

Issues, Etc.TM

JOURNAL



Job, In 4 Not-So-Easy Steps

by Todd Wilken

Wittenberg Trail: Lutheranism, Christianity's Best-Kept Secret

by Ross Johnson

Winter, 2013



Dear *Issues, Etc. Journal* Reader,

Greetings in the name of Jesus.

In the latest edition of the *Journal* you will find a short essay on the book of Job. Job's story is one of the most misunderstood in all of the Bible. If we misunderstand Job's suffering, we will misunderstand our own suffering. But more importantly, we might fail to see how Job is pointing to Jesus Christ.

Our Wittenberg Trail feature is from Pastor Ross Johnson. He tells how he and his wife discovered Christianity's best-kept secret, the Lutheran faith, and in the end, found healing for the spiritual sickness of pop-American Christianity.

You'll also find a list of the congregations in the **Issues, Etc. 300** at the end of the *Journal*.

Enjoy this edition of the *Journal*.

Wir sind alle Bettler,

Todd Wilken, host
Issues, Etc.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in grey ink. The signature appears to read "Todd Wilken" in a cursive, flowing script. The letters are connected, and the overall style is casual and personal.

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Job, in 4 Not-So-Easy Steps

by Todd Wilken

The book of Job is probably the most misunderstood book in the Old Testament. It is, or so we think, a story of a man who suffers to the point of death for no reason... or, for good reason. We're not sure. Job suffers because God is punishing him, or teaching him a lesson, or humbling him, or something. Again, we're not sure.

All this confusion makes Job a dangerous book. When we suffer, we turn to the book of Job. If we misunderstand Job's suffering, we will misunderstand our suffering as well. We will also miss the point of the book.

Job is misunderstood. There are several reasons for this. To begin, many of us haven't actually read the book. And, who could blame us? Job's story is very interesting for the first two chapters, very boring and confusing for the next 39 chapters, then just confusing in the final chapter.

We think we know Job's story when we really don't. We learned something about Job in Sunday school, and that's about all we know. Sunday school hardly ever gets Job right.

The book is pretty easy to ignore. It is never quoted in the New Testament. Job himself is mentioned only once outside the book in the Old Testament, and only once in the New Testament.¹

Finally, the book of Job seems intentionally enigmatic, purposefully difficult to understand. In fact, I believe that the book of Job is specifically designed to be *impossible* to rightly understand apart from Christ.

That is the point of what you will read here.

The book of Job is difficult, but not impossible. Those middle, boring and confusing 39 chapters are there for a reason —but not the reason we might suppose. What we learned in Sunday school about Job was probably wrong. But, we

don't have to ignore Job. We can rightly understand this book of apparently needless suffering —but only by reading it by the light of Jesus Christ's necessary suffering, death and resurrection.

To understand the book of Job, we have to lay aside some of the ideas we have about the book. We need to see what the book actually says, rather than what we think it says. This isn't easy. In fact, it may be rather difficult to accept what Job's story of suffering is really telling us.

Step 1: It Isn't Job's Fault.

Job's suffering is nothing short of horrendous. His ten children are killed, all his possessions are stolen or destroyed, and Job himself is afflicted with "loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head." He is left with nothing and no one, sitting alone on the ash heap. On top of all that, Job's four friends spend the better part of the book torturing him with their subtle, and not-so-subtle accusations.

Why would God permit Job to suffer as he did? Indeed, why would God permit anyone to suffer to the extent Job suffered?

Has Job done something to deserve his suffering? We assume he has. But that assumption is completely wrong.

From the beginning of his story, Job is "blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil."² God himself describes Job this way twice. In addition, even after his suffering has begun, we are told, "In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong."³

Does this mean that Job is sinless? No. But the author wants us to understand that Job has done nothing to bring his suffering on himself. Job's suffering isn't Job's fault.

You might object. After all, at the end of the story, Job himself says,

I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Doesn't Job's repentance strongly suggest that Job did something to deserve his suffering? No. Of what does Job repent? "I have uttered what I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Remember, Job is not sinless, and he knows it. But Job's sin, in this case, was the result of his suffering not the cause of it.

This is very important. Job suffers as an innocent man. God has declared him "blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil."

Job's friends disagree. They think they know why Job is suffering. Job's friends are certain that Job has done something (or failed to do something) to bring all this calamity on himself. Job insists otherwise. Job's friends repeatedly assert that God is rightly punishing Job for something he has done. Job asserts to the end that he has done nothing. And, in the end, Job's assertion is vindicated. In the end, God rebukes not Job, but Job's friends, Eliphaz and his two companions:

My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has.⁴

Job's friends are clueless regarding the reason for Job's suffering. But then, so is Job.

Step 2: Job Never Knows Why.

So, why does Job suffer? The answer is difficult to accept. Job suffers because God has made a wager, an agreement with Satan. This is the only reason given for Job's suffering. Job is a pawn in God and Satan's game. Or, so it seems.

Don't believe me? Read the first chapter of Job's story yourself. This is what you will find:

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand."

Then in chapter two, a similar scenario is repeated:

The Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil? He still holds fast his integrity, although you incited me against him to destroy him without reason." Then Satan answered the Lord and said, "Skin for skin! All that a man has he will give for his life. But stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life."⁵

Job's suffering is the result of God accepting Satan's challenge: "He will curse you to your face." This, and this alone, is the reason why Job suffers.

Moreover, Job never knows this. We readers are privy to the heavenly conversation between God and Satan. Job never is. We know all along why Job is suffering; Job never does.

Even after God has ended Job's suffering and restored his health and possessions, He doesn't reveal to Job the reason for his suffering. The book ends, "And after this Job lived 140 years, and saw his sons, and his sons' sons, four generations. And Job died, an old man, and full of days." Job dies, never knowing why all this had happened to him.

Step 3: The Hand of Satan, The Hand of God.

Job's story is not only about why Job suffers; it is also about who inflicts his suffering. First, notice that no one in the story thinks Job's suffering is Satan's doing. No one knows of Satan's part in the story. Everyone assumes that Job's sufferings are caused directly by God, especially Job. When his wife encourages him to curse God and die, Job responds, "Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"⁶ Even Job's friends, intent on defending God's part in Job's suffering, never suggest that anyone other than God himself is afflicting Job.

But Satan is directly involved in Job's suffering. How? The answer is found the original agreement between God and Satan. First, Satan challenges God: "Stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face... stretch out your hand and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face." Then God gives Satan permission to harm Job: "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand... Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life."⁷

Does Job suffer at Satan's hand or at God's hand? The answer is both. Indeed, God doesn't merely permit Job to suffer, God hands Job over to Satan to suffer. Perhaps it is a good thing Job doesn't know what is really happening.

So, is Job a pawn in God and Satan's game? Not at all. God's reason for afflicting Job and Satan's reason for afflicting Job are not the same. Satan afflicts Job to destroy Job's faith. God afflicts Job to strengthen Job's faith. Satan takes everything away from Job so that Job will curse God. God takes everything away from Job so that Job will continue to trust God.

God does not use Job to prove something to Satan. That is Satan's game; not God's. God uses Satan to prove Himself to Job. Job is not God's pawn; Satan is.

But there is more. Remember, Job suffers as an innocent man. God has declared him "blameless and upright, one who fears God and turns away from evil." God is not punishing Job or teaching him a lesson. Through Job's suffering God is confirming the substance of Job's faith —the real reason God had declared Job blameless and upright. What do I mean?

The book of Job is not only about Job's faithfulness to God; even more, it is about God's faithfulness to Job. Remember, I said that Job is mentioned only once in the New Testament? Listen to what it says:

As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.⁸

What is the point of Job's story? "The Lord is compassionate and merciful." That is Job's only hope in the middle of his suffering. In fact, Job himself tells us this. Job chapter 19 is Job's own summary of how God has afflicted him:

*He has stripped from me my glory
and taken the crown from my head.
He breaks me down on every side, and I am gone,
and my hope has he pulled up like a tree.
He has kindled his wrath against me
and counts me as his adversary.
His troops come on together;
they have cast up their siege ramp against me
and encamp around my tent.
He has put my brothers far from me,*

*and those who knew me are wholly estranged from me...
My bones stick to my skin and to my flesh,
and I have escaped by the skin of my teeth.
Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, O you my friends,
for the hand of God has touched me!* ⁹

As far as Job knows, God is the only one afflicting him. And, he doesn't know why. Job doesn't know that God has ordered Satan to spare his life. As far as Job knows, God intends to kill him. Then Job speaks his most famous words:

*Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!* ¹⁰

Job doesn't know why he is suffering. Job doesn't know about God's heavenly council or Satan's challenge. Job doesn't know that God has put him in Satan's hand. Job doesn't know if he will live or die. But Job knows that he has a Redeemer.

Job's suffering has left him with nothing and no one, except his Redeemer. This was not a lesson Job learned from his suffering; this was the substance of Job's faith all along.

This is why Job can so adamantly maintain his innocence in the middle of what looked to everyone else like divine punishment. This is why Job continues to refute his friends' accusations even while suffering at God's hand. Job maintains his innocence because he has a Redeemer who lives, even if Job himself dies. Job stares into the face of unimaginable suffering and says, in effect, "God cannot be punishing me; He is my Redeemer. Even if I die at God's hand, I know that my Redeemer lives."

Step 4: Job Is About Jesus.

Now we see the true nature of the book of Job. Job's story is just not a study in human suffering. It is a study in the suffering of the innocent, blameless and upright at the hand of God. It is a study of the Cross.

Satan did his worst to innocent, blameless, upright Job. Satan does his worse to Jesus on the Cross, worse than he ever did to Job.

But at the Cross, Satan isn't Jesus' real problem; God, His Father is. Satan, false friends, real enemies, Pilate, Herod, the Jewish authorities, the Roman soldiers—God uses them all against His Son. Job is not being punished. He is innocent. But Jesus is being punished, even though—because— He is truly innocent. Jesus suffers all this from God for us.

Job shows us what the Cross looks like in the life of those whom God has declared innocent, blameless and upright on account of Jesus. Was Job sinless? No. But his suffering was not punishment for his sin. It could not be. He had been declared innocent for Jesus' sake. The same is true of us.

We turn to the book of Job when we suffer. Misery loves company. But Job isn't there to keep us company in suffering. Job is there—bereft of everything, property, children, friends and health— sitting on the ash heap, pointing with his sore-covered finger to Jesus, his Redeemer, and ours.

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¹ Ezekiel 14:14, James 5:11.

² Job 1:1, 8; 2:3.

³ Job 1:22; 2:10.

⁴ Job 42:7-9.

⁵ Job 1:8-12; 2:3-6.

⁶ Job 2:10. See also Job 3:23; 4:9; 6:4, 9; 9:34; 10:2-3; 16:7-14; 19:6-22; 21:17-19; 23:14-17; 27:2, 30:11, 19-23.

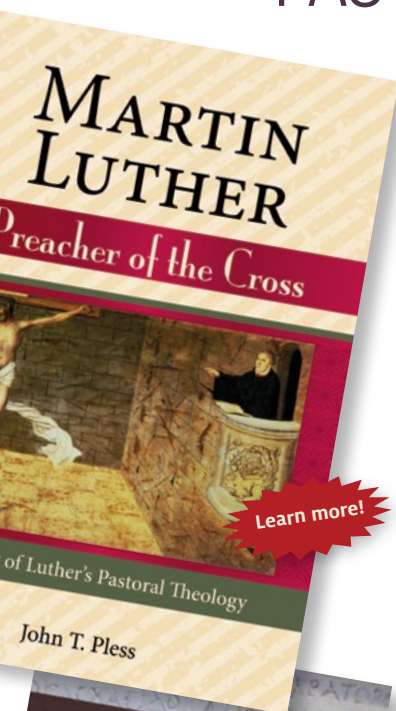
⁷ Job 1:11-12, 2:5-6.

⁸ James 5:10-11.

⁹ Job 19:9-13, 20-21.

¹⁰ Job 19:23-27.

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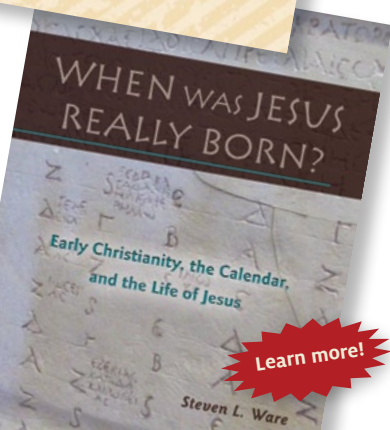
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Wittenberg Trail: *Lutheranism, Christianity's Best-Kept Secret*

by Ross Johnson

Growing up in a conservative Christian home was a tremendous blessing for me. I grew up knowing who Christ is and had a saving faith in Him. I grew up going to church every Sunday and went to a Christian day school as well.

My sophomore year in high school was a turning point for me. Many of my friends had begun to drive. We now had freedoms that we had only dreamt of—freedoms that my friends abused by partying, drinking too much or breaking just about every commandment there is. It seemed as though they were having a lot more fun than I was. So I began a journey, a small spiritual quest that would eventually lead me to where I am today. I decided to study the Christian faith. I figured if Christianity was true, then I would wholeheartedly follow the Commandments and the Scriptures; but if it was not true, then I might as well walk away; stop wasting my time at church, and start enjoying my time with my friends.

As I began my spiritual quest to reaffirm my Christian beliefs, I read many Christian resources and compared them to other faiths. I compared Christianity to the Mormon religion, the Muslim faith, the New Age movement, and many other religions, cults, and sects. Through this time of searching, the Scriptures made one thing clear: Christianity is the only true faith. I was one hundred percent convinced of the truthfulness of Christianity and one hundred percent convinced that all other religions are a lie. Thus, I made a commitment to follow Christ and His Word wholeheartedly.

At this time of renewed joy in my faith, a good friend invited me to attend his church, Calvary Chapel in Costa Mesa, California. Calvary Chapel is a large fellowship of conservative evangelical churches, started by Chuck Smith during the "Jesus Movement" of the 1960s and 1970s. In one of the sermons I heard there, Pastor Chuck Smith said, "Now some Bible scholars disagree with me on this point..." I remember thinking naively, "How could anyone disagree with this Pastor?"

He is obviously preaching right out of the Bible, how could anyone disagree with him?" Well, that sparked something in my mind; I wanted to know what other conservative Christians taught and believed.

During my last two years of high school, I started buying theology books with every paycheck I made. I read, Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, Louis Berkoff's *Systematic Theology*, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and many other seminary textbooks. I soon realized that there is a diverse range of theological opinions on just about every theological topic.

I was becoming a theological salad bar, picking and choosing from different theological systems. On the one hand I believed what the Presbyterian Church taught regarding the end times; but, on the other hand, I did not agree with them regarding their view on salvation. I agreed with the Baptists on their view regarding the Christian life; but, at the same time I strongly disagreed with their view concerning baptism. In this state of confusion, I started to become disenchanted and disillusioned with my church. I realized that I didn't quite fit any mold. I didn't speak the right *Christianese*, I wasn't overly wordy with my prayers, I didn't soften my tone of voice when I spoke—to many Christians this meant that I was spiritually immature. I was reminded time and time again that I didn't measure up as a Christian— I just wasn't good enough to be a leader or a pastor.

In the midst of my struggle, a friend of mine encouraged me to read some great Lutheran doctrine. Frankly, I was extremely skeptical of Lutheranism, because the only Lutheranism I was aware of was extremely liberal. The Lutheran churches that I had encountered allowed women to be pastors, didn't believe in the inerrancy of scripture, and didn't hold to many other essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

As I began to delve into conservative Lutheran doctrine, I realized that Lutheranism was what I had been seeking, although I had not known that it existed. I read about the two natures of Christ, the Lord's Supper, the end times, and much more. I began to realize that there was a church out there that had a doctrine that clearly articulated what I believed. The more I read, the more I found that Lutheranism put my theological puzzle pieces together.

When I read amazing Lutheran theologians, such as Chemnitz, Pieper and Walther, I recognized that—even though the different churches that I attended

were conservative— I was extremely spiritually sick. I knew that Christ had died for me, and that He was the atoning sacrifice for me, but there was an underlying current that continually told me that somehow I was responsible for keeping my salvation. Christ had given me a free gift, but now it was up to me to remain in the faith. This awesome responsibility, and a lot of other bad theology, left me in a horrible state. I constantly doubted my salvation. I continually checked to make sure that the fruits of the Spirit were apparent in my life. When I heard the pastor's sermon on Sunday morning, I always left depressed, because I knew that I was completely incapable of living up to the standard that he had set for me. I feared God. I feared death. I was spiritually frustrated. I was afraid that my spirituality just wasn't good enough, and that if I died I would wind up in hell. Whenever I would get down, I was told that I needed to evangelize, pray, read and memorize the Bible more. Unfortunately, although these things in and of themselves are good things to do, they did not bring me comfort, nor did they clarify the doctrinal questions that I had. I was miserable. I rarely heard a word about forgiveness, and I had no comfort as God's Child. God had become a cosmic killjoy who robbed me of all hope. I believed the perfection He demanded of me was cruel, since there was no way that I could measure up to His high standards.

God in his mercy heard my cry. I went to the website of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and looked up churches in my area. The closest church was Faith Lutheran in Capistrano Beach, California. The church had a weekly evening service where Dr. Rod Rosenblatt, from Concordia University, Irvine, was preaching through the book of Ephesians. The liturgy was simple yet reverent. Only about ten people were in the sanctuary. There was no organist, only a CD of organ music to accompany our singing. This church was doing everything that would seem wrong in the eyes of the church growth movement: it had no praise band, nothing was "contemporary," and there were no multimedia. Because it was free from gimmicks, I loved it. In fact, I found it a welcomed relief from the show that I was getting every Sunday at the evangelical church. If the worship included a praise band and a PowerPoint display, I would have gone back to my evangelical church, and I wouldn't be a Lutheran today. Since the Lutheran church offered a unique spirituality and hymns of theological substance, I sat down in the pew. At the end of the service I knew I was home. Although I was still very ignorant of Lutheranism, I

knew I was where I needed to be.

About three months after I first stepped into the Lutheran church, I was able to talk my wife Mireya into visiting a Lutheran church. I took her to St. Paul's Lutheran church in Laguna Beach, California. At first Mireya hated the Lutheran church. By our second visit she was ready to leave and never come back. However, a small but bold move from Pastor Alfonso Espinosa was what made the difference. As Mireya and I were leaving the church with smiles on our faces (even though she hated the liturgy, the organ, and the sermon), Pastor Espinosa walked after us and said, "Well, Johnson's, now that you have come twice in a row, I would like to invite you next week after service to a catechism class to answer any questions that you have about Lutheranism." Before my wife could respond, I said, "Sure, we would love for you to answer our questions after church next Sunday." When we got to the car Mireya was frustrated with me. She didn't want anything to do with this dead and boring Lutheran church. Still, she felt bad rejecting the pastor's kind invitation. I asked her to give the Lutheran church a year. And if, after a year, she still hated it, we would leave the church and never come back. I was giving the Lutheran church a fair chance to teach us what they believed and why they believed it.

Every week for eight months, Mireya and I peppered Pastor Espinosa with every conceivable question we had: "Why does baptism save?" "Do Lutherans listen to secular music?" "Why do you wear that 'Catholic' outfit?" Pastor Espinosa always kindly addressed all of our misconceptions, and he never made us feel foolish or dumb. He helped us decode a lot of Lutheran vocabulary that only Lutherans understand. We were both very impressed by the amount of individual attention that Lutherans give their members because neither of us had ever even met the pastor of the mega church that we had attended for years.

After much time and study, Mireya and I realized that Lutheranism is Christianity's best-kept secret. We love being Lutheran. Out of our love for others, we want to tell everyone about the beauty of our church. We want others to be in a healthy place spiritually. In the Lutheran faith, both of us found spiritual peace and rest. We found forgiveness. We could now live a life that was free in Christ. When we became Lutheran, we felt as though we were new converts to Christianity. Before I was a Lutheran I had literally read thousands of theology books and I had

never heard of a conservative Lutheran church theologian or pastor, nor did my local Christian bookstore sell any Lutheran books. Mireya and I constantly tell our friends the wonderful depths of Lutheran Spirituality.

After we were confirmed in 1998, my pastor knew that I felt called to be a pastor, and he encouraged me to attend seminary. In 2000, I began attending Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, and my wife began her studies in the MA program at the seminary. Seminary was the best thing that we could ever have done; we grew in our love and appreciation of our Lutheran theology and spirituality.

There is nothing I can do or say to express my gratitude to the people who lovingly nurtured me back to spiritual health in the Lutheran faith. Mireya and I will always be grateful to Pastor Espinosa and Pastor Ron Hodel for taking the time to catechize us and for being faithful to God's word. Their patience and kindness allowed us to slowly change our paradigm from an Evangelical perspective to a Biblical one. Now she and I live in peace and forgiveness. We rest solely on the work of Christ. We understand that in our Baptism Christ rescued us from sin, death, and the devil and truly gave us eternal life. It amazes me to see how faithful the Lord was in all of this. He saw our struggle and pain.

I know that we were Christians before becoming Lutheran. But, just because we were Christians, does not mean that we were spiritually healthy. This is the same as if you choose to live off of fast food all your life, you won't die, but you'll be sick all of the time. Mireya and I were eating spiritual junk food; eating a lot of fluff with just enough nutrition to keep us alive. Being Lutheran has changed all of this. The old Adam still pops up and wants to rob us of our salvation, but the Lord faithfully reminds us that we are His through our Baptism and He will never let us go.



Pr. Ross Johnson is a graduate of Concordia Theological Seminary-Ft. Wayne, IN, where he did a three-year vicarage as a church planter and theological instructor in Venezuela and Guatemala. In 2006, he received a call to Redeemer Lutheran Church-Fairhope, AL. In 2009, Pr. Johnson was called to become a Reserve Chaplain in the US Army. In 2012, Pr. Johnson, along with his Battalion, was deployed to Kuwait and Afghanistan. After safely returning to the United States, Pr. Johnson was called to the Office of National Mission to be the Director of Disaster Response for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.



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