

## Call of the First Disciples



Detail of Domenico Ghirlandaio: Calling of the First Apostles | 1481–82 | Sistine Chapel, Vatican | PD-US

<sup>12</sup> When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. <sup>13</sup> He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled: <sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali, the way to the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles, <sup>16</sup> the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light, on those dwelling in a land overshadowed by death light has arisen.” <sup>17</sup> From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” <sup>18</sup> As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter; and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.” <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him. <sup>21</sup> He walked along from there and saw two other brothers, James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They were in a boat, with their father Zebedee, mending their nets. He called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left their boat and their father and followed him. <sup>23</sup> He went around all of Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and curing every disease and illness among the people.

<sup>24</sup> His fame spread to all of Syria, and they brought to him all who were sick with various diseases and racked with pain, those who were possessed, lunatics, and paralytics, and he cured them. <sup>25</sup> And great crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan followed him. (Matthew 5:12-23; vv. 24-25 are not part of the Sunday reading)

### The story so far...

Each gospel writer tells their story in a different way with themes and audiences in mind. For Matthew the audience is Jewish and the narratives lean heavily upon Old Testament (OT) images, characters, and key places in the story of the descendants of Abraham. It was the purpose of the opening genealogy - connecting Jesus to the great patriarchs and kings - as well as everyday folks, sinners and even foreigners. Matthew's concern is to place Jesus of Nazareth within the traditions of God's chosen

people and to show how this same Jesus bursts the bonds of those traditions and brings them to fulfillment. Matthew takes pains to point out how the events in Jesus' life fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament and restores the proper understanding of God's intent in the Law and Covenant.

After the Infancy Narrative, Jesus appears at the Jordan River as an adult coming to the ministry of John the Baptist and the call to "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" (Mt 3:2) It is exactly the same call Jesus will make in Mt 4:17. In this we understand the reference to Isaiah 40:3: John's preaching in the wilderness prepares the way for Jesus, who is baptized by John, receives the Spirit, and then that same Spirit leads Jesus to a time of preparation and temptation in the wilderness, readying Him for public ministry.

Jesus has been marked as the one who will carry the work announced by John the Baptist into the era of judgment and salvation promised from of old by God. It is here in our gospel reading that the stage is now set for the public ministry of Jesus to begin in earnest. Following the arrest of John the Baptist, Jesus began his own ministry in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, in the region of Capernaum.

This is not a simple geographical reference. Zebulun and Naphtali were the northernmost tribes of Israel. They were the first to fall when Assyria invaded (2 Kings 15:29). Their name became synonymous with humiliation, destruction, exile, and religious laxity. Isaiah called them a people in "darkness" residing in "the land of gloom" (Isa 8:23). By beginning His public ministry there, Jesus brings God's salvation precisely to the places first wounded and most forgotten. Restoration and redemption begins where the suffering was greatest. It is in the next chapter of Isaiah that the prophet proclaims, "*to them a child is born...They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.*" (Isa 9:5–6) Matthew is quietly invoking all of Isaiah. It is his way of saying: the promised Child, the Davidic Messiah, is Jesus of Nazareth.

### **From that time on**

Matthew includes the first of two important markers for the ministry of Jesus by telling us that "*From that time on Jesus began to preach ...*" (4:17). The focus of the Gospel is no longer the identification of Jesus based upon the witness of others, but rather Jesus' self-revelation in his words, deeds and signs. It is in these things he is revealed as the messenger of the Covenant, the King who declared that the kingdom of heaven was breaking into the experience of men and women.

The beginning of this record of Jesus' ministry is marked by a note about those who followed him. Two sets of brothers are called by Jesus and become the first disciples. They are Simon Peter and Andrew, followed by James and John. The first call to discipleship is to fishermen, whose work is now to be '*fishers of men*' – pointing to the later commissioning and mission to Israel and then to the ends of the earth. In addition to the special call of the disciples, the ministry of Jesus calls out to a wider audience. As he teaches throughout Galilee and heals the sick, "*great crowds followed him*" (4:25). But he does more than heal, Jesus is setting the stage to bridge to the "Sermon on the Mount."

As noted above vv.24-25 are not part of the Sunday reading. As Brian Stoffregen points out: "The word *akoloutheo* -- "follow" (the origin of our word "acolyte") is used of Peter and Andrew (v. 20), James and John (v. 22), and then of the "great crowds" (v. 25). Could there be a difference in following Jesus **before** any healings and miracles, like the fishermen; in contrast the great crowds who follow **after** verses indicating that Jesus healed all the sick? The contrast could raise the question if we follow because we have been grasped by Jesus' call, or because we are going along with the crowd, or because of what we personally get out of it."

After being identified as the Son of God in the baptism account (3:13–17) and after proving what kind of Son of God he is via the testing in the wilderness (4:1–11), Jesus journeys from Judea to Galilee in order to begin his public ministry (4:12–17). In the course of this journey Jesus will call his core

disciples (vv.18-22) and witness to his proclamation with powerful deeds (vv.23-25). His journey will cover the wilderness of Judea and the towns of Galilee.

But all this begins with the barest of comments: “*When he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee.*” (v.12) The word used for arrest (*paradidomi*) almost becomes the technical term for Jesus' "betrayal". There are parallels between the fates of John and Jesus. At this point we do not know why John was arrested or by whom until (cf. 14:1-12.) Yet, his arrest strongly suggests that the powers from Jerusalem reacted negatively to his practice of baptism, his call for repentance, and the proclamation that the kingdom was upon them. The authorities must not have shared the hope of the kingdom's coming but rather viewed it all as a threat. Jesus' proclamation (v. 17) is exactly the same as John's (3:2). It is not likely to go well for Jesus.

### **Preaching God's Kingdom**

<sup>13</sup> *He left Nazareth and went to live in Capernaum by the sea, in the region of Zebulun and Naphtali, <sup>14</sup> that what had been said through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled:*

Matthew is not introducing a travelogue for ancient Israel. It is in the context of his on-going fulfillment theme that he mentions these towns and specifically connects them to a citation from Isaiah 9:1-2 (see Mt 4:15-16). Matthew actually abbreviates the Isaian text which describes the land from the perspective of an 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE Assyrian invader. The results of that invasion truly made the area “*Galilee of the Gentiles*” (v.15) as successive movements of population had given it a predominantly Gentile population until a deliberate Judaizing policy was adopted by the Hasmonaean rulers (1<sup>st</sup> century BCE), resulting in a thoroughly mixed population. That such an area should be the place of revelation of the Jewish Messiah needed to be justified (cf. 2:23). Matthew sees the justification in Isaiah's prediction of new light dawning in Galilee after the devastation caused by the Assyrian invasion.

Matthew has already cited Isaiah 7:14 in his Infancy Narrative, and now connects Isaiah's “*dawning light*” with the birth of the divine child of Isa 9:6-7. It is in this context that Matthew points to Isa 9:1-2 to geographically locate the ministry of Jesus in Capernaum, located in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, thus having prophetic implications.

With his characteristic fulfillment formula Matthew introduces a quote from Isa 9:1–2. In its original context, Isaiah 7–9 promises deliverance from the threat of Assyria. Matthew has already connected the birth of Jesus with the sign promised to Ahaz (1:23; cf. Isa 7:14; 8:8, 10). Here he connects the political darkness facing Israel in the days of Isaiah to the spiritual problem that caused it. Israel's defection from the Mosaic covenant had led to her oppression by other kingdoms. But for Matthew, Israel's dark political prospects were symptomatic of her need for the redemption from sin that was now coming through Jesus the Messiah.

### **Calling the Disciples**

“*From that time on, Jesus began to preach and say, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”* The very wording of the passage indicates a fresh start, a new phase of Jesus' activity. At the heart of this new ministry is the proclamation of a message identical with that of John the Baptist (3:2), and later to be echoed by Jesus' disciples (10:7). Jesus calls for a decisive response to a new situation, the arrival in his ministry of *the kingdom of heaven*.

The first to make that decisive response are the first disciples. The story of the call of Simon Peter and Andrew is very similar to the following story about the call of James and John. Both stories echo the story of Elijah's call of Elisha (1 Kgs 19:19–21; and the prophets generally, cf Amos 7:15) – people divinely called, uprooted from ordinary existence. The calls similarly possess a four part structure: (1)

the appearance of Jesus (4:18, 21); (2) the comment on the work of the prospective disciples (4:18, 21); (3) the call to discipleship (4:19, 21); and (4) obedience to the call (4:20, 22).

The first disciples encountered Jesus coming to them in their everyday occupation of fishing in the Sea of Galilee — then as now, an important and profitable business in Israel's economy. It is easy to assume that Jesus has made an *ad hoc* metaphor. However, the image of a deity calling people to a new life — in both Judaism and local pagan cults — as “fishing” was common. The common theme of this metaphor was that the person was being called to participate in the divine work. Here God's saving and judging mission to the world is represented by Jesus who calls disciples to participate in the divine mission to humanity. This scene anticipates the formal mission sending (9:36 *ff*) and the wider mission imperative to the whole world (28:19-20)

Without any preparation and with little or no deliberation, they leave behind their business and their families in order to follow Jesus. Discipleship is first and foremost being with Jesus, and the quick response of the first disciples (“*at once*” according to verses 20, 22) suggests how appealing the invitation to be with Jesus must have been. But discipleship also involves sharing in the mission of Jesus (“*fishers of men*” according to v.19), and that dimension too is stressed from the very beginning.

Boring (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 169) notes that “Despite its small size, this pericope represents a major subsection of Matthew's structure... The call of the first disciples is the beginning of the messianic community: the church. Jesus' baptism and temptation were not merely individualistic religious experiences of a ‘great man,’ but the recapitulation of the birth of Israel in the Red Sea and the wilderness testing; they lead to the formation of a new community, the Messiah's people (1:21).”

It is here that we gain some insight into Matthew's understanding of discipleship. A modern reader is tempted to refashion this biblical picture of discipleship into more manageable categories: accept Jesus' principles for living, accept Jesus as a personal savior. Jesus “barges” into our midst and does not call us to admire him or accept his principles, but issues the divine imperative to follow him. The reasonable reply, “Where are you going?” is suborned to discovery along the way. Even without the language, the call of the disciples is a story of “belief,” “faith” and “trust.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in *The Cost of Discipleship*, notes that Jesus comes to men already leading useful lives. He does not fill a hole in their lives or fulfill a need, but calls them away from work and family. The divine sovereignty is clothes in the call to human response: “I could not seek you, if you had not already found me” (Augustine, *Confessions* 1). Discipleship is not an offer man makes to Christ. It is only the call which creates the situation.” (Bonhoeffer, 161)

## Fishing

Clearly Jesus is calling the disciples to a life with him. But every “calling to” is by default a “calling from” in some sense. Fishing was not as easy as getting a boat and having a go. Fishing was controlled by the “powers that be” in two ways. (1) Commercial fishermen worked for the royal family or wealthy landlords who contracted with them to provide a specific amount of fish at a certain time. They were paid either with cash or with fish. (2) Fishermen leased their fishing rights from persons called “toll collectors” in the NT for a percentage of the catch. The “tax” could be as much as 40% (see Malina & Rohrbach, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, p. 44).

Thus, Jesus calling fishermen is more than just calling them away from their families. It also involves a break from the “powers that be” -- the wealthy and or the government -- and into a new power: the reign of heaven. Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*) comments about significance of Jesus calling fishermen:

The double call narrative in 4:18-22, then, utilizes a common form to present Jesus as God's agent enacting his commission to manifest God's saving presence, the empire of the

heavens, and to legitimate the beginning of an alternative community of disciples called to live on the basis of this reign. The calls occur in the midst of the empire's close control of fishing whereby licensing, quotas, and taxation secure Rome's sovereignty over the water and its contents. Jesus' call contests this dominant reality by asserting God's sovereignty and offering an alternative way of life. [p. 120]

While the fishermen have some economic resources, their social ranking is very low. In Cicero's ranking of occupations (*De Off* 1.150-51), owners of cultivated land appear first and fishermen last. Athenaeus indicates that fishermen and fishmongers are on a par with money lenders and are socially despised as greedy thieves (*Deipnosophistai*, 6.224b-28c). The two characters have a socially inferior and economically precarious existence under Roman control. It is among such vulnerable people that God's empire is first manifested. [p. 121]

### Fishers of Men

At one level the phrase does bring up an image of the unwilling being netted and dragged into the boat/the church. Perhaps it isn't so bad for parents to "drag" their children to church. Maybe we should "drag" more people into church, whether or not they want to come. Put up roadblocks on the street and force the cars into our parking lots! Or maybe the "dragging" indicates that the coming of the Kingdom is out of our control. We are going to be "caught" in its coming whether we like it or not.

Generally we view being captured in such a way as a negative thing; but we also talk about being "captured by love". The relationship of love is often something out of our control. It happens to us. When its power runs its full effect, it means a change in life -- marriage is as much a dying to the old life as it is the beginning of a new life. That new life brings with it new relatives, whether we want them or not. Being captured by Jesus' irresistible call meant an end to the old life and relations for the fishermen, so that they might start begin a new life together as followers of Jesus

### The Kingdom of Heaven

"The kingdom of heaven" is uniquely Matthew's phrase. He often uses it in place of Mark's "kingdom of God." Perhaps, if we assume a Jewish background for Matthew, it is a way of avoiding saying and thus possibly misusing the name of God.

*Basileia* can refer to the **area** ruled by a king; or it can refer to the **power** or **authority** to rule as king. We probably shouldn't interpret the "kingdom of heaven" as a place -- such as the place we go when we die; but as the ruling power that emanates from heaven. One commentator translates the phrase: "heaven rules".

The verb *eggizo* is difficult to translate in this passage. It means "to come near". It can refer to space, as one person coming close to another person; or to time, as "it's almost time". The difficulty is with the perfect tense of the verb, which usually indicates a past action with continuing effects in the present. For instance, the perfect: "He has died" or "He has been raised" or "I have believed" can also be expressed with the present: "He is dead" or "He is raised" or "I am believing". When we say with the perfect tense that "The kingdom of heaven has come near." That implies that the kingdom **is near** or even that it **arrived**. Its "time has come" or "is now". Given the ambiguity of the perfect tense and the translation in the preceding paragraph, we might say: "Heaven's rule has arrived and is arriving."

Ironically, in a chapter called "Worship," Mark Allan Powell in *God With Us: A Pastoral Theology of Matthew's Gospel*, states:

Still if worship is an appropriate response, it is not the ideal one. For Matthew, the ideal response to divine activity is repentance. . . . Indeed, Jesus never upbraids people for failing

to worship or give thanks in this gospel (compare Luke 17:17-18), but he does upbraid those who have witnessed his mighty works and not repented (11:20-24). We know from Jesus' teaching in Matthew that people can worship God with their lips even when their deeds demonstrate that their hearts are far from God (15:3-9). Thus, the responsive worship of the crowds in 9:8 and 15:31 is commendable but will be in vain if performed with unrepentant hearts. [pp. 41-42]

What should be our response to the coming of heaven's rule? Surprisingly, it is not worship or praise, but repentance. Perhaps this is the big problem with the coming of the Kingdom or the coming of Jesus at Christmas or Palm Sunday (or even "praise services") -- we want to celebrate and praise, rather than repent -- let the coming one change our thinking and our living.

### A Summary of Jesus' Activities

Although Jesus' activity is confined to the region of Galilee, word of it spreads to the whole province of Syria. The outward movement of Jesus' reputation as a teacher and healer results in the movement of many people toward him. People suffering from all kinds of diseases are brought to him, and they are cured (v. 24). People from every region of Israel except Samaria join the crowds that follow him (v. 25). Such people, along with the disciples, form the audience for the Sermon on the Mount (see 5:1; 7:28).

Matthew 4:23–25 encapsulates the ministry of Jesus. It may be viewed as a concluding summary of Jesus' early ministry in Galilee, or as the introduction to the Sermon on the Mount. It is noteworthy that 4:23 is repeated almost verbatim in 9:35. Both 4:23 and 9:35 are located just before major discourses of Jesus, and they serve to summarize his deeds as the context for his words. But there is likely more to the repetition than that. Taken together, 4:23 and 9:35 form an *inclusio*, a set of literary bookends, which summarize Jesus' words and deeds at the beginning and end of two sections that present his words (Matt 5–7) and deeds (Matt 8–9) in detail. Significantly, both the words (7:29) and deeds (8:9; 9:6) demonstrate Jesus' Kingdom authority, an authority he passed on to his disciples in 10:1. As his words and deeds proclaim and demonstrate the Kingdom, so will the words and deeds of his disciples (10:7–8; 24:14).

By way of preparation for the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has established Jesus' superiority to John the Baptist (3:1–12), recounted the divine acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God (3:13–17), and shown what kind of Son of God Jesus is (4:1–11). He has also explained why Jesus taught and healed in Galilee (4:12–17) and how he attracted an inner circle of disciples (4:18–22) and a larger circle of interested followers (4:23–25). The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29) will reveal what a powerful teacher Jesus is.

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### Notes

**Matthew 4:12 *withdrew to Galilee*:** Jesus made this journey when he learned that John had been imprisoned. "Withdrew" translates a word (*anachōreō*) used several times in Matthew to describe a strategic withdrawal in the face of danger (2:12–14, 22; 10:23; 12:15; 14:13; 15:21). The arrest and imprisonment of John led to his execution (14:1–12), which in turn led to another strategic withdrawal by Jesus (14:13). Perhaps these two withdrawals by Jesus anticipate the close connection made later between the fate of John and the fate of Jesus (17:12).

**Matthew 4:13 *Nazareth...Capernaum...Zebulun...Naphtali*:** Jesus' first stop in Galilee was Nazareth, the village where he grew up (2:23). Matthew does not dwell on Nazareth (*cf.* Luke

4:16–30), preferring to stress Capernaum because its location has prophetic significance. Capernaum (cf. 8:5; 11:23; 17:24) is on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee, roughly two miles west of the Jordan River. Because Capernaum is not mentioned in the OT, Matthew stressed its location in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali (cf. Josh 19:32–39); these two are mentioned in Isaiah 8:22–9:2. The territory of these two tribes was the first to be devastated (733–32 B.C.) at the time of the Assyrian invasion.

**Matthew 4:15 *Galilee of the Gentiles*:** Galilee was looked down upon by the Jerusalem establishment and those who supported it. Its population was a mixture of Jews and Gentiles (2 Kgs 15:29; 17:24–27; 1 Macc 5). It was to this darkened place (cf. Ps 107:10; Luke 1:79) that Jesus brought the light of the Kingdom of God. His mission was not to the Gentiles during these early days of the Galilean ministry (9:35; 10:5–6; 15:24), although he did occasionally minister to Gentiles (8:5–13; 15:21–28). It seems, the Gentiles to whom Jesus ministered took the initiative to come to him, suggesting the applicability of Jesus’ message for all the nations (24:14). The beginnings of Jesus’ ministry in a remote, despised place, largely populated by Gentiles, foreshadows the expansion of mission to all the nations at the end of Jesus’ ministry (28:19).

**Matthew 4:17 *From that time on*:** Many interpreters of Matthew think this phrase signals a transition to the second major section of Matthew.

**Matthew 4:17 *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*:** At the beginning of his preaching Jesus takes up the words of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2) although with a different meaning; in his ministry the kingdom of heaven has already begun to be present (Matthew 12:28). This linkage of the messages of John and Jesus seems to lay a foundation for the similar fates of the two messengers (14:2; 17:12–13).

**Matthew 4:18 *Simon, who is called Peter, and... Andrew*:** The name Simon (cf. 10:2; 16:16–17; 17:25) appears much less often than the popular nickname Peter (23 times), which Jesus gave Simon in 16:17–18. In view of the prominence of Peter in Matthew, especially Matt 16:13ff, it is not merely coincidental that Peter is the first disciple who responds to the call of Jesus. Andrew, by contrast, is mentioned only once after this (10:2; but cf. John 1:35–42). On a linguistic note Simon is a Semitic name, while Andrew is a Greek name – likely reflecting the mixed culture of the Hellenistic Galilee.

**Matthew 4:19 *Come after me*:** The call of the first disciples promises them a share in Jesus’ work and entails abandonment of family and former way of life. Following Jesus involved both traveling with him and obeying his teaching and modeling of God’s will. It could and did lead to hardship and peril (8:19, 22; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21). Three of the four, Simon, James, and John, are distinguished among the disciples by a closer relation with Jesus (Matthew 17:1; 26:37). It should also be noted that in both narratives it is Jesus who sees the prospective disciples and takes the initiative in calling them to follow him. This is an important factor in distinguishing Jesus as a charismatic or prophetic figure, after the model of Elijah, from the late Rabbinic model in which the disciples took the initiative in attaching themselves to the Rabbi (cf. *m. Avot* 1:6).

***fishers of men*:** This is an expression found elsewhere in the NT only in Mark 1:17. It is just possible that fishing here is an allusion to Jer 16:16, or that fishing for people implies eschatological judgment (13:47–50). In any event, this new “fishing” results in life for those “caught” by the message of Jesus.

The occupation of fisherman could take one of three forms: (a) a tax collector, having a Roman franchise, who sold fishing rights to local businessmen, (b) a person who owned or leased boats and employed day laborers, and (c) the day laborer’s themselves. This distinction is helpful in locating the social class of Peter, *et.al.* It is likely that Peter belonged to the second group.

**Matthew 4:20 *at once they left their nets*:** Here and in Matthew 4:22, as in Mark (Mark 1:16–20) and



unlike the Lucan account (Luke 5:1-11), the disciples' response is motivated only by Jesus' invitation, an element that emphasizes his mysterious power. For the similar story of the call of Matthew, see 9:9.

**Matthew 4:23 *their synagogues*:** Matthew usually designates the Jewish synagogues as their synagogue(s) (Matthew 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:54) or, in address to Jews, your synagogues (Matthew 23:34), an indication that he likely wrote after the break between nascent Christian church and synagogue.

**Matthew 4:24 *Syria*:** the Roman province to which Palestine belonged.

**Matthew 4:25 *great crowds*:** Matthew's use of the term "*crowds*" is noteworthy, since it often portrays those who are attracted to Jesus because of his sensational deeds (cf. 8:1, 18; 11:7; 12:46; 15:30; 17:14; 19:2). The crowds occupied a middle ground between Jesus' committed disciples on the one hand, and the hostile religious leaders on the other. At times, the crowd seemed favorable to Jesus (9:8; 12:23; 15:31), and he to the crowd (9:36; 14:14; 15:32). But as time went on, under the influence of the leaders, the crowd ultimately called for Jesus' death (26:47, 55; 27:20, 24). In this context, the presence of the crowds led Jesus away to the mountain where he delivered his first discourse (5:1). ***the Decapolis*:** a federation of Greek cities in Palestine, originally ten in number, all but one east of the Jordan. ***beyond the Jordan*:** This refers to the region farther south, east of Jerusalem and the Jordan River. Matthew's geographical language covers the whole land of Israel, moving from northwest (Galilee) to northeast (Decapolis) to Jerusalem (probably to be understood as the center of the land) to southwest (Judea) to southeast ("beyond the Jordan").

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