

## IN THE NAME OF GOD

### THE THEOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF ANCIENT ISRAEL'S WARS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO SOME OF TODAY'S STRUGGLES

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This essay will ask about the role of God in some of Ancient Israel's wars as described in the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible on the one hand, and about some strategical acts of Ancient Israelite kings by connecting religious contents with political procedure on the other. It is divided into three main parts by using each as a testcase for various aspects of our contemporary political ideas and situations in general and to war- and conflict-ideologies in particular.

#### 1 First Testcase: God as warrior and saviour

The liberation-story at the reed-sea and especially the connected song of Exodus 15 deals with the liberation of the people of Israel by Yahwe and his acting as the warrior for Israel. It also treats the destruction and annihilation of the Egyptian Pharaoh and his army. For many people, this is one of the most scandalizing texts not only within the Old Testament, but within the whole Christian Bible. Because this text has to be read at every Easter-Vigil celebration, many people know it – and of course have their problems with it.

But in fact, if we want to examine the genuine role of this and similar texts, we have to ask for their theological and historical foundations. In the case of Exod 15 it seems very likely to deal especially with its so called "refrain" given at v1b and v21b and analogous also in v4 and v19a. The reduction of our interest to this refrain is less motivated by the assumption of many scholars, that it may be the earliest and therefore the most original part of the whole chapter, but more by the fact that on a literary basis, this refrain obviously summarizes and crystalizes the main topic and central message of the reed-sea-story. This refrain at the version of v1b and v21b says:

I shall sing<sup>1</sup> to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph; horse and rider he has hurled into the sea.

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<sup>1</sup> In v21 this is formulated as an imperative: Sing (to the Lord). Such an imperativic invitation at the end of a song is a sign to the reader/hearer to identify him or herself with the song and its message and to confess in unison with the author or the characters of the text respectively.

Within an exact reading of this refrain, we should notice three things:

First: This verse is a hymn, a song. This means that it has the character of a solemn proclamation; strictly speaking the proclamation of a content, which seems to be substantely a general belief or, in other words, something of general knowledge and at least a matter of identity within the Ancient Israelite society.

Second: This hymn is very clear that the main actor of the described deed is not the people of Israel, but Yahwe himself and only he. It was Yahwe, not some Israelite troops, who hurled the horses and riders of the Egyptian troops into the sea.

As Manfred Weippert and Eckard Otto have shown, this phenomenon is neither typical for Israel alone, nor is it a theologumenon only throughout the premonarchic time, as Rainer Albertz and others have stated. Otto's thesis, that most of the Mesopotamien wars were seen as battles which the kings and their troops fought in the name of the war-god or – similar to Exod 15 – only as tools of the gods, who themselves were understood as the true actors, can be well documented, e.g. at the so called "Ashur-Prisma"<sup>2</sup> of Esarhaddon (680-669):

I prayed to Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Bel, Nebo and Nergal, the Ishtar of Niniveh, the Ishtar of Arbela, and they agreed to give an oracle-answer. By means of their correct and positive answer, they sent me the trustworthy oracle received by extispicy: "Go ahead, do not tarry! We will march with you, kill your enemies!" I did not even wait for the next day, nor for my army, did not turn back, did not muster the contingents of horses broken to the yoke or the battle equipment, I did not even pile up provisions for my expedition, I was not afraid of the snow and the cold of the month Shabatu in which the winter is hard, but I spread my wings like the flying storm to overwhelm my enemies. I followed that road to Niniveh which is difficult for travelling but short. In front of me, in the territory of Hanin-galbat, all their best soldiers blocked the advance of my expeditionary corps, sharpening their weapons. But the terror of the great gods, my lords, overwhelmed them.<sup>3</sup>

Also in this text the battle itself is not fought by Esarhaddon, but by the gods in whom he was trusting. Enemies of a land or state in Ancient Mesopotamia were automatically seen as personal enemies of the gods of this state, especially the god of wars. Therefore nearly all the wars ideologically and theologically were seen as wars of gods. In this context it is thus impossible to distinguish between profan and religious wars. A war is not seen as either religious or profane, but the religious component is the ideological explanation of any war or political

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<sup>2</sup> Otto (1996) 53.

<sup>3</sup> For this translation see Pritchard (1955) 289.

conflict and in any case the gods are the real actors and of course also the winners (or even losers) of such battles.

Another example for the topos of God as the real actor in war, where Israel is involved as the loosing side, gives us the so-called “Mesha-stela”, on which the Moabite king Mesha describes how his main god “Chemosh” drove the Israelites out of his territory<sup>4</sup>:

And Chemosh said to me [i.e. Mesha]: “Go, take Nebo from Israel”. So I went by night and fought against it from the break of dawn until noon, taking it and slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the tools of Jahwe, dragging them before Chemosh. And the king of Israel had built Jahaz, and he dwelt there while he was fighting against me, but Chemosh drove him out before me.<sup>5</sup>

The God Chemosh, not the king, ensures for the success of this war and he again is also the main actor. But this inscription of the Mesha-stela tells us also something about the final goal of such battles, namely salvation, peace and safety within the land including a clear declaration of possessing this land and the necessary protection by the respective god.<sup>6</sup> With this we have another striking parallel to a main topic of the already shown in the Old Testament war ideology. After the refrain (v2f.), Exod 15 continues:

The Lord is my refuge and my defence; he has shown himself my deliverer. He is my God, and I shall glorify him; my father’s God, and I shall exult him. The Lord is a warrior, JHWH is his name.

This leads us to the third aspect when reading Exod 15: God as warrior and God as saviour and protector build an undividable whole. It is neither possible nor allowed to define any Ancient Israelite war as a battle with JHWH as actor, without a clear connection to a defending situation of Israel’s land, freedom or safety. Never can the destruction and killing of enemy people or even the violent extension of possessing territory be a goal or even a reason for a war fought by God. He is not a warrior in order to show his strength, but to set up right, peace and salvation for his people of Israel and this includes the owning, but not any extension, of the promised land.

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<sup>4</sup> Otto (1996) 54f.

<sup>5</sup> For this translation see Pritchard (1955) 320.

<sup>6</sup> The text of the Mesha-stela starts with the words: “I am Mesha, son of Chemosh, king of Moab, the Dibonite – my father had reigned over Moab thirty years, and I reigned after my father – who made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh, because he saved me from all the kings and caused me to triumph over all my adversaries” (Pritchard 320).

Martin Klopfenstein points to another important characteristic of Ancient Israel's military situation – and from this point of view Israel differs from the surrounding countries – namely the obvious fact that in more or less all the wars the Israelite troops were inferior in number as well as in warfare.<sup>7</sup> Under such circumstances, it is all the more understandable that Israel could see itself only as the poor henchman of God in its glorious battles. This is impressively documented in the song of Debora, where the inhabitants of Meros are cursed because they did not help their God throughout the war:

A curse on Meroz, said the angel of the Lord; a curse, a curse on its inhabitants, because they did not come to help the Lord, to help the Lord among the heros.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to the observation of this deep connection between JHWH as warrior, the possessing of the promised land and a protected and peaceful life in the land, it seems quite likely that the actuality of this topic can not be reduced to the premonarchic times<sup>9</sup>. Rather, it has much more evidence of occurring during the exilic and early post-exilic period, when the ideological topic of JHWH as giver of the land and warrior for the rights of his people were of new importance.<sup>10</sup> There is no wonder that the composition of large parts of the Books of Joshua and Judges can be dated into these periods.<sup>11</sup>

It seems clear, that believing in a God who guarantees wellbeing, territory, salvation and rescue in such an active and committed manner is a fascinating and convincing perspective. It allows hope and faith also in hard and nearly unbearable times and it gives a common identity to all the people, who understand their past – and therefore also their future – in the hands of this God. Actually this very believing in God's past rescueoperations and in the active mission for his people in general, led the Jewish people in keeping their religious and ethnic identity throughout many centuries without their own territory and without a general holding-company.

Such an active warrior-god, however, also contains some risks. If God himself acts as warrior in some cases, this can easily lead to the misguided assumption that he justifies wars in general. The motif of a fighting God, whom the people serve as henchmen, can also quite easy be misinterpreted in the way, that several – or even all – of the own conflict and war activities at least are fulfillments of God's will or even an assistance for him. Such forms of misuse by the Ancient Israelites themselves are also well documented in the so called histori-

<sup>7</sup> Klopfenstein (1996) 208.

<sup>8</sup> Judg 5:23.

<sup>9</sup> Against Klopfenstein (1996) 208f.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Weippert (1991) 297.

<sup>11</sup> For such a dating see Niehr (1998) 194 and 200f.

cal writings of the Bible, especially the Books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. In 1 Kg 11:26–12:33, for example, the conflict between Jerobeam and Rehabeam, which led to the partition of the united Judean and Israelite kingdom, is justified by equalizing the drudgery at the salomonic house with that of the Israelites in Egypt. Thus understood, the partition of the united kingdom could be seen as a result of God's acting for his people.

These same themes arise when examining the context of many contemporary struggles. In many present-day conflicts, both parts tend to see their own activities not as attacks, but only as reactions, which are necessary for defending one's own rights, territory, stability and inner-safety. These wars are therefore considered to be justified by both adversaries and, not seldom, God and religion are stressed as justifications as well as propaganda. This is also given in a more subtle manner by using religious or theological language in order to formulate political and strategical targets as for example "fight against the evil" and similar slogans.

Especially many of the more fundamentalistic groups and regimes rely upon this language of God as warrior. The Muslim suicide-bombers of the Arab world are totally convinced of acting in the name of God and at least for God and his will. It even seems that many of them also see themselves only as henchmen and helpers for God, whom they understand as the real actor and warrior. Moreover, with quite the same arguments, the regimes of the so called "theocracies" also justify their politics.

## **2 Second Testcase: Syncretisms and multireligiosity on voluntary base**

Numerous Old Testament scriptures – especially the historical and prophetic writings – deal with this topic. Of special interest in this case are those texts, which show us the problems of freely chosen multireligious situations. Such writings deal with multireligious phenomena in general and with the worshipping of Baal and other gods of the former Israelite and their neighboured societies by Israelites and Judeans in particular. Of course these Old Testament texts are written from a critical and condemning point of view. Nevertheless, they provide valuable insight into how the reality seems to have been. A famous example for this is 1 Kg 16:29-33:

Ahab, son of Omri, became king of Israel in the thirty-eight year of king Asa of Judah, and he reigned over Israel in Samaria for twenty-two years. More than any of his predecessors he did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord. As if it were not enough for him to follow the sinful ways of Jerobeam, son of Nebat, he took as his wife Jezebel, daughter of king Ethbaal of Sidon, and went and served Baal. He prostrated himself before him and erected an altar to him in the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. He also set up a sacred pole. Indeed he did more to

provoke the anger of the Lord, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel before him.

Ahab – in continuity with his father Omri – has been one of the most successful kings of the Ancient Israelite state. Economy, trade and important diplomatic relationships with other nations, especially the northern Phoenician and Hittite neighbours, under his reign were in permanent prosperity. His strategic marriage with Jezebel, the daughter of the Phoenician king of Sidon, was also part of his successful political programme; obviously, religion and cultic practices were affected by Ahab's ruling style as well.<sup>12</sup>

The text cited above shows that Ahab not only allowed but also forced the worshipping of Baal. As we know from archaeological sources, not only Jezebel and other Phoenician immigrants, businessmen etc. took the opportunity of serving Baal and other gods besides, but the Israelites themselves did also. In 1 Kg 16 King Ahab himself is said to have practised syncretism. In other words, the successful politics of Ahab also include a deliberate multiculturalism and multireligiosity, accepting even syncretistic tendencies. This strengthened the economic and trading power on the one hand, but it provoked the anger of the Israelite prophetic and priestly circles on the other. In 1 Kg 16:29ff. Ahab, who was such a successful politician, is said to be the most wrongdoing king Israel ever had in the eyes of Yahwe.

This conflict between court and temple sparked opposition and led to a splitting throughout society. The story of Naboth and his vineyard in 1 Kg 21:1-21 is a detailed description of how these two groups dealt with their conflict – including judicial murder<sup>13</sup> – and how this very problem of different religious and social interests led to the failure of a successful kind of politics in principle:

Some time later there occurred an incident involving Naboth of Jezreel, who had a vineyard in Jezreel adjoining the palace of king Ahab of Samaria. Ahab made a proposal to Naboth: 'Your vineyard is close to my palace; let me have it for a garden, and I shall give you a better vineyard in exchange for it or, if you prefer, I shall give you its value in silver'. But Naboth answered: 'The Lord forbid that I should surrender to you land which has always been in my family'. Ahab went home sullen and angry because Naboth had refused to let him have his ancestral holding. He took to his bed, covered his face, and refused to eat. When his wife Jezebel came in to him and asked: 'Why this sullenness, and why do you refuse to eat?', he replied: 'I proposed that Naboth of Jezreel should let me have his vineyard at its value or, if he liked, in exchange for another; but he refused to let me have it'. 'Are you or are you not king in Israel?', retorted Jezebel. 'Come, eat and take heart; I shall make you a gift of the vineyard of Naboth of Jezreel'.

<sup>12</sup> Albertz (1992) 231.

<sup>13</sup> For more details see Albertz (1992) 236f.

She wrote letters in Ahab's name, sealed them with his seal, and sent them to the elders and notables of Naboth's city, who sat in council with him. She wrote: 'Proclaim a fast and give Naboth the seat of honour among the people. Opposite him seat two unprincipled rogues to charge him with cursing God and the king; then take him out and stone him to death'. The elders and notables of Naboth's city carried out the instructions Jezebel had sent them in her letter: they proclaimed a fast and gave Naboth the seat of honour. The two unprincipled rogues came in, sat opposite him, and charged him publicly with cursing God and the king. He was then taken outside the city and stoned, and word was sent to Jezebel that Naboth had been stoned to death.

As soon as Jezebel heard of the death of Naboth, she said to Ahab: 'Get up and take possession of the vineyard which Naboth refused to sell you, for he is no longer alive; Naboth of Jezreel is dead'. On hearing that Naboth was dead, Ahab got up and went to the vineyard to take possession.

The word of the Lord came to Elijah the Tishbite: 'Go down at once to king Ahab of Israel, who is in Samaria; you will find him in Naboth's vineyard, where he has gone to take possession. Say to him: This is the word of the Lord: Have you murdered and seized property? Say to him: This is the word of the Lord: Where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, there dogs will lick your blood!' Ahab said to Elijah: 'So you have found me, my enemy?'. 'Yes', he said, 'because you have sold yourself to do what is wrong in the eyes of the Lord. I shall bring disaster on you; I shall sweep you away and destroy every mother's son of the house of Ahab in Israel, whether under protection of the family or not'.

This story sheds not only light on the deep social conflicts during Ahab's reign, but it also blames Jezebel, the foreign wife of the king, for having caused the death of Naboth. In this text we also find a kind of undesirable alien motif: She, the foreign wife of Ahab, is the real evil actor.

This religiously motivated opposition was successful. It not only changed the religious-political option "Yahwe and Baal" to "only Yahwe", but it also led to the economical and diplomatic decline of the Israelite kingdom.<sup>14</sup>

Conflicts like these are certainly not foreign to our present situation. World-wide economic relations and the ongoing globalization of the modern living conditions automatically lead to winners and losers. These socio-economic factors help form multicultural and multireligious societies in which some people are, economically speaking, invited and made welcome while others are estranged and alienated. Similarly, such present-day multiculturalism leads not only to economic progress but to xenophobia as well. Where such multiculturalism is present, a benign syncretism will inevitably arise but so too will rivalries between different religious groups. The so-called Islamic fundamentalists, for

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<sup>14</sup> Albright (1992) 244.

example, are not “fundamentalist”, because they are Muslims, but because many people of the Arab and Muslim world are among the losers of this worldwide globalization and economic progress. As in the story of Ahab and Naboth, religious feelings and traditions are effective ways for motivating people to build an opposition.

Taking such parallels into consideration, it seems most worthwhile also to deal with the after effect of this biblical testcase. This could lead to a kind of learning from the history, which may prevent us from consequences similar to those of Ancient Israel.

### 3 Third Testcase: Extorted syncretisms

The conflicts mentioned above led to political instability, economical and social poverty of many people and at least to the destruction of the Israelite kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The Assyrians were well known as a colonial power, which urged its satellite states to force the Assyrian religion. This is well documented by an inscription of Tiglath-pileser III (744 – 727) found at Kalah:

[...] the town Hatarikka as far as the mountain Saua, the towns Byblos, [...] Simirra, Arqa, Zimarra, Uznu, Ri-raba, Ri-sisu, [...] the towns [...] of the Upper Sea, I brought under my rule. Six officers of mine I installed as governors over them. [...] the town Rashpuna which is situated at the coast of the Upper Sea, the towns [...] nite, Gal'za, Abilakka which are adjacent to Israel and the wide land of Naphtali, in its entire extent, I united with Assyria. Officers of mine I installed as governors upon them.

As to Hanno of Gaza who had fled before my army and run away to Egypt, I conquered the town of Gaza, [...] his personal property, his images [...] and I placed the images of my gods and my royal image in his own palace [...] and declared them to be thenceforward the gods of their country. I imposed upon them tribute.<sup>15</sup>

Many Old Testament texts dealing with syncretisms and with the worshipping of other gods besides or even instead of Yahwe, should be understood in reference to this kind of Assyrian political view. It was better for the Assyrian controlled regions to obey the rules of their colonial power because they would thus be able to keep some other spheres of life under their own freedom of choice. For such situations we also find some hints in the Hebrew Bible as for example the reports about the kings Ahaz and Manasseh.

When King Ahaz went to meet King Tiglath-pileser of Assyria at Damascus, he saw there an altar of which he sent a sketch and a detailed plan to Uriah the

<sup>15</sup> Pritchard (1955) 283.



priest. Accordingly, Uriah built an altar, following all the instructions that the king had sent him from Damascus, and had it ready against the king's return. When the king came back from Damascus, he saw the altar, approached it, and mounted the steps; there he burnt his whole-offering and his grain-offering and poured out his drink-offering, and he flung the blood of his shared-offerings against it. The bronze altar that was before JHWH he removed from the front of the house, from between this new altar and the house of JHWH, and put it on the north side of this altar. King Ahaz gave these instructions to Uriah the priest: 'Burn on the great altar the morning whole-offering and the evening grain-offering, and the king's whole-offering and his grain-offering, and the whole-offering of all the people of the land, their grain-offering and their drink-offerings, and fling against it all the blood of the sacrifices. But the bronze altar shall be for me, to offer morning sacrifice.' Uriah the priest carried out all the king's orders. (2 Kg 16:10-16)

King Ahaz, who ruled in Jerusalem from 742 to 727, obviously replaced the old Salomonic altar in the temple of Jerusalem by the new, big Damascus-style altar. He used this new altar for all the sacrifices and offerings to Yahwe, whereas he now used the old altar for the fulfilling of his religious duties as a vassal.<sup>16</sup> In other words, he did what was required, but not more and certainly not with any enthusiasm. Another type of reaction to the Assyrian power in the time of Manasseh's kingship (697 – 642) is captured in the following story:

Manasseh was twelve years old when he came to the throne, and he reigned in Jerusalem for fifty-five years; his mother was Hephzibah. He did what was wrong in the eyes of JHWH, in following the abominable practices of the nations which JHWH had dispossessed in favour of the Israelites. He rebuilt the shrines which his father Hezekiah had destroyed, he erected altars to the Baal, made a sacred pole as Ahab king of Israel had done, and prostrated himself before all the host of heaven and served them. He built altars in the house of JHWH, that house of which JHWH had said: 'I shall set my name in Jerusalem'. He built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of JHWH. He made his son pass through the fire, he practised soothsaying and divination, and dealt with ghosts and spirits. He did much wrong in the eyes of JHWH and provoked his anger. He made an image of the goddess Asherah and set it up in the house of which JHWH had said to David and Solomon his son: 'In this house and Jerusalem, which I chose out of all the tribes of Israel, I shall establish my name for all time. I shall not again make Israel outcasts from the land which I gave to their forefathers, if only they are careful to observe all my commands and all the law that my servant Moses gave them.' But they did not obey, and Manasseh led them astray into wickedness far worse than that of the nations which JHWH had exterminated in favour of the Israelites. (2 Kg 21:1-9)

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<sup>16</sup> For this interpretation see also Schoors (1998) 99.

Without any doubt this reaction of Manasseh is much more than doing only the minimally demanded duties. Apparently there must have been some kings who tried to identify themselves with some of the commanded actions they had to fulfil and therefore did more than the bare minimum. Within the religious and cultic field, this – similar to the voluntary actions of the second Testcase – led to syncretisms in one part of the Judean society, but also to sharp criticism and opposition among prophetic and priestly groups. One of the most famous critics is Jeremiah the prophet, who at the same time demonstrates how such Assyrian cultic elements became integrated into the Israelite religion by quite a lot of people. One example of this is Jer 7:16-20,<sup>17</sup> where Jeremiah receives a word from God:

Offer up no prayer for this people, Jeremiah, raise no plea or prayer on their behalf, and do not intercede with me, for I shall not listen to you. Do you not see what they are doing in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? Children are gathering wood, fathers lighting the fire, women kneading dough to make crescent-cakes in honour of the queen of heaven; and drink-offerings are poured out to other gods – all to grieve me. But is it I, says JHWH, whom they grieve? No; it is themselves, to their own confusion. Therefore, says the Lord God, my anger and my fury will pour out on this place, on man and beast, on trees and crops, and it will burn unquenched.

Such a situation causes the same consequences as we have stated in the second Testcase: a breakdown of the inner solidarity within the society, violent actions between various social groups, weakness in diplomatic matters and decline as the final consequence. This third Testcase can therefore be seen as a warning sign for our contemporary societies. It is not easy to find the right way between the necessary opening for and acceptance of foreign ideologies, cults and political systems on the one hand and the self-protecting retreat into and conservative protection of the own culture, rituals and lifestyle on the other. A stable, secure and economically-prosperous political system must always seek to maintain a healthy balance between these two poles.

Religion and cult have always played a fundamental role in defining a society and they will no doubt continue to shape peoples and cultures. Respecting the others by practising the own religious beliefs without fear, but also without any fundamentalism, is therefore still one of the main tasks and a necessary foundation for a successful and peaceful social and political life. Most of Ancient Israel's prophets already dreamed of – but also believed in – such a world:

In days to come the mountain of God's house will be established higher than all other mountains, towering above other hills. Peoples will stream towards it; many

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<sup>17</sup> For further texts see Schoors (1998) 100.

nations will go, saying: 'Let us go up to the mountain of God, to the house of Jacob's God, that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.' For instruction issues from Zion, the word of God from Jerusalem. He will be judge between many peoples and arbiter among great and distant nations. They will hammer their swords into mattocks and their spears into pruning-knives. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will never again be trained for war. Each man will sit under his own vine or his own fig tree, with none to cause alarm. The Lord of hosts himself has spoken. Other peoples may be loyal to their own deities, but our loyalty will be for ever to JHWH our God. (Micah 4:1-5)

Prophetic visions like this of Micah 4 invited the ancient readers as well as today's readers to share their dreams, hopes and faith. But Old Testament texts not only speak of dreams and of the future. As we have stated above, they represent also social and political realities and thus invite us to take part in the process of organizing this world and human life in it. The more we try to do our very best and to take responsibility for our society, the more the vision of Micah 4 will become a reality. The Old Testament is not a general instruction for good politics, but many texts of the Hebrew Bible may inspire our daily life and acting in a good way.

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