

Alcohol: At the Feast and at Home

When we were first called into God's true church, many of us had much difficulty in beginning to keep some of His commands. Other commands most of us had little or no difficulty keeping. Yet *other* commands, most of us actually *relished* keeping! Here is just one of these in the latter category:

You shall truly tithe all the increase of your seed, that the field brings forth year by year. And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place which He shall choose to place His name there, the tithe of your corn, *of your wine*, and of your oil, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks; that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. And if the way be too long for you, so that you are not able to carry it; or if the place be too far from you, which the LORD your God shall choose to set His name there, when the LORD your God has blessed you: then shall you turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and shall go unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose: and you shall bestow that money for whatsoever your soul lusts after, for oxen, or for sheep, or *for wine, or for strong drink*, or for whatsoever your soul desires: and you shall eat... *{and drink}*... there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you, and your household. (Deuteronomy 14:22-26)

The purpose of this article is to discuss with you the topic of the use of alcoholic beverages, both at the Feast of tabernacles and throughout the year at home. This will include a discussion of God's authorization for the use of alcohol as well as His strict warnings regarding its use.

God's Old Testament Approval

Benjamin Franklin once said that, “Beer is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” But some time ago, a man wrote to us, and claimed that all the *positive* scriptural mentions of wine refer to unfermented grape juice, and that all the *negative* mentions refer to fermented wine! But God's Word disagrees. Rather, it shows that it is perfectly alright for His people } to enjoy alcoholic beverages in moderation. Please note that I am referring to adults who do not have alcohol abuse problems. The scriptures are replete with accounts of *proper* uses of wine and other types of alcoholic beverage by people considered righteous by God's standards. Here are some Old Testament examples.

First of all, Melchizedek – who we believe to have been Jesus Himself – brought wine to His meeting with Abram:

And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread *and wine*: and He was the Priest of the Most High God. (Genesis 14:18)

When Isaac was giving his blessing to his son Jacob (who he thought was Esau), he drank wine, and he asked for “plenty of wine” for his son as a blessing from God:

And he {Isaac} said, “Bring it near to me, and I will eat of my son’s venison, that my soul may bless you.” And he brought it near to him, and he did eat: and *he brought him wine, and he drank...* Therefore God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and *plenty of corn and wine.* (Genesis 27:25, 28)

Considering the fact that Isaac was a man close to God, is it likely that he would ask God to bless his son with an abundance of wine, if he knew that God forbade it?

God included wine in other blessings too. For example, through Moses, God promised the Israelites that, if they would obey Him, wine would be included among the many blessings He would richly pour out upon them:

And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and *your new wine* and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you.

(Deuteronomy 7:13)

Then Israel shall dwell in safety, the fountain of Jacob alone, in a land of grain and *new wine*; His heavens shall also drop dew.

(Deuteronomy 33:28)

Yes, wine was promised by God as a blessing for obedience. But conversely, He solemnly warned them that, if they disobeyed Him, He would take their wine and their vineyards away from them as a curse:

You shall plant *vineyards* and tend them, but you shall neither drink of the *wine* nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them... And they [*fierce foreign invaders*] shall eat the increase of your livestock and the produce of your land, until you are destroyed; they shall not leave you grain or *new wine* or oil, or the increase of your cattle or the offspring of your flocks, until they have destroyed you. (Deuteronomy 28:39, 51)

In many scriptures in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, God commanded that wine should be used in certain of Israel's offerings to Him; also that the Israelites should give Him the firstfruits of all the wine they produced:

The firstfruits of your grain and your *new wine* and your oil, and the first of the fleece of your sheep, you shall give Him. (Deuteronomy 18:4)

Also, as we read in our opening scripture – Deuteronomy 14:23-26 – in His instructions on the proper use of “second tithe” for the celebration of His Feasts, God authorizes the purchase and use of wine and strong drink. The term “strong drink” is translated from the Hebrew word *shekar* which means “intensely alcoholic liquor” and might include the likes of whisky, brandy and fortified wines.

God's New Testament Approval

The instructions and examples continue throughout the Old Testament. Now let us examine some New Testament scriptures. We will begin with a question: In the transition between the two eras covered by the volumes we call the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament,” did God change his mind regarding the use of alcohol?

Jesus and His apostles mention wine and strong drink numerous times in the New Testament. It is very true that drunkenness and excessive consumption of alcohol are clearly condemned in many New Testament scriptures, as they are in the Old Testament. We will come to some of them later. But nowhere does the Bible say that moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages is sin. Some scriptures even strongly indicate that, during His human sojourn, Jesus Himself enjoyed the occasional glass of wine:

For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and you say, ‘He has a devil.’ The Son of Man is come eating and drinking; and you say, ‘Behold a gluttonous man, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners!’ (Luke 7:33-34)

Why would anyone call Him a “winebibber” if it was anything other than wine that he had been seen drinking? Realistically, would His critics have judged Him for drinking mere grape juice? Also, Jesus drank wine with His disciples at his last Passover service, and He promised that He would again enjoy a glass of wine with them after their resurrection:

**But I say to you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom.
(Matthew 26:29)**

The very first miracle Jesus performed was to turn water into wine:

And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: and both Jesus was called, and His disciples, to the marriage. And when they wanted {NKJV: ran out of} wine, the mother of Jesus said unto Him, “They have no wine”... And there were set there six waterpots of stone, after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three firkins {as much as nine gallons or forty litres!} apiece. Jesus said unto them, “Fill the waterpots with water.” And they filled them up to the brim. And He said unto them, “Draw out now, and bear unto the governor of the feast.” And they bore it. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was: (but the servants which drew the water knew;) the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, and said unto him, “Every man at the beginning does set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but you have kept the good wine until now.”
(John 2:1-3, 6-10)

Not only did Jesus condone the proper use of wine, but He knew the qualities of a *good* wine! This fact is confirmed in:

And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, ‘The old is better.’ (Luke 5:39)

The man who wrote to us argued that, at the Cana wedding, Jesus changed the water into unfermented grape-juice. But have you ever heard of grape-juice connoisseurs? Or have you ever heard anyone comparing the qualities of good, old grape-juice with that of lesser quality? The Greek word translated "wine" in John 2:1-10, etc. is *oinos* which means “fermented wine.”

The apostle Paul followed his Master's lead on this subject. In the same letter in which he soundly condemned excessive alcohol consumption, Paul advised Timothy to drink some wine to help ease his chronic stomach problems:

No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities. (I Timothy 5:23)

God gave us wine and other alcoholic beverages for our enjoyment, to learn how to use them properly, and to help us develop character and the proper exercise of wisdom and self-control.

Drunkness and Alcoholism are Not the Same

The proper use of alcohol is a great responsibility. Only the *wrong* use of it is sin. Let us continue by discussing the *wrong* use of alcohol.

Just what *are* some wrong uses of alcohol? In answer to this question, two words usually come to mind: “Alcoholism” and “drunkness.” The Bible does not specifically distinguish between the two; so many make the common mistake of thinking that these two conditions are one and the same. They most certainly are *not!* They may well be “two sides of the same coin” and both conditions *may sometimes* appear in the same person. Some alcoholics are also shameless drunkards. But not always!

We sometimes come across what is commonly called a “Dry Drunk” – technically termed a “Delta Alcoholic” – a man or woman who can be very effective in hiding his or her condition from the world and from the church. But not from God!

Let us define both terms – alcoholism and drunkness:

Alcoholism may be:

- i) A chronic disease caused by addiction to alcohol, which leads to deterioration in health and social functioning.**
- ii) Acute alcohol poisoning.**

An alcoholic is a person addicted to alcohol, and/or one who abuses alcohol.

Is alcoholism really a disease? An illness? Yes, it is! Though some may argue the point, the very latest studies on alcoholism prove conclusively that it **is** a disease; also that many alcoholics are genetically predisposed to alcoholism.

But alcoholism is not the main topic of this article. I am just touching on it briefly to let you know that alcoholism and drunkness are not the same thing, and to encourage any of you who are affected by alcoholism to seek expert professional help. If you have an alcohol problem, *please* discuss it with your spouse or your parents – and with your minister – and most importantly, with God.

I do not claim to be an expert on alcoholism; but I have done some extensive research into the topic and I have already learnt enough that I can, hopefully, point you in the right direction. A few years ago, my wife and I attended a four-day program for family members of alcoholics and drug addicts at a Canadian drug and alcohol addiction recovery program.

Neither my wife nor I is an alcoholic or drug addict; but alcoholism and drug addiction do exist in God's church and, as we previously had little or no practical knowledge about substance abuse, when this opportunity arose to attend this family program, we jumped at it.

Now let us move from the topic of alcoholism and onto our main topic for this article: drunkenness. Here is a simple dictionary definition:

- i) The state of being drunk,**
- ii) Inebriation,**
- iii) The state of intoxication after having drunk an alcoholic beverage.**

Here are the definitions of a few associated terms:

**Inebriation: Behaving as though affected by alcohol; for example:
exhilaration, being dumbened or stupefied.**

Intoxicated: Stupefied or excited by means of a chemical such as alcohol.

These definitions show that drunkenness is different than alcoholism. A case of drunkenness might be an occasional or even a one-time event. It might perhaps occur once a year (at the Feast, for example) to a person who is totally sober in between. Still, every case of drunkenness is a sin, and needs to be repented of.

The Drunkards of Ephraim and Manasseh

A recent news item on BBC Radio reported:

- That “Binge Drinking” – drinking with the purposeful intent of becoming intoxicated – is approaching epidemic levels throughout the United Kingdom – especially among young people.
- The worrying popularity of “Alcopops” among young people. “Alcopops” are bottled or canned alcohol drinks which resemble soft drinks or lemonade, but which have an alcohol content up to 7% and tend to appeal more to young females.
- That Liverpool’s Alder Hey Children’s Hospital has been admitting children as young as nine-years-old, suffering from alcohol poisoning.
- That the British are among Europe’s biggest drinkers, and boast the fastest increase in drinking in all of Europe.

But why should we be surprised at these statistics? Thousands of years ago, God foretold Ephraim’s wretched condition:

Woe to the crown of pride, to the drunkards of Ephraim, whose glorious beauty is a fading flower, which are on the head of the fat valleys of them that are overcome with wine!... The crown of pride, the drunkards of Ephraim, shall be trodden under feet: (Isaiah 28:1, 3)

Alas, if only the once proud, glorious and powerful Israelite tribe of Ephraim were the only tribe afflicted with this ever-increasing crisis. Let us now shift our focus from Ephraim to his brother, Manasseh. Here is an excerpt from a recent World Congress of Families newsletter:

A recent study finds that student drinking – a perennial campus problem – is getting worse, and officials of area colleges are stepping up efforts to curtail it. “Students know about the movie ‘Animal House,’ and that is what they think they are supposed to do at college,” lamented Lori Lambert, director of residence life at Xavier University.

The study, by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at New York's Columbia University, found that 3.8 million full-time college students (that is 49%) binge drink and/or abuse prescription and illegal drugs, and that 1.8 million full-time college students (22.9%) meet the medical criteria for substance abuse and dependence. That is more than twice the percentage of the general population.

The survey saw no significant change from twelve years ago in the percentage of students who drink, but it discovered that the intensity of excessive drinking has jumped sharply.

The study found that, between 1993 and 2001, the proportion of students who frequently binge drink increased by 16%, those who drink on ten or more occasions in a month went up by 25%, those who got drunk at least three times a month increased 26%, and those who drink to get drunk was up 21%.

Among the consequences of alcohol abuse on college campuses were 1,717 deaths from alcohol-related injuries in 2001, up 6% from 1998, and a 38% increase from 1993 to 2001 in the proportion of students injured as a result of their own drinking.

The report said there was a 21% increase from 2001 to 2005 in the average number of alcohol-related arrests per campus, and noted that in 2005 alcohol-related arrests constituted 83% of campus arrests.

In 2001, 97,000 students were victims of alcohol-related rapes or other sexual attacks and 696,000 students were assaulted by a student who had been binge drinking.

Is this what the cream of the youth of modern Ephraim and Manasseh have come down to? Two of the most blessed of all modern Israelite nations! I am sure that, if we were to look a little deeper, we would probably find that the other modern Israelite nations are not too far behind these "leaders"!

But this problem is only out there in “the world” – surely! Only in *physical* Israel – surely! Not in *spiritual* Israel – surely! There is no drunkenness or alcoholism in the true church of God – surely! And certainly not in your branch of the church – surely! Is it?

You bet it is!

Yes, some church members – yes, probably including some members of *your* branch of the church – are suffering from alcohol-abuse problems. The whole of your congregation can be affected by their abuse – either directly or indirectly; and the whole Body of Jesus Christ can be affected by their abuse.

Here are just a few of many examples of alcohol-related problems that I have become aware of at the Feast of Tabernacles in recent years. Groups of church people – mainly young people, but not all of them, seen and heard every night of God’s Feast (yes, including Holy Days) drinking and partying in public areas until the “wee hours” of the morning. In one church group, the annual singles’ wine and cheese party had to be discontinued because of multiple exhibitions of public drunkenness in the hotel. After helping various families into the Feast hotel with their luggage, a porter commented to a church member that he had been doing the same job for many years, but that he had “never seen so much booze in all his life!”

What kind of light and example are we shining to the world? To the people at our Feast sites? To the hotel staffs at our Feast sites?

God's New Testament Warnings

Please do not get me wrong! I am not a spoil-sport, an abolitionist, or a teetotaler. I enjoy a glass of good beer, wine or Scotch whisky. I am not picking on any individual specifically. I am not a holier-than-thou hypocrite and I admit that, in my past on a few occasions – thankfully, just a few – I have overdone it and drunk too much. When I look back on those occasions, I am ashamed and embarrassed, and I pray that God will forgive and forget those sins.

It is true that, as we have seen, God's Word allows moderate consumption of alcoholic beverages and even encourages their use (again, to non-risk adult members who enjoy them) at the Feast and throughout the year.

But the same book firmly condemns drunkenness! Do we sometimes suffer from “selective spiritual hearing” or selective Bible study? Do we choose to remember Deuteronomy 14:23-26 and other scriptures that support the drinking of alcohol, but then overlook the many scriptures that strictly forbid drunkenness?

In the King James Version of the Bible, there are seventy-seven appearances of the word “drunk” and its derived words. Not all of these have a negative connotation implying inebriation; many of them are merely the past tense of the verb “to drink.”

In the remainder of this article, I would like to concentrate on God's New Testament warnings against drunkenness. Let us begin with our Saviour's very own words:

But and if that servant say in his heart, “My lord delays his coming”; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken; the lord of that servant will come in a day when he looks not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more. (Luke 12:45-48)

Here we see some possible fruits of drunkenness: Becoming an evil servant; the drunkard thinking and saying “My lord (Lord) delays his coming”; thus thinking that there is plenty of time left to straighten out his life. Beating his fellow-servants – perhaps his family and/or his fellow-Christians; yes, perhaps beating them physically; perhaps beating them in other ways – perhaps emotionally, sexually, verbally, or socially. I have personally seen or become aware of all of these. The drunkard sometimes comes to prefer the company of other fellow-drunkards, rather than that of sober fellow-Christians.

What does Jesus warn will be the results of these actions? The drunkard will find that the lord (Lord) will *not* delay his coming. The Lord (or the drunkard’s death) will come when the drunkard is totally unprepared for it. The drunkard will be cut off from his/her fellow-Christians and will be grouped – not with his fellow-Christians – but with the hypocrites and unbelievers. His misery will be so great that he will weep and gnash his teeth – because he failed to heed God’s multiple warnings against drunkenness. If he is aware of these multiple warnings, but does not heed them, he will be punished more severely than if he was unaware.

But please note: If you were not aware before reading this article, then God is making you aware of His warnings in this regard right now. These are not my warning words. These are the warning words of Jesus Christ. So please heed them! Jesus hammers home His warnings even more in another scripture:

And take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting... *{excess; overindulgence in eating or drinking}*... and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unawares. For as a snare shall it... *{that day}*... come on all them that dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch you therefore, and pray always, that you may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man. (Luke 21:34-36)

If you and your beloved family were in a situation where severe danger threatened, and you were told that rescue forces were on their way to liberate you and your family from the danger – on the condition that you watch, stay awake, stay alert and stay vigilant, sober and free from the drowsiness of excessive alcohol, would you not do it – in order to save yourself and your family from the danger? Of course you would!

This is Jesus' warning here! What makes a drunkard think that the dangers of "that day" are any less perilous than the dangers of today? We know very well what makes the drunkard think it – or rather *who* makes him think it. It is Satan who deceives the whole world! Is the drunkard correct in believing that "that day" is somehow less dangerous than the hazards of our day? No! Here is what God says about "that day":

Alas! For that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble... (Jeremiah 30:7)

None is like it! No day has ever been as dangerous as that day will be! So please, for your own safety, stay awake! Stay alert! Stay sober!

Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting...

{Greek: komos: revelling and carousal – usually at night-time}...

and drunkenness, not in chambering...

{Greek: koytay: illicit sexual behaviour}...

and wantonness...

{Greek: aselgia: lasciviousness, unbridled lust, excess, licentiousness, filthy, outrageous and shameless behaviour}...

not in strife and envying. (Romans 13:13)

Many or all of these sins can be negative by-products of excessive drinking. Remember the unbelievable statistics in the Columbia University study quoted above? Remember all the rapes, sexual assaults and other violent attacks?

Please notice also that, through Paul, God warns us against excessive nocturnal partying. He repeats this warning more specifically in Paul's first letter to His church congregation in Thessalonica:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. You are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. (I Thessalonians 5:4-8)

We are children of the day! One of our church deacons in Oregon State has this erudite saying: “Nothing good happens after 11:30pm.” Some may think that this saying is an overstatement; but please take some time and think about these wise words!

I wrote unto you in an epistle not to company with fornicators *{New King James Version: sexually immoral people}*: yet not altogether with the fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must you needs go out of the world. But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such a one not even to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are outside *{i.e. outside God's church}*?... do not you judge them that are within? But them that are outside God judges. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person. (I Corinthians 5:9-13)

We are not to even keep company with drunkards. Please notice that God groups drunkards with the sexually immoral, extortioners, and even idolaters! The shame of this scripture – and today’s application of it – is that it is referring to people who consider themselves to be in God’s true church – *not* people outside the church!

Know you not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (I Corinthians 6:9-10)

Did God make a mistake here by including drunkenness in His list of sins that will keep the unrighteous people out of the His Kingdom? Of course He did not! Continuing in verse 11:

And such were some of you: but you are washed, but you are sanctified, but you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

Converted children of God – brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ – must not be doing these things! We have been – and continue to be – washed, sanctified and justified.

Rather than continuing in our pre-conversion sins, perhaps thinking that we can safely continue because “our sins are covered by God’s grace,” we must rather use God’s Holy Spirit in us to grow more like our Elder Brother.

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Galatians 5:19-21)

This is no laughing matter! Drunkenness is one of the deadly “works of flesh.” We may not think it ranks “up there” with the likes of murder, idolatry and witchcraft; but it is not *our* thinking and opinions that matter. It is *God’s* thoughts and opinions and Word that truly matter. And He says that unrepented-of drunkenness is a deadly sin that will keep a person out of His Kingdom. Yes, this is a salvation issue and He repeats His warning over and over.

At the Feast each year, Herbert Armstrong used to ask the question, “Why are we here?” Why do we attend the Feast, each year? Why do you attend the Feast? Just to have good time? Just to fellowship? Just to see friends that you have not seen for a while? Just to eat, drink and be merry?

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things – in moderation and balance. But if these things are *all* you attend the Feast for, then they are the *wrong* reasons!

One of the main reasons we all *should* attend the Feast is to learn to fear our great God. And in order to hear and to read what God is saying to us through His ministers and His other speakers, we need to be alert.

But if you do not *care* what God thinks and says, then you may as well not bother attending anymore! You may as well save your hard-earned money so that you can booze it up at Christmas and New Year with the rest of the world – with the rest of those with whom God promises to group you!

And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness... {Another warning against night-time activities!}... but rather reprove them, for it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done of them in secret. But all things that are reprovved are made manifest by the light: for whatsoever makes manifest is light. Wherefore He says, “Awake you that sleeps, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light. See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be you not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. And be not drunk with wine... {or with beer, whisky, rum, alcopops, cider, or whatever}... wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit...

Be filled with spiritually-refreshing, spiritual “water” – and be doing what all of us should be doing at the Feast of Tabernacles and throughout the year:

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; (Ephesians 5:11-20)

Whether occasional or habitual, whether at the Feast or throughout the year back in your home area, drunkenness is not worth it! Esau foolishly gave up his precious birthright for a miserable bowl of lentil stew. Is it worth giving up your eternal life and your place in the Kingdom of God for one-too-many glasses of wine?

Please enjoy alcoholic beverages in moderation. Please enjoy God’s wonderful Feasts. Please enjoy your daily life between Feasts in your home area. Please enjoy the rest of your physical life. But please, for your salvation’s sake, obey God’s admonition through the apostle Paul:

Be not drunk!

*John Plunkett
Building Bridges, The Church of God Canada
Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada
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