

# The Concept of Miracle and The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigerian Church

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**Abstract:** *Miracles were a part of the ministries of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and of course Jesus and the apostles, and their miracles primarily served the purpose of confirming their message as being from God. Miracles are accompanying signs by which God confirms the words of witnesses (Mark 16:20). Miracles can be simply defined as God making possible what under normal and natural circumstances would have been impossible. Miracles can be simply defined as God making possible what under normal and natural circumstances would have been impossible. These are deeds that are enabled by the supernatural power of God to alter the normal course of nature. So miracles as seen in the Bible come from God and believers have been given authority by the Holy Spirit to cast out demons and perform miracles. The miracle of human conversion (salvation) is actually greater than any healing miracle because this bring eternal life in Christ. Miracles should not be what take Christians to church; it is not for self-aggrandizement as displayed 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria Church, it is simply a pointer to God.*

**Keywords** – Christian, God, Holy Spirit, Miracle, Nigeria.

## Introduction

As the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, God has the power to suspend natural laws in order to fulfill His purposes. Counterfeit products are a major problem for manufacturers such as Nike, Puma, and LG TV etc. The counterfeit product is so well made that most buyers accept it as the genuine article. Only a trained eye can detect the difference between the counterfeit and the genuine. Throughout the history of the church, the genuine and the counterfeit have existed side by side. The genuine is easy to recognize, while the counterfeit requires closer inspection. This is particularly true in the area of signs, wonders and visions along with other manifestations, divine and otherwise.

It is the Lord's desire that we His followers do the works that He did (John 14:12). Therefore, this research will be looking at miracles, its impact on the body of Christ and its place in the church. The "greater" work that Jesus Christ referred to in John 14:12 is that His disciples will do greater number of miracles through His Holy Spirit (as He returns to His Father) including greater scope of ministry. This includes the greatest of all miracles, which is the converting of people to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Although, there is an abundance of evidence in the Scripture to convince us that the signs and wonders in the ministry of Jesus and the early church were genuine, the flow of miracles in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian Church seems incongruent. On this note, the research explores the concept of miracle

## Purpose of Miracles in Biblical History

Miracles authenticate God's message and his messengers. Miracles in Scripture are acts of God that proclaim his sovereign power over creation as well as his commitment to the good of his people. Miracles are often significant because they serve a larger purpose in God's redemptive plan, testifying to the authenticity of God's

messengers who bring his revelation to humanity. This is one of the primary functions of miracles in the scriptural narratives: "When miracles occur, they give evidence that God is truly at work and so serve to advance the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

In the Old Testament, Moses did miracles to demonstrate his authority as God's spokesman (Exod. 4:1–9). Similarly, the prophets were given words to speak from God, and in order to verify their authority God granted them the ability to perform miracles. (1 Kings 17:17-24) Whereas "the miracles of the Old Testament age authenticated Moses and the prophets as men of God," the miracles of the New Testament age authenticated in turn Christ and his apostles.<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus, for example, recognized that God was with Jesus because of the miracles he did (John 3:2)). Luke records approximately 20 of Jesus' miracles, and all healings are unique to only Luke. Jesus' miracles authenticate his authoritative role in the divine plan that brings salvation (Luke 7:22) In fact, the scope of Jesus' healings shows the breadth of his authority. He heals the sick, casts out evil spirits, and cures a variety of specific conditions: a flow of blood, a withered hand, blindness, deafness, paralysis, epilepsy, leprosy, dropsy, and fever. He resuscitates the dead and exercises power over nature.<sup>3</sup>

Miracles also point to God's kingdom and the restoration of creation. John calls the miracles of Jesus "signs" and Jesus suggests that his miraculous works verify that the kingdom of God has come (Luke 11:14-23). Jesus performed healings, exorcisms, and "nature" miracles (such

<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *the Gospel According to John: Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 87.

<sup>2</sup> David O. Oyedepo, *Exploits of Faith* (Lagos: Dominion Publishing House, 2005), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Gbile Akanni, *Living with Eternity in View* (Gboko Benue, Peace House Press, 2010), 16.

as turning water into wine and multiplying food) as a sign that God's kingdom had come to earth. As Wayne Grudem puts it, *one of the purposes of miracles was "to bear witness to the fact that the kingdom of God has come and has begun to expand its beneficial results into people's lives."* This is the point of what Jesus says in Matthew 12:28 "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." Because of Jesus' miraculous works, those who saw him knew that the God of Israel was once again acting in their midst.

Miracle seems to be a characteristic of the New Testament church that miracles occur. In the Old Testament, miracles seemed to occur primarily in connection with one prominent leader at a time, such as Moses or Elijah or Elisha. In the New Testament, there is a sudden and unprecedented increase in the miracles when Jesus begins his ministry (Luke 4:36-37;40-41). However, contrary to the pattern of the Old Testament, the authority to work miracles and to cast out demons was not confined to Jesus himself, nor did miracles die out when Jesus returned to heaven. Even during his ministry, Jesus gave authority to heal the sick and to cast out demons not only to the Twelve, but also to seventy of his disciples.

Tim Keller says that miracles lead not simply to cognitive belief, but to worship, to awe and wonder. Jesus' miracles in particular were never magic tricks, designed only to impress and coerce. Instead, he used miraculous power to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and raise the dead; the modern people think of miracles as the suspension of the natural order, but Jesus meant them to be the restoration of the natural order.<sup>4</sup>

#### Miracle in the Church

Miracles as seen in the Bible come from God and believers have been given authority by the Holy Spirit to cast out demons and perform miracles (Mt 10:1). In Mark 16:17-18, Jesus clearly teaches His disciples, to expect miraculous deeds as the gospel of his kingdom is announced (Mt 10:1).

Christ expects that the supernatural signs and miracles continue in the churches in our days until His return. Scripture never suggests that these signs were restricted to the period of the early church. We are therefore expected to demonstrate the power of the kingdom as our Lord Jesus did (Acts 10:38) by casting out demons and healing the sick. We can see very clearly that these signs are not special gifts for a few, but are signs to all believers who in obedience to Christ witness the gospel and claim its power. Therefore, the roles of miracle can be seen as follow:

- i. God uses miraculous signs and wonders to liberate people from their captivity as we preach the gospel (Mark 5:18-20).
- ii. The power of God is manifested by signs and wonders as proclamation of the gospel goes on (Acts 16:25-31).

iii. Miracles are accompanying signs by which God confirms the words of witnesses (Mark 16:20).

#### Why people seek Miracles

1. *Miracles were a part of the ministries of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and of course Jesus and the apostles, and their miracles primarily served the purpose of confirming their message as being from God* (Hebrew 2:3-4). Today, many people still seek to experience the miraculous, and some will go to great lengths to have that experience. There may be many reasons for such a desire, and Scripture gives us at least five:
2. Some people seek after signs and wonders because they want confirmation of the truth of God. There is nothing inherently wrong with this desire. In fact, God willingly gave signs to Moses (Exodus 4:1-9) and Gideon (Judges 6:11-22) to confirm His word. Miracles can aid a person's coming to faith, as in John 2:23, "Many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name." However, there comes a time when enough miracles have been performed—the truth has been proved—and it is time to exercise faith. When Moses hesitated to obey after a series of miracles at the burning bush, "the LORD's anger burned" (Exodus 4:14).
3. Some people seek after signs and wonder because they do not believe the signs and wonders which have already been performed. The Pharisees of Matthew 12 were just such a lot. Jesus had been performing miracles for quite some time when a group of scribes and Pharisees came to Him with an insolent demand to see another sign. In response, Jesus condemned them as "wicked and adulterous" (Matthew 12:38-39). They were "wicked" in that they refused to believe the signs and wonders Christ had already performed. "In spite of his wonders, they did not believe" (Psalm 78:32). Their hearts were hardened towards the truth, even after numerous public miracles. Nothing would make them believe; their hearts were as pharaoh's, hardened after witnessing Moses' miracles in Egypt (Exodus 9:34-35).
4. Some people seek after signs and wonders because they seek an occasion to excuse their unbelief. There were people in Jesus' day who "tested" Him by seeking a sign (Matthew 16:1; Luke 11:16). Since they specified that the sign be "from heaven," they most likely wanted something spectacular, similar to Elijah's calling down fire from the sky (Kings 18:38) or Isaiah's causing the sun to reverse course (Isaiah 38:8). Probably, their "test" was designed to be something "too big" for Jesus to accomplish—they simply hoped He would attempt it and fail in the attempt.
5. Some people seek after signs and wonders because they are curious thrill-seekers. Like the crowds in John 6:2 and King Herod in Luke 23:8 they want to see something sensational, but they have no real desire to know the truth of Christ.

<sup>4</sup> Robert L. Raymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 45.

6. Some people seek after signs and wonders because they hope to get something for themselves. After Jesus fed the multitudes, a large crowd followed Him to the other side of Galilee. Jesus saw their true motivation, however, and rebuked it: "I tell you the truth, you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill" (John 6:26). The crowd's desire was not to know Christ or even to see more miracles; it was simply to fill their stomachs again. Equally the desire of some so called minister of God performing sign and wonders is not to show Christ to the people but to fill their stomach.

### Miracles in the Nigerian Church Today

So how should Christians think about miracles today? First, we must realize that the sheer volume and close proximity of the miracles in the Bible served significant purposes in God's redemptive plan at the time. However, this point doesn't mean that miracles have ceased today. Many people in Nigeria actually presuppose that miracles have ceased but the biblical examples and establishments of what miracles actually reveal that the assertion is incongruent with the scripture.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, as Grudem notes, "There is nothing inappropriate in seeking miracles for the proper purposes for which they are given by God: to confirm the truthfulness of the gospel message, to bring help to those in need, to remove hindrances to people's ministries, and to bring glory to God." Miracles still happen, and Christians should avoid the two extremes of seeing everything as a miracle and seeing nothing as a miracle.<sup>6</sup>

21<sup>st</sup> century Christians in Nigeria need to expand their understanding of God's action to include both his providential sustaining in daily affairs and also his miraculous works of redemption in the church. For example, in John 14:12, Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." But it isn't immediately clear what Jesus means when he says that those coming after him will do "greater works." Some may think that these "greater works" refer to more miracles and other such events.

The "signs" and "works" Jesus performed during his ministry could not fully accomplish their true end until after Jesus had risen from the dead and been exalted. Only at that point could they be seen for what they were. By contrast, the works believers are given to do through the power of the eschatological Spirit, after Jesus' glorification, will be set in the framework of Jesus' death and triumph, and will therefore more immediately and truly reveal the Son.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> H. Chadwick, *Lessing's theological writings*, London: Adam & Charles Black, 1956), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>7</sup> C. Brown, *Miracles and the critical mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.M. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1984), 187.

And while these works certainly included the signs and wonders done by the early church in the Spirit's power, they weren't limited to those miraculous deeds. Instead, they also included the "mystery" of Gentiles being included into the one new people of God. God's miraculous works in the church include the forgiveness of sins and the inclusion of those who were formerly far off into God's one new people. Healings, signs, and wonders are extraordinary, yes, but no more extraordinary than the redemption accomplished by Christ.

Even if we don't frequently see extraordinary miraculous events, God is active. He is active in the regular (natural) processes we see every day. He is miraculously calling people to himself as his church grows and expands. He is active in miraculous ways among people we don't know around the world. Suppositional observation can deduce that the Spirit Movement of the postmodern era is growing exponentially and at an alarming rate. In South Africa, the mainline Christianity suffers a set-back. The exodus from the liturgical Christianity to the new movement is momentous and seems unstoppable.<sup>8</sup>

The dawn of democracy opened the doors for the Neo-charismatic churches, especially those from West Africa (especially Nigeria) into the South African Christian terrain. It is not only the mainline denominations suffering this emptiness, but also the classical Pentecostal churches of the 20th century, such as the Apostolic Faith Mission, Assemblies of God, Full Gospel Church of God, et cetera. These churches are constantly experiencing schisms as some of their devotees catch the spirit of the age where gospel power is witnessed in demonstrations such as healing, breakthroughs out of depression, wealth, et cetera.

The prominent Nigerian churches attracting many adherents out of these traditions are Christ Embassy of Pastor Chris Oyakhilome; The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG) of Josiah Akindayomi; Winners Chapel, also known as Living Faith Church Worldwide of Bishop David Oyedepo; Synagogue Church of All Nations of Pastor Temitope Bologun (TB) Joshua, et cetera. They make such a great influence where these manifestations are the centre of attraction.

However, RCCG is difficult to categorize it strictly to these manifestations, because of its diverse polity and proclivity towards evangelical practices. The South African prominent churches following this trend are the Rivers of Living Waters Ministries (Bishop Zondo); Rabboni Centre Ministries (Pastor Lesego Daniel); Incredible Happenings Ministry (Prophet Paseka Motsoeneng aka Mboro); Tyrannus Apostolic Church (Apostle Simon Mokoena), et cetera.<sup>9</sup>

The South African society went through writhing pains of agony and grief because of the loss of about 80 lives

<sup>8</sup> Brown, 192.

<sup>9</sup> E. Brunner, *The mediator: A study of the central doctrine of the Christian faith* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934), 76.

on a pilgrimage to Lagos, Nigeria, in September 2014. The historic tragedy of the collapse of Pastor TB Joshua's church guesthouse on the 12th September leaves theological analysts with the question of people crossing the borders to seek the *miraculous* experiences at a particular *cultic* centre. The recent *miraculous* events that sent the shock waves were those by Pastor Lesego Daniel who made his congregants to eat grass, drink petrol and eat flowers. Watching these incidents on the television and media in general clearly shows the acts of manipulation that cannot be cited as miracles.

One Sunday Times Lifestyle Magazine's columnist relays her discussions with her friends about Pastor Lesego Daniel's petrol-drinking congregation: Some friends suggested that the controversial pastor should be arrested for endangering his parishioners. Still others suggested that the flower-eating, petrol-guzzling 'it tastes just like pineapple juice' members be arrested for mass stupidity. Still others thought the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious, and Linguistic Communities should have been involved. The last lot never quite highlighted the commission's potential role, since I have never heard that it prosecutes anyone for religious beliefs that are detrimental to citizens' health.<sup>10</sup>

The DRUM Magazine (09 October, 2014) journalists (Mokubung, Ngcobo & Ngwenya, 2014) wrote an article in which the local miracles makers join the debate concerning the collapse of the building in Nigeria, and Prophet TB Joshua in general. Pastor Lesego Daniel apologetically defends Pastor TB Joshua, while Pastor Paseka Mboro Motsoeneng is critical towards the Nigerian prophet. One of the salient features of the Neo-charismatic preachers is the lack of theological essence in their debates. This is because of their low esteem towards theological analysis, insights or debates. This absence or shallowness of theological insight is replaced with unconventional practices tagged miracles. Both their ecclesiology and Christology are always on personal convictions rather than in the hermeneutical principles of the Bible.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, their ministries are exceedingly egocentric in structures, methods and objectives. Shenk (2005) argues that missions in the end times: will take place in a situation of claims and counter-claims.<sup>12</sup> Many pretenders will proclaim themselves to be messiah, but these false messiahs cannot deliver what they promise (Mark 13:6, 21-22). Messianic options can also take the form of ideological and revolutionary movements that claim they will liberate humankind from its present dilemma.

### Theological critique of the miracles in Nigeria

<sup>10</sup> E. Brunner, *The mediator: A study of the central doctrine of the Christian faith*, 77.

<sup>11</sup> H. Chadwick, *Lessing's theological writings*, 66.

<sup>12</sup> E. Brunner, *The mediator: A study of the central doctrine of the Christian faith*, 79.

A miracle is when God (not an apostle, prophet, evangelist or pastor) breaks the rules of nature to reveal his power or will in a humanly impossible situation. A miracle cannot be orchestrated or demonstrated. It takes audiences by surprise and leaves them baffled. The thesis is clear that a miracle is an occurrence which is contrary to what is known of nature. The British theologian, Macquarrie, correctly asserts that theologically: Within the wide range of understanding established in this work, a miracle is understood not just as a happening that excites wonder but as an act of God. Such an act may be a vehicle for revelation or for grace or for judgement or for all of these together.

A miracle is *providentia ordinaria*, that is, God is fully involved with it through second causes in accordance with the laws of nature. It is an event that breaks into the order of nature. But a miracle is also *providentia extraordinaria*, that is, when God works immediately or without the mediation of the second causes in their ordinary operation. A miracle happens when regular procedures of nature are suspended for a cause.<sup>13</sup>

One of the 20th-century theologians, Berkhof, cautions us that: distinctive thing in the miraculous deed is that it results from the exercise of the supernatural power of God. And this means, of course, that it is not brought about by secondary causes that operate according to the laws of nature. If it were, it would not be *supernatural* (above nature), that is, it would not be a miracle. This explanation calls into question the acts of people eating grass and drinking petrol. The leader is totally involved in orchestrating the events by giving commands as to what actions are to be initiated. The agent is in charge and directs the events towards his desired goals. There is no obfuscation to open devotees' eyes and minds to Jesus.

It is therefore theologically legitimate to examine these practices in the light of orthodoxy regarding doctrine and discipline in their context. 'An authentic response to a context like this requires a response to the *complexus* of truths, beliefs and values within the context. One quality of a miracle is that it occurs unpretentiously and modestly. This brings a spotlight to the methods applied by the Neo-charismatic leaders mentioned above.<sup>14</sup>

Watching the videos of miraculous healings at Synagogue Church of All Nations, whose building collapsed in Nigeria recently, one wonders of the place and the role of modesty and human dignity when people expose their nakedness in front of the audiences to prove their health status or the divine interventions. People vomiting and urinating blood in front of the masses questions the chastity and authenticity of these events. Truthfully: a miracle done by the God of Christianity will be of a character which is in harmony with the mind and spirit of Christ. This is a moral criterion.

<sup>13</sup> David O. Oyedepo, *Exploits of Faith*, 98.

<sup>14</sup> G. Price, and H. Price, *Miracles: True stories of how god acts today*, Macmillan, London, 1995), 47.



Another quality of a miracle is its divine orchestration as opposed to human demonstration. Most, if not all, of these 'miracles', are human initiated. It is the preacher that the devotees look to, not God. The theological validation of miracles is that God is the *primun movens* - the prime mover. Jesus Christ never received any reward after a miracle. His miracles were divinely orchestrated, hence left people with wonderment.<sup>15</sup>

This fact is highlighted by Kasper that miracles as acts of power (*dunamis*) and signs (*σήμεία*) 'are extraordinary, unexpected events which provoke amazement and wonder'. Jesus never called people to come and witness a miracle. His miraculous acts happened unpretentiously and spontaneously without any call towards himself. Hence, people in bewilderment could exclaim: 'What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!' (Mt 8:27): Miracles are also called 'wonders'. They stunned and amazed those who saw them. When Jesus healed a lame man, the response was: 'This amazed everyone and they praised God saying, 'We have never seen anything like this' (Mark 2:12). By these acts of power and signs and wonders, God was seen to be performing miracles through His Son.<sup>16</sup>

Miracles are not the mark of spirituality or in consonance with theological correctness. The performance of miracles is not the sign of authentic discipleship. The performers are to be verified as to by which spirit are they doing these things? The morality and the character of the performers (especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian church) should be under the scrutiny of the biblical orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup> The performer and the act itself must be synchronically aligned. Church history has proved that the false prophets do not last long. They either align to the orthodox confession of faith, or disappear from the *theatrum gloriae Dei* - the arena within which the glory of God may be discerned and recognized.

Also, miracles although not an article of faith, arouse interest or point people towards God, not towards the performer or an agent. Conclusion is made that 'there are no compelling scientific, philosophical, or theological reasons to write off the possibility of miracles, whether healings or exorcisms or similar'. It is theologically legitimate to accept that 'a miracle turns people's eyes upwards; towards God, miracles concern belief in God and his glorification.' Miracles are examined by the criteria that are generally used to establish the historical Jesus.<sup>18</sup> They confirm the *kerygma* - verbal revelation. Miracles do not establish the credentials or the character of the agent just like many Nigerian pastors portrays it.

In the current scenario, miracles are the magnet towards the preacher instead of a propeller towards God.<sup>19</sup> Hence, pilgrimages to a particular geographical location or a human figure have become a norm. Miraculous powers are associated with a particular personality or a cultic centre (celebrity and centre cult). This tendency questions faith in the omnipotence and the omnipresence of God.<sup>20</sup> The bottom line is miracles involve the extraordinary, the unusual and the amazing. A miracle is a result of a personal initiative of God.<sup>21</sup> A miracle can only be seen as the act of God by faith. It does not force faith, but challenges it and makes it credible.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

In Africa (especially in Nigeria), miracles are seen as the validation of the Person and the Power of Jesus Christ. Theology must rightly interest itself in the meaning of the mighty deeds of Jesus and his person. Miracles are the divine intervention where laws of nature are suspended for the purpose of God to prevail. There is a proliferation of miracles in the Nigerian churches and in Africa generally. Most if not all of the events knighted miracles are human orchestrated; therefore, critically subjected to ecclesiastical and doctrinal scrutiny, analysis and evaluation. However, the thesis remains: miracles, in their original and pure form, are above nature; and count as acts of God.

The Christian theologians spent a great deal of time in trying to validate the theological authenticity of miracles. Many of their conclusions came to the crossroads. The remaining factor is that miracles are still possible. However, it has been: evidently assumed that not only can God and his plenipotentiaries perform miracles and signs, but so can the devil and his demonic angels, and even false prophets and the Antichrist. Modesty must prevail as Christ; the great miracle worker himself respects the dignity of humanity. There will be no theological scrutiny if all preachers and theologians understand that The core of the matter is miracles must be Christo-centric, not egocentric. Miracles take the audience by surprise. Because miracles are mentioned in the list of *charismata* as a corollary gift in the Pauline literature, they are to operate symbiotically with other gifts especially the gift of discernment.

Discernment of spirits then seeks to determine the source and evaluate the results of spiritual manifestations and teachings by means of the gift of the Spirit and the Word in the body of believers. Like in all Christian practices, modern-day miracles should be cognisant of the reality of

<sup>15</sup> G. Price, and H. Price, *Miracles: True stories of how god acts today*, 48.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>17</sup> E. Keller, & M.L. Keller, *Miracles in dispute: A continuing debate*, SCM Press, London, 1969), 65.

<sup>18</sup> S.J. Land, *Pentecostal spirituality: A passion for the Kingdom* (Cleveland, OH: CPT Press, 2010), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 159.

<sup>20</sup> J.K Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretation from an African context* (Cape Town: Wipf & Stock, Eugene, 2013), 42.

<sup>21</sup> A. König, *Here Am I: A believer's reflection on God* (Marshall Morgan & Scott, London, 1982), 123.

<sup>22</sup> Asamoah-Gyadu, 128.

context. The poor must never be exploited. 'An authentic response to a context like this requires a response to the *complexus* of truth, beliefs and values within the context.

- a. Every believer (in Nigeria especially) needs to exercise Biblical Discernment when they go to any meeting advertising miracles and manifestations of the Spirit
- b. People should center their faith on facts and truths that have been set forth in Scripture,
- c. Christians should stay in the bounds of the Scripture where there is true power, love, glory, forgiveness, passion, miracles (the miracle of salvation), and everything else that is focused on Him for eternity.

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