

MIDWESTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

ANTICHRIST

A PAPER

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE
DR 37360 NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

BY

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SEPTEMBER 19, 2018

Introduction

The term antichrist is employed only by John in his first and second epistles. The prefix *anti-* added to a person's name or title can mean either the claim to be that person, or opposition to, equivalence to, or substitution for that person.¹ Throughout the history of the church many have been assigned the title "The Antichrist." This list includes Judaism, Roman Emperors, Muslims, the Pope², King George, Abraham Lincoln, Juan Carlos of Spain, Mussolini, Hitler, Ronald Reagan, Elvis, JFK, FDR, Henry Kissinger, Gorbachev, Moshe Dayan, Anwar el-Sadat, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and Saddam Hussein.³ Stephen Nichols comments, "The point is, the whole task of identifying the antichrist, which has a long and cornucopian history indeed, is a misdirected quest. The text never calls upon us to identify the antichrist."⁴

Rather than seeking to identify a certain religion, movement, or individual as the antichrist, this paper will argue that antichrist is a recurring entity in the last days and will culminate in a final antichrist who embodies all that is against Christ. In order to establish this position, first an identification of the terms used in Scripture to denote and connote the antichrist will be necessary. With this foundation, an exegetical examination of the New Testament texts

¹ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 98.

² Identifying the Pope as the Antichrist has the longest standing and most consistent tradition including interpreters such as Hilary of Poitiers, Martin Luther, John Calvin, many Puritans, Jonathan Edwards, Arno Gaebelein, R. A. Torrey, and J. Dwight Pentecost.

³ For more information regarding the history of naming the Antichrist see: Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Robert Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an American Obsession* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); Bernard McGinn, *Antichrist: Two Thousand Years of the Human Fascination with Evil* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994); and Stephen J. Nichols, "Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows: On the History of Identifying the Antichrist," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44/1 (2001): 75–85.

⁴ Nichols, "Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows," 75.

that discuss the antichrist will be offered. Finally, after all the pertinent texts have been exegeted, this paper will construct a theological synthesis of the exegetical material.

Antichrist Terms

There are three biblical terms that the authors of the New Testament use to denote antichrist: *ἀντίχριστος*, the man of lawlessness, and the beast. These three terms help identify the pertinent New Testament passages. Each of these terms will be described below.

ἀντίχριστος

The term *ἀντίχριστος* is used only by John in 1 John 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 John 7. BDAG describes antichrist as the adversary of the Messiah to appear in the last days.⁵ Already it can be seen that this term is an eschatological term that deals with an enemy of God's anointed. Louw and Nida add that *ἀντίχριστος* is one who is opposed to Christ in the sense of usurping the role of Christ.⁶ With this addition, antichrist is pictured as one who does not just war against Christ, but seeks to replace Christ. Danny Akin observes with balance, "John's interest in the concept is primarily theological and Christological, not political or eschatological."⁷ This observation is helpful in bringing Christological concerns to the discussion though it goes too far to remove John's eschatological concerns. *ἀντίχριστος* is indeed to appear in the last days. Raymond Brown argues that the term *ἀντίχριστος* is a convergence of four parallel Jewish traditions: 1) the sea monster or Leviathan; 2) Satan; 3) a wicked human ruler that embodies evil; and 4) the

⁵ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Revised and edited by Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁶ J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, Vol. 2 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 542.

⁷ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 267.

false prophet.⁸ Roy Yates adds, “There is no single Antichrist, but many — wherever doctrines are taught that subvert the essential truths of the gospel.”⁹ Yates begins to expand the theme of antichrist beyond a singular individual and to consider the theological grounds that must be considered when considering antichrist.

The Man of Lawlessness

In 2 Thessalonians 2:3 Paul introduces the term “man of lawlessness.” The person to whom Paul is referring to here is an individual who is without law. Gene Green summarizes the semantic data for the word *ἀνομος*, “[this term] could mean ‘without [the] law’ or ‘against [the] law,’ but it came to be a synonym for ‘sin’ or ‘iniquity.’”¹⁰ The term *νόμος* is used in Paul’s writing to refer to the moral law that is known by each individual’s conscience, the Law of Moses, and the Law of Christ. In the latter two usages, the concepts of covenant and obedience are implicit. The man of lawlessness is one who embodies all that is in opposition to the Lord. Charles Wanamaker acknowledges that “the lawless one” is a phrase used in *Psalms of Solomon* 17.11 to refer to the Roman general Pompey who led the Roman troops into Palestine in 63 B.C.¹¹ This Roman occupation of Palestine led to Jewish apostasy.

The Beast

In Revelation, John first envisions the beast rising from the abyss in 11:7. In 13:1, John sees the beast rising from the sea. The language used to describe the beast in vv. 1–2 is similar to

⁸ Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 333.

⁹ Roy Yates, “The Antichrist,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 44 (1974): 43.

¹⁰ Gene L. Greene, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 308.

¹¹ Charles Wanamaker, *Commentary on 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 245.

Daniel 7:3 LXX. Grant Osbourne states with force, “the beast from the sea is the Antichrist, who will stand against Christ and try to usurp his authority and power.”¹² George Ladd adds, “The beast then is the eschatological Antichrist who was foreshadowed in certain aspects of Rome, and in other totalitarian states as well.”¹³

The terms *ἀντίχριστος*, the man of lawlessness, and the first beast will be examined in their contexts in order to produce a New Testament theology of the antichrist theme.

Exegesis of New Testament Texts

This section will offer an exegetical analysis of 1 John 2:18–23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; and Revelation 13:1–10. These passages offer insight on antichrist, the man of lawlessness, and the beast respectively. Once these passages have been exegeted, the data will be synthesized in the final section of this paper to produce a concise New Testament doctrinal understanding of antichrist.

1 John 2:18–23

The first epistle of John was written to followers of Jesus Christ to promote joy (1:4), prevent sin (2:1), protect believers from false teaching (2:26), and provide assurance (5:13).¹⁴ In his attempt to help protect believers from false teaching, John offers specific identifiers of antichrist before exhorting believers in 2:24, “Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you.”

¹² Grant Osbourne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2002), 491.

¹³ George E. Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 177.

¹⁴ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 32.

V.18 begins by confirming to the reader that it is “the last hour.” This phrase is unique to John but communicates the same idea that New Testament expressions such as “in the last days” or “in the last times” communicates. Paul, James, Peter, and Jude use the phrase when referring to the final portion of the last days that will be marked by tribulation in 2 Timothy 3:1; James 5:3; 2 Peter 3:3; and Jude 18. Jesus also referred to these last days in Matthew 24 and Mark 13.

Offering proof that John’s audience is in the last hour, John goes on to say, “and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour.” John makes a distinction between the “many antichrists” that have come and “antichrist” who is forthcoming. In making this distinction, it appears as if there are many that represent antichrist in character and yet there is one antichrist yet to come that will be qualitatively different than all the previous antichrists. D. Edmond Hiebert comments, “John placed the future coming of the personal Antichrist as a parallel reality to the existence of the ‘many antichrists.’”¹⁵

In considering whether antichrists are human or supernatural beings, Kruse concludes, “It is probably best to say that while the antichrists are experienced now as human entities, behind them there is another force making war against God and his people.”¹⁶ The remainder of the passage under consideration goes on to describe antichrists as John is understanding them here.

In v.19 John describes these antichrists as those who “went out from us, but they were not of us.” The term “antichrists” is being assigned to individuals who had once been a part of the

¹⁵ D. Edmond Hiebert, “An Exposition of 1 John 2:18–28,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989): 80.

¹⁶ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 101.

church community. By their leaving, these individuals demonstrate that they were never genuinely part of the community of believers.

Before returning to vv.20–21, it is helpful to continue to develop John’s description of antichrists. In v. 22 John asks, “Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” He then states definitively, “This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.” Later, in 1 John 4:2–3, John adds, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard is coming and now is in the world already.” This is similar to the declaration that John makes in 2 John 7, “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.”¹⁷ Nichols aptly observes, “John provides a singular criterion for identifying antichrists: a heretical Christology.”¹⁸ Antichrist is applied to those who deny that Jesus is the Christ, deny the Father and the Son, and deny that Jesus has come in the flesh. I. Howard Marshall explains:

For John the height of heresy is to deny that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and Savior. To reduce Jesus to the status of a mere man, or to allow no more than a temporary indwelling of some divine power in him is to strike at the root of Christianity. Modern thinkers may have more refined ways of stating similar denials of the reality of the incarnation. It may be doubted whether they are any more immune to John’s perception that they take the heart out of Christianity.¹⁹

¹⁷ There were three threads of heresy present in John’s day that he could be specifically addressing here: Proto-Gnosticism, Docetism, and Cerinthianism. For a helpful treatment of each see Christopher D. Bass, *That You May Know: Assurance of Salvation in 1 John* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 32–40.

¹⁸ Nichols, *Prophecy Makes Strange Bedfellows*, 76.

¹⁹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 159.

Having a sound Christology is critical to the Christian life. If the person and work of Christ are diminished in any way, the good news becomes no gospel at all and the Jesus being worshiped is one other than the Jesus that is presented in the Scriptures.

Akin observes six important facts offered by John in this passage that serve as an excellent summary of this passage's contribution to a New Testament theology of antichrist.

They are worth quoting at length:

1) The Johannine community had been told that an opponent of Christ would come. He is the Antichrist, an eschatological figure of evil. Though John is the only author of Scripture to use the term "antichrist," he makes it clear the concept, and the term itself, was already being used in the early church (cf. 2:18); 2) "Many antichrists have come" (reflecting the warning in Mark 13:22 of "false christs and false prophets" and "deceivers"; cf. 2:26 and 2 John 7). John clearly makes a distinction between many "antichrists" (plural) and "Antichrist" (singular), between the many who have come and the one who is to come; 3) The antichrists had left the church because they did not belong to the community of the faith. They were unregenerate and energized by an evil force (4:3); 4) The antichrists were of the world (that evil, organized system that under the rule of Satan is the opponent of God), not of the Christian community (4:1-5; 2 John 7); 5) The heretics claimed a unique knowledge of the truth and asserted that other Christians spoke falsely (2:22, 27); 6) They denied that Jesus was the Christ; thus John classified them as "antichrist."²⁰

John is zealous for the believing community to have a right knowledge of the person and work of Christ. His contributions to the New Testament are deeply concerned with followers of Christ knowing the truth, embracing the truth, and proclaiming the truth.

2 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Paul writes 2 Thessalonians to engender hope in the church at Thessalonica as they had grown discouraged through persecution (1:4) and theological misunderstandings (2:2-3). In order to help this struggling church, Paul instructs them about the coming judgment of Christ, the events surrounding the return of the Lord, and how they ought to live while they await the return

²⁰ Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 267.

of Christ. Essentially, Paul encourages the church to persevere because Jesus will return and set all things right by judging his enemies and rescuing his people.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:1–2, Paul begins by saying, “Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” This phrase enables the reader to understand that Paul is referring to the last days as described above. His concern is to dispel ignorance and deception and replace it with clarity and understanding. There was a false teaching present that “the day of the Lord had already come.” Understandably, this stirred up much anxiety as the church was taught earlier by Paul in 1 Thessalonians that many other events must occur during the return of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11).

In v.3, Paul begins to remind the church of the events that must take place before Christ comes. He offers at least two events that must take place before the coming of the Lord: the rebellion must come and the man of lawlessness must be revealed. Green comments, “In the NT [rebellion] frequently appears in this second sense of ‘apostasy,’”²¹ and then he cites Matthew 24:11–13; Acts 21:21; and 1 Timothy 4:1. The second event is the revealing of the man of lawlessness.

Andy Johnson identifies several textual features in this passage that signal Paul’s desire for his audience to understand the man of lawlessness as the Antichrist:

For example, given that the Lord Jesus destroys the man of lawlessness (v 8), the two are depicted in opposition to each other such that the former might indeed be said to be anti-Christ in the sense of being the enemy of Christ. In addition, given the similar language used of both, this passage may be an example of rhetorical *synkrisis*, that is, a comparison between the figures of Christ and the lawless human. Both have a royal coming *parousia* (2:8-9), both are revealed/appear (1:7; 2:8), and both are directly connected to another supernatural figure, that is, God the Father (1:12; 2:16) or Satan (2:9).²²

²¹ Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 307.

²² Andy Johnson, “Paul’s ‘Anti-Christology’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 in Canonical Context,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 8/1 (2014), 126.

These textual markers are important to acknowledge as the text never explicitly uses the term *ἀντίχριστος*. This line of argumentation gives this passage a hearing in the development of a theological understanding of antichrist. This concept is not counter John's understanding of antichrist detailed above. John saw many antichrists already at work in the world and he anticipated another antichrist to come in the last days.

2 Thessalonians 2:3–12 then offers a description of the man of lawlessness and details his lawless actions. First, he is called “the son of destruction.” This is the same title used of Judas in John 17:12. D. Michael Martin explains, “‘Son of destruction’ is parallel but adds another element to the reader’s understanding of the man of lawlessness. He is doomed, destined to be destroyed.”²³ This is made evident in 2:8 when Paul states definitively, “the Lord Jesus will kill [the man of lawlessness] with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming.”

Paul begins to outline this man’s actions in v.4. This man will oppose and exalt himself above all gods, even taking his seat in the temple of God and proclaiming himself to be God. J. Julius Scott is helpful in understanding how Paul’s original audience would have heard this comment:

The prediction that the coming evil one will "take his seat in the temple of God," may borrow imagery from the Isaianic "Lucifer passage" (14:12ff) or Ezekiel's lament over the king of Tyre (28:12ff). However, to 1st century Jews this type of language might have easily recalled the activities of Antiochus Epiphanes whose representatives "erected a desolating sacrilege (or Abomination of Desolation) on the altar of burnt offering" in the Temple of Jerusalem, I Macc. 1:54.²⁴

²³ D. Michael Martin, *I, 2 Thessalonians*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 234.

²⁴ J. Julius Scott, “Paul and Late-Jewish Eschatology—A Case Study, I Thessalonians 4:13–18 and II Thessalonians 2: 1–12,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15/3 (1972): 140.

Paul's audience had a context for understanding a human individual who would exalt himself to the position of God and blaspheme the name of God through his words and actions. In proclaiming himself to be God, this man of lawlessness would perform his greatest act of lawlessness—rejecting God entirely and seating himself in the position of God. This self-proclamation is a rejection of the relationship that exists between Creator and creature. This self-exaltation is a complete failure to submit to the law of God. The man of lawlessness exalts himself above the law of God.

Paul then expresses a concept similar to John's many antichrists and a future antichrist when he says in v.7, "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work." This secret power is supernatural in nature and is opposed to Christ.

In vv.9–10, Paul explains that Satan stands behind the activity of the lawless one. Satan exercises his supernatural power through the man of lawlessness to deceive people and encourage them in their rejection of the truth. Yates contends, "[The man of lawlessness] is not Satan himself, but a unique man in whom Satan dwells and operates. So complete is the control of Satan over this instrument that the parallel between the incarnation of Christ and the indwelling of Satan in the *Anomos* is almost complete."²⁵

The man of lawlessness will perform signs and wonders. These are described as false signs and wonders. They are counterfeit. They will provide evidence that the one who does them holds power but the text is clear that the power is from Satan; not from God. The power wielded by the man of lawlessness is by the activity of Satan and will lead the wicked into further deception.

²⁵ Yates, "The Antichrist," 44.

2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 depicts the man of lawlessness who will embody rebellion against God. He will claim divinity for himself and in arrogance exalt himself to the highest place. He will blaspheme Almighty God and take the seat that belongs to God alone. This man of lawlessness will be anti-Christ. He will reject the law of God where Christ perfectly fulfilled it (Matthew 5:17). He will incite rebellion where Christ brought submission (Luke 22:42). He will exalt himself and claim superiority over God where Christ embodied humility and did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (Philippians 2:6). He will perform signs and wonders by the power of Satan where Christ performed signs and miracles by the power of the Spirit (Matthew 12:28).

Revelation 13

Revelation 12:7–17 recounts John’s vision of the dragon, along with his angels, making war on Michael and his angels in heaven. The dragon is cast down to the earth and a loud voice declares in v.12, “But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short.” The dragon then goes to make war against “those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus.” Revelation 12 ends with the dragon standing on the sand of the sea.

Revelation 13 opens with a beast rising out of the sea. Leon Morris observes that in ancient thought, the sea was commonly understood as the reservoir of evil.²⁶ This beast has blasphemous names written on its head and the dragon gives to the beast his power, his throne, and great authority (13:2). W. White details the offense of blasphemy, “Blasphemy is one of the most serious of all spiritual iniquities in the Old Testament because it denies and makes sport of

²⁶ Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Today’s New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 165.

the overwhelming concept of all Old Testament history and law, namely, the sovereignty of the Creator.²⁷ Paige Patterson adds, “The concept of blasphemy is more than failure to believe in God and endorse his programs and ways; it is active repugnance and open opposition to the Creator God.”²⁸

The beast is empowered by Satan. This converges with the description of the man of lawlessness above. Satan is using the beast in order to blaspheme God and make war on the saints. The wicked stand in awe of the dragon and of the best. They marvel at their power and they are compelled to worship the beast. In v.4 they exclaim, “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?” The Old Testament uses similar language about God in Exodus 15:11; Psalm 35:10; Isaiah 40:18; Jeremiah 49:19; and Micah 7:18. This is another demonstration of the antichrist nature of this figure. Robert Thomas summarizes the first four verses of this chapter well concerning the beast, “He blends two types of endeavor: insolent blasphemy toward God and almost irresistible powers of seduction over men.”²⁹

In Revelation 13:5 John writes, “[the beast] was allowed to exercise authority for forty-two months.” During this time, he blasphemes God and makes war against the saints. Ladd comments, “The primary purpose of the beast is to turn men away from Christ, which he attempts by fierce persecution.”³⁰

²⁷ W. White, “Blasphemy,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 1:624.

²⁸ Paige Patterson, *Revelation*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2012), 275.

²⁹ Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8–22 An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1995), 160.

³⁰ Ladd, *A Commentary on the Revelation of John*, 180.

The beast that arises from the sea is summoned by Satan and empowered by Satan. He is given authority and power over all who dwell on the earth. All those whose names are not written in the book of the life of the Lamb will marvel at this beast and will worship this beast. The beast will demand and accept worship from those who dwell on the earth and he will exalt himself with blasphemy and demonstrations of his power. For an allotted time, he will be granted the authority to conquer the saints and receive universal worship.

A Theological Synthesis of Antichrist

Antichrist, the man of lawlessness, and the sea beast are three New Testament terms that denote or connote the antichrist theme. The above section examined 1 John 2:18–23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1–12; and Revelation 13:1–8. Having explored these descriptions of the nature and work of antichrist above, this section will synthesize the above findings into a cogent New Testament theology of the antichrist theme.

Antichrist in the New Testament is that which is opposed to Christ. John and Paul agree that there are many antichrists that have come and there is an antichrist who is forthcoming. The antichrists or mystery of lawlessness that are already present in the world are those individuals, idealisms, or institutions that advance doctrines that subvert the essential truths of the gospel. There is a denial of the person and work of Christ and an exaltation of rebellion against God and his ways. Polycarp is most helpful when considering this aspect of the antichrist theme:

For whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, is antichrist, and whosoever does not confess the testimony of the cross, is of the devil; and whosoever perverts the oracles of the Lord to his own lusts, and says that there is neither a resurrection nor a judgment, he is the first-born of Satan.³¹

This understanding of antichrist highlights the Christological component of the conversation and demonstrates the importance of sound doctrine.

³¹ Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians*, ANF 1 34, 7.

While many antichrists have come and the mystery of lawlessness is already at work in the world, there is coming a final embodiment of antichrist. The Scriptural witness seems to indicate that the final antichrist will be an individual who embodies all that is in opposition to the Lord. His aim will be to turn men away from Christ and lead a rebellion against the Almighty.

Antichrist will wield the very power and authority of Satan. This power will enable him to perform signs and wonders that will capture the hearts and attention of all those who do not belong to the Lord. His demonstrations of power will be so great that mankind will think antichrist is unstoppable. His shameless blasphemy against the Lord will go unchecked for a time and he will exalt himself as the sole object of the world's worship.

In the end, Christ will return and defeat the antichrist and all antichrists with the breath of his mouth and by virtue of his appearing. All the power and authority that seemed to be held by antichrist will be shown for the counterfeit it is and Christ will reign supreme. Anthony Hoekema sums up the theology of antichrist well:

The sign of antichrist, like the other signs of the times, is present throughout the history of the church. We may even say that every age will provide its own particular form of antichristian activity. But we look for an intensification of this sign in the appearance of *the* antichrist shortly before Christ's return. This sign, too, does not enable us to date the return of Christ with precision. We simply do not know how the final antichrist will appear or what form his appearance will take.³²

While there are many details God has not revealed, the above synthesis brings together the New Testament's teaching on the antichrist theme. Antichrists are here and the antichrist is coming but Jesus Christ reigns in victory.

³² Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 162.

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