise:

The effortless power,
the arm which never tires,

⁴³ Ibid., 259, quoting St. Gregory the Theologian, Or. 23.13, On peace 3, PG 35, 1165B.

⁴⁴ Puhalo, 7-8, quoting St. Ephrem the Syrian, "Letter to Publius," para. 21-23.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁴⁷ Metropolitan Hierotheos, 252.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 265, 268.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 269; See also 262-271 271.

planted this Paradise,
adorned it without effort.
But it is the effort of free will
that adorns the Church with all manner of fruits.
The Creator saw the Church
and was pleased;
He resided in that Paradise
which she had planted for His honor,
just as He had planted the Garden
for her delight.⁵⁰

Within the Church, the Faithful partake of the Tree of Life, which is the Medicine of Life:

The assembly of saints
bears resemblance to Paradise:
in it each day is plucked
the fruit of Him who gives life to all;
in it, my brethren, is trodden
the cluster of grapes, to be the Medicine of Life.⁵¹

Archimandrite Vasiolios Bakogiannis made the point that “our sinful deeds send us to Hell. And it is ourselves who commit them. We have free-will. Nobody forces us. Not even God.... We eat, sleep, walk, sin or do good when we want. So, since it is our deeds that send us to Hell and we act of our own accord, then we send ourselves to Hell.”⁵² St. John Chrysostom, commenting on the Second Coming of Christ, spoke of sin as bringing self-condemnation to a person according to a sentence that comes from within.⁵³ To avoid Hell, then, we must, by our free will, live the life of the Church, the path of deification (purification, illumination, and theosis).

St. John Chrysostom proclaimed, “I know that many have feared only gehenna; I, however, consider the loss of the glory of heaven a greater hell than gehenna.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, Archimandrite Vasiolios wrote, “Hell is life without God. Far from God. Therefore, it does not begin after death, but before it. In this present life.”⁵⁵ St. Gregory of Sinai noted that by participation in our present sin we partake in the “first-fruits of hell’s torments.”⁵⁶ To avoid eternal Hell, then, we must walk the path of repentance

⁵⁰ St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymn 6.10,112. Also, see introductory commentary on p. 108.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Hymn 6.8, 111. See also Hymn 6.9, p. 112.

⁵² Bakogiannis, 128.

⁵³ St. John Chrysostom, “Homily on Matthew 24.16-18,” Homily 76.3, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, vol. 10, ed. by Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 459-460. This passage is also mentioned by Archbishop Lazar in the footnote of his text, p. 8.

⁵⁴ Vassiliadis, 513, quoting St. John Chrysostom, Homily 25, “On the Future Judgment.”

⁵⁵ Bakogiannis, 121.

⁵⁶ Metropolitan Hierotheos, 270, quoting St. Gregory of Sinai, “137 Texts,” 34, *Philokalia*, vol. 4, p. 218.

within the Church, constantly turning away from ways of living that prove empty of the experience of God's glory, so that we may be worthy to enter the eternal Paradise and live as deified children of the Creator in the Uncreated Light. All Orthodox Christians should endeavor to prepare for entry into the Kingdom of Heaven or, as St. Ephrem instructed, "Forge here on earth and take the key to Paradise."⁵⁷

⁵⁷ St. Ephrem the Syrian, Hymn 2.2, 85.

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