**Kingdom Through Covenant (1)**:

The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament

The Bible is centered around the good news of Jesus Christ our Lord (cf. Ro 1:1-4). 2Co 1:20 says, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ.” In turn, we ask: What is at the heart of Jesus and his ministry? It is the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom (Mt 4:23; Mk 1:15). The Sermon on the Mount is concerned with the righteousness and the kingdom of God (Mt 5:20; 6:33). The main topic in the Lord’s prayer relates to God and his reign (Mt 6:9-10). Jesus’ parables focus on the kingdom (Mt 13:11; Mk 4:11), and the Lord’s Supper looks forward to the kingdom of God (Mt 26:29; Mk 14:25). The risen Jesus empowered his disciples as ambassadors of the kingdom. In fact, the advancement of the kingdom is at the center of the Old and New Testament.

In my presentation, we will trace the progressive unfolding of the kingdom in redemptive history. As we do so, I have a question for you: Are you excited about the kingdom? If you are not, you have an issue with the concept of the kingdom. You must radically revise it based the Bible. For today’s people, the kingdom is merely fantasy or outdated. For some, it often sounds oppressing. People, living under tyranny of self-centeredness, have difficulties with this concept. But the kingdom is utterly relational and other-centered. To properly grasp this, we must focus on Christ the King, who is the fulfillment of God’s covenant. From Jesus, we can see the beauty and majesty of God’s kingdom.

That said, we are given a Christocentric method for our study: (A) We begin with the New Testament because there we encounter Christ, through whom by faith we are saved and made God’s people; (B) the NT leads us back to the Old Testament because the Old Testament is the basis of the gospel; (C) with Christ, the focal point of God’s revelation, we follow progressive revelation until it leads us to its fulfillment in the gospel. In this way, we take account of the dynamic and living progression of the Old Testament, which leads us to the Christ in the New Testament.

Kingdom and Covenant

What do we understand under the kingdom? The kingdom is “God’s kingly or sovereign rule,” encompassing both the realm of the rule and the exercise of authority to reign. God’s kingship expands over the entire creation. “The Lord has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all” (Ps 103:19; cf. Dan 4:34-35). In a general sense, God rules sovereignly over all his works as King.

Specifically, God’s kingdom relates to his people and history. Graeme Goldsworthy helpfully defines the kingdom as follows: “a king who rules, a people who are ruled, and a sphere where this rule is

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1 Presented at the Midwest regional staff meeting in Chicago (May 2018).
3 This is a part of biblical theology that “seeks to understand the relationship between the various eras in God’s revealing activity recorded in the Bible” (Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, 45f). My presentation is much indebted to Goldsworthy’s biblical theology.
5 Peter Gentry and Stan Norman, “*Kingdom of God*.”
recognized as taking place.” To say it shorter: “God’s people, in God’s place, under God’s rule.” Following Goldsworthy’s lead, Vaughan Roberts summarizes the concept of the kingdom as follows: “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing.”

This helpful definition of the kingdom is directly related to the biblical covenant. The kingdom and covenant belong together. One of the central themes of the Bible is kingdom through covenant. God establishes and rules his kingdom through covenant. What is covenant? The Hebrew term for covenant is berith; the Greek term is diaetheke. Covenant is a solemn, binding commitment of the involved. Covenant is a key word used to express the relationship between God and his people. In using the word covenant, we must avoid any notion that God and man are equal parties in the establishing of the covenant. “The distance between God and the creature is so great” that we cannot allow such thoughts. While the creature owes obedience to the Creator, the infinite Creator owes nothing to the creature. But all blessing from God comes to us only by his grace and through a sovereignly given covenant. All of God’s dealings with men in his covenant are both sovereign and gracious. While God doesn’t have to enter a covenant with us, he did so out of his freedom and grace. God acts based on his commitment to creation. He reveals his rule by entering a covenant in history and works out his purposes. God wants his rule to be acknowledged in a relationship of love, faithfulness, and trust. So, the concept of the covenant reveals that the kingdom is utterly relational. This covenant is fully revealed in Jesus the Messiah.

Structure of Redemptive History

The Bible is God’s redemptive history, and structured as the Old Testament and the New Testament. The first chapter of the New Testament opens: “This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). Jesus is at the center of God’s redemptive history. Here we can see the structure of God’s redemptive history: Abraham – David (up); David/Solomon – before Exile (down); Exile – Jesus (hope); Jesus the Messiah.

Goldsworthy in his book Gospel and Kingdom suggests the following structure of redemptive history: (1) The kingdom-pattern established – Eden; (2) The kingdom promised – Abraham; (3) The kingdom foreshadowed – David/Solomon; (4) The kingdom revealed in prophecy; (5) The kingdom at hand – Jesus Christ; (6) The kingdom consummated – return of Christ. I believe that this suggestion is very helpful in providing a big picture of the Bible.

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6 Goldsworthy, Kingdom.
7 Roberts, God’s Big Picture.
8 Cf. Stan Norman & Peter Gentry, “Kingdom of God”; Peter J. Gentry & Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant.
9 See Westminster Confession of Faith, VII 1.
10 Goldsworthy, Plan, 118.
11 Roberts, God’s Big Picture, following Goldsworthy’s lead, divides the Bible into eight sections: (1) The pattern of the kingdom; (2) The perished kingdom; (3) The promised kingdom; (4) The partial kingdom; (5) The prophesied kingdom; (6) The present kingdom; (7) The proclaimed kingdom; (8) The perfected kingdom.
Craig G. Bartholomew & Michael W. Goheen, The Drama of Scripture divide the movements of the Bible into 6 acts: Act 1 God establishes his kingdom: creation; Act 2 Rebellion in the kingdom: fall; Act 3 The King chooses Israel: redemption initiated; Act 4 The coming of the King: redemption accomplished; Act 5 Spreading the news of the King: the mission of the church; Act 6 The return of the King: redemption completed.
My presentation will follow the advancement of the kingdom, considering the biblical covenants as follows.  

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**The Kingdom-pattern Established (Eden)**

**Creation**

The kingdom of God dominates the whole biblical story, beginning with the first chapters of the Bible. It is essential to acknowledge that God is the Creator and that we are his creatures. God is sovereign. Everything that exists belongs to him. By his will all things were created and have their being (Gen 1:1; Jn 1:3; Rev 4:11). Fundamentally, God’s kingship is absolute and sovereign.

Creation covenant: Creation is intended to live in a covenantal relationship with its Creator. God created people in his own image as pinnacle of creation. We can speak of the covenant with creation. Humankind, made in the image of God, are put under the blessing and loving rule of God. They were chosen to be covenant partners of God. They became people special to him. He was truly caring for them. They are given the command to rule over the rest of God’s creation. In light of the background of the ancient Near East, the setting up of the king’s statue was to proclaim his domination over the area in which the statue was erected. Likewise, “man is set in the midst of creation as God’s statue. He is evidence that God is the Lord of creation.” Man is to exert his rule as a responsible agent.

Adam and Eve, living before God in the Garden of Eden, show the pattern of the kingdom of God. Eden is the Garden Kingdom: the people of God (Adam and Eve), in God’s place (the garden paradise which God prepared as the perfect environment for his people) and under the rule and blessing of God (expressed by his word in Gen 2:16-17). God’s kingdom work in creation was never intended to be an end in itself; rather it moves towards the eschatological direction of God’s eternal plan that he works out in terms of covenantal relationship with his creation that is ultimately centered in Christ (cf. Eph 1:11; Col 1:15-20; Rev 4:11).  

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13 Peter J. Gentry & Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 177ff.
16 Stan Norman & Peter Gentry, “Kingdom of God.”
17 Cf. Peter J. Gentry & Stephen J. Wellum, 592.
The Fall of Man

As humankind rebelled against God, the whole created order fell from its place. Man’s fall is not merely the breaking of God’s law, but the dethroning of God. Since God’s creatorship is absolute and uncompromised, man’s rebellion against him is such a heinous sin; it is idolatry, worshiping creature rather than the Creator. Since the fall, God, mankind and the rest of creation don’t relate anymore in the perfect way that God intended. The fallen world is the very opposite of the kingdom of God. Now it is impossible for God to be true to himself and at the same time tolerate man’s sin of rebellion and idolatry. The world is characterized by sin and death. Sinful man is under God’s inevitable and radical judgement.

First Revelation of Redemption

Even after man’s fall, God is still sovereign and in control. Human sin cannot thwart the plan of God. While in Genesis chapters 3-11, the themes of sin and judgment are dominant, the theme of grace and mercy is also running through.

Even after Adam and Eve committed the horrible sin of rebellion, God didn’t destroy them, but still loved them and promised the serpent-crusher (Gen 3:15). In Gen 4-11, we can see that God does not give up on the fallen world. His commitment to creation continues. [He preserves mankind and establishes a godly line of people who are “the object of God’s special redeeming love.”] A godly line begins with Seth who takes the place of his murdered brother (Gen 4:25); Enoch (Heb 11:5-6), Noah (Heb 11:7).]

God’s covenant with Noah shows his unchanging commitment to creation. God promised Noah that he would save his family from the deluge through the ark (Gen 6:18). After he obeyed God and was rescued, God made a covenant with Noah: “I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Ge 9:11). Even though human hearts are evil, rebelling against God, God is not finished with his creation. Instead, he blessed Noah and gave a new beginning, since God was determined to continue and fulfill his eternal plan. Through the covenant with Noah, God preserved the world. The salvation of Noah and his family through a covenant is an act of God’s grace that leads to a new beginning. This foreshadowed the restoration of humans. (The genealogy in Gen 11:10-26 illustrates that God’s redemptive history continues and moves towards the goal.)

In the following section, I’ll follow the progressive unfolding of the kingdom of God as revealed in Israel’s history.

The Kingdom Promised (the Abrahamic Covenant)

The narrative in Gen 12-24 is running through God’s covenant promises. God’s words to Abraham are his gracious promise, which is good news. The main elements of the Abrahamic covenant are as follows:

(1) Abraham’s descendants becoming a great nation (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 16:10; 18:18); (2) these descendants possessing the promised land (Gen 12:7; 13:13:14-15; 15:18-21; 17:8); (3) these descendants being God’s own people (Gen 17:2,7-8; 18:19); (4) blessing to all peoples (12:3; 17:4-6).

Abraham received God’s promise by faith. Isaac is the son of the promise. After obedience, Abraham is reassured by the promise when his faith stood firm (Gen 22). The Abrahamic covenant dominates the rest

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18 Goldsworthy, Plan, 113.
19 Ibid., 115.
20 See Goldsworthy, Kingdom, 67ff.
of the Bible and is central to the redemptive history recorded in the Bible.\textsuperscript{21} God’s divine revelation is centered around the gospel of Jesus who is “the son of Abraham” (Mt 1:1). All nations will be blessed through the seed of Abraham, who is Christ (Gal 3:16).

The Abrahamic covenant is unconditional and solely based on God’s grace. Abraham was chosen not because he was qualified for this, but because of God’s grace alone. Circumcision was a seal of the justification that Abraham had through faith in the promise rather than its condition (Ro 4:11). Genesis 15 points out this unilateral/conditional character of the Abrahamic covenant. Following the Lord’s instruction, Abraham cut the animal carcasses in two and arranged the halves. Then, God made an oath. Usually in establishing political covenants, the greater king made the lesser kings pass through the cut animal carcasses, swearing that they deserved death in case of breaking the covenant. But in the Lord’s covenant with Abraham, the Lord reversed the role and he took full responsibility for his promise by passing through the halves.\textsuperscript{22} God the Creator chooses to commit himself to the fulfillment of promises to Abraham. This is the uniqueness of God’s covenant of grace.

\textbf{The Kingdom-Promises Activated}

\textbf{The Exodus and Mosaic Covenant}

In studying the Exodus and Mosaic covenant (Ex 19-24), we need to avoid misunderstandings. \textit{Is the OT the record of the failure of plan A to be fixed by a plan B of the NT? No.} Two major events go before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai: The covenant with Abraham and the Exodus.\textsuperscript{23} First, before establishing the Mosaic covenant, the Lord saved Israel from slavery to Egypt by his mighty hand. He identified and sided with the slaves, not the powerful. Israel stood before Sinai as a people who were freed from bondage. God reminded them of his saving grace in Ex 19:4 “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.” Second, the Lord performed his saving deeds based on his promise to Abraham. God who sends Moses is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex 2:24, 3:6,13,15-16; 4:5; 6:2-5). The LORD is faithful to the covenant with Abraham, acting to save the children of Israel. The Exodus event is God’s saving act, to fulfill his promises to Abraham. So, the Sinai covenant is “part of a single, comprehensive plan God had from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{24}

Later, the people of God had to recall the Exodus as the basis of their response to him (cf. Ex 20:2; Dt 6:20-25; 26:5-10; Jos 24:6-13; Neh 9:6-12; Ps 78; 105; 106; 114; 135; 136). So, the Ten Commandments opens with these words: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” The law is given to the people of God after they experienced salvation and become the people of God by grace. The Mosaic covenant is not separate from God’s grace, but “dependent upon the covenant with Abraham and is an exposition of it. At Sinai God spells out for his people what it means to be the people of God.”\textsuperscript{25} In this sense, we need to see all the laws including ceremonial laws in the context of the covenant. Especially, the tabernacle/temple and sacrificial system symbolized God’s gracious presence among his people, which looked to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

At Sinai, God promised the former slaves that they would be his treasured possession, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” for him; and in turn, they were commanded to obey his covenant law (Ex 19). Even though the Mosaic covenant was fundamentally a part of God’s covenant of grace, we must distinguish

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. John Stott, \textit{Understanding the Bible.}

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Michael G. Brown, \textit{Sacred Bond}, 91; Robertson, \textit{The Christ of the Covenants}, 127ff.

\textsuperscript{23} H.J. Kraus, \textit{Systematische Theologie}, 159ff.

\textsuperscript{24} Goldsworthy, \textit{Kingdom}, 74.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 75.
between the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic law. After Israel had been saved from slavery by grace, they were required to live as a faithful covenant partner by obeying the covenant law. In this sense, the Mosaic covenant was not unconditional or unilateral, but conditional or bilateral. While the Mosaic law in the Old Testament was a guide for Israel toward a life of freedom, it also functioned as an accuser when they disobeyed God and his law. Yet, the Mosaic law was never given as a means of salvation for sinners by keeping it.

According to the New Testament, the Mosaic covenant was given to the people of Israel to lead them to trust in Christ and his perfect obedience and sacrifice. It was a pointer to the grace of God in the Savior (Gal 3:24). Its purpose was fulfilled as it pointed people to Christ who is “the culmination of the law” (Ro 10:4).

*God’s Kingdom at Sinai: God’s people (Israel under Moses), in God’s place (Promised Land), under God’s rule (Sinai covenant)*

The Progress towards Monarchy

The book of Numbers records the incidents between Sinai and the entry. The grumbling of the nation became a pattern of behavior (cf. Ex 16-18). In Deuteronomy, the Lord shows his gracious provision for his people. Why does he show his kindness despite the sinful rebellious people? Why does God show grace to us today? Israel’s faithless rebellion is the recurring theme of the OT. So is God’s faithful loving kindness. Obedience to God’s law should come because of his saving grace (Dt 6:20-25). God saved Israel not because they deserved it, but because he loved them; and wanted to fulfill his original promise to Abraham (Dt 7:8; 9:7).

The book of Joshua describes that God gave the Israelites all the land he swore to give to their ancestors. The Lord gave them rest on every side as promised to their forefathers. Not one of the good promises failed (Jos 21:43-45). Now Israel is to live by the covenant (Jos 23:14-16). The covenant renewal ceremony emphasizes what God has done for them (24:2-13) and what God requires from them (24:14-27).

Judges stressed that the tribes of Israel did not follow the instructions to utterly drive out the enemies within the land (Jdg 2). Though the nation of Israel was not willingly submitting to God’s rule, God saved them whenever they cried out for salvation. Every victory under each Judge is a saving act of God. The book ends with a theological summary: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes” (Jdg 21:25). The author sees the monarchy as necessary.

When the Israelites requested a king, their motives were political rather than godly. Their sin was that they were rejecting God as ruler, to depend on a human ruler. They wanted political stability at the expense of God’s rule. Here, we need to distinguish between the kind of kingship people asked for and the kind of kingship in God’s purpose. Kingship in a positive meaning is stated in Dt 17:14-20. It should be in line with the theocratic idea described in the covenant law. This is about a king obeying God’s law.

**David and Davidic Covenant**

God chose David as a king. David slayed Goliath (1Sa 17). It was a saving event in which the anointed of the Lord wins the victory on behalf of God’s people. David was a man after God’s own heart (1Sam 13:14), exemplifying a theocratic ideal of shepherd king. But his reign was not perfect, mixed with human sinfulness.

What does David’s reign mean in view of the salvation history? David’s reign represented fulfillment of the covenant promises: the stability and prosperity, removing the threat of enemies. In Israel’s monarchy,
“the king represented the whole nation as the true covenant partner of God. At the same time, he mediated God’s rule to the people.” But kingship and the temple were separate. It was through the temple and its ministry of atonement that God’s people experienced forgiveness and reconciliation.

After his monarchy was firmly established, David wished to build the temple for the Lord. Then, God made his promise to David through prophet Nathan in 2 Samuel 7. Though the word “covenant” is not used there, David himself acknowledges that God has made with him “an everlasting covenant” (2Sa 23:5; cf. 2Ch 13:5; 21:7; Isa 55:3; Ps 89:3; 132:11). God promised to him that God would raise up a Davidic heir and David’s kingdom would be established forever (2Sa 7:12-13). This promise is unilateral and unconditional. Many psalms highlight God’s promise about an eternal kingdom (cf. Ps 89:3–4; 110; 132:11).

In an immediate sense, Solomon fulfills Nathan’s prophecy that the house of God would be built by such a son. The prosperity and glory of Solomon is the fulfilment of the promises to Abraham. The people live in the land, safe and prosperous. But Solomon is “an enigma, for he was both the perfecter of Israel’s glory and the architect of its destruction.” While Solomon built a magnificent Temple for Israel (1Ki 7-8), he became the apostate from whom the kingdom was removed (cf. 1Ki 3:1; 11:1-13). So, Nathan’s prophecy to David (2Sa 7) anticipates a prophetic perspective (v. 5-14), its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Israel’s Monarchy: God’s people (Israel), in God’s place (land, Jerusalem, temple), under God’s rule (Mosaic covenant/Davidic covenant)

The Kingdom in Prophetic Hope

As history proves, the Israelites didn’t keep their covenant obligations, but broke them. There are three characteristics of the prophets, especially in pre-exilic prophets: the covenant lawsuit, judgment, and salvation.

1) The covenant lawsuit: The prophets repeatedly brought the covenant lawsuit against God’s people. Based on the covenant of Sinai, they accused Israel of their sins. By breaking the covenant, Israel terribly provoked God who saved them. For example, Hosea accused them of spiritual adultery; Amos, of social injustices (1:6-8; 4:1-3; 5:10-13; 8:4-6); Isaiah, of Israel’s formalism of worship, idolatry and apostasy; Ezekiel, of the apostasy in Judah; all sins are transgression of the covenant regardless of social or religions sins.

2) Judgement: the prophets challenged people to repent and warned them of a terrible and final judgement. The pattern of rebelliousness was obvious from the beginning of Israel’s history (Ex 15:22-24; 16:1-3; Ps 95:8-11). Because of the covenant people’s stubbornness, the course of history moved inevitably towards their self-destruction. Even the most notable efforts at reform by some kings were powerless to correct the situation (2Ki 23:24-27)

There are two emphases in the judgement: (1) an immediate and local judgement of God; and (2) God’s universal or cosmic judgement (Jer 4:23-26; Isa 2:2-22; 13:5-10; 24:1-23; Nahum 1:4-6; Habakkuk 3:3-12; Zeph 1:2-3,18; 3:8; Eze 38:19-23). The destruction of Samaria occurred in 722 B.C. Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C. Some aspects of judgement relate to the future final judgement.

26 Goldsworthy, Plan, 170.
27 Goldsworthy, Kingdom, 89.
28 Ibid., 94ff.
3) Salvation: the prophets in the OT never conclude with judgment, but always with hope of salvation. The prophets declared that God was not done with his sinful people. Two related aspects of saving restoration are: to restore the covenant people to their inheritance and to restore the whole universe. “All the hope for the future is expressed in terms of a return to the Kingdom structures revealed in the history of Israel from the Exodus to Solomon.”

Why does God care about a work of salvation for a rebellious people? From the viewpoint of the Bible, it is because God remembers his covenant to Abraham (Gen 17:7) and David (2Sa 7). It is because of his steadfast love to his chosen people (Isa 54:7-8; 55:3; Jer 33:33:10-11; Mic 7:18-20). God does a new work based on his faithful love. Because of his covenantal love, God never gives up on his unfaithful people. See Hosea 2:19,20 “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord.” In view of the covenant people’s unfaithfulness, God promised a new covenant through the prophets (Jer 31:31-34; cf. Eze 36:24-27). The fall made man totally unable to meet the conditions of the Mosaic covenant. By his one-sided grace, God would give them a changed heart, universal knowledge of him and complete forgiveness of their sins. God mercifully did these things. The new covenant is God’s unilateral and unconditional promise. It embodies God’s provision and blessing for his people, even though they do not deserve it.

The Messianic king would finally come despite the unfaithfulness of his people. God’s shepherd king would rule over his people (Isa 11:1; Jer 23:5-8; 33:14-26; Eze 34:11-13,23-25; 37:24-28). He would not only obey and fulfill the Mosaic law fully but would bring the Abrahamic blessings to all nations (Gen 12:3; Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-4; Zech 8:20-23).

The new temple (Eze 40-47) would be established by a work of the Spirit (Zech 4:6-9) so that God’s presence would be among his people.

A renewed people. A people, whose heart is changed and to whom a new spirit is given so that the law is fulfilled within them (Isa 10:20-22; 46:3-4; 51:11; Jer 23:3; 31:7; Eze 36:25-28).

The new creation. The kingdom is God’s new creation which cannot be brought in by human reformation, but only by a radical intervention from God in the whole created order. Jerusalem is the new Eden in which the harmony of nature is restored (Isa 11:1-9). God will make Zion’s wilderness like Eden (Isa 51:3; Eze 36:33-36). The Edenic kingdom is the pattern for the new kingdom to come, a new heaven and new earth (Isa 65:17-21).

Prophecy: God’s people (a renewed people), in God’s place (restored land, Jerusalem, temple, new creation), under God’s rule (the Messianic king; new covenant written on the heart)

Concluding Remarks

God is sovereign in carrying out his plan of the kingdom. He persistently moves towards the goal of his kingdom based on his covenant he entered on our behalf. Despite differences between the biblical covenants in the Old Testament, there is a fundamental truth: while people are unfaithful, God is faithful. His covenantal love is at the center of the kingdom that is fully revealed in Jesus Christ.

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29 Ibid., 99.
30 Cf. Horton, Pilgrim Theology, 163.
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