
PLANTS IN THE BIBLE

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INTRODUCTION

Illustrations and symbols are employed by the writers of Scripture to explain and elucidate truths of Scripture. Out of all the illustrations in the Bible, a small group concerns the use of certain plants. This is found both in the Old and New Testaments. These plants were used by the prophets and even Jesus Himself to help those whom they were speaking to understand the doctrines more clearly. The people living in those days and in that environment were familiar with the characteristics and nature of the plants in question, and this is often lost to the reader of God's Word today. As we are living in a different time, a different environment, and a different context, we would not be able to grasp the full significance of these truths without a careful study into the characteristics of these plants used in the Bible.

Therefore, in this workshop, we shall aim to study some more prominent plants mentioned in the Bible, to understand their characteristics, and to see how these characteristics can help us have a clearer understanding of the portions of Scripture that mention these plants.

1. ALMOND TREE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT

The almond tree is translated from the Hebrew word '*shaked*' (H9196). Some understand '*luz*' (H4280) as referring to the almond tree also as the Arabic and Aramaic word for almond bears the same name, though it is translated as '*hazel*' in the KJV.

The taxonomic name for the species of almond tree found in Israel is probably the *Prunus dulcis* / *Prunus amygdalus*, though there are other wild species found in the same area.

The key feature of the almond tree is its pinkish white flowers that bloom sometime between January to March. The flower of the almond tree blossoms before its leaves appear. It can grow to the height of 25 feet (~7.5m).



OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

The first occurrence to take note of is in Ecclesiastes 12:5,

“Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets:”

The context of Ecclesiastes 12 talks about the need to remember the Creator in the days of our youth before age catches up to us and it will be too late. Solomon gives a series of illustrations to demonstrate old age. Here in verse 5, Solomon uses the flourishing of the almond tree to point to the greying of the hairs. When flourishing, the almond tree produces white flowers.

Another occurrence to note is that in Jeremiah 1:11-12

“Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the LORD unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it.”

The context of Jeremiah 1 was the call of Jeremiah into the ministry. The Lord used two signs to confirm the calling of Jeremiah – the almond rod and the seething pot. One might wonder how the almond rod relates to the promise that God would perform His word. The key lies in the original language. As mentioned earlier, the word for almond tree is the word ‘*shaked*’ (H9196), and the word for hasten in verse 12 is the word ‘*shoked*’ (H8245). These two words sound similar, and the Lord was using the almond tree as a reminder for Jeremiah in his ministry that the Lord will hasten to fulfil His word.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

Genesis 30:37 *“And Jacob took him rods of green poplar, and of the **hazel** and chesnut tree; and piled white strakes in them, and made the white appear which was in the rods.”*

Genesis 43:11 *“And their father Israel said unto them, If it must be so now, do this; take of the best fruits in the land in your vessels, and carry down the man a present, a little balm, and a little honey, spices, and myrrh, nuts, and **almonds**.”*

Exodus 25:33-34 *“Three bowls made like unto almonds, with a knop and a flower in one branch; and three bowls made like **almonds** in the other branch, with a knop and a flower: so in the six branches that come out of the candlestick. And in the candlestick shall be four bowls made like unto **almonds**, with their knops and their flowers.”*

Exodus 37:19-20 “Three bowls made after the fashion of **almonds** in one branch, a knop and a flower; and three bowls made like **almonds** in another branch, a knop and a flower: so throughout the six branches going out of the candlestick. And in the candlestick were four bowls made like **almonds**, his knops, and his flowers:”

Numbers 17:8 “And it came to pass, that on the morrow Moses went into the tabernacle of witness; and, behold, the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi was budded, and brought forth buds, and bloomed blossoms, and yielded **almonds**.”

2. CEDAR TREE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT



Cr: Mustafa Gökmen, 2013.08.26

In the Hebrew, the word translated as cedar is ‘erez’ (H730). While this can point to conifer trees in general, this word is used most often to describe the *Cedrus libani* or the Cedar of Lebanon. The Cedar of Lebanon is a magnificent evergreen tree that thrives on rocky soil at elevations of about 1800m. The cedar can grow up to 120 feet (36m), and 40 feet (12m) wide. Its timber was most valuable for it was very durable and retarded rotting. It also has a fragrant

resin. As its name suggests, this cedar was a prized resource for Syria, though this is not so much the case today as it was in the past. Where before the Cedars of Lebanon were found in great multitude in Syria, today, it is scarcer in comparison. Nevertheless, the Lebanese flag still bears this significant tree today.

OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

The first occurrence that is noteworthy is that in Psalm 29:5,

“The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon.”

In the context of this psalm, the psalmist was describing the glory and majesty of God, and how He deserves our worship. In this verse, the psalmist uses the breaking of the cedar to explain the magnitude of God’s power. The cedar tree was strong, tall, and durable, yet God by His voice alone can break them. One of the most robust materials known to man at that time was no match for the voice of God.

Another occurrence of significance is that in Psalm 92:12,

“The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.”

The context of Psalm 92 speaks of the need that believers have to praise the Lord. In comparison to the wicked who will taste of the judgment of God, the righteous will flourish. The illustration used of the cedar tree is show the extent that God would bless the righteous. Just as the cedar tree grows tall and great, the Lord will also cause the righteous to flourish.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

There are 75 occurrences of the word ‘cedar’ or ‘cedars’ in the Bible. Some examples include:

Leviticus 14:4 *“Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds alive and clean, and **cedar** wood, and scarlet, and hyssop.”*

Judges 9:15 *“And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the **cedars** of Lebanon.”*

2 Samuel 5:11 *“And Hiram king of Tyre sent messengers to David, and cedar trees, and carpenters, and masons: and they built David an house.”*

Job 40:17 *"He moveth his tail like a cedar: the sinews of his stones are wrapped together."*

Psalm 104:16 *"The trees of the Lord are full of sap; the cedars of Lebanon, which he hath planted;"*

Jeremiah 22:7 *"And I will prepare destroyers against thee, every one with his weapons: and they shall cut down thy choice cedars, and cast them into the fire."*

Jeremiah 22:23 *"O inhabitant of Lebanon, that makest thy nest in the cedars, how gracious shalt thou be when pangs come upon thee, the pain as of a woman in travail!"*

Ezekiel 17:22-23 *"Thus saith the Lord God; I will also take of the highest branch of the high cedar, and will set it; I will crop off from the top of his young twigs a tender one, and will plant it upon an high mountain and eminent: In the mountain of the height of Israel will I plant it: and it shall bring forth boughs, and bear fruit, and be a goodly cedar: and under it shall dwell all fowl of every wing; in the shadow of the branches thereof shall they dwell."*

Ezekiel 31:10 *"Therefore thus saith the Lord God; Because thou hast lifted up thyself in height, and he hath shot up his top among the thick boughs, and his heart is lifted up in his height;"*

3. FIG TREE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT

The fig tree is ubiquitous in the land of Israel. While there are various kinds of figs, the most common variety of figs in the area would be the *Ficus caria* or the common fig. The fig tree is a fruiting tree, and the figs from the fig tree were commonly eaten in the region. During the summer months, the foliage of the fig tree is thick. The fruiting of the fig tree is unlike other plants. During the



winter months, the fig tree would lose all its leaves. Around the end of March, they will begin to grow tender leaf buds, and at the same time, tiny figs will grow. These immature figs grow alongside the leaves until they reach the size of a small cherry before falling to the ground. Some of these immature figs will remain on the tree and ripen in June, and these are called the early figs or firstripe figs. As these early figs are ripening, the buds of the second crop will grow higher up the branches. This would finally culminate in the time of harvest in August.

There are various words both in the Hebrew and the Greek to describe the different stages of the figs. The general word to describe the fig and the fig tree is *'teenah'* (H8384) in Hebrew, and *'sukon'* (G4810) in Greek. The immature figs are called *'pag'* (H6291) in the Hebrew and *'olunthos'* (G3653) in the Greek. The early figs are called *'bikkur'* (H1061). And *'debelah'* (H1690) refers to the pressing together of figs to form a cake.

OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

The first noteworthy passage is found in Hosea 9:10,

“I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstripe in the fig tree at her first time: but they went to Baalpeor, and separated themselves unto that shame; and their abominations were according as they loved.”

In the context of this verse, the Lord was lamenting the idolatry of His people. The people had turned away from God, and God was rebuking His people. He recounts the time where He established His covenant with His people. He said that they were like the firstripe in the fig tree. The firstripe would be that which was refreshing and the

taste of the firstripe would be representative of the harvest. In other words, they started well and were promising, but they failed the Lord with their idolatry.

Another noteworthy passage is found in Matthew 24:32-33,

“Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh: So likewise ye, when ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors.”

This passage is part of the Olivet Discourse where the Lord prophesied of the end times. To illustrate the fact that when these signs come to pass, it shows that Jesus will be coming soon, Jesus used the illustration of the fig tree. As mentioned earlier, during winter, the fig tree loses its leaves. But when the leaves begin to grow, it shows that the time of winter has ended, and summer is soon arriving. Just as one would be able to tell the season by the leaves of the fig tree, so we must be able to tell the season of the times by the signs that are fulfilled.

Finally, a commonly misunderstood passage concerning fig trees is found in Mark 11:13-14,

“And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it.”

Some have found this passage challenging to understand, but understanding the nature of the fig tree sheds light on this passage. When Jesus saw the fig tree from afar, He noticed that there were leaves on the tree. The winter months had just ended, and the fact that there were leaves on the fig tree would mean that there should be little buds of immature figs on the tree. However, when He came near, He did not find any immature figs. The Bible tells us that it was not the time of figs. This means that it was not time for the harvest of figs that would only come after the second budding. Therefore, Jesus was not unreasonable to curse the fig tree for not bearing fruit outside of the harvest season. Rather, the tree ought to have borne fruit already, but it failed to.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

There are more than 60 occurrences of figs in the Bible. Here are some examples:

Genesis 3:7 *"And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons."*

Jeremiah 24:5 *"Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel; Like these good figs, so will I acknowledge them that are carried away captive of Judah, whom I have sent out of this place into the land of the Chaldeans for their good."*

Micah 7:1 *"Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grape gleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat: my soul desired the firstripe fruit."*

Revelation 6:13 "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind."

4. GRAPEVINE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT

The grapevine, like the fig tree, was a key produce in agricultural Israel. The grapevine of the Bible is the *Vitius vinifera*. The grapevine, as its name suggests, is a climbing woody vine that produce grapes. The vine can grow up to 35m long. The grapes harvested from the vine were either eaten fresh, pressed into grape juice, or dried as raisins. The word vine is translated from 'gephen' (H1612) in Hebrew, and 'ampelos' (G288) in Greek.



Grapes were cultivated in vineyards which had to have ideal conditions. The grapes grew best when they were on the hillside with elevation and with prolonged sunshine. To build a vineyard, one would need to find or form a terrace on the hillside. He would then need to build a fence around the vineyard to keep wild animals and thieves out. He would need to build a watch tower to guard against intruders. He would also need to build a winepress where the grapes can be processed into wine. In the first three years, the grapevine had to be meticulously pruned and were not allowed to fruit. Following that, constant attention was required to continue pruning and removing dead or non-fruiting branches so that the nutrients can be fully supplied to the grapes.

OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

In Isaiah 5:1-7, the Lord describes the planting of a vineyard and uses it as an illustration to rebuke His people,

“Now will I sing to my wellbeloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My wellbeloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine,

and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah his pleasant plant: and he looked for judgment, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry.”

The people of Judah were described as God’s vineyard. God had taken deliberate care and effort in nurturing this vineyard. He desired the fruit of the vine, but it gave forth wild grapes. This signified how the Lord was meticulous and patient in nurturing His people, and yet they bore evil fruit. The Lord pronounced judgment upon Judah by announcing that He will destroy the vineyard. This was a prophecy of the coming judgment by the Babylonians.

Another passage of Scripture that uses the vine as an illustration is that in John 15:1-6,

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.”

The Lord Jesus Christ uses the picture of a vineyard to describe the relationship that the believer has with his God. God the Father is the husbandman of the vineyard. He is the One Who tends to the grapevine. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. The branch draws its nutrients from the main vine to bear fruit. When the branch is attached to the vine, God the Father will prune the branches to cause it to bring forth more fruit. This signifies how God the Father will work in our lives to cut away things that are hindering our spiritual growth. However, if the branch is not attached to the vine, the branch cannot bear fruit. To such fruitless branches, the Lord says that the husbandman will cut them off and burn them. This is a description of false believers who, though they may have claimed to be attached to Christ, they were never really abiding in Him to begin with. They stand to suffer eternal judgment in hellfire.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

The grapevine appears more than 100 times in the Bible. Here are a select few examples:

Genesis 9:20 “*And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard:*”

Ecclesiastes 2:4 “*I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards:*”

Matthew 21:33-41 “*Hear another parable: There was a certain householder, which planted a vineyard, and hedged it round about, and digged a winepress in it, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country: And when the time of the fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the husbandmen, that they might receive the fruits of it. And the husbandmen took his servants, and beat one, and killed another, and stoned another. Again, he sent other servants more than the first: and they did unto them likewise. But last of all he sent unto them his son, saying, They will reverence my son. But when the husbandmen saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him. When the lord therefore of the vineyard cometh, what will he do unto those husbandmen? They say unto him, He will miserably destroy those wicked men, and will let out his vineyard unto other husbandmen, which shall render him the fruits in their seasons.*”

5. MUSTARD TREE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT

There are a variety of mustard types in the region of Israel, hence it would be difficult to pinpoint the exact species of mustard that is mentioned in the Bible. Some postulate that the mustard mentioned in the Bible is the *Brassica juncea* (brown mustard), the *Brassica nigra* (black mustard), or the *Sinapis alba* (white mustard). These species of mustard can grow to a height of 15 feet (4.5m) but are properly shrubs rather than trees. There is one more candidate for the mustard, and that is the *Salvadora persica*, also known as the toothbrush tree as its branches and sap can be used as a toothbrush and toothpaste respectively. Though this is properly a tree, it is not exactly known for its herbaceous properties.



Black Mustard



Mustard seed

According to Albert Barnes, the mustard tree that is mentioned in the Bible is unlike what is known to us today. Ancient Hebrew writers spoke of the mustard tree as one on which they could climb, as on a fig tree.¹ The gospels classify the mustard tree as an herb. Therefore, though the *Salvadora persica* comes closest to the description of the mustard tree

¹ Albert Barnes, Commentary on Matthew, Matthew 13:31.

mentioned in the Bible, we cannot be certain if the Jews used it culinarily. It could very well be a plant that is not known to us, being part of the mustard family, bearing its herbaceous properties, and yet grown like a tree with a woody stem.



Salvadora persica

OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

The most prominent passage concerning the mustard tree would be Jesus' parable found in Luke 13:18-19,

“Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it.”

The mustard seed is one of the smallest seeds known to the people living in the Mediterranean region. Though it is small, it grows into a great tree where the birds of the air can perch on the branches. The Lord used this to signify the growth of the kingdom of God (Jesus => Apostles => Jews => Samaritans => Gentiles => Uttermost parts of the earth), and how the blessings of the gospel spread far and wide.

Another instance where the Lord used the mustard seed as an illustration is in Matthew 17:20,

“And Jesus said unto them, Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Remove hence to yonder place; and it shall remove; and nothing shall be impossible unto you.”

The Lord was speaking of the disciple's failure to cast out the demon in a child. Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief and exhorted them to have faith of a mustard seed. In

other words, as long as we have faith in Christ, though small, the Lord can still work through us to do that which is impossible.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

Matthew 13:31-32 “Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is like to a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and sowed in his field: Which indeed is the least of all seeds: but when it is grown, it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof.”

Luke 13:18-19 “Then said he, Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I resemble it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his garden; and it grew, and waxed a great tree; and the fowls of the air lodged in the branches of it.”

Luke 17:6 “And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you.”

6. OLIVE TREE

OVERVIEW OF PLANT

The olive tree is another ubiquitous plant in the land of Israel. The olive tree is also known as the *Olea europaea*. This is a plant that played a crucial role in agricultural Israel. The people of old and even till this day would press the olives for their oil. The olives will be collected by way of beating the tree with a long stick. This would cause the olives to fall to



the ground. The olives would then be collected and prepared for processing into oil. This was done in different stages. The first stage of ancient production of olive oil was crushing the olives on a circular mill. They were spread on a horizontal stone basin and a vertical grindstone was rolled over the olives to crush them. This was the best-quality or virgin oil. The second stage was pressing the crushed olives with a beam- or a screw-press. Pulp from the initial crushing was placed in woven baskets, that were loaded onto a press, that worked with a heavy horizontal beam let into a notch in the wall acting as a lever to press out the oil and water from the mash seep out of the mats, by adding stone weights progressively increasing the pressure and

drip into collection vats. Another method is the screw-press. When the screw had been tightened to the point that the uprights began to lift, their weight constituted the pressure. The third stage was the separation of the oil from the watery lees in the expressed liquid. The oil was removed from the vats by a dipper. The oils collected from the olives were used for ceremonial anointing, medicinal use, for cooking, and for fuelling oil lamps.

In the original languages the olive tree is translated from the word ‘zayith’ (H2132) or sometimes ‘shemen’ (H8081) meaning fat in Hebrew, and from the word ‘elaia’ (G1636) and sometimes ‘kallielaios’ (G2565) pointing to the good olive tree, and ‘agrielaos’ (G65) pointing to the wild olive tree in Greek.

OCCURRENCES OF PLANT

OCCURRENCES TO NOTE

One notable passage that highlights the olive tree is in Micah 6:15,

“Thou shalt sow, but thou shalt not reap; thou shalt tread the olives, but thou shalt not anoint thee with oil; and sweet wine, but shalt not drink wine.”

This was part of God’s judgment to His people. One of the judgments that God pronounced upon His people was that they will tread the olives but they will have no oil to anoint with. This gives us a glimpse into the process of harvesting olives. The Lord’s judgment upon them was that they would labour hard but their labour would not be blessed by the Lord because of their sins against Him.

Another notable passage is that of Romans 11:16-24,

“For if the firstfruit be holy, the lump is also holy: and if the root be holy, so are the branches. And if some of the branches be broken off, and thou, being a wild olive tree, wert grafted in among them, and with them partakest of the root and fatness of the olive tree; Boast not against the branches. But if thou boast, thou bearest not the root, but the root thee. Thou wilt say then, The branches were broken off, that I might be grafted in. Well; because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not highminded, but fear: For if God spared not the natural branches, take heed lest he also spare not thee. Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off. And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graff them in again. For if thou wert cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and wert grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree: how much more shall these, which be the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?”

Here the Apostle Paul gives a warning to the Gentile Christians. Though Israel was God’s chosen nation, because of their rebellion and sin, they were cut off from the land. Paul uses the picture of the cutting off of the branches of the olive tree. The

Gentiles, who had no part in this tree, were grafted into the tree, pointing to the salvation that they obtained through Christ, after the rejection of Christ by the Jews. However, they were not to be proud, but fear the Lord, because God can very well execute the same judgment upon them just as He did to the Jews. Furthermore, if the Jews believe, they can be grafted back into the olive tree. Paul used this illustration to help the Gentile Christians to understand that they ought not to be high-minded but fear.

OTHER OCCURRENCES

The olive tree appears more than 100 times in the Bible. Some examples can be found below:

Genesis 8:11 *"And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth."*

Exodus 27:20 *"And thou shalt command the children of Israel, that they bring thee pure oil olive beaten for the light, to cause the lamp to burn always."*

Isaiah 24:13 *"When thus it shall be in the midst of the land among the people, there shall be as the shaking of an olive tree, and as the gleaning grapes when the vintage is done."*

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