


Divine presence and absence: A theodicy of narrative analytic theology

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For centuries, philosophers and theologians debated how to reconcile the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving, and ever-present God with the problem of evil. However, the question of why the righteous suffer remains unanswered. Given the omnipresence of God, one wonders why the sufferers experience what seems like God's absence in their adversity. This study presents a theodicy of narrative analytic theology because the experiences of the saints of old compel us to rethink our approach to the problem of evil from the 'God's-eye view' to the experiential and existential worries of the sufferer. The study looks at the story of Job and Daniel and his friends in Babylon. The narrative theodicy approach helps us understand why the righteous never denounced God in the Old Testament. The New Testament, in line with the Old Testament, reveals a suffering motif of the saints, which includes participation in the atoning work of Christ and the purification of the souls of the sufferer. Nevertheless, it seems some evils are pointless. The sufferers do not see their suffering as a punishment or a weakness from God but as a distraction and a test to perfect their covenantal relationship with the Triune. Ultimately, the suffering of the righteous will be overcome at the eschaton.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article aligns with the scope of *Verbum et Ecclesia*. It contributes to the current discussion on the problem of suffering within the broad discipline of theology, philosophy of religion, and how narrative analytic theology can enhance our response to the problem of evil.

Keywords: divine presence; narrative theodicy; analytic theology; participation; soul-making.

You are always righteous, LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease? (Jeremiah 12:1 [New International Version])

Introduction

God has been traditionally conceived to be omnipresent. However, believers seem to experience divine presence differently. Sometimes he is very close to them, but sometimes, he seems absent, especially in adversity. How do we make sense of God's *everywhereness* in adversity? In this paper, I propose a theodicy of narrative analytic theology. By a theodicy of narrative analytic theology, contrary to traditional theodicies, I mean a response to the existential problem of evil that takes the narratives of saints in the Hebrew Bible seriously to draw lessons relevant to contemporary believers in their adversity. When scrutinised, these narratives compelled us to see another dimension to why both the just and wicked suffer. This is necessary because

[T]aking a narrative turn involves a hermeneutical stance, in which the individual biography and religious construction are valued ... From a theological point of view, this is called for if we want to do justice to [the] voices of the oppressed and the unheard ..., and if we want to acknowledge the religious individual. (Ganzevoort 1998:24)

The purpose of adopting this approach is to see how our answer to the problem of suffering could

[S]hift its attention somewhat from the theoretical God's-eye view to that of the existential and religious situations of those who really suffer – and from the epistemic status of religious belief to the practical situatedness of lived experience. (Griffioen 2018:3)

For a very long time, philosophers and theologians have consistently tried to respond to the problem of suffering while giving little or no attention to the stories of the sufferers. It has always been on the justice of God amid aberrant evil. Sure, this is not bad. However, how my brothers and sisters feel today in the context of religious persecution, bad governance, and all forms of suffering calls for a rethink. To do this properly, we must begin with personal experiences of suffering in the Scripture. The narrative approach to theodicy has epistemological relevance.

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It firstly helps the sufferer to see their suffering in the light of the saint of old and, secondly, helps them to draw lessons from such experiences for their lives today (Hernandez 2021).

The Bible's narratives, as well as contemporary Christians' experiences, suggest that human suffering may have been for refining their souls (Ja 1:2–4). It also seems that after our souls have been purified by Christ's atoning work on the cross, the suffering of contemporary Christians is a participation in the suffering of Christ. However, there are instances in the Scripture suggesting that there might be no sense of suffering, like in Mark 2:1–11 or John 9:1–3. In the New Testament, Jesus neither says that there is any meaning in an illness nor that a sick person or their ancestors must have sinned against God.

The characters of the Old Testament saints, as shown below, revealed they were unwilling to give up on God despite their suffering. They saw their afflictions as distractions that could not truncate their covenantal relationship with God. Their responses to suffering were not necessarily contingent upon the fact that they may have been suffering for their sins or that some good was to be obtained at the end of their suffering. It might be that they also thought about the fact that some of their sufferings were natural in a falling world as they were falling humans. This suggests that just as Christ's Trinitarian union with the Father did not stop him from suffering on the cross to redeem us, our union with Christ and the Trinity, instead of ending our suffering here on earth, could mean calling us to participate in everything the Trinity experienced, including suffering. This conclusion aligns with Karl Barth's argument that

If we suffer with Him in this hope, and we believe according to God's Word that we have to suffer with Jesus Christ in this hope, we can and may and must suffer in patience: answering His patience with our patience; giving the right answer to the waiting of His wrath with our waiting for redemption. (CD2 1956:140–142)

God's presence in suffering

God's significant promise to Christians in the Bible is that he will always be with them. However, the Bible has several examples of saints experiencing both God's presence and seeming absence. According to Antombikums (2024), presence and mutual intimacy are essential for the survival of a partnership:

... presence and mutual closeness are critical elements to sustaining a union. These lead to the question of what it means to be present with or to and if it is possible to be present with or to someone without being close to the person. Stump distinguishes between minimal personal presence and significant personal presence, depending on the nature of closeness. (p. 10)

Stump (2010:110) established that actual presence requires second-person experience and [joint] shared attention, adding to her former view that being present to or with someone involves 'having direct and unmediated causal contact with and cognitive access to another'.

Surprisingly, on the cross, even the Son of God cried loud because he felt the absence of the Father and asked, *Father, Father, why have you forsaken me?* (Mt 27:46). The Greek word *enkataleipō* means to 'separate' or to 'disconnect,' which means Christ's connection to the Father was disconnected on the cross. Why will there be such a disconnection among the Persons of the Trinity? Bible commentators believed that the Father forsook the Son because he vicariously took our inequities and, as a result, stood as an enemy of God (Holmen 2003). This explains why the Father abandoned him.

Charles Spurgeon (1902) argues that because it was not in the custom of Christ to address the Father as God, Christ must have been speaking like a man and not as the second Person of the Trinity. On the cross, contrary to his prayer at Gethsemane, Christ referred to the Father as God. Spurgeon's explanation is justified because there is no way we can make sense of God forsaken God on the cross if it was not for the fact that Christ, the God-human, was speaking from his humanity and not the divine-human Christ. This explanation may also face some logical consequences. However, the reader has a sense of a divine-human relationship rather than a divine-divine relationship.

In explicating 'Christ's cry of dereliction', Stump (2018) argues that God the Father's forsaken God the Son should be understood from a distance perspective because of *internal fragmentation*. Three possibilities come to mind according to Stump (2018):

- (1) something about God prevents closeness between God and Christ ...
- (2) something about Christ prevents closeness between God and Christ ...
- (3) shared attention between God and Christ is hindered. (pp. 219–220)

After assessing all possibilities, Stump (2018) argues that:

The shame of...[Christ's] mode of death must be dwarfed by the feeling of that inward experience of human moral vileness ... [there was] a real distance between Christ and God that assigns no culpability for the distance and no lack of love to either Christ or God. (p. 236)

In other words, although humanity's sin was the cause of the Father's apparent abandonment, the Son (who is both God and human) was not actually abandoned because the Father did not desert him, nor had the Father forsaken him. In his humanity, having taken upon himself the sin of all humanity and its corruption, the Son could not share attention with the Father, which he was able to do before ascending the cross. This gives us an idea of the noetic effect of sin, firstly, for the divine-human relationship, and secondly, for understanding divine presence in suffering.

On the cross, Christ took away humanity's sin to reconcile us to God and fellow humans (2 Cor 5:19). This reconciliation leads to a union with Christ. In this union, death and sin, including the consequences of sin, have been overcome. However, if Christ had already vicariously taken away our disconnection or separation from the Father, are we supposed to be disconnected further? In what follows, I will examine

how God's presence was understood in suffering in the Old Testament before presenting a summary of the suffering motif of the New Testament.

Because of their desire to experience God concretely after Moses had gone to be with the Lord at the Mountain, the Israelites requested Aaron to construct the Golden Calf for them. After its construction, Aaron presented it as the God that led them out of Egypt (Bernd 2015). The Israelites sometimes felt that God was absent. This was often the case when no visible representation showed that God was with them. However, because of his immateriality, can God be absent? Metaphysically, God cannot be absent because he is omnipresent.

Because God is omnipresent, his Spirit was always present with the Israelites, even in exile. However, because they wanted to experience God concretely, they made several decisions contingent on their desire for a material presence of God – for instance, requesting a material leader like other nations (1 Sm 8). In exile, they felt God was not there; they missed a golden opportunity to demonstrate who God was as well as fellowshiping with him when they were asked to sing the Lord's song, but they refused. They claimed it was improper for the Lord's song to be sung in a strange land (Ps 137:1–4). The apparent reason for this decision is unclear.

However, one could deduce a trend in pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic Hebrew Scripture suggesting that God was more present in some places than others because he is Holy, which means to be set apart. God was intensely present in such set-apart areas than the common places. The Lord's Temple, the Ark of the Covenant, the tent of meeting, and theophanies are examples of these set-apart places or instances. This explains why they were unwilling to sing the Lord's song because they believed the Lord was not present in Persia or Babylon; after all, those were the lands of the heathen, a common place where God could not be present. This seemingly explains why Jonah fled from the Lord's presence when he was asked to go and preach at Nineveh. He somehow believed that God was absent at Tarshish. Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish seems to contradict this conclusion because it seems to show that Jonah acknowledged that God is everywhere given that it was God who saved him (Jn 2:6). Contrary to the aforementioned, although the Israelites felt that God was not present in the common places as he was in the holy places, and therefore not everywhere intensely, God was present with them by his Spirit. His Spirit ruled over them through the judges, the Kings, and even in exile (Macdonald 2013).

The exile is complicated because it happened in the context of war. One expects that women, children, and older people should have been exempted in the context of military might. However, this was not the case as it is in modern warfare. The captives lived with a daily reality of struggle in a foreign land. They suffered in exile despite having the promise of

God as the chosen race, including God's covenant relationship with their ancestors, which was continued with them. Where was God when the Southern and Northern Kingdoms of Israel were destroyed? How did this experience affect how the Hebrew saints viewed the presence of God? A closer reading of a few selected texts in the Hebrew Scriptures will show that one of the responses to suffering was Deuteronomistic theodicy.

Deuteronomistic theodicy

By Deuteronomistic theodicy, I mean a response to the problem of suffering based on one of the central theological messages of the Book of Deuteronomy: blessings for obedience to the Law of Moses and curses for disobedience taken from Deuteronomy chapter 28. This notion is recapitulated in the Pentateuch and appropriated progressively into the prophets. In Deuteronomy, the apparent response to the problem of evil seems to be what is regarded as the free will defence today. The writers take for granted that humans can do good or evil (Laato 2003). Every action has a corresponding consequence (Crenshaw 2003). Deuteronomistic theodicy, as stated above, can be found in the Law of Moses and prophets. In fact, it was the guiding principle of Deuteronomistic theodicy that the prophets used to justify the exile, including every form of suffering in the Hebrew Scriptures. We will see this precisely as we turn to the Book of Job below (Crenshaw 2003).

Job

The *Book of Job* opened with the assertion that Job has met all the requirements of the law. God also boasted about Job's righteousness and integrity before the Devil. After a couple of engagements between God and the Devil, Job is brought into the picture and tested severely. His wife failed, but Job did not. His friends came to lament with him. This lament is a deep philosophical discussion on retributive theodicy. Job boasted that he knows his redeemer lives and shall see him. The redeemer in Job 19:25–27 seems to resonate with Numbers 35 and Deuteronomy 19, who avenges by killing the killer. Typologically, this appears to mean the killing of God by God for Job after he has passed from this life from his flesh. In that case, it means the death of Christ on the cross for those who suffer (Friesenhahn 2016). However, the Book 'seemed to make quite clear that the pious are not necessarily blessed with prosperity by God' (Friesenhahn 2016:96).

Contemporary analytic philosophers and theologians have done a great job rereading the experiences of some Saints in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially Job. Eleanor Stump and N. Verbin are among such thinkers providing a dynamic response to the problem of evil from the *Book of Job*. However, some, for instance, Bart D. Ehrman (2008; Friesenhahn 2016), think that the *Book of Job* fails to provide a sufficient and viable account of suffering because he believes the Book is a conglomeration of disjointed texts – prose and poetry with contradictory responses to the problem of suffering. He argues that God fails to answer Job's questions when God

appears but merely bullies him into submission (Ehrman 2008:163; Friesenhahn 2016:95). Since I am upholding the unity of the Book, in what follows, I will present a summary of how Stump and Verbin understand Job, after which I will show that there are other possible responses to why the just suffer and whether or not they saw their suffering as having anything to do with God. Looking at Job, and as we will see in Daniel later, it is evident that contrary to how philosophers and theologians conceived and discussed the problem of evil today, Biblical saints, although they had similar questions we ask today, seem to have a different perspective from ours. This is because they had a covenantal relationship with God.

Stump argues that the most important thing the story of Job presents, which many commentators missed, is that Job saw God face-to-face at the end of the story. Although not a literal way of seeing, because of shared attention when God showed up, Job saw God in such a way that he would not have seen him except for his suffering. This seeing is crucial to the entire Book of Job, so that after it, Job drops his charges against God, including his existential worries. His focus shifted to hearing why he suffered. Although God did not answer the *why* question, Job saw the love of God as a parent directing his love towards the entire creation, including those suffering (Stump 2008).

An African proverb states that people should be aware of what they say when separating a fight between lovers because when they finally reconcile, the peacemaker sometimes becomes the enemy. Stump argues that this is what we found in the Book of Job when God showed up after Job had presented his case. God challenged Job for questioning him and simultaneously condemned his friends for condemning Job. These conflicting responses raise a few questions and objections. Stump finds an answer to this objection in the ontological distinction between the creator and the creatures – notwithstanding Job's second-person experience with God. Because God showed up at the summons of Job, it means that Job was honoured. God acted like a parent who defended the child from their bully but disapproved of the child questioning them (Stump 2008).

Verbin holds that being intimate with God in suffering and experiencing his presence actively is possible. In his suffering, Job never saw God far away nor felt any disconnection from God. He was still intimate with God. However, contrary to the former, God is now cruel to Job in this new intimacy. Job wonders what has become of his relationship with God and seeks explanations for God's actions, hoping to reestablish the former blissful relationship (Verbin 2007). The following two passages substantiate these claims as cited by N. Verbin. Job noted how having the former relationship with God was great, saying in Job 29:1-2 (*author's emphasis*):

How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness! Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's *intimate friendship* blessed my house, when the Almighty was still *with* me and my children were

around me, when my path was drenched with cream and the rock poured out from streams of olive oil.

Contrary to these good days, God is no longer with Job as He used to be. Although, as argued, God is not distant from Job. However, He is absent from Job's life by His positive mutual relationship. Here, Job laments:

I cry out to you, God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of your hand you attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm.

Job believed God unjustly treated him; he put on a defence and rejected the Deuteronomistic or retributive construction of his afflictions by his friends. He thinks he is innocent even when God appears to him. However, the fundamental question about why Job suffered in the first place and the suffering of all the righteous is not answered unequivocally in the Book of Job, even when God appears (Verbin 2007).

As is evident, Stump believes that the answer to Job's predicament is that he saw God; Verbin argues that Job recanted equalling himself with God but not the accusation of his unjust suffering. Nevertheless, he forgave God but was unwilling to reconcile with him. Verbin argues that the centrality of the entire episode is about a failed relationship. God was an assailant who refused to take responsibility for his actions and tried to buy Job over by giving him a double portion of his earlier riches. Nevertheless, it does not change the fact that the relationship failed because God is like an assailant without a deep knowledge of his actions' harm to the victim (Verbin 2007).

I agree with these interpretations. However, given the argument of this paper, a new understanding of Job is possible contrary to the lesser evil for the greater good, protest and forgiveness of Verbin and finding God, as in the case of Stump. I believe that another important aspect of summarising the entire Book of Job, which I think is in line with the experiences of the Old Testament saints and is in close proximity to the New Testament, is accepting the fact that God and humanity have an eternal indissoluble bond. This bond is not based on benefits, but it is an ontological bond. In other words, although the Hebrew Scriptures show the just agonising in their suffering and wondering why God seems distant, their actions suggest that they never believed he was absent in their suffering. Let us now turn to the Book of Daniel to see another example.

Daniel 3:16–18

The general background to the Book of Daniel is an exilic context built on the Deuteronomistic theodicy. Because of Israel's sin, they were taken captives to exile. Daniel and his friends were removed from their ancestral land and the Holy Temple. They were disconnected from the physical representation of the dwelling place of God. Deventer (2012) argues that for the deportees, including those left behind,

[T]he exile meant the loss of what they believed their God had promised and given them: a land, a place of worship, and an everlasting royal lineage. To them, the event of the exile presented a conundrum: why had their God not lived up to his promises? (p. 208)

Notwithstanding this question, from the beginning of the Book, the writer makes it clear that Daniel and his friends had resolved to live in a covenantal relationship with God despite being in exile. Their God could not defend them but gave them up because they sinned against him. Instead of giving up on him since he forsook them because they broke the law of Moses, Daniel and his friends did not consider their precarious condition as a justification for worshipping a self-acclaimed god who is a mere mortal.

Against this background, Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego are spectacular characters amid adversity worth emulating by contemporary Christian sufferers. Montgomery (1959) argues that:

The defendants [*Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego*] throw themselves upon their God; yet with the restraint of faith, for they admit that he may not interfere, but nevertheless they will keep faith and defy the king. Had the story meant that they were sure of deliverance, their reply might have been spiritual arrogance. (p. 206)

I want to highlight that in their defence, three elements are essential to the current discussion: (1) The exilic context had already given the sufferers grounds for dismay, given that God could not save them from their captors, notwithstanding the Deuteronomistic context. (2) They were aware that God might not save them from the arrogant king, who had exalted himself to the level of God and demanded worship from them. (3) The apparent reason for the sufferers' attitude amid such aberrant evil is not based on God's deliverance but on a conscious decision to sustain a union, including sacrificing their earthly lives.

Philosophers and theologians, including those suffering like Job, have always expected black-and-white answers to the problem of suffering. However, the Books of Job and Daniel reveal that this is impossible (Dell 2023). As we shall see below, the New Testament also wrestles with the question of the suffering of the saints and provides different responses.

Suffering motif in the New Testament

Just like in the Old Testament, there are various justifications for the suffering of the saints in the New Testament. Retribution is taught in the Gospels; for instance, in Matthew 5:3–12, testing seems to refine souls in 1 Corinthians 10:13, and James 1:2–4, and suffering is seen as a discipline by a loving parent in Hebrews 12:5–11 (Holmen 2003). However, as stated above, there are instances in the Bible where there might be no sense of suffering, like in Mark 2:1–11 or John 9:1–3.

Despite the continuation of the retributive principle, there seems to be a change of order in how suffering is understood: it is one of the signs of discipleship. Because humanity was subjected to the law, sin and the Devil in the old covenant, one expects the new covenant to reverse the old completely. This is indeed the true story of the incarnation. God became human to save humans. Surprisingly, the New Testament never taught that suffering ended with the coming of Christ. Instead, Jesus continually taught his followers that there was no hope in the current world during his earthly ministry. He explicitly told his followers they would suffer greatly for his name's sake. He argues that the student is not greater than the master. Since he, the master, did not escape suffering, they could not but also suffer (see Mt 10). He ended his ministry by promising to always be with his followers: 'And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Mt 28:20).

Paul's death to self and life in Christ in Galatians gives some insight into the nature of the divine presence in the new creation. Because of this new creation, the believers now live their lives in union with Christ and share the *mind of Christ* with him. They can now experience joint or shared attention with Christ. This is a form of a mystical union. Through dyadic and triadic joint attention, Paul now has a mutual closeness with Christ, sharing in his compassion and suffering (McCall 2021).

As seen above, the Deuteronomistic or retributive concept of suffering sees suffering from a perspective of cause and effect. Despite its vulnerability, this perspective has a scriptural basis and seems rooted in Genesis chapter three in the Fall and its aftermath. The Fall and Deuteronomistic theodicy, which informs the response of the friends of Job, is, however, challenged in the New Testament, as mentioned above. In Paul, union with Christ means a lot. In as much as union with Christ, a critical part of the *ordo salutis* leads to glorification; through it, believers must first go to the cross with Christ, die, be buried and rise with him to obtain glorification (Holmen 2003).

In Galatians 2:20, Paul argued that:

I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Biblical exegetes have been polarised regarding the message of this passage, and there seems to be a rejection of a literal interpretation. There are moderate and radical apocalyptic, occasionalist readings of the passage (McCall 2021).

The occasionalist reading refers to the body, the soul or consciousness and denies that dying with Christ is a continuous process but fails to mention the Spirit (McCall 2021:19). In as much as Adam and Eve did not die immediately after disobeying God's command, it is clear that what happened was the departure of God's Spirit from humans. It was the entrance of such Spirit that gave humans life. In

other words, as a result of their union with Christ, believers today are once again alive spiritually, having died because of their sins. This spiritual becoming is progressive and will be fully actualised at the *eschaton*.

So how do we understand suffering as Christians today, given the narratives above, Jesus' teaching and sufferings, and other New Testament books, especially the Pauline Corpus? The Epistles to Hebrews, Romans, of James, among many, have many answers to the question of suffering in the New Testament.

Suffering is a central element of the Christian life. During His earthly ministry, Christ suffered all kinds of sufferings, which made Him perfect as He obeyed His Father (Hebrews 5:7-10). Christ is present in our suffering because he also suffered when he was tempted. He can help those suffering today (Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-16). Suffering not only serves the purpose of refining our souls, but it is part of our glorification with Christ. In other words, our suffering with Christ could ignite a form of divine intimacy that is not received outside of suffering with Christ (Ekstrom 2023).

Christ endured the cross and all its shame because of the joy and glory ahead (Heb 12:1ff). Although Christ died once and for all, we cannot but participate with him on the cross so that we can participate in his future glory. Believers are automatically part of Christ's suffering after being united with him in death and resurrection. Just as Christ was exalted after passing through the cross, believers may also be elevated after their earthly suffering with Christ. In other words, there is no future glory without the cross.

The New Testament sees suffering as part of character and spiritual formation because resilience is a critical hallmark in the Christian race. Paul argues in Romans 5:2-4 (New International Version [NIV]) that:

And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Without hope, there is no faith with which we can please the Lord while patiently waiting for his second coming.

Because Christians are not of this world but pilgrims, the world cannot love them just like it hates their master. The rulers of this world killed him, so his followers must be hated and persecuted. Because they are in a wilderness moving to their promised land, they must endure all forms of suffering, including tests and temptations. In fact, no true believers will not experience persecution and suffering because they authenticate that we belong to Christ (2 Tm 3:12).

Conclusion

Although believers may suffer all forms of suffering today, Paul argues in Romans 8 that nothing can separate them

from the love of God. He ended up by stating that all things work together for their good. Of course, this is a hard pill to swallow for the unbelievers. Because of suffering, the power, love, and God's existence have been denied. Christian philosophers and theologians laboured daily to show that evil does not negate any of the great-making properties of God, including his goodness, love, mercy and compassion. There is nothing wrong with doing that. However, this study argues that while that approach is excellent, it seems to over-concentrate on God with little attention to the sufferer.

The study argues that God is always present in the affliction of the righteous. Their suffering is not always a result of their actions or from God. It might simply mean participation in the suffering of Christ because of their union with him. It could also be a result of distraction from the enemies of God. The Holy Spirit groans and sympathises with the believers in their affliction; therefore, they are comforted. We look forward to the end, where everything will be perfected at the consummation of all things. We shall live in eternal bliss with the Lord forever; amen.

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I declare that I am the sole author of this research article.

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