Bringing Chaos to Order: 
Historical Memory and the Manipulation of History

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Abstract
In modern approaches to biblical and classical studies enlightenment scientific models have dominated historical investigation. As such, the notion of memories and traditions, even when they are assumed to be invented, are presented as reflecting a linear projection of history, with singular causes of change. Modern science, however, has moved beyond the Newtonian view of mechanics that undergirds such a view and is working with models of chaos and complexity. Social scientists and humanists are lagging behind and are only now beginning to understand the implications for their disciplines. This paper adds another voice to the small but growing cadre of promoters of a non-linear notion of historiography by noting its implications for a project of redescribing Graeco-Roman antiquity.

Keywords
historiography, chaos theory, monocausality, Lord’s Supper, historical trajectory, Roman history, Christian origins

1. Introduction

In composing the preface for his gospel, Luke takes note of other resources available for understanding the story of Jesus, but distinguishes himself from his predecessors by claiming that his account will be laid out accurately and in order (ἔδοξε κἀμοὶ παρηκολουθηκότα ἀνωθεν πᾶσιν ἀκριβῶς καθεξῆς σοι γράψαι, Luke 1:3). In using the adverb καθεξῆς (‘in order’) Luke sets out to demonstrate the logical sequencing of events one after another and, in so doing, shows how one event leads to, and in many cases, has a cause-effect relationship with the next event.1 As the seminal church

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1 On καθεξῆς see Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains, 2d ed. (eds. J.P. Louw and E.A. Nida; New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 610. As John Noland notes, Völkel (NTS 20 [1973–74] 289–99) has been able to show that the word can denote
historian, Luke has served a paradigmatic role in subsequent understandings of how Christianity developed, with an emphasis not only on accuracy but also on logical order. Even today among many biblical historians, Luke's approach is taken at face value as the way in which history is to be narrated. The isolation of key events or key figures leads to theories of monocausality. In subsequent debates, the central issue at stake becomes whether one or another cause led to subsequent events. When theological assumptions are brought into play – as they are in Luke-Acts and in much of Christian historiography – the monocausality points in the direction of divine intervention, or at the very least the suggestion that God's guiding hand has given direction to the events. In the case of Christian events, they are then taken to be exceptional or unique.

Monocausality is not limited to Christian historiography. Human ability to conceive history has been limited to the means whereby we organize and manage knowledge, which are very much restricted by the properties of the physical media that we employ. For example, encyclopaedias are arranged according to the alphabet, with the limits of page size and article length restricting how much, or how little, can be included. Sidebars and cross-references can provide further information but are still limited by the physicality of the medium of paper. Thus, information is disseminated in a linear, orderly fashion. The approach to history, at least in the West, has reflected such restrictions on the dissemination of knowledge. We expect to fashion history in a linear manner, showing how one event led to another, often articulating the causal relations in between.

In this article, we will give an example of how the historiographic assumption of monocausality has impacted on discussion of the Christian Lord's

the use of an ordering principle that sets the parts in logical relation to a coherently understood whole (i.e., an ordering according to the sense of the whole), and this seems to suit best Luke's use here (cf. esp. Acts 11:4 and Völkel, 294) (Luke 1–9:20 [WBC 35A; Dallas: Word Books et al., 1998], 10). The only other uses of the word come also from the hand of Luke and in each case indicate temporal, special, or logical ordering – Luke 8:1; Acts 3:24; 11:4; 18:23.


3 On the problem of monocausality in sociology see Andrew Abbott, ‘Transcending General Linear Reality,’ Sociological Theory 6/2 (1988), 183: ‘sociological theory and methods are divided by the unnecessarily narrow approach to causality implicit in the dominant methods in the discipline’. For a brief introduction to the issue among historians see Allan Megill, Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2007). Megill asserts that although ‘history is a field where multiple causes, at different levels, are assumed to operate’ (p. 149) many historians fail to take account of this in their historical reconstructions by assuming ‘that what did happen pretty much had to happen’ (p. 150, emphasis original).
Supper tradition. We will then explore more broadly questions of historical method, demonstrating that when early Christian historians such as Luke are placed into their wider Graeco-Roman context, their approach to history differs little from their contemporaries, which is to say that they are manipulating their sources in order to create functional traditions. When these ancient practices are brought into conversation with recent developments in the natural and social sciences, we find that traditional historiography becomes problematized. Although seemingly operating in completely different fields, engagement with advances in the physical sciences can inform historical study, particularly the work of redescribing Graeco-Roman antiquity.

2. Problematizing the Past – ‘Same Story, Different Versions and All Are True’

It is difficult to know the identity of the initiator of the Christian meal tradition, although the first written evidence that we have comes from Paul’s letters. In 1 Corinthians Paul claims that it goes back earlier, to Jesus himself, but in this case his claim could just as easily be understood as originating with the risen Christ, not the human Jesus; ‘for I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you’ (ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὁ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, 1 Cor 11:23). Paul possibly invoked this historicized introduction in order to legitimate a practice – a tradition – that he himself initiated in the midst of the

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6 Tia Dalma in Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest (Dir. Gore Verbinski, 2006).


8 I would agree with Caroline Vander Stichele (‘The Concept of Tradition in 1 and 2 Thessalonians,’ in The Thessalonian Correspondence [ed. Raymond F. Collins; BETL 87; Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990], 500) and Frederick F. Bruce (Tradition: Old and New [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970], 33) who see ‘the Lord’ as the authority rather than the source of the tradition in 1 Corinthians, although they both seem to maintain that the tradition originated outside Paul himself.
Jesus-group at Corinth. The gospel writers would later cement this tradition more firmly in the historicized past.

Henk Jan de Jonge argues that Mark (14:22–26a) and Paul (1 Cor 11:23–25) draw upon a ‘common tradition,’ although it ‘does not reach back to Jesus himself.’ The tradition’s appearance in Paul’s letter, and, independently, in the Didache (9–10), suggest that there was an earlier tradition that developed through independent channels. The tradition arose, he suggests, ‘as a clarification of the Christian rite of the Lord’s Supper or eucharist, for it looks very much like a post-Easter aetiology of that rite.’ With its focus on the memorialising of Jesus (‘in memory of me’), the tradition seems to de Jonge to be ‘an attempt to trace the origin of the meal back to Jesus.’ Drawing parallels from the meal practices of ancient ‘voluntary associations,’ de Jonge concludes,

_The Lord’s Supper did not evolve out of a Jewish meal or synagogal assembly. It arose as the Christian analogy to the periodical suppers in which numerous clubs, societies, and religious groups, both Jewish and gentile, gave shape to their ideals of equality, fellowship, unity, and community._

The pattern of the Lord’s Supper can thus be compared to the practices of Graeco-Roman associations. Yet this still begs the question, with whom did the original rite arise?

In responding to de Jonge, Dietrich-Alex Koch agrees that it is possible that the Lord’s Supper is a post-resurrection rite. Citing Klinghardt and others on

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9 As is the case with invented traditions generally, it functioned as a sign of club membership. In his discussion of new, national invented traditions in the United States and in Britain, Eric Hobsbawn states ‘The crucial element seems to have been the invention of emotionally and symbolically charged signs of club membership rather than the statutes and objects of the club. Their significance lay precisely in their undefined universality’ (‘Introduction: Inventing Traditions,’ in _The Invention of Tradition_ [eds. idem and Terence Ranger; Past and Present; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 11).


13 De Jonge, ‘Early History of the Lord’s Supper,’ 235, emphasis original.
the social function of community meals, Koch notes that this evidence does not sufficiently explain why early Christianity takes the *particular* path it does.\(^{15}\) He correctly observes that ‘due to the fact that the Christians congregated they also had to eat together, therefore as an established religious community they had to hold religious feasts, and thus they had to invent the Lord’s Supper.’\(^{16}\) In going on to suggest (almost insist), however, that the tradition follows a certain line back through to the Jerusalem church, perhaps even to the meal practices of Jesus himself, Koch assumes that the specificity of the Jesus-tradition makes it somehow special or different from other traditions in antiquity.

Were that the case, one might ask why Paul would import a tradition from Jerusalem rather than draw upon existing local conditions to establish the ‘tradition.’ This is strengthened, not weakened, given Paul’s tenuous relationship with the practices of the Jerusalem Jesus-group. Yet in referencing the communal meal practice as a ‘sacramental meal’ throughout his article, Koch loads the argument in favour of its origins in Jesus. Whereas other forms of commensality, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, are referenced in the article simply as ‘meals’ or, at best, ‘ritual meals,’ the ‘sacramental’ character of the ‘Christian’ meal sets it apart from other meals and allows it, rhetorically for Koch, to have a special status, somehow outside of the trajectory of other traditions.

Overall, this kind of exchange tends to mark discussions of the Lord’s Supper, as though in proving that Jesus (or Paul) did (or did not) inaugurate the tradition, we have somehow explained it. Yet even were we able conclusively to answer the question of who was the originator of the rite, the answer would not actually take us further into reconstructing the history of the Lord’s Supper, for the identification of originator does not account for, among other things, the dynamics of individual or communal practices in antiquity.\(^{17}\) Bowersock points out concerning the ancient novels, ‘With works of imaginative literature there is nothing more ruinous for historical understanding than genre theory or a mindless search for antecedents, origins, and distant parallels,’ a


\(^{16}\) Koch, ‘Response,’ 249.

\(^{17}\) De Jonge, ‘Early History of the Lord’s Supper,’ 235 suggests that as a variant of Hellenistic community meal practices, the primary function of the Lord’s Supper ‘was to establish the fellowship, communion, and unity among the participants.’ I would agree, although I think much more is happening with the invocation of this tradition.
sentiment that we would be willing to extend to the more ‘historical’ works from the Graeco-Roman period.\textsuperscript{18}

The search for the origins of the Christian meal practice of the ‘Lord’s Supper’ serves as a modern apologetic, with the believability of the position taken resting in the trustworthiness of the source.\textsuperscript{19} Those defending the Jesus-as-originator view uphold the orthodoxy and tradition of the church. That this ritual comes to us by no less than the Gospel writers, who tell us that Jesus instituted it, suggests that it must be believed. Sacred Scripture surely would not lie! Yet the notion that it is Scripture, and thus trustworthy as a source, is itself a construction, a product of socio-cultural-political-theological-etc. forces in a distant past. Those arguing for an alternative source often point out that the meal is not grounded in an actual event but in the needs of early believers to memorialise their hero. In so arguing, they uphold the orthodoxy and tradition of the historical-critical scholarly methods. In this case, however, ‘the need to find a justification for mythmaking betrays our own uneasiness about error and is the obverse of our own mythology of truth and knowledge…. Since truth remains unique and above suspicion, the fault must lie with modalities of belief of unequal value and intensity.’\textsuperscript{20}

In the end, the Jesus-as-originator hypothesis fails on the same methodological point that the Paul-as-originator hypothesis encounters, or any other particular originator. All such hypotheses assume a single originating point and a direct line of tradition through the early Jesus groups. Such hypotheses cannot be sustained in light of recent discussions of historiography that centre on notions of moncausality.\textsuperscript{21} Given that Luke, Paul, and other early

\textsuperscript{18} Glen W. Bowersock, Fiction as History: Nero to Julian (Sather Classical Lectures 58; Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1994), 14.


\textsuperscript{20} Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 112.

\textsuperscript{21} Such moncausality is often linked to positivism, ‘the belief that the empirical and logical claims of predictive science will ultimately unmask and eliminate superstition, religion and metaphysics’ (J. Foster and D. Lehoux, ‘The Delphic Oracle and the Ethylene-intoxication Hypothesis,’ Clinical Toxicology 45 [2007], 88); see also the comments by Johannes N. Vorster on religion as sui generis (“And God Became Human”: Conversations Within the Humanities, Religion & Theology 12 [2005], 245–7; cf. John Polkinghorne, Quantum Theory: A Very Short Introduction [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002], 47, 82). Thankfully, positivism does not go unchallenged. For example Foster and Lehoux expose the faulty logic of the ‘ethylene-intoxication hypothesis’ concerning the nature of the Delphic Oracle and suggest that despite its evidential problems the scientific investigation that supported the initial hypothesis only received widespread acceptance and popular attention ‘because it appeals to a nascent positivism in its readership’ (‘Delphic Oracle’, 88). Other works have exposed the complexity of historical phenomena; see for example, Brian K. Pennington, Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and the Colonial Construction of Religion (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) or more generally John R. Gillis,
Christian historians are situated in Graeco-Roman antiquity, it is instructive to examine how ancient historians perceived and received their past and how the past functioned for them in the present. For the Romans, history was not simply a matter of writing an historical account of the past. There is an explicit connection made by the Romans between memoria and historia that ‘inevitably leads to a refashioning of the meaning of the past, requiring authors to give it meaning in the present and decide not only what to remember but how it should be remembered.’ The remembrance of things past functions for the present, in the mind of the Roman author, either to serve his own social or political agenda in supporting or vilifying a particular leader, or to serve the wider public good by advocating a particular moral order. Writers during the Augustan period invoked the heroes of the Republican period not for their


22 ‘Too often we isolate such traditions into a world of their own – for example, ‘the world of the New Testament’ – which serves only to protect these traditions from the full impact of what it means to situate them in their wider cultural contexts. Bowersock has observed for the Greek and Latin novels that to set them into their own world ‘is to suggest that these works somehow have a separate, self-contained world of their own, whereas they ought to be seen as part of something larger, which is the Graeco-Roman empire’ (*Fiction as History*, 15, emphasis original).


24 As Bruce Lincoln suggests, myth – stories that possess truth-claims, credibility, and authority – can be used by a person or persons agitating for particular socio-political change (*Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* [New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 24–26), that is, ‘to change the nature of existing social formations’ (*Discourse and the Construction of Society*, 27). Hobsbawm argues that the invention of tradition ‘is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition’ (*Inventing Traditions*, 4). In some cases traditions are invented and constructed by a single initiator while in other cases they evolve in private groups. Either way, they are myth-forming, and as such subject to use and to misuse (see Paul Post, ‘The Creation of Tradition: Rereading and Reading Beyond Hobsbawm.’ in *Religious Identity and the Invention of Tradition: Papers read at a NOSTER conference, Soesterberg, January 4–6, 1999* [eds. Jan W. van Henten and A. Houtepen; STAR 3; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001], 47). Throughout history innovative persons generated their own traditions of ‘three overlapping types: a) those establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities, b) those establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority, and c) those whose main purpose was socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior’ (Hobsbawm, *Inventing Traditions*, 9). Historically, such traditions functioned at times to ‘foster the corporate sense of superiority of elites – particularly when these had to be recruited from those who did not already possess it’ (*Inventing Traditions*, 10).
own sake but, whether implicitly or explicitly, in order to provide a comparison with the Emperor.

The emergence of a single, nearly all-powerful individual in the Roman state was accompanied, as all momentous political changes are, by the struggle to control memory. Given the degree to which Romans viewed memory as an essential means of connecting with the past, and thereby of preserving their sense of self and identity, no one who wished to be a successful princeps could afford to ignore the past.25

Thus, Horace lists the heroic kings and icons of Rome in order to demonstrate that Augustus is the true hero (Carm. 1.12).26 Ovid praises men of the past if only to show how ‘their honors pale in comparison with those accorded Augustus; they are human, he on par with Jupiter’ (Ovid, Fast. 1.607–608).27 Livy’s lengthy history of the Republic reshapes it in order to provide connections between a glorious past and the Roman sense of identity (and support) under the Principate.28

For Seneca ‘the memory of the past needs to be cultivated and passed on; failure to recollect and recollect often will cause us to forget that which we should remember (Ep. 72.1, Ben. 3.2.3).’29 The past provides the examples of great people whom those in the present can emulate and imitate in their pursuit of the moral and honourable life (Ep. 11.8–9), although Seneca himself has already predetermined who will be these exempla.30 What is striking, however, is the degree to which Seneca, among others, is willing to ‘fictionalise history’ to suit his own purpose – ‘the fact is that history in the hands of a Roman is endlessly mutable and dynamic – otherwise it would risk becoming irrelevant.’31

There is more to it, however, than memorialising and supporting the current status quo. Other writers in antiquity were manipulating memory in much deeper ways. For example, Valerius writes of the murder of Tiberius in such a way as to serve the current political situation.32

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25 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 152.
26 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 20.
27 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 21.
28 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 22–23.
29 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 71.
30 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 72–73.
31 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 96. Not everyone appreciated the liberties taken by the historians of the time, as can be seen in Lucian's sarcastic 'How to Write History,' with quips such as 'I do not say that there is no room for occasional praise in history. But it must be given at the proper time and kept within reasonable limits to avoid pleasing future readers. In general such matters should be controlled with a view to what posterity demands' (De Historia Conscribenda 9, Kilburn, LCL). He concludes with, 'History then should be written... with truthfulness and an eye to future expectations rather than with adulation and a view to the pleasure of present praise' (De Historia Conscribenda 63, Kilburn, LCL).
way as to show that it ‘would have repercussions not only in the present but also in the past, as though the act had the potential somehow to “change” history . . . and therefore memory.’\(^{32}\) This is similar to the way in which the writers of the Gospels, particularly Matthew, and even Paul, among other early Jesus-believers, understood the death and resurrection of Christ. It changed the past, at least the understanding of the past, in such a way that Jesus could be found throughout the stories of old. Thus, Matthew can make the odd hermeneutical move to find in Jeremiah’s reference to Rachel weeping in her tomb as the Judeans are forcibly marched past it as they go into exile (Jer 31:15) a link to Herod’s elimination of his two-year old competitors in Bethlehem (Matt 2:18).

For Roman historians the linking of the Republican period to the Principate begins to dissipate in the post-Augustan period, particularly in the time of Nero, due not only to the chronological gap but to the acquisition of a ‘history’ of its own on the part of the Principate.\(^{33}\) Unlike the time of Augustus and Tiberius, the Neroian period is not marked by the representation of itself as a continuation of the Republican past (the exception being Seneca, as noted above). Again, we find a similarity in the development of Christianity as a separate ‘religion’. Although laying claim to Judaic roots for their identity and legitimation, as some Jesus-groups became more confident they took on an identity that did not necessitate the claim of an ancient Jewish past. In fact, some writers came to vilify that very past, finding in Jesus something quite new and different, albeit, with his own history that extends back beyond the time of the Hebrew people to the pre-creation period (so John 1:1–4 or Col 1:15–18).

During the time of Marcus Aurelius the fiction novels were proliferating and ‘history was being invented all over again; even the mythic past was being rewritten, and the present was awash in so many miracles and marvels that not even the credulous or the pious could swallow them all.’\(^{34}\) The assumption that history had embedded in it an element of fiction allows Celsus to accuse the Gospels of being untrue. Despite his counter arguments, in the end, even Origen admitted that fabrication had, if nothing else, crept into the historical record and, as such, cast doubt upon the veracity of the Gospels (Cels. 1.42). In this admission, ‘he reflects a general indifference to the distinction between history and myth’ in the ancient world.\(^{35}\)

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\(^{32}\) Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 53.

\(^{33}\) Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 68.

\(^{34}\) Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 2.

\(^{35}\) Bowersock, *Fiction as History*, 9.
Such indifference did not create for the ancient reader/hearer a crisis concerning the veracity of individual accounts of the past. Ancient historians considered versions of events that they received to be tradition and, if they reworked it at all, it would only be to improve it, not to intensify or to demythologize it. Readers of such histories trusted their sources, much the same way that modern readers of newspapers trust the accounts that are published – ‘both kinds of readers have confidence in the professional.’ Similar to the function of journalism, ancient history was a means of creating belief. Historical memories, whatever their origin, ‘become part of the individual’s experience and understanding of the past, and, to the extent that such memories are shared, part of the culture’s “collective memory”.’

For the modern historian, however, knowledge of this process becomes part of the challenge of interpreting sources that have rewritten or invented the past. Yet it is not entirely clear that modern historical methods have circumvented the same process. As Charles Martindale notes,

> our current interpretations of ancient texts, whether or not we are aware of it, are, in complex ways, constructed by the chain of receptions through which their continued readability has been effected. As a result we cannot get back to any originary meaning wholly free of subsequent accretions.

These accretions, Martindale suggests, are the very things that allow us to read a text from the past, ‘including such material and institutional factors as scriptoria, publishing houses and the whole apparatus of scholarship, together with countless acts of appropriation by readers.’

In responding to the title of his own book – Did the Greeks Believe Their Myths? – Veyne concludes that the obvious answer would be ‘of course.’ Yet he demonstrates throughout that ‘what is true of “them” is also true of ourselves.’ It is within the ‘palaces of the imagination,’ both in antiquity and today that

36 Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 7; Bowersock, Fiction as History, 7–8.
37 Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 10.
39 Gowing, Empire and Memory, 10.
40 Bowersock, Fiction as History, 13; Gowing, Empire and Memory, 10.
42 Martindale, Redeeming the Text, 8; Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 11. Although we should also note that ‘The habit of citing authorities, of scholarly annotation, was not invented by historians but came from theological controversy and juridical practice, where Scripture, the Pandects, or trial proceedings were cited’ (Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 11).
43 Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 129.
historically constructed narratives exist and without which there is no access to historical ‘reality.’ There is a constructedness to our own historical writings that lead us to believe in the very historical myths and traditions that we invent for ourselves in our writing of history. The nature of this constructedness we will examine in the next section.

3. Promising Potentials – ‘History Repeats, But It’s Never the Same’

In a recent attempt to examine the ‘rise’ of Christianity James Crossley rightly critiques the dominance of Christians in the field of New Testament studies and calls for more non-Christian voices within the guild of scholars. He notes that his book is an attempt ‘to continue the tradition of those scholars who have sought to provide a thoroughly (socio-) historical explanation for the rise of Christianity without having to resort to theological reasons.’ He concludes by calling for ‘an approach to the causal factors involved in the spread of earliest Christianity,’ albeit a ‘widespread’ approach that will focus ‘on the question of why this movement or these movements happened.’ In the end, however, Crossley’s own analysis still operates with an underlying monocausal assumption. Crossley’s call for the answer to the question ‘why?’ can too easily replace theological answers with ideological answers. Crossley’s answers are limited by the factors that modern researchers can isolate, and those that the historian deems ‘significant.’ While these factors may indeed

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44 Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*, 121–2.
46 Meeks recognizes this issue within the guild of biblical studies. He notes that the ‘anonymous writer we call “Luke” was, as far as we know, the first self-conscious historian of the Christian movement. With his emphasis on the archē of Jesus’ story, he invented the notion of “Christian beginnings,” which has so obsessed biblical scholarship since the Enlightenment’ (‘Assisting the World,’ 154, emphasis original). Meeks notes that ‘while we easily criticize writers like “Luke,” we can only offer alternative reconstructions, knowing full well that they are infected by our own worldview, prejudices, and interests’ (‘Assisting the World,’ 159).
50 Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened*, 175, emphasis original.
51 In reflecting upon a particular case of scholarly debate that limits its conclusions to the influence of one particular force over another, Lincoln expresses his cynicism in terms that could
play a part, to suggest that they, and they alone, are responsible for events fails to account for the full range of variables at play, both ancient and modern.

More recent historiography has noted that serious historical study must give due attention to the embedded and implicit ideologies of the historians themselves, citing the insufficiency of ‘scientific’ rigour to draw out untainted or objective historical conclusions. Historical conclusions are grounded in our human desire for the past to make sense.

There is nothing more basic in human life than cause and effect. It has been a triumph of mathematics, science, and engineering to break up unified events into causal chains made up of much more elementary events, such that each is the effect of the previous one and the cause of the next. This kind of analysis gives us the feeling that we understand the complex event, having consciously reduced it to a set of basic events that are taken as self-evident.

Herein lies the problem – the human mind blends simple cause-effect relationships in such a way that explanation is possible. But it is a heuristic explanation, not a full explanation. When it comes to the reconstructions of history, at best we get approximations of some of the cause-effect relationships that impact the phenomenon under investigation. They are ‘dynamic scenarios that one can run’ but are still only ‘representations’ of the events under scrutiny. Such representations are indeed ‘crucial for problem solving of all types’ but are still only steps on the way to understanding; they are not, in and of themselves, the answer. ‘What’s happened is that we’ve made the past controllable through constructed memories, which we very much prefer to uncontrollable and therefore embarrassing or even terrifying memories.’

be applied more broadly to linear historical explanations: ‘I am inclined to believe that things are a good deal more complex, however, and that the socio-political instrumentality of the past is rather more varied than the adherents of such a position are prepared to admit’ (Discourse and the Construction of Society, 17).


55 Fauconnier and Turner, The Way We Think, 78.

Thus, to Crossley’s question ‘Why did Christianity spread?’ we can perhaps most honestly answer with another question: ‘Who cares?’ For, it is in the identification of the ‘who’ that we may be able to determine how the historical reconstruction has been constructed.\textsuperscript{57} It is in light of such developments that ‘New Historicism’ arose, which ‘is concerned above all with the analysis of the exercise of power within societal relations.’\textsuperscript{58} This approach attributes all data to the invention of the scholars themselves, which results in a functional denial of any verifiable facts and focuses on the causation of ‘history’ being located in the power relationships within the scholarship.\textsuperscript{59} Some postmodernist/deconstructivists go so far as to suggest that there are no objective historical ‘facts’ to which we might have access and that all knowledge is constructed. This seems unnecessarily to blur the line between ‘what happened’ and how historians investigate what happened. Hobsbawm frames it nicely in stating that despite intellectually fashionable claims that there is no clear difference between fact and fiction, ‘there is, and for historians, even the most militantly antipositivist ones among us, the ability to distinguish between the two is absolutely fundamental.’\textsuperscript{60} What does matter is how one comes to know those facts and the certainty – or, better, the uncertainty – one expresses about one’s conclusions, particularly in the discipline of history (including biblical studies and classics).

\textsuperscript{57} David Weinberger points out that ‘Reality is multifaceted. There are lots of ways to slice it. How we choose to slice it up depends upon why we’re slicing it up’ (Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder [New York: Times Books, 2007], 82, emphasis original); also Meeks, ‘Assisting the World,’ 160. As Veyne observes, ‘Everything is invention or reinvention, one after the other’ (Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 6).


\textsuperscript{59} Von Stuckrad, ‘Relative, Contingent, Determined,’ 908; also Kippenberg, ‘Response,’ 919.

'History' is a set of facts that happen and call for explanation. Hence, our interpretations, contingent and relative as they are, are determined by facts that simply happen and are not manipulated or even understood by ourselves.61 Scholars that reject the new historicism most often maintain an approach to history focused on causal relationships, a method in which ‘historians scrutinize the ‘facts’, and interpret them according to rational procedures, to give progressively more accurate accounts of the past ‘as it was’.62 The problem is that the historical reconstruction is composed post eventum and as such the trajectory of historical causation is traced backwards through time.63 Such historians betray their commitment to a ‘discourse of motives and causes’ when ‘they are constantly reconstructing, confidently, the motives of historical figures.’64 In so doing, they are, perhaps subconsciously, assuming ‘that ancient writers are describing the same phenomena as modern writers but less convincingly.’65

A recent development in historiography opens up an alternative approach that focuses on non-linear dynamics and ‘the modelling and understanding of complex natural and social processes – chaos theory, fractal geometry, and non-equilibrium thermodynamics in particular.’66 It is an approach that is borne out of recent developments in the natural sciences, the implications of which are only starting to be appreciated within historical, biblical, and classical studies.67 In the natural sciences, non-linear dynamics provides a corrective...

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61 Von Stuckrad, ‘Relative, Contingent, Determined,’ 911.
62 Martindale, Redeeming the Text, 19.
63 Veyne, Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?, 36, 103.
64 Martindale, Redeeming the Text, 20.
65 Martindale, Redeeming the Text, 20.
67 For an example of what such an application might look like see Phyllis Culham, ‘Chance, Command, and Chaos in Ancient Military Engagements,’ World Futures 27 (1989), 191–205, in which she applies theories of quantum mechanics to an analysis of Greek and Roman battles. Eschewing the usual attempts to find in military history formulae or laws of success for battle, Culham rephrases the questions to demonstrate how determination of causation is contingent upon where the observer is standing. In reality, the complexity of the battlefield is such that some events or conditions, at times seemingly innocuous, can create bifurcation points from which the predictability of outcome is not possible (cf. Polkinghorne, Quantum Theory, 24). In a separate argument, Phyllis Culham uses her study of Roman defence fortifications along the Germanic border as a case study of fractal and self-similar patterning that proved more effective than conventional, linear defence strategies. The frontier of the Empire became organically self-organizing in a way that made it impossible for any barbarian incursion to bypass the Roman defences (‘Defense in Depth: Strategy, System, and Self-Similarity,’ in Time, Rhythms, and Chaos in the New Dialogue with Nature [ed. G.P. Scott; Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1991], 161–76). On fractals more generally see Ian Stewart, Does God Play Dice? The New Mathematics of Chaos (new ed.; London/New York: Penguin, 1990), 201–27.
Newtonian laws of motion suggest that all objects either remain at rest or continue along a given trajectory. Once determined, the particular trajectory of a body (for example, a planet) becomes known as its natural state of things. It is only when it encounters an external force that a body will deviate from its ‘natural’ trajectory. Post-enlightenment humanistic and social studies, including historical and biblical studies, have emulated applications of Newtonian laws in their own research. At a popular level one hears the notion expressed all too frequently in television documentaries that such-and-such an event ‘changed the course of history’ – as if history had a set, pre-determined course, a particular trajectory upon which it was inevitably moving (and, in the Western mind, this trajectory is linear, with a clear beginning and a less clear, but still inevitable telos). The external force – e.g., Napoleon’s defeat at Waterloo – changes the direction, but not the linearity of history.

The search for singular causes of events and causal relationships among phenomena has provided legitimacy to humanistic research in general. Such scientific inquiry is ‘enjoined to seek laws of the kind that can, when conjoined to statements of initial conditions, yield predictions and/or explanations as deductive consequences.’ In simple systems acting under highly reliable conditions this approach can and does work in producing ‘objectively verifiable’ and ‘positivistic’ results. But such is not the purview of history, nor, it turns out, is it the way of the physical sciences. Sensitivity to initial conditions is such that the predictability and/or retrodictability of events are not fully attainable. Historicism, like classical physics, ‘describes a world that is

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68 C. Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction, Curious Liaison: Clio Meets Chaos,’ Philosophical Forum 21 (1990), 370. It is recognized that most relationships are not linear, yet functionally it is possible through ‘techniques of approximation, to analyse non-linear trajectories ‘as if’ they were linear’ (Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 370). When this mathematical principle gets transferred to historical phenomena, however, the ‘as if’ is dropped out of the equation. Complex historical phenomena are treated as cause-effect linear relationships. These approximations then become inscribed as historical ‘facts,’ ‘truths,’ or ‘data.’ As Leonard A. Smith notes, ‘The failure to distinguish between reality and our models, between observations and mathematics, arguably between an empirical fact and scientific fiction, is the root of much confusion regarding chaos both by the public and among scientists’ (Chaos: A Very Short Introduction [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 15).


70 This is view is held popularly, but it is also the metaphysical position of proponents of the ‘block universe’; see John Polkinghorne, Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion (London: SPCK, 2005), 113–4.

71 Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 377.
clear and determinate.\textsuperscript{72} Historical lessons can be learned because of the constants of the trajectory. If we understand the trajectory of past events and their ‘inevitable’ conclusion, then we can avoid proceeding upon the same trajectory.

The problem with historical monocausality is rooted in its underlying Newtonian mechanics – it works, but only in ideal conditions or when objects exist in isolation. The reality is that ‘isolation is not the natural state of anything.’\textsuperscript{73} Non-linear dynamics cautions the historian to resist the reductionist assumption that in mapping the past through causal events and taxonomic categories we have explained it; that is, ‘the belief that you can best understand reality by breaking it up into its various parts.’\textsuperscript{74} Unlike historicism, an approach that embraces non-linear dynamics builds on quantum physics, which ‘describes a world that is cloudy and fitful.’\textsuperscript{75} The challenge of non-linear dynamics lies in the recognition that the world is ‘in constant flux, with change the norm, and any lasting sameness the result of very special local conditions maintained at cost.’\textsuperscript{76} Historical phenomena, like natural phenomena, do not exist as linear systems but as complex sets of interrelated relationships; for example, an ecosystem. Changing one small component of such a complex system can lead, immediately or over time, to radical and often unpredictable changes in the overall system.\textsuperscript{77}

It is possible to demonstrate this effect even in Cartesian space when one imagines a line that behaves deterministically along a given trajectory (e.g., a curve) but that encounters an opposition that ends the original trajectory – Dyke suggests ‘a point on the trajectory at which all hell breaks loose.’\textsuperscript{78} Here the original trajectory ends and we can imagine that, minimally ‘two trajectories seem to begin, with their beginning points at some distance from the end of the smooth original trajectory, and at some distance from each other.’\textsuperscript{79} The point of discontinuity is the bifurcation point– the subsequent trajectories are not predictable from an examination of the earlier trajectory, nor can the

\textsuperscript{72} Polkinghorne, \textit{Quantum Theory}, 26.
\textsuperscript{73} Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 373.
\textsuperscript{74} Gaddis, \textit{Landscape of History}, 54; see also Weinberger, \textit{Everything is Miscellaneous}, 91.
\textsuperscript{75} Polkinghorne, \textit{Quantum Theory}, 26.
\textsuperscript{76} Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 373.
\textsuperscript{77} Popularly expressed as the ‘butterfly effect’ along such lines as ‘a butterfly flaps its wings in Tokyo and causes a hurricane in Brazil,’ but is really a comparison of two worlds separate and parallel in every detail save one (e.g., the existence of the butterfly); see Smith, \textit{Chaos}, 15; Stewart, \textit{Mathematics of Chaos}, 130–3.
\textsuperscript{78} Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 274.
\textsuperscript{79} Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 274.
examination of subsequent trajectories be read backwards to reconstruct the original trajectory.\(^{80}\)

In complex systems the processes do not end here. There is evidence that there exist attractors, 'the state of a system toward which the system will move under the right conditions.'\(^{81}\) Upon the introduction of small change(s), a system will behave in a manner that might be considered chaotic. However, it will soon begin to evidence a discernable pattern of behaviour. Dyke uses the example of a pendulum swinging along a given trajectory that is acted upon by an external force such as a little shove every few swings. The pendulum quickly evidences a chaotic pattern of looping but will settle into one complicated looping pattern or another, depending upon the initial conditions. 'One starting point can get the pendulum swinging in one pattern; the very tiniest change in starting point will get it swinging in an entirely different pattern, apparently unrelated to the first.'\(^{82}\) More importantly, there is no way to predict the pattern into which the pendulum will settle.

In the description of historical phenomena, as with biological or natural phenomena, terms of interaction rather than terms of causality must dominate the discussion.\(^{83}\) 'A history that writes a series of isolated narratives, then compares those narratives for similarities in order to discover the generalities they share, is a history that betrays its Newtonian roots.'\(^{84}\) A project of historical description-to-redescription will remain positivistic if it sees as its goal the identification of causal relationships. It will be more productive if, in the process of redescription, we are able to identify multifaceted conditions for phenomena, which might include individual or collective ‘shapers’ but will not isolate these as the singular origin points for subsequent events.

What is required is description that recognizes at the outset that historical phenomena are embedded in complex, non-linear systems – ‘there can no

\(^{80}\) Dyke points out that such bifurcation points are not merely based in mathematical theory – they exist in many systems (‘Strange Attraction,’ 375). He gives the example of chemical reactions in the brain that lead to specific actions in the body that do not follow linear trajectories.


\(^{82}\) Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 376, emphasis original. In the famous experiment of Reynolds in which automated ‘boids’ start to ‘flock’ together can be explained not because chaos always moves towards order (thus, falsifying the second law of thermodynamics) but because of the parameters set upon the ‘boids.’ In a closed system (such as a computer) there are only a finite number of options and eventually the subject will hit a configuration it has hit before and after that it will cycle in the same loop forever (Smith, Chaos, 109). This is different than the theoretical models of mathematics, which are predicated on ‘noise’-free environments (see Smith, Chaos, 29).

\(^{83}\) Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 382.

\(^{84}\) Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 386.
longer be an a priori assumption that the systems we look at... are highly stabilized systems functioning close to equilibrium.\textsuperscript{85} Dyke captures well the current situation in this way:

The science of the Enlightenment taught us how to deal with organized simplicity. Nineteenth century science (Boltzmann, etc.) taught us to deal with disorganized complexity. The challenge for twentieth century science is to learn how to deal with organized complexity (without, I would add, pretending that it is simply conjunctive simplicity).\textsuperscript{86}

This final aside, however, cuts to the core of the problem in much of the humanistic sciences, as can be seen in the field of biblical and classical studies. Too often the complexity of the past that we find captured in our primary texts is brought to light in a series of linearly connected descriptive narratives that produce a story of simple causality that are then taken to be historical truths. These are cogent, even convincing, despite their failure to incorporate fully the range of the social factors that may have played a part. The production of copious footnotes and references to other similarly produced linear narratives attempt to pass for evidence for the complexity of the problem, but all too frequently they bolster the pretence of the organized simplicity that is the scholar's narrative. What chaos and complexity theory do, as they are applied to the human past, is allow us to be conscious of the multiplicity of forces that play a part in the creation of a particular phenomenon that we, as historians, have chosen to isolate. We are required to recognize that there may well be forces involved about which we are unaware and that these too played their part in events, even when we cannot narrate them.

If we are serious about being ‘scientific’ in our approach to the history of Graeco-Roman antiquity, then we need to take seriously how scientists currently conduct their own work.\textsuperscript{87} Weinberger argues that ‘for the first time in the history of science’ we are required to take seriously how scientists are writing their own history.

\textsuperscript{85} Dyke, ‘Strange Attraction,’ 382, emphasis original.
\textsuperscript{87} Luther H. Martin, ‘Toward a Scientific History of Religion,’ in Theorizing Religion Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition (Cognitive Science of Religion Series; eds. Harvey Whitehouse and Luther H. Martin; Walnut Creek: Altimira Press, 2004), 9–10, citing Gaddis, Landscape of History, 17. Throughout his book Gaddis argues that it is not simply the case that science is the model for historians but that scientists are becoming more historical in their approach, including the use of narrative and the recognition that they are concerned with a process of change and development. Gaddis contrasts this with the modeling of the social-sciences, which he sees as proceeding on the assumption that things are static and changeless (see, for example, Landscape of History, 60; also Abbott, ‘General Linear Reality,’ 169). The type of science to which Gaddis refers is not that which involves the replicability of experiments in a laboratory environment (e.g., chemistry or physics) but that which involves ‘the virtual replicability’ that’s associated
history, we are able to arrange our concepts without the silent limitations of
the physical’ and in so doing have the potential to change ‘our ideas, organizations,
and knowledge itself.’ Digital technologies have moved us from the
notion of ‘everything in its place’ to the assigning of things to multiple places
simultaneously. Historians have been provided a way to represent relationships; it is,
to use Gaddis’ expression, ‘a new kind of literacy, and hence a new
set of terms for representing historical processes.’ As a result of new media
for representing history ‘we’re no longer forced to carefully construct a single
shared path through memory.’

As we fully recognize, redescribe, re-order, and, most importantly, ‘tag’ his-
torical data into large and seemingly chaotic and miscellaneous databases, we
can navigate new and multiple paths through the data to explore the rich
diversity that is human history. As a result, redescribing Graeco-Roman antiq-
uity will become less of ‘what we have assembled and locked away and more
what we can assemble and share.’ It is not so much that there is no organiza-
tion to our data. Rather, there are multiple ways to organize and analyse the
data and, in doing so, an ability to demonstrate that more than one linear
system makes ‘sense’ of the data and must therefore be considered in the
description of antiquity.

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88 Weinberger, Everything is Miscellaneous, 7. He refers to the ‘digital revolution in ordering’
as ‘third-order’ organization (Everything is Miscellaneous, 22). The first-order is the organization
of the things themselves (e.g., shelving books in a library). The second-order involves applying
taxonomic identifiers to the first-order things (e.g., the Dewey decimal system that codes the
type of book and where it is located in the library) and is often reliant upon the filters of experts
who create and maintain the taxonomy. Third-order organization allows multiple coding and
multiple ways of organizing and retrieving particular things (e.g., the way Google will bring back
search results on the World Wide Web). Weinberger shows how Melvil Dewey, and his biblio-
graphic classification system, has assumed that a thing can only be of one primary type or genre
or species. The problem with that a view is that ‘any map of knowledge assumes that knowledge
has a geography, that it has a top-down view, that it has a shape. That assumption makes sense in
the first and second orders of order. It unnecessarily inhibits the useful miscellaneousness of the
third’ (Everything is Miscellaneous, 63).

89 Weinberger, Everything is Miscellaneous, 14.

90 Gaddis, Landscape of History, 78, emphasis original.

91 Weinberger, Everything is Miscellaneous, 15.

92 Weinberger, Everything is Miscellaneous, 15, his emphasis. He is here referring to memory
as a result of his analogy with photograph albums, but I think the metaphor can be justifiably
applied to historical investigation of antiquity.
4. Conclusion

The historian of Graeco-Roman antiquity writing in and for the twenty-first century needs to be concerned to describe the Graeco-Roman world in a way that neither highlights, isolates, nor ignores early Jesus-groups any more than other groups in order to see what patterns might emerge within the chaos of the time. ‘Reimagining Christian origins must involve a refusal to marginalize the social, religious, and cultural context of early Christianity into the flattened category of “backgrounds”.’ \(^{93}\) Such factors are complex and chaotic, but within them are betrayed patterns of behaviour that can be discerned. Once the patterns have been identified, then we can begin to look at the myriad of casual influences, direct and indirect, that play a part in what will become the historical myth of the ‘rise’ of Christianity. Such a wide-ranging project cannot be carried out by isolated scholars working alone – we need to embrace fully the discursive nature of the historical disciplines by recognizing that ‘knowledge isn’t in our heads: It is between us. It emerges from public and social thought and it stays there, because social knowing, like the global conversations that give rise to it, is never finished.’ \(^{94}\) It is only while on shared ground, where we are in conversation with one another, that we can obtain not ‘knowledge’ but ‘understanding.’ \(^{95}\)

Returning to whence we began, with the Christian meal tradition of the ‘Lord’s Supper,’ we might ask whether it originated with Jesus or with Paul, with Mark or with some Ur-tradition (currently) unbeknownst to us. Did early Jesus-believers simply adapt and modify their existing meal practices, be they Jewish or Gentile? Did they imitate practices common among other groups such as the Qumranites or members of voluntary associations? It may well be that for those who followed him, but only for them, Jesus’s death functioned as a ‘bifurcation’ point from which multiple trajectories, including

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\(^{93}\) Elizabeth Castelli and Hal Taussig, ‘Drawing Large and Startling Figures: Reimagining Christian Origins by Painting Like Picasso.’ in *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honoring Burton L. Mack* (eds. idem; Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996), 12. It is precisely this ‘flattened’ category that exists when the rich diversity of Graeco-Roman religions becomes simply a category of ‘other’ with which the more ‘important’ or privileged category of ‘Christianity’ or (to a lesser extent) ‘Judaism’ might be contrasted. The inclusion of Judaism as a category is often done, it seems, in order to provide a buffer. Since ‘Christianity’ arose from ‘Judaism’ it remained untainted by ‘other’ (Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). Cf. Polkinghorne, *Quantum Theory*, 43: ‘Physicists have come to realize that in many cases it is important to take into account, more seriously than they had done previously, the environment within which quantum processes are actually taking place’.

\(^{94}\) Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, 147.

\(^{95}\) Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous*, 203.
multiple meal trajectories, emanated. To limit the answer to a single one of these (or other) options at the expense of the exclusion of other possibilities is to be drawn into the historicized myth of monocausality.\footnote{96}

What the science of complexity theory does is open up the possibility of investigating all of these influences upon the development of the Christian meal tradition. Its inception was likely more chaotic than presently recognized, but over time it settled into a discernible pattern of behaviour or ‘tradition,’ in part through the influence of writers such as Paul or Mark. Unfortunately, as historians of Graeco-Roman antiquity we lack the range of detailed evidence required to document how the ‘Lord’s Supper’ traditions developed from a variety of perspectives. Thus, we are in the position of many of our colleagues that examine this same period:

\begin{quote}
What confronts us in examining the evidence from early imperial Rome can only be a slice of Roman cultural and collective memory, and we should not make the mistake of making the part stand for the whole. Nonetheless, such as it is, the evidence embodies and communicates memory.\footnote{97}
\end{quote}

Through the lens of non-linear dynamics, however, we are invited to broaden our redesription of antiquity in order to break free of the shackles of monocausality and acknowledge the full complexity of the history.\footnote{98}

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\footnote{96} Much more profitable is the approach taken by Paul F. Bradshaw who argues that the Eucharistic traditions emerged gradually over the first few centuries of Christianity and cannot be traced to a singular inception point (Eucharistic Origins [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], esp. 43–60).

\footnote{97} Gowing, Empire and Memory, 9.

\footnote{98} Polkinghorne notes, ‘Although we can know the everyday world in its Newtonian clarity, we can only know the quantum world if we are prepared to accept it in its Heisenbergian uncertainty’ (Quantum Theory, 87). The Heisenberg uncertainty principle states that ‘the precise measurement of one variable renders another one imprecise’ (Gaddis, Landscape of History, 15), or, put another way, ‘the act of observation alters what’s being observed’ (Gaddis, Landscape of History, 29), thus rendering objectivity impossible (see further Polkinghorne, Quantum Theory, 32–34; Smith, Chaos, 107–11). For historical research, this suggests that our modes of representation determine whatever it is we’re representing (Gaddis, Landscape of History, 29; Potter, Literary Texts, 18).
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