

The Crucifixion and Docetic Christology

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I. CRUCIFIXION

We often forget how incongruous a symbol for a religious movement the cross is. It was, after all, the means of capital punishment in the ancient world — the equivalent of the electric chair, the gas chamber, or the gallows. (Cf. the “gibbet” of the NEB at 1 Pet. 2:24.) In spite of the Jewish curse on anyone who was hung upon a “tree” (Deut. 21:22-23), the apostles boldly preached the resurrection of a Messiah who had been killed on a cross (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24).¹ Knowing well that both Greeks and Romans regarded the cross as the humiliating punishment reserved for slaves and rebels, Paul preached Christ crucified and even declared that He who was equal to God had humbled Himself to experience such a shameful death (Phil. 2:6-11).²

A. Archaeological Evidence

The harsh reality of crucifixion's brutality has been brought home to us by the discovery in 1968 of ossuaries at Giv'at ha-Mivtar just north of Jerusalem. Among the bones of thirty-five individuals, there is evidence that nine died from violent causes, including a child who was shot with an arrow, a young man who was burned upon a rack, and an old woman whose skull was bashed in.³

Of the greatest interest is one ossuary which provides us for the first time with physical evidence of crucifixion. It is inscribed with the name “Yehohanan” followed by the patronymic “son of HGQWL.”⁴ By reinterpreting the *gimel* as an ‘*ayin*, Yadin speculates that the latter enigmatic word means “H'QWL” or “one hanged with his knees apart,” that is, one who was hanged upside down.⁵ Yehohanan was a young man between the ages of twenty-four and twenty-eight, who was about five feet and five inches tall. He was crucified at some time early in the first century A.D. After his flesh had rotted away, relatives gathered his bones and those of a young child and redeposited them in a limestone box known as an ossuary.⁶

Yehohanan's *calcanei* (heel bones) were still transfixes by a four and a half inch iron nail, which had been bent as it was pounded into a cross of olive wood.⁷ The right *tibia* (shin bone) had been fractured into slivers by a blow, the “coup de grace” which was administered to hasten death (cf. John 19:32). The

crease in the right radial bone indicates that the victim had been pinioned in the forearms rather than in the hands as in the traditional depictions of Christ's crucifixion.⁸ The Greek word *cheiras* in Luke 24:39-40 and John 20:20, 25, 27, usually translated "hands," can and should be translated "arms" in these passages.⁹

The fact that both heel bones were transfixed by a single nail has complicated reconstructions of the posture of the victim. Haas suggests that the man was provided with a *sedile* to sit upon, and that his legs were in a bent position when the heels were nailed to the cross.¹⁰ On the other hand, Moller-Christensen has speculated that a rectangular frame was made for the man's feet so that they were not bent sideways.¹¹

B. Jewish Texts

Because of the Mosaic curse (Deut. 21:22-23) a crucified Messiah was a stumbling-block to the Jews (1 Cor. 1:23). We can sense the acute difficulties of the Jews from the responses of Trypho to Justin Martyr (early second century):

Trypho said, "These and such like scriptures, sir, compel us to wait for Him who, as Son of man, receives from the ancient of days the everlasting kingdom. But this so-called Christ of yours was dishonourable and inglorious, so much so that the last curse contained in the law of God fell on him, for he was crucified."¹²

In addition to references in the rabbinic texts,¹³ we have two texts from Qumran which seem to refer to crucifixion. J. M. Allegro first called attention to the *Nahum Commentary* which seems to allude to Alexander Jannaeus, who crucified eight hundred of his enemies.¹⁴ More recently Y. Yadin has brought to light the *Temple Scroll*, which reads as follows (col. 64, lines 6 ff.): "If a man has informed against his people and has delivered his people up to a foreign nation and has done evil to his people, you shall hang him on the tree and he shall die."¹⁵ In spite of the arguments of Baumgarten to the contrary, the verb *tlh*, "hang," in these texts would seem to refer to crucifixion.¹⁶ Fitzmyer points out that this demonstrates that even prior to Christianity, the Jews themselves had applied Deuteronomy 21:22-23 to crucifixion.¹⁷

The Jewish historian Josephus recounted numerous incidents of crucifixion, perhaps none so poignant as an incident which took place during the siege of Machaerus (*War* VII. 202-203). The Roman commander captured a brave youth named Eleazar.

... he ordered a cross to be erected, as though intending to have Eleazar instantly suspended; at which sight those in the fortress were seized with deeper dismay and with piercing

shrieks exclaimed that the tragedy was intolerable. At this juncture, moreover, Eleazar besought them not to leave him to undergo the most pitiable of deaths . . .

Heeding his pleas, the other Jews proceeded to surrender the fort.

C. Classical Texts

Jurgen Moltmann understates the case greatly when he remarks: "To the humanism of antiquity the crucified Christ and the veneration of him were also an embarrassment. . . . In the human search for the good, the true and the beautiful, the crucified Christ was not a valuable aesthetic symbol."¹⁸

Martin Hengel in his erudite monograph on the subject reports that the Greeks never used the concept of crucifixion in a metaphorical sense.

In ancient thought, e.g. among the (Roman) Stoics, an ethical and symbolic interpretation of the crucifixion was still possible, but to assert that God Himself accepted death in the form of a crucified Jewish manual worker from Galilee in order to break the power of death and bring salvation to all men could only seem folly and madness to men of ancient times.¹⁹

In a famous passage of his speech defending Rabirius in 63 B.C. Cicero vividly described the horror which crucifixion evoked among Romans:

But the executioner, the veiling of the head and the very word cross (*nomen ipsum crucis*) should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the very mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.²⁰

One of the benefits of Roman citizenship was that except in rare cases it protected the citizen from crucifixion.

Among the horrors of crucifixion was the length of the prolonged agony portrayed by Paul's contemporary, Seneca:

Can anyone be found who would prefer wasting away in pain dying limb by limb, or letting out his life drop by drop, rather than expiring once for all? Can any man be found willing to be fastened to the accursed tree (*ad illud infelix lignum*), long sickly, already deformed, swelling with ugly weals on shoulders and chest, and drawing the breath of life amid long-drawn-out agony? He would have many excuses for dying even before mounting the cross.²¹

As crucifixions were intended as deterrents the Romans set up crosses in the most public places, as Quintilian noted: "Whenever we crucify the guilty, the most crowded roads are chosen, where the most people can see and be moved by this fear. For penalties relate not so much to retribution as to their exemplary effect."²²

D. Christian Texts

In addition to the charges of atheism, immorality, and cannibalism which the pagans lodged against Christians, the idea of worshipping a crucified Savior brought forth jibes such as the one expressed in Minucius Felix's *Octavius* (9:3):

And anyone who says that the objects of their worship are a man who suffered the death penalty for his crime and the deadly wood of the cross, assigns them altars appropriate for incorrigibly wicked men, so that they actually worship what they deserve.²³

Arnobius reports that the pagans said:

The gods are not hostile to you because you worship the Omnipotent God but because you maintain that a man, born a human being, and one who suffered the penalty of crucifixion, which even to the lowest of men is a disgraceful punishment, was God²⁴

Arnobius was hard put to answer that charge, arguing that the manner of death does not negate a man's words or deeds, citing the deaths of Pythagoras and of Socrates.

Though Christians were not always able to express in words the reasons for their faith, they were soon called upon to be *martyrs*, "witnesses" by death, at times on crosses as in the persecutions of Nero in A.D. 64 (Tacitus, *Annals* XV. 44.6). Eusebius (*H.E.* II. 25.5) reports that in Nero's day "Paul was beheaded at Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified." The apocryphal *Acts of Peter* (37) relates that Peter asked, "I request you therefore, executioners, to crucify me head-downwards — in this way and no other."²⁵

A graphic description of the martyrdom of Pionius of Smyrna, who was crucified in the Decian persecution (A.D. 250), has been preserved for us in the *Acta Pionii*:

The condemned men were led by the police-officer . . . to the stake prepared for them in the arena. At his bidding Pionius willingly stripped off his clothes. . . . He then lay down and stretched himself along the stake, and allowed the soldier to drive in the nails. . . . So they raised the stake into an upright position, and lowered it into a hole in the ground, adding greatly to the pain in the sufferer's wound. . . . Fuel

was then brought, heaped round the victims' feet, and set alight. . . . As the flames rose around him, with a joyful face he spoke a last "Amen"; and adding the words: "Lord, receive my soul!" he expired.²⁶

II. DOCETISM

The words "docetism" and "docetic" are derived from the Greek *dokein* "to appear," referring to beliefs in an apparent rather than a real incarnation of Christ.²⁷ Hippolytus (VIII.3.25) referred to a specific group called the *Docetae*, but the terms are applied more broadly.²⁸ Docetism was not a separate heresy but was, as J. N. D. Kelly points out: "an attitude which infected a number of heresies, particularly Marcionism and Gnosticism."²⁹

As Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* III.11.3) recognized, there was a great variety of views among docetists. The various positions ranged from pure docetism to semi- or quasi-docetic conceptions of Christ. Some following Plato denied the reality of all sensible phenomena. Others denied that Jesus had a real body, or that He actually suffered on the cross. Some admitted that Christ had a body but maintained that this was quite different from the rest of humanity.³⁰

Davies identifies four different types of docetisms as to their points of departure: (1) those that derived from ideas of the *Godhead*, such as the impassibility and the immutability of God; (2) those that stressed *cosmology*, holding that matter belonged to the realm of the Demiurge and was not capable of salvation; (3) those that centered on *anthropology*, maintaining that flesh was evil and that the soul was the real man; (4) those that denied the incarnation because of their views of *Christology*, rejecting the crucifixion of the Messiah as this would make the envoy of God inferior to the angels.³¹ In actuality many of these themes were combined by any given group of docetists.

III. DOCETISM AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

As in the larger issue of Gnosticism and the New Testament, some scholars, particularly Bultmannians, believe that they can detect both the influence of and the polemic against docetism in the New Testament. Many scholars believe that Paul's opponents at Corinth espoused a docetic if not a Gnostic view of the resurrection.³² Not a few believe that the "Carmen Christi" of Philippians 2:5-11 had its origins in a group with docetic leanings.³³ In opposition to this view, which has been advocated by E. Lohmeyer and E. Kasemann, J.A.T. Robinson writes:

Under the "form of a slave", the *morphe doulou* (by which is intended nothing in the least docetic, but the most realistic

description of the condition of fallen humnaity), Christ led a life of complete alignment with the will of God³⁴

Robert Gundry believes that the hymn of 1 Timothy 3:16 is directed against "gnostic docetism."³⁵

A few scholars have been able to detect docetic or antidocetic strains in the first two Gospels.³⁶ C. H. Talbert has argued vigorously that Luke's realism both in his Gospel and in the Acts betrays an anti-docetic concern:

When the Third evangelist says that Jesus was born Son of God, anointed by the Spirit, and that he journeyed to Jerusalem where he died and was raised before ascending bodily into heaven, he is saying "No" to a docetism which claimed that the spiritual redeemer descended upon the man Jesus at the baptism and left him before his passion. At least a major facet of Lucan Christology is a way of saying to docetism that the church's Saviour was really human from first to last.³⁷

When after the resurrection Jesus is depicted as eating grilled fish in the presence of His disciples (Luke 24:39-43), according to Benoit, "By this Luke does not mean that glorified bodies need food; only that Jesus accommodates Himself to their understanding and gives His disciples a proof that He can eat and therefore is not a mere phantom but a man."³⁸ Jeremias notes that "A variant on Luke 24.42 f. has the disciples giving the Risen Lord a piece of honeycomb as well as the fish, the remainder of which the Risen Lord then hands back"³⁹

Many have argued that the Gospel of John is docetic, none so baldly as E. Kasemann, who accuses the evangelist of "naive docetism."⁴⁰ Bultmann and his disciples have assumed that the Fourth Gospel was an adaptation of previously Gnostic material.⁴¹ In spite of what he calls its "docetic" look, J. A. T. Robinson notes that the Evangelist is not unconcerned with historicity.⁴² Cullmann indeed argues that John's Gospel is firmly anchored in history: "Everything that is said in the Johannine prologue about the beginning of all things is seen from the perspective of the decisive statement, 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.14)."⁴³ Pollard concludes: "For all his emphasis on the divinity of Christ, Christ for him is *a man* (i. 30; iv.29; viii.40; ix.11, 16; x.33);"⁴⁴

Of course, the clearest examples of anti-docetic passages are to be found in the Johannine Epistles, where we read the following (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7, NIV):

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the

flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, have gone into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the anti-christ.

The positive emphasis of I John 1:1 strikes the keynote of John's concern: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

But how are these verses to be interpreted? Are these to be taken as statements against pure or quasi-docetism? Are they evidence of a developed Gnosticism? I. H. Marshall in his recent commentary presents several alternative interpretations:

According to U. B. Muller, *Die Geschichte der Christologie in der johanneischen Gemeinde*, Stuttgart, 1975, 53-68, John's opponents were Docetists who did not separate Jesus from the Christ (as in Cerinthianism), but rather argued that, although Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God, he did not suffer and die to save men; they regarded Jesus as a glorious figure but not as a savior. Jesus' sufferings were thus merely "apparent" and not real.⁴⁵

Another scholar, K. Weiss, has argued that the error was not so much docetism as "a total denial of the character of Jesus as Christ and Son of God . . . For them Jesus was simply a man."⁴⁶

Marshall himself favors the widely held view that the error was similar to the docetism of the Gnostic Cerinthus, which held that the Christ indwelt the human Jesus only during the period from the baptism to the crucifixion.⁴⁷ At the same time Marshall does not subscribe to the view of the Bultmannians that the Johannine Epistles were directed against a full-fledged Gnosticism:

It remains, however, very doubtful whether Gnosticism in the full sense of the term existed in the first century; and it is important to notice that what John condemns is a Docetic or similar Christology and a lowering of Christian ethical standards rather than the full-blown Gnostic system of teaching.⁴⁸

IV. THE APOCRYPHAL NEW TESTAMENT

Both the "Infancy" and the "Gnostic" categories of the Apocryphal New Testament books are pervaded with docetic or quasidocetic features.⁴⁹ A *Latin Infancy Gospel* in the Arundel Manuscript has the following report of the midwife who assisted at the Nativity: "And I took courage and bent down and touched

him, he had no weight like other children who are born. . . . And while I wondered greatly because he did not cry as new-born babes are accustomed to cry”⁵⁰

The *Ascension of Isaiah* 11:7-14 has the following account of the babe’s birth:

And after two months, when Joseph was in his house, and his wife Mary, but both alone, it came to pass, while they were alone, that Mary straightway beheld with her eyes and saw a small child, and she was amazed. And when her amazement wore off, her womb was found as it was before she was with child. . . . Some said, “The virgin Mary has given birth before she was married two months,” and many said, “She has not given birth: the midwife has not gone up (to her) and we have heard no cries of pain.”⁵¹

The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* relates how Jesus as a young child was not like other children in his miraculous powers. As he grew to manhood, the *Acts of Peter* (20) tells us: “He ate and drank for our sakes, though himself without hunger or thirst”⁵²

The most striking expressions of docetism are found in relation to the passion of the Lord. Eusebius (*H.E.* VI. 12:2-6) tells us how Serapion, the bishop of Antioch (second half of the second century), at first permitted the reading of the *Gospel of Peter* at the church at Rhossus but then forbade its reading when he learned of its docetic character. According to the *Gospel of Peter* when Christ was crucified “he held his peace, as if he felt no pain,” and when He expired, He cried out, “My power, O power, thou hast forsaken me.”⁵³

The *Acts of John*, which also comes from the late second century, is quite explicit in its advanced docetism.⁵⁴ John exclaims of Jesus that “he sometimes appeared to me as a small man with no good looks, and then again as looking up to heaven.”⁵⁵ He also relates, “sometimes his breast felt to me smooth and soft, but sometimes hard like rock,”⁵⁶ and also reports, “sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial and incorporeal, and as if it did not exist at all.”⁵⁷

At the time of the crucifixion John flees to a cave, where the true Lord explains to him the mystery of the cross:

“John, for the people below in Jerusalem I am being crucified and pierced with lances and reeds and given vinegar and gall to drink. But to you I am speaking, and listen to what I speak.”⁵⁸

"But this is not that wooden Cross which you shall see when you go down from here; nor am I the (man) who is on the Cross, (I) whom now you do not see but only hear (my) voice. I was taken to be what I am not, I who am not what for many others I was; but what they will say of me is mean and unworthy of me."⁵⁹

V. THE NAG HAMMADI TEXTS

As in the patristic accounts so in the newly published Nag Hammadi texts⁶⁰ we encounter a variety of docetic views ranging from the purely docetic, to possibly docetic, and even to anti-docetic expressions.⁶¹

A. Clearly Docetic Texts

There are two striking illustrations of the "substitutionary" docetism of Basilides (*Adv. Haer.* 1.24.4): the *Second Treatise (Logos) of the Great Seth* (CG VII,2), and the *Apocalypse of Peter* (CG VII,3), in which we have the Savior laughing at the foolishness of the mob which mistakenly believe that they have crucified Him.⁶² In the former account (55.9-19, 31-56.19), we have the following passage:

"And I was in the mouths of lions. . . . But I was not afflicted at all. Those who were there punished me. And I did not die in reality but in appearance For my death which they think happened, (happened) to them in their error and blindness, since they nailed their man unto their death. . . . Yes, they saw me; they punished me. It was another, their father, who drank the gall and the vinegar; it was not I. They struck me with the reed; it was another, Simon, who bore the cross on his shoulder. It was another upon whom they placed the crown of thorns. But I was rejoicing in the height over all the wealth of the archons and the offspring of their error, of their empty glory. And I was laughing at their ignorance."⁶³

The account of the *Apocalypse of Peter* (81. 15-24; 82.27-83.8) is strikingly similar:

The Savior said to me, "He whom you saw on the tree, glad and laughing, this is the living Jesus. But this one into whose hands and feet they drive the nails is his fleshly part, which is the substitute being put to shame, the one who came into being in his likeness."

"But he who stands near him is the living Savior, the first in him, whom they seized and released, who stands joyfully looking at those who did him violence, while they are divided among themselves. Therefore he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind. So then the

one susceptible to suffering shall come, since the body is the substitute. But what they released was my incorporeal body."⁶⁴

In the *First Apocalypse of James* (CG V,3; 31.14-19) we have the following statement: "The Lord said, 'James, do not be concerned for me or for this people. I am he who was within me. Never have I suffered in any way.'"⁶⁵ In the *Second Apocalypse of James* (CG V,4) we have some possible docetic passages (e.g. 57.10-20),⁶⁶ but we do not have a wholesale denial of the identity of the crucified one with the Savior.⁶⁷

In the *Letter of Peter to Philip* we have the following passage (139.9-22):

And Peter opened his mouth, he said to his disciples, "[Did] our Lord Jesus, when he was in the body, show us everything?" He spoke thus: "Our illuminator, Jesus, [came] down and was crucified. And he bore a crown of thorns. And he put on a purple garment. And he was [crucified] on a tree and he was buried in a tomb. And he rose from the dead. My brothers, Jesus is a stranger to this suffering."⁶⁸

We have a similar denial of the suffering of the Savior in *Zostrianos* (CG VIII, 1; 48.27-29): "He was there again, he who suffers although he is unable to suffer, for he was a power of a power."⁶⁹

In the very important tractate, the *Trimorphic Protennoia* (CG XIII,1) we encounter many parallels to the Prologue of the Gospel of John — so much so that James Robinson and members of the *Berliner Arbeitskreis für koptisch-gnostische Schriften*, an East Berlin group which includes the West Berlin scholar Carsten Colpe, have hailed it as the *Vorlage* of the Johannine Prologue.⁷⁰ Pitted against this view are the arguments of Y. Janssens⁷¹ and R. McL. Wilson⁷² whose analyses lead them to conclude that the *Trimorphic Protennoia* is secondary.

Supporting their position is the study of J. Helderman, who demonstrates that the use of the Greek loanword *skene* as a noun in 47.16, "The third time I revealed myself to them [in] their tents as the Word,"⁷³ is a transformation of the verb *eskenosen*, "He tabernacled," in John 1:14 in a clearly docetic direction.⁷⁴ The Redeemer reveals Himself to the elect in the world of light, rather than tenting with men in the world of matter.

B. Possibly Docetic Texts

There are a number of Nag Hammadi tractates whose alleged docetism is ambiguous or contested. Among these are the

following:

The *Gospel of Philip* (CG II,3) has the following passage (57.28-58.8), which has been considerably restored:

Jesus took them all by stealth, for he did not reveal himself in the manner [in which] he was, but it was in the manner in which [they would] be able to see him that he revealed himself. . . . He [revealed himself] to the small as small. He [revealed himself to the] angels as an angel and to men as a man. Some indeed saw him, thinking that they were seeing themselves, but when he appeared to his disciples in glory on the mount he was not small.⁷⁵

In another passage, which has unfortunately been even more badly damaged, there is a reference to the Redeemer's flesh (68.34-37). As restored it reads: "[He did indeed possess] flesh, but his [flesh] is true flesh. [Our flesh] is not true, but [we possess] only an image of the true."⁷⁶

In the *Gospel of Thomas* (CG II,2) we have in Logion 28 the following statement: "I took My place in the midst of the world, and I appeared to them in flesh." Gartner comments that it is not necessary to deduce from these words an incarnation in the New Testament sense: "This is supported by the term *ophthen*, as well as the Gnostics' use of the word *sarx*."⁷⁷

Whether or not the Christology of the *Gospel of Truth* (CG I,2) is docetic or not is contested. Grobel comments:

Though the category of history is rarely touched, the history of Jesus' passion is both implicitly and explicitly present. Even whether Jesus on earth is Docetically conceived is at least uncertain; the one expression which might decide the matter (31:6) is ambiguous.⁷⁸

G. W. MacRae translates the key Coptic word *cmāt* as representing the Greek *homoïoma*, "appearance," in a docetic sense.⁷⁹ On the other hand, a Japanese scholar, Shibata, has argued that there is "no factor which hints the docetic nature of *sarx*" in the *Gospel of Truth*.⁸⁰ Another Japanese scholar has argued that the Christology of the tractate is hardly Gnostic and is secondary.⁸¹

In the *Gospel of Truth* (20.23-27) we have the following reference to the cross: "For this reason Jesus appeared; he put on that book; he was nailed to a tree; he published the edict of the Father on the cross."⁸² But according to Menard the Christ on the cross is merely the symbol of men crucified on the cross of matter.⁸³

C. Non-Docetic Texts

The tractate first called *Rhēginos*, and now the *Treatise on the*

Resurrection (CG I,3), was regarded by its original editors as a Valentinian work with a docetic Christology.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Malcolm Peel has argued that the references to "flesh" (44.14-15) and to "humanity" (44.24-26) indicate that the Savior used a body of flesh if only for a time: "It is difficult in the light of such passages to see how the editors could conclude that our Letter presents a thorough-going docetic Christology."⁸⁵

One of the most remarkable documents in the collection is the tractate *Melchizedek* (CG IX,1), which launches a vigorous polemic against docetism (5.1-12):

[They] will come in his name, and they will say of him that he is unbegotten though he has been begotten, (that) he does not eat even though he eats, (that) he does not drink even though he drinks, (that) he is uncircumcised though he has been circumcised, (that) he is unfleshly though he has come in flesh, (that) he did not come to suffering though he came to suffering, (that) he did not rise from the dead though he arose from [the] dead.⁸⁶

The very diversity of Christological views in the tractates provides evidence for the nature of the Nag Hammadi collection. Jean Doresse, the earliest investigator, had suggested that this was the library of a Sethian Gnostic sect which lived in the area.⁸⁷ But not all the texts are Sethian. Moreover, the researches of John Barns demonstrate that the books were written in a Pachomian monastery.⁸⁸ But by whom? James Robinson has suggested that the texts were copied by Christian Gnostic monks before the time when they were considered as heretics and were expelled.⁸⁹

On the other hand, Barns himself felt that the orthodox monks had copied such works as references for their apologetic refutations.⁹⁰ This view has also been developed by T. Säv-Söderbergh: "The library can have been brought together for haeresiological purposes, let us say by persons who like Epiphanius wanted to collect a Panarion against the Gnostics."⁹¹ Lending support to the view that the tractates were copied for reference purposes is the scribal note attached to the *Hermetic Prayer of Thanksgiving* (CG VI,7):

I have copied this one discourse of his. Indeed, very many have come to me. I have not copied them because I thought that they had come to you (pl.). Also, I hesitate to copy these for you because perhaps they have (already) come to you, and the matter may burden you, since the discourses of that one, which have come to me, are numerous.⁹²

In conclusion, the presence of docetic, quasi-docetic, and anti-docetic tractates supports the view of the Nag Hammadi tractates

as a reference collection rather than the view that they were the library of any single Gnostic sect.

VI. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The struggle between the proponents of a docetic Christology such as Simon Magus, Saturninus, Basilides, Cerinthus, Marcion, Valentinus, Bardesanes, etc.⁹³ and the church fathers, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, and especially Tertullian⁹⁴ has been well documented and fully discussed.

One movement upon which new light has been shed deserves comment. Mani (216-276), a Persian born in Mesopotamia, founded the syncretistic and dualistic religion of Manichaeism,⁹⁵ which numbered among its adherents Augustine before his conversion. The sensational discovery of the Cologne Codex on the life of Mani and its publication in 1970 confirm Arabic reports that Mani emerged from the Jewish-Christian Elchasaites.⁹⁶

According to the Manichaeans Jesus was "an apparent corporeality and not a real person."⁹⁷ Mani, who had been influenced by the teachings of Marcion, taught that Jesus was not born of Mary. Faustus, a Manichaean leader against whom Augustine wrote, held that Jesus' death was only apparent.⁹⁸ The Manichaean *Epistle of the Foundation* maintained that the Prince of Darkness, who had hoped to have the Savior crucified, was himself nailed to the cross.⁹⁹ Koenen comments:

The suffering of the divine Light is the suffering in a body. Jesus, however, was supposed not to have such a body. Therefore, the crucifixion of Jesus lost its theological relevance. Consequently, it played almost no role in Manichaean rites. However, the Manichaeans celebrated the passion of Mani at the *Bema* Feast.¹⁰⁰

That is, though Mani was not crucified, his sufferings were understood as equivalent to crucifixion.

Augustine reports that the Manichaeans taught peculiar doctrines about *Jesus Patibilis*, "The Suffering Jesus," and *Crux Lucis*, "The Cross of Light." That these concepts were not invented by Augustine has now been confirmed by the Cologne Codex. The Manichaeans taught that particles of the divine Light, which had become captive in plants, were to be liberated by the elect through burping and digestion!

Christ dies daily, suffers daily and is born daily in pumpkins, leeks, purslane, and other plants. Cutting, cooking, chewing, and digestion cause pain to the divine substance, to the limbs of God. Such suffering was symbolized by the cross¹⁰¹

In the seventh century Muhammad may have revived a substitutionary docetism, similar to that held by Basilides, for we read in the Qur'an 4:157: "And because of their saying: 'We slew the Messiah Jesus son of Mary, Allah's messenger' — They slew him not nor crucified, but *it appeared so unto them* [Arabic: *shubbiha lahum*]; and lo! those who disagree concerning it are in doubt thereof; they have no knowledge thereof save pursuit of a conjecture; they slew him not for certain."¹⁰² Most Christian interpreters (e.g. F. F. Bruce¹⁰³) and Muslim commentators interpret the verse as a docetic understanding of the crucifixion. On the other hand, G. Parrinder argues that the key Arabic words "it appeared so unto them" may originally have meant that the bystanders misunderstood the crucifixion.¹⁰⁴

Be that as it may, the presence of Christians who held docetic views of Christ among pre-Islamic Arabs is attested.¹⁰⁵ The docetic interpretation of Christ's crucifixion is now standard dogma among Muslims. The missionary-minded Ahmadiyya sect, founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908), teaches that Jesus survived the crucifixion and wandered off to Srinagar in Kashmir, where he finally died.¹⁰⁶

VII. CONCLUSIONS

By the fourth century, with the exception of the Manichaeans, the advocates of a docetic Christology had been almost completely refuted by the incarnational Christology of Irenaeus and of Tertullian. In the fifth century a minor movement did emerge, the "aphthartodocetists" who held that Christ was so glorified that His body was insensible to suffering.¹⁰⁷

For most of the church the four ecumenical councils at Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon have clarified and defined the human nature and the divine nature of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁸ In our day the major attacks upon orthodoxy come from those who would question the Lord's divinity rather than His humanity. But the following citation from a modern religious movement demonstrates that the tendency to docetism is always possible:

The invisible Christ was incorporeal, whereas Jesus was a corporeal or bodily existence. The dual personality, of the seen and the unseen, the spiritual and material, the Christ and Jesus, continued until the Master's ascension, when the human, the corporeal concept, or Jesus, disappeared, while his invisible self, or Christ, continued to exist in the eternal order of Divine Science.¹⁰⁹

This survey of docetism has sought to remind believers of the reality of the cross and of Christ's humanity by noting to what lengths people have gone who have denied both.

FOOTNOTES

1. H.M. Shires, *Finding the Old Testament in the New* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), pp. 38, 58, 101.
2. E.E. Ellis, "Christ Crucified," in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. R. Banks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 69-75.
3. N. Haas, "Anthropological Observations on the Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *IEJ*, 20 (1970), pp. 44-46, 48.
4. J. Naveh, "The Ossuary Inscriptions from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *IEJ*, 20 (1970), p. 35.
5. Y. Yadin, "Epigraphy and Crucifixion," *IEJ*, 23 (1973), pp. 18-22.
6. Cf. E.M. Meyers, *Jewish Ossuaries: Reburial and Rebirth* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1971).
7. Cf. J.W. Hewitt, "The Use of Nails in the Crucifixion," *HTR*, 25 (1932), pp. 29-45.
8. Cf. plate 22, *IEJ*, 20 (1970).
9. J.H. Charlesworth, "Jesus and Jehohanan: An Archaeological Note on Crucifixion," *Expository Times*, 84 (1973), p. 148, n. 16, comments: "The so-called Turin Shroud, which might have once contained a crucified man, apparently reveals nail wounds near the wrists and not in the palms." On the shroud, see further: C.J. McNaspy, "The Shroud of Turin," *CBQ*, 7 (1945), pp. 144-64; E.A. Wuenschel, "The Shroud of Turin and the Burial of Christ," *CBQ*, (1945), pp. 405-37; P.N. Vignon, *Shroud of Christ* (Secaucus: University Books, 1970); T. Humber, *The Sacred Shroud* (N.Y.: Pocket Books, 1977). The linen shroud which has been venerated since the fourteenth century was subjected to scientific tests in 1978 to determine its date. The results have not yet been published. See V. Bortin, "Science and the Shroud of Turin," *BA*, 43 (1980), 109-17.
10. Haas, p. 57, plate 24; cf. J.F. Strange, "Crucifixion, Method of," *IDB Supplement*, p. 200.
11. V. Moller-Christensen, "Skeletal Remains from Giv'at ha-Mivtar," *IEJ*, 26 (1976), pp. 35-38.
12. *Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, tr. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1892), # 132, p. 126; cf. # 89, p. 212.
13. Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion* (London: SCM, 1974), pp. 84-85.
14. Cf. E.M. Yamauchi, "The Teacher of Righteousness from Qumran and Jesus of Nazareth," *Christianity Today*, 10 (May 13, 1966), pp. 816-18.
15. Cited in J.A. Fitzmyer, "Crucifixion in Ancient Palestine, Qumran Literature, and the New Testament," *CBQ*, 40 (1978), p. 503.
16. J.M. Baumgarten, "Does *TLH* in the Temple Scroll Refer to Crucifixion?" *JBL*, 91 (1972), pp. 472-81. Cf. J.M. Ford, "'Crucify him, crucify him,' and the Temple Scroll," *Bible and Spade*, 6 (1977), pp. 49-55.
17. Fitzmyer, p. 507.
18. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (London: SCM, 1974), p. 33.
19. Hengel, p. 89.
20. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 42. As to the "weals" mentioned here, the head of a Roman scourging whip was found for the first time at Heshban; see *AUSS*, 14 (1976), p. 216.
21. Cited in Hengel, pp. 30-31.
22. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 50, n. 14.

23. *Tertullian, Apologetical Works; and Minucius Felix, Octavius*, tr. R. Arbesmann, E.J. Daly, and E.A. Quain (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1950), p. 336. A pagan had incised a cartoon on the Palatine Hill in Rome with the words, "Alexamenos worshipping his god" with the picture of a man with the head of an ass hanging on a cross.
24. Arnobius of Sicca, *The Case Against the Pagans*, tr. G.E. McCracken (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1949), I.36, p. 84. Cf. Celsus' jibe. "You have had the presumption to . . . assert that a man who lived a most infamous life and died a most miserable death was a god" (*Contra Celsum* VII, 53).
25. E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Aprocrypha I* [hereafter *NTA I*] (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), p. 319.
26. C.J. Cadoux, *Ancient Smyrna* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1938), pp. 398-99.
27. Cf. J.L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), I. p. 55; G.C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 199; John Knox, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1967), pp. 16-17.
28. *Fathers of the Third Century*, tr. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (ANF V; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 reprint), *Ref.* VIII. 3, p. 119.
29. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (5th ed.; N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 141.
30. Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III.11.3; J. Tixeront, *History of Dogmas* (3rd ed.; St. Louis: B. Herder, 1930), pp. 179, 316; S. Laeuchli, *The Serpent and the Dove* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), pp. 90-91; A. Orbe, "La Pasion segun los gnosticos," *Greg.* 56 (1975), p. 9.
31. G. Davies, "The Origins of Docetism," *Studia Patristica VI*, ed. F.L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1962), pp. 13-35.
32. W. Schmithals, *Gnostics in Corinth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); E.M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973) [hereafter *PCG*], pp. 39-42.
33. Knox, p. 32; *PCG*, pp. 43-44; H.M. Schenke, "Die neutestamentliche Christologie und der gnostische Erloser," in *Gnosis und Neues Testament* [hereafter *GNT*], ed. K.-W. Troger (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1973), p. 219.
34. J.A.T. Robinson, *The Body: A Study in Pauline Theology* (London: SCM, 1952), p. 39.
35. R.H. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning and Background of the Hymn Quoted in I Timothy 3:16," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, ed. W.W. Gasque and R.P. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 222.
36. *PCG*, pp. 35-36. Cf. W. Schenk, "Die gnostisierende Deutung des Todes Jesu und ihre kritische Interpretation durch den Evangelisten Markus," *GNT*, pp. 231-43.
37. C.H. Talbert, "An Anti-Gnostic Tendency in Lucan Christology," *NTS*, 14 (1967/68), p. 271; *idem*, *Luke and the Gnostics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966). On the alleged contrast between Luke and Paul on the nature of the resurrection body, R.H. Gundry, *Soma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1976), p. 164, comments: "We might note, however, that writing as a Jew, indeed as an ex-Pharisee, Paul may feel no need to stress the physicalness of the resurrected body. That went without saying and was clearly implied in the very meaning of *soma*. Because of a keener appreciation of the Greek proclivity to doubt a physical resurrection, Luke may take pains to stress what Paul thinks can hardly be mistaken. There is no necessary contradiction between the two writers."

38. P. Benoit, *The Passion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 285.
39. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), pp. 302-303.
40. E. Kasemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968), p. 26. W. Schmithals, "Die gnostischen Elemente im Neuen Testament als hermeneutisches Problem," *GNT*, p. 378, protests that Kasemann must ignore John 1:14. Cf. R. Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), pp. 186 f.
41. *PCG*, pp. 30-34.
42. J.A.T. Robinson, "The Use of the Fourth Gospel for Christology Today," in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S.S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973), pp. 67, 75.
43. O. Cullmann, *Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, rev. ed., 1964), p. 324.
44. T.E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1970), p. 19.
45. I.H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 19, n. 31.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 20. Cf. K. Weiss, "Die 'Gnosis' im Hintergrund und im Spiegel der Johannesbriefe," *GNT*, pp. 341-56.
47. Marshall, p. 21; *PCG*, p. 54; Davies, p. 18; R. McL. Wilson, *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), p. 40.
48. Marshall, p. 52. F. Wisse, "The Epistle of Jude in the History of Heresiology," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Alexander Bohlig*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), p. 139, comments: "In my judgment I John is also a tract dealing with the arrival of the eschatological antichrists rather than with a group of docetic Gnostics." It is important to note that though we have evidence of dualistic Christology in the late first and early second centuries, evidence of dualistic cosmology does not appear until later in the second century. See E.M. Yamauchi, "The Descent of Ishtar, the Fall of Sophia, and the Jewish Origins of Gnosticism," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 29 (1978), p. 143-75.
49. Cf. E.M. Yamauchi, "The Word from Nag Hammadi," *Christianity Today*, 13 (Jan. 13, 1978), pp. 19-22.
50. E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds., *New Testament Apocrypha I* [hereafter *NTA I*] (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 414.
51. *NTA II*, p. 661; cf. *Acts of Peter* 24 in *ibid.*, p. 307. See A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, rev. ed., 1975), I, p. 66.
52. *NTA II*, p. 302.
53. *NTA I*, p. 184.
54. M.R. James, *Apocrypha Anecdota II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1897), p. xv, declared of the *Acts of John*: "It is as important a document for the knowledge of Docetism as can be found . . . primary, because it is a statement of doctrine by a member of the Docetic sect, and not the representation of a hostile critic."
55. *NTA II*, p. 225.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 233. For an atypically anti-docetic passage in the apocryphal New Testament, see the purported letter of Paul to the Corinthians embedded in the *Acts of Paul*, *ibid.*, pp. 374-76.

60. See E.M. Yamauchi, "New Light on Gnosticism," *Christianity Today*, 23 (Oct. 6, 1978), pp. 36-40, 42-43.
61. See K.M. Fischer, "Der johanneische Christus und der gnostische Erloser," *GNT*, pp. 246-66; K.-W. Troger, "Doketistische Christologie in Nag-Hammadi-Texten," *Kairos*, 19 (1977), 45-52; U. Bianchi, "Docetism," in *Myths and Symbols*, ed. J.M. Kitagawa and C.H. Long (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1969), pp. 265-73. I have not seen P. Weigand, *Der Doketismus im Urchristentum und in der theologischen Entwicklung des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Theol. Diss., Heidelberg, 1961), or K.-W. Troger, *Die Passion Jesu Christi der Gnosis nach den Schriften von Nag Hammadi* (Berlin, 1977).
62. Cf. the striking title of John Dart's book, *The Laughing Savior* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).
63. James M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* [hereafter *NHL*] (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), p. 332.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 344. Cf. S.K. Brown and C.W. Briggs, "The Apocalypse of Peter," *Brigham Young Studies*, 15 (1974/75), 131-45. Some Mormon apologists are now claiming that parallels between the Nag Hammadi texts and the Book of Mormon and other Mormon documents confirm the latter.
65. *NHL*, p. 245.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
67. W.-P. Funk, *Die zweite Apokalypse des Jakobus aus Nag-Hammadi-Codex V* (TU 119; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1976), pp. 107, 206.
68. *NHL*, p. 397.
69. *Ibid.*, p. 381.
70. J.M. Robinson in a paper read at the SBL meeting in New Orleans on Nov. 19, 1978. Cf. G. Schenke, "Die dreigestaltige Protennoia," *TLZ*, 99 (1974), cols. 731-46.
71. Y. Janssens, "Le Codex XIII de Nag Hammadi," *Le Museon*, 87 (1974), pp. 341-413.
72. R. McL. Wilson, "The Trimorphic Protennoia," in *Gnosis and Gnosticism*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), pp. 50-54. See also E.M. Yamauchi, "Jewish Gnosticism? The Prologue of John, Mandaean Parallels and the Trimorphic Protennoia," *Gilles Quispel Festschrift*, ed. R. van den Broek (Leiden: E.J. Brill, forthcoming), pp. 264-82.
73. *NHL*, p. 469.
74. J. Helderman, "'In ihren Zelten . . .' Bemerkungen bei Codex XIII," in *Miscellanea Neotestamentica I*, T. Baarda, A.F.J. Klijn, and W.C. van Unnik (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), p. 207.
75. *NHL*, p. 135. Cf. R. McL. Wilson, *The Gospel of Philip* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1962), pp. 91-93.
76. *NHL*, p. 141. Cf. Wilson, pp. 135-36.
77. B. Gartner, *The Theology of the Gospel according to Thomas* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 142.
78. K. Grobel, *The Gospel of Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960), p. 22.
79. *NHL*, p. 43.
80. Y. Shibata, "Non-Docetic Character of Evangelium Veritatis," *Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute*, 1 (1975), p. 130.
81. S. Arai, *Die Christologie des Evangelium Veritatis* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964). Cf. S. Arai, "Zur Christologie des Apokryphons des Johannes," *NTS*, 15 (1968/69), pp. 302-18.
82. *NHL*, p. 39. Cf. Grobel, p. 62.
83. J.-E. Menard, "Die Erkenntnis im Evangelium der Wahrheit," in

- Christentum und Gnosis*, ed. W. Eltester (BZNW 37; Berlin: Alfred Topelmann, 1969), p. 61. For the lack of narrative and historical orientation in Gnostic texts see E.M. Yamauchi, "The Gnostics and History," *JETS*, 14 (1971), pp. 29-40.
84. M. Malinine et al., eds., *De Resurrectione (Epistula ad Rheginum)* (Zurich: Rascher, 1963).
 85. M.L. Peel, *The Epistle to Rheginos* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 113.
 86. *NHL*, p. 400. Cf. Dart, pp. 111-12.
 87. J. Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York: Viking, 1960), pp. 250-51.
 88. J. Barns, "Greek and Coptic Papyri from the Covers of the Nag Hammadi Codices," in *Essays on the Nag Hammadi Texts in Honour of Pahor Labib*, ed. M. Krause (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), pp. 9-17.
 89. *NHL*, pp. 16-18.
 90. Barns, p. 16. J.-D. Dubois, "Les Textes de Nag Hammadi en 1974: un Bilan," *ETR*, 89 (1974), p. 385.
 91. T. Save-Soderbergh, "Holy Scriptures or Apologetic Documentations?" in *Les Textes de Nag Hammadi*, ed. J.-E. Menard (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), p. 4.
 92. *NHL*, p. 299.
 93. See *PCG*, pp. 58 ff.; R.M. Grant, ed., *Gnosticism: A Sourcebook of Heretical Writings from the Early Christian Period* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961).
 94. See *PCG*, ch. 3; R.M. Grant, ed., *Second-Century Christianity: A Collection of Fragments* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957); J. Oulton and H. Chadwick, eds., *Alexandrian Christianity* (LCC II; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), p. 88; *Tertullian*, tr. A.C. Coxe (ANF III; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 reprint), p. 524; T.D. Barnes, *Tertullian* (New York: Oxford University, 1971), pp. 122 ff.
 95. Cf. E.M. Yamauchi, "Manichaeans," in *The Handbook of Christian History*, ed. T. Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 48-49.
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 97. G. Widengren, *Mani and Manichaeism* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1965), p. 124.
 98. Orbe, p. 42.
 99. Doresse, p. 22.
 100. L. Koenen, "Augustine and Manichaeism in Light of the Cologne Mani Codex," *Illinois Classical Studies*, 3 (1978), p. 192.
 101. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.
 102. *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, tr. M. Pickthall (New York: New American Library, 1953), p. 93.
 103. F.F. Bruce, *The Defence of the Gospel in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), p. 83.
 104. G. Parrinder, *Jesus in the Qur'an* (New York: Oxford University, 1977), pp. 111 ff.
 105. J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longmans, 1979), pp. 49-55.
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108. H. Jedin, *Ecumenical Councils in the Catholic Church* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1960).
109. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (52nd ed.; Boston, 1891), p. 229, cited by C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), p. 346.

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