

ART AND
THE BIBLE
SERIES

MUSEUM OF BIBLICAL ART
MOBIA

The Museum of Biblical Art in New York is a young museum with an ambitious mandate: to shed light on the ways in which Biblical stories, symbols and traditions have influenced art and visual culture. The Museum's Art and the Bible Series extends that mission. The volumes in this series will bring new scholarship on the centuries-long encounter between art and the Bible to a wide audience.



CHAGALL'S BIBLE: MYSTICAL STORYTELLING



CHAGALL'S BIBLE: MYSTICAL STORYTELLING

The Museum of Biblical Art celebrates and interprets art related to the Bible and its cultural legacy in Jewish and Christian traditions through exhibitions, education, and scholarship. The exhibition, Marc Chagall: Mystical Storytelling, is but one outstanding example of the ways in which the Museum embodies its unique mission.

Marc Chagall holds a singular place in the canon of modern painters. Melding symbolic motifs and iconographies from the traditions of Jewish Hasidism, eastern Orthodoxy, and western Christianity as well as incorporating elements from his Russian cultural roots, fondness for France, and experiences of joy and tragedy, Chagall created a style of mystical storytelling from which flowed a dynamic and personally significant series of biblical narratives. Composed of over one hundred etchings, lithographs, and paintings, Chagall's Bible: Mystical Storytelling examines issues of historical context and evolving religious sensibilities, and represents an important moment in the reappraisal and deepening understanding of the artist's intriguing and unique images of biblical heroes, prophets, and scenes of the Crucifixion.

Tom Freudenheim's essay, Marc Chagall: A Meditation, is inspired by an instance of geographic intersection between his family and Chagall and expounds on the theme of "transgression" in the life and work of the artist.

Marc Chagall: Mystical Storytelling is on view at the Museum of Biblical Art from Tuesday, October 7, 2008 through Sunday, January 18, 2009.

MARC CHAGALL: A MEDITATION



TOM FREUDENHEIM

Any exhibition of Marc Chagall's work is an opportunity to add to the voluminous extant writings about the artist. That's especially true when contemplating his Biblical images; after all, their ostensible source is the written word. But for me Chagall has always led to meditations about his fascinating hold on the imagination, as well as his amazing popularity. This essay foregoes the temptation to rehash most of the well-known biographical details of the artist's life, or systematic formal and stylistic analysis – the heft of Chagall books, both scholarly and popular, suggests that as a redundant task – in favor of simply taking a fresh look at the works in this exhibition (is there such a thing as a fresh look at Chagall?) while ruminating on their meanings. Any artist trying to handle Biblical themes, in any medium, faces centuries of predecessors, and the challenge of wondering how to contribute new accretions to so much that's already been done. Were that to cause despair, we would have a lot less art in the world; the committed artist is not afraid to confront the demons of his predecessors. The exhibition demonstrates that this is no less true of Marc Chagall.

The initial impulse for my meditation on Chagall's prints comes from an odd personal connection – albeit a very slim one. First shown in Berlin by the now-legendary Herwarth Walden in 1913, the artist was included in a two-man exhibition (with Alfred Kubin) at Walden's gallery in 1914. My father, born in Berlin in 1904, would have been only ten at the time, so while Chagall may well have visited the noted artist Hermann Struck (1876-1944), who lived in the apartment above my grandparents at Bruecken Allee 33, my dad would not have remembered that.¹ Nor, alas, did he ever tell me of meeting Chagall on the artist's subsequent Berlin visits – even in 1922, when Chagall spent time with both Struck and Joseph Budko, learning the techniques of printmaking. It is assumed that Struck “introduced Chagall to the technique of printmaking.”² Perhaps these were simply studio, rather than home, visits. Or possibly Chagall was not sufficiently well-known at that time for my 18-year-old father to have remembered meeting him. But considering Chagall's significant output in several print media, this brief Berlin training period in the methods of printing was clearly significant and would impact his art for the rest of his life. Struck's handbook about art printing, *Die Kunst des Radierungs*, was first published by Paul Cassirer in 1920, and went through several subsequent printings. A 1923 edition includes a Struck portrait etching of a young Marc Chagall. Struck moved to Haifa (in then-Palestine) in 1922, probably shortly after that portrait was executed, although he returned to Berlin each summer (including in 1926, when he drew a deathbed portrait of my grandfather that August).

It is unclear whether Chagall met Struck through Cassirer or the other way around, but in any case 1922 is also the year of Chagall's first significant print output. The group of prints Chagall executed in that year demonstrates his affinity with this new medium. The twenty engravings (etching and dry point) that he produced for his autobiography, *My Life*, were published separately by Cassirer.³ They are wonderful fantasies, filled with the humor of Chagall's early work, and playfully alluding to the various artists whose work he must have seen in his travels – Moscow, Paris, Berlin – Kandinsky, Grosz, Picasso, Matisse, Vlaminck, Delaunay, and others. Yet we never confuse Chagall's work with anyone else's – a characteristic that was to remain dependable for the rest of his life. If he took bits of abstract ideas from influences as broad as Cubism, Fauvism, the Blue Rider, Orphism, and Vorticism, he remained quite steadfastly within the range of figurative and coloristic ideas that determined his art throughout his very long career.



In the world of art criticism, the term *illustrator* often carries a vague sense of the pejorative – as if making “pictures for books” is somehow less worthy than other forms of art. That negative sensibility is not generally applied to such illustrations as medieval manuscript illuminations, or the works of countless artists who have depicted scenes from classical mythology or the Bible or other literature – as long as we approve of the artist on some level other than “mere” illustration. Chagall’s reputation may not rest on the output of his prints, and yet his graphic oeuvre is vast, and surely plays a part in assuring both his wide availability and his popularity. In 1960, his prominent printer/publisher, the Parisian Fernand Mourlot (1895–1988), issued the first of what was to become a six-volume catalogue raisonné of the lithographs (probably over 1100 in all). Following his work on the autobiographical etchings, Chagall’s ventures in the world of book illustration continued with etchings for two books, *Maternité* (by Marcel Arland) and *Les sept pêchés capitaux*, both published in 1926. The following year was seminal for the history of Chagall’s print output, because it marks the beginning of his relationship with legendary publisher/dealer Ambroise Vollard (1866–1939), which was to continue even after Vollard’s death.

The first Vollard project involved illustrations for that quintessentially French work, *The Fables* of La Fontaine because, Vollard said, “his aesthetic seems to me to be as close, in a sense related, to La Fontaine’s – at once sturdy and subtle, realistic and fantastic.”⁴ It is worth considering that those same qualities are probably at the root of Chagall’s immense popularity. But the project was heavily attacked in the press, as giving over a national literary treasure to a “Russian, a Jew and a foreigner” or “the sign painter from Vitebsk” or, as art critic Jacques Genne wrote in *l’Art Vivant*, “to have a quintessentially French poet illustrated by a Russian, by Chagall, what a sacrilege!”⁵ Vollard’s defense of his choice is also instructive, describing Chagall as “an artist whose providence has made him familiar with the magic of the Orient...”⁶ Chagall’s home town of Vitebsk is not exactly “the Orient”; but this comment

reflects a common intimation of “the Jew” as “oriental” and exotic – an atavistic holdover from 19th-century characterizations which often conflated Middle Eastern and North African exoticisms, Muslims and Jews, especially in visual depictions.

Worse attacks were to come their way, however, as Vollard and Chagall embarked on the vast project of Bible illustrations (Fig. 1). As Chagall’s friend and biographer, the artist Jacob Baal-Teshuva, wrote: “[art critic] Maurice Reynal [in] *L’Intransigeant* solicited and published opinions on the project. [And Georges] Rouault, who was well known for rendition of Biblical subjects...commented spitefully: ‘Chagall is going to do his dance in front of the Wailing Wall.’”⁷ It is not especially comforting to consider that these comments were being made in France in the late 1920s, only a few years before Hitler’s ascent to power next door. And it reflects an attitude Chagall was to encounter from artist colleagues all his life, even after he had become a lionized celebrity. Over lunch in the 1950s, Picasso remarked to Chagall, apropos of his being away from Russia for so many years: “Why don’t you go back to your own country?” and then “With you I suppose it’s a question of business. There’s no money to be made there.”⁸

In preparation for this project of Bible illustrations, Chagall and his family visited Palestine from February to April of 1931, at the invitation of Meir Dizengoff, long-time mayor of Tel Aviv.⁹ It is slightly amusing to think that a visit to the Holy Land should serve as inspiration for Bible illustrations that seldom depict a sense of place,¹⁰ and yet there is a pervasive sensibility – still evident in much of today’s political upheavals – that physical contact with the land itself can be inspiring. “A Homeland for the Jews” (that is, modern political Zionism) has always lived in a kind of tension with the idea of “the Holy Land” (the traditional Jewish – and Christian and Muslim – attachment to the land of the Bible). In any case, for all the attacks on Vollard and Chagall, and despite the artist’s extended visit to Palestine, the Bible illustrations took many years to complete and be published and don’t reflect the actual venue of those stories. By the time of Vollard’s death in 1939, Chagall had finished 66 plates. World War II – and Chagall’s stay in the United States – interrupted the project, so that 105 sheets were finally published by Teriade (real name: Statis Eleftheriades, 1889–1983) in 1956. These and various other Teriade prints, some published in his de luxe magazine, *Verve*, form the present exhibition (Fig. 2). The range of subject matter presents wonderful opportunities to consider questions of iconography, how we see what we see, the reasons that some works zap us with an immediate visual message, and why others need labels or explanations.

Traditionally, Jews don’t subject the Hebrew Bible – the Torah, i.e., Pentateuch – to illustration. There are various points of view as to how strictly Jews have followed the injunction of the Second Commandment:

*“You shall have no other gods beside Me. You shall make you no carved likeness and no image of what is in the heavens above or what is on the earth below or what is in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not bow to them and you shall not worship them, for I am the Lord your God, a jealous god, reckoning the crime of the fathers with sons, and with the third generation and with the fourth, for My foes, and doing kindness to the thousandth generation for My friends and for those who keep My commands.”*¹¹

Whatever else may be pictured, the Torah scroll itself is never illustrated, and indeed Jews would consider an illustrated Pentateuch as seriously transgressive. But as the English novelist, Howard Jacobson, writes, “...precisely because the Lord was one we did

FIGURE 1.
Marc Chagall © ARS, NY,
*Joseph Interprets Pharaoh's
Dreams*, 1957, *The Bible*,
no. 22. Hand-colored etching,
The Patrick and Beatrice
Haggerty Museum of Art,
Marquette University,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin,
acc. 80.7.105.

FIGURE 2.
Marc Chagall © ARS, NY,
David and Bathsheba, 1956.
From the 1956 (nos. 33, 34)
Verve edition of Chagall's
The Bible. Color lithograph,
Private Collection.

not tolerate idols. In which case why did we kiss words? A word, too, could be an idol, couldn't it?"¹² Since the late Middle Ages, other books of the Hebrew Bible have been subject to illustration. Prime among these is the Book of Esther, read during the Jewish Purim holiday, and often subjected to vivid illustrations, especially during the 17th and 18th centuries. And the primary non-Biblical liturgical book regularly used by Jews – the Passover *Haggadah* – is frequently illustrated, and for centuries has been a primary creative target for artists (Fig. 3).

My Chagall meditations have taken me toward this constantly recurring sense of transgression. Anyone growing up in a western urban environment that gave primacy to the Christian church – both socio-logically and physically – would have a keen sense of its power. We are reminded of this when we travel in the Île-de-France and see the overbearing size of a Gothic cathedral hovering in the distance. It is even evident, if a bit more gently, in the spire of a New England church that towers over a pretty historic village. But for a Jew growing up in late 19th and early 20th century Eastern Europe, that local church is more than picturesque; it is also menacing, because it represents an ever present threat – of potential hate, or pogrom, or expulsion. The resultant phobias and superstitions (not derived out of religious injunctions) vary: some traditional Jews might be uncomfortable writing x's, while others will refrain from crossing their legs (the cross being a Christian symbol with negative valence). But as with many phobias, there is an equally seductive attraction to that which is uncomfortable, just as there is to the forbidden; that is a human, not a Jewish, characteristic. Chagall would have been very familiar with the churches of his own city of Vitebsk, and given the wealth of visual possibilities in a Russian Orthodox church – where icons and mysterious glitter abound – it is not unlikely that a young Chagall would have ventured inside, first out of curiosity and then for the visual feast. It is one of the most tantalizing transgressive acts available to Jews – especially young ones tightly controlled by religious laws and customs. If this lure was also subject to risk (for example, someone finding you in the church) or punishment (when found out), there was also the gain of multiple rewards: access to the exotic, demystifying or remystifying the unknown, and perhaps a new sense of connection with the majority culture within whose menacing vise one lived.

All these feelings would have been available to Chagall, who was already a teenager when the infamous Kishinev pogroms took place in 1903 and 1905. All things Christian must have seemed both repellant and alluring – potentially both threatening and liberating. It is against this background that we need to view the counter impulses that would have made Bible illustrations an appealing project, just as the frequent use of Christ images and other details of Christian iconography turn into especially powerful – even disturbing – means of drawing us into Chagall's work (Fig. 4). And considering that he gained iconic status as



FIGURE 3.
Giving out unleavened bread and sweetmeats to the children, c. 1320.
British Library/HIP/
Art Resource, NY.



FIGURE 4.
Marc Chagall © ARS,
NY, *Quai de Tournelle*,
1953. Oil on canvas,
Private Collection.

the quintessential “Jewish” artist, there is a special kind of tension by which Chagall lets us share in his transgressive impulses. Coming from a traditional Jewish background, in an environment steeped in the celebratory modes of Hasidism (itself considered transgressive of tradition by its opponents), Chagall's gradual gaining of self-confidence as an artist would also have made him feel increasingly secure about engaging in the forbidden. In the early 1930's, by the time he was working on his Bible illustrations, that sense of wrongdoing might no longer have been a prime factor, but it surely cannot have been absent from the artist's sensibility.

The Bible illustrations themselves are rich in original concept yet include also numerous nods to the tradition of western art out of which even an artist from Vitebsk emerged. He had, by then, spent plenty of time in the world's art capitals (and presumably in their museums), so he would have been familiar with many of the most famous Biblical images by earlier artists. It is thus interesting to consider which of the Bible stories gets the most visual attention, and to rediscover that it is a pretty haphazard selection. The choice of themes does not appear to be based on any sense of their relative narrative importance. It is a puzzling, odd mixture of moments in the narrative that have become iconic in western art and totally unfamiliar ones. Chagall almost snubs his nose at his predecessors' versions. Compare Chagall's *Creation of Man* (Fig. 5) with Michelangelo's interpretation on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, or Chagall's *Sacrifice of Isaac* with versions by Ghiberti¹³ and Rembrandt.¹⁴ We want an artist to take on the familiar and imbue it with a fresh sensibility; that is what happens in Chagall's work over and over again, demonstrating the artist's whimsical approach to what might otherwise be very heavy subject matter, just as he ignores or transforms traditional versions of the Biblical narrative. But we also see the artist's deep roots in western art, and even in its romantic 19th-century Jewish offspring: is the bearded man in *God and Eve* just a surrogate rabbi type (Chagall would have seen plenty of those images while working with Hermann Struck), or is he a Christian God-the-Father? How different is this from the bearded *Abraham Weeps for Sarah*, or the crying bearded man we see in *The*

FIGURE 5.
Marc Chagall © ARS,
NY, *The Creation of Man*,
1957, *The Bible*, no. 1.
Hand-colored etching,
The Patrick and Beatrice
Haggerty Museum of Art,
Marquette University,
Milwaukee, Wisconsin,
acc. 80.7.46.

Sufferings of Jeremiah? For an artist whose personality and self-portraits flew about in so much of his earlier work, it is fascinating to note the impersonal nature of so many of Chagall's beloved Biblical characters. Why does *Adam and Eve Expelled from Paradise* seem so benign, considering the profound pathos that artists such as Masaccio brought to the subject?¹⁵ In Jewish tradition, the Expulsion resonates differently from the way it does in Christianity, but nevertheless it carries significant weight: the end of Sabbath is seen as a kind of leaving of Paradise, something the artist misses here. Chagall's *David and Goliath* shows the future king as a towering but somewhat insipid figure, and misses the generations of wonderful David variations – all the way from the silver plate in the so-called Cyprus Treasure¹⁶ to Andrea del Castagno¹⁷ to Michelangelo¹⁸ and Bernini.¹⁹ If there are rules being broken here – depicting God, making images where none are allowed – they are not just the rules of Judaism but the rules of traditional iconography as well. We expect artists to know the principles before departing from them; we never doubt this in Chagall's work, even when narratives of immense power are sometimes transformed into the kind of fairy tale figures that might suggest the best fanciful children's books.

FIGURE 6.
Marc Chagall © ARS, NY,
Moses with the Tablets
of the Law, 1956. From
the 1956 (nos. 33, 34) *Verve*
edition of Chagall's *The*
Bible. Color lithograph,
The Collection of Edward
and Diane Knippers.

FIGURE 7.
Marc Chagall © ARS,
NY, *Levi*, 1962, *Jerusalem*
Windows series.
Color lithograph,
Private Collection.

It is also worth perusing these illustrations and asking which are immediately recognizable, even without the assistance of text. That is important because our sense of recognition comes from an instinctive understanding of and connection to the visual traditions into which Chagall was placing himself. Assuming some rudimentary familiarity with Bible stories, *Jacob's Ladder* reads clearly, as does *Potiphar's Wife*, and *Samson Destroying the Temple*. And viewers must consider the clues or signs that speak to us immediately: the harp as David's identifier, the two connected forms with rounded tops (Ten Commandments) to show us that the figure holding them is Moses (Fig. 6). There is the occasional oddity which reminds us of Chagall's connection to his fellow artists, as in the way *Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba* suggests Pascin's *Le Roi Pausole* (1924).²⁰ Indeed, the Bulgarian born Jules Pascin (1885–1930) preceded Chagall in Paris, and the two artists surely knew each other there, so it's not surprising that the occasionally emphatic casualness of Chagall's image arrangements should hint at Pascin's voluminous, and often erotic, drawings. And yet there is also the contrast of carefully organized and studied, even formalized, spatial ordering, as in the forceful diagonal that cuts across *Moses Breaking the Tablets*, and the scroll and hands and arms in *The Calling of Ezekiel*.

Marc Chagall obviously was not bothered about imagined constraints of his Jewish tradition, when convenient.²¹ The windows for Union Church on the Rockefeller estate in Pocantico Hills, and other church commissions in France, Germany, Switzerland, and England, gave him special status as an artist who could communicate ideas inherent in the



Jewish, and by extension the Jewish and Christian, Bible. In his commission for the windows of the new chapel at Jerusalem's Hadassah Hospital, Chagall bowed, at least partially, to the Jewish tradition by not including human figures in the designs for a series representing the Twelve Tribes (Fig. 7). If that made the art sufficiently "kosher" for a Jewish house of prayer, the lack of people, so integral a part of Chagall's imagery, also made those windows seem especially pretty and decorative, but lacking in the enigmatic fantasies that have generally been a part of his most successful works. The omission of human images in the Jerusalem Windows presumably derives from the Second Commandment and its prohibition against images one might worship in place of the One God; certainly not in, of all places, a Jewish house of worship! As Howard Jacobson's transgressive hero speculates:

"I happen to take that prohibition very seriously. Not in its sensuous applications but in its ethical ones. It is not good to lose oneself in art. It is idolatrous. Lose yourself in art and you end up not knowing where you begin and end. It is a mistake to fuse with the image."²²

And yet the Hadassah chapel itself has become a kind of pilgrimage site for its Chagall Windows, and contrary to the dictates of Jewish law, one might wonder whether the windows have themselves become icons. Record crowds (presumably many of them Jewish) stood in line for hours when the windows were shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961–62, prior to their installation in Jerusalem. Art as an object of worship: how un-Jewish and yet how modern!

Such puzzles seem appropriate to an artist who brought us into his flights of fancy from his earliest days. Chagall's work always appears easier to read than it really is. So he also was not about to conform to anything conventional when taking on Biblical narrative as subject matter – Jewish or Christian. The Christ images (as here in *Mystical Crucifixion*, Fig. 8, and *Christ in the Clock*) are strange and even playful; they do not look much like what

FIGURE 8.
 Marc Chagall © ARS, NY,
Mystical Crucifixion, 1950.
 Color lithograph, The
 Bowden Collection.



we see in churches or museums, even if we think we know what they depict. This conforms to the ways in which Chagall always juxtaposed images that were at once easily understood and elusive in meaning. Floating figures above imprecisely remembered town scenes make no more sense than the conflict – and willful transgression – of a deeply Jewish artist working with forbidden imagery in forbidden ways. Chagall’s various Crucifixion images, juxtaposed with Jewish subject matter, may have alluded to the Holocaust, but that probably has never satisfied traditional Jews who would be offended (and perhaps even repulsed) by any image of a Crucifixion. After all, deeply etched in the Jewish collective memory, and predating the Holocaust by centuries, is the knowledge that the Crucifixion is part of the narrative in which Jews are depicted as playing an unsavory and critical role; as a result, Good Friday was generally a frightening day in the lives of Jews who lived among devout Christians and often cowered in their homes until the Resurrection was celebrated. Any Jew emerging from the Pale of Settlement knew this very well.

Even when sitting in the safety of America during World War II, trying to digest the horrible news of Jewish slaughter in Europe, Chagall was grappling artistically with depictions – of burning houses or fleeing people or a crucified Christ – that never quite capture the horror of reality. Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937) responds to contemporary tragedy in a searing way, suggesting that perhaps this kind of intensity eluded Chagall. I don’t believe that. He obviously worked with different intentions. In Chagall’s art, the playful usually overtakes the awful; that derives from the many ways in which his figures move about in the space he has created for them, and from his exceptionally vivid palette, whose glorious colors he transformed from paint to print to glass to tapestry to mosaic. The Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall, opened in 1973 in Nice, testifies to the impact of Chagall’s work with Biblical themes that continued to the end of his life and was further developed in a variety of media. If religion has its dour artists (and practitioners), Chagall is surely not among them. And it may well be that our need for whimsy is what makes of Chagall such an enduringly popular artist.

ENDNOTE

- 1 Struck’s home was a notable meeting place for early leaders of modern Zionism, and he was a personal friend of Theodore Herzl, its founder. I often heard stories about how it was filled with art and objects of Judaica, creating an exotic environment: “Thinking to our wonderful and beloved Bruecken Allee 33 is giving me such a warm feeling and I nearly smell the atmosphere.” (Mally Struck [his widow] in a letter to my father, January 30, 1945.)
- 2 Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Chagall* (Los Angeles, Taschen America, 1998), p. 219. From Struck: engraving and etching; from Budko: woodcuts and lithography.
- 3 “Chagall had finished writing the book in Moscow in 1922, but it was not until 1931 that it finally appeared.” Baal-Teshuva, p. 219.
- 4 Baal-Teshuva, p. 221.
- 5 Cited in Baal-Teshuva, p. 221.
- 6 Cited in Baal-Teshiva, p. 221.
- 7 Baal-Teshiva, p. 223.
- 8 Cited in Jonathan Wilson, *Marc Chagall* (New York, Nextbook, 2007), p. 193.
- 9 After 1957 Chagall made several trips to Israel.
- 10 Rachel’s Tomb is an interesting exception, since it was also the subject of nostalgic images by generations of artists visiting the Holy Land.
- 11 Exodus, Chapter 20. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004), pp. 429–430. Alter cites Moshe Weinfeld as proposing that the “first Commandment” would read “I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods beside Me” — which would still keep the “second Commandment” in the anti-image mode.
- 12 Howard Jacobson, *Kalooki Nights* (London, Jonathan CAOE, 2006), p. 20.
- 13 Lorenzo Ghiberti (1378–1455), Baptistry Doors, Florence
- 14 Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), *Abraham and Isaac*, 1634, Hermitage, St. Petersburg
- 15 Tommaso Cassai, called Masaccio (1401–1428), Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence.
- 16 613–29/30 A.D., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 17 1450, National Gallery of Art, Washington
- 18 1504, Galleria dell’Accademia, Florence
- 19 1623–24, Galleria Borghese, Rome
- 20 Josefowitz Collection, Lausanne
- 21 He’s even buried in a Catholic cemetery in Saint-Paul-de-Vence, although that appears to have been his widow’s doing.
- 22 Jacobson, p. 251.

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