

## EMBRACING JESUS IN A FIRST CENTURY CONTEXT: WHAT CAN IT TEACH US ABOUT SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT?



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*Abstract. It is appropriate to open an essay in honor of someone by commemorating that person. When I think of Dallas Willard I think of someone who has not been afraid to point to Jesus and spiritual commitment in an age when most people are committed to themselves. Dallas has been very clear in all of his writings that knowing Jesus is not a hobby, a business transaction one makes and forgets, nor an add-on to life; it is an entry into a journey God is to direct in the context of the uniqueness of His person and the enablement of His rule and presence. The Father leads, Jesus mediates and exemplifies, and the Spirit enables. This commitment to Jesus is the goal of this article. It deals with unique claims about Jesus within the Second Temple Judaism of the first century, as well as looking at what religious life was like in the first century Greco-Roman world. Such background might seem distant in a journal on spiritual formation, but let me warn you that is not the case. To understand the world in which “decisions” for Jesus were made is to appreciate what it took to receive Jesus and begin the journey with Him. The study hopes to show that Willard’s emphasis that genuine faith in Jesus is life-changing came with the first century territory. I proceed in three parts: the Jewish context, the Greco-Roman context, and then the application.*

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### THE JEWISH CONTEXT

Those who study Jesus know that he emphasized the coming of the kingdom of God, the reestablishment of a rule among His people lost by Adam and sought for in Israel. The failure of this rule to gain a consistent response among God’s people led to the promise of the prophets that one day God would do a work in the hearts of people. Whether this was called the New Covenant (as in Jeremiah), the Eternal Covenant (as in Isaiah), or simply described (as in Ezekiel), the point was that God would cleanse His people and bring them enablement from within so His rule could now be

visible. This inner reading of the Law stands at the core of Matthew 5 and the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus measures integrity not by the Law's letter but by the heart. This is a text Dallas Willard developed so well in his key work, *The Divine Conspiracy*. So murder is not the issue, anger is. Adultery is not the issue, lust is. Divorce is not the issue, a commitment before God and His design are. The presence of an oath is not the point, having your word be true is. An eye for an eye in revenge is not the point, but vulnerability in the seeking to serve peace is. Hating your enemy is not the call, loving your enemy is. In all of this Jesus pushes for human responses that are hardly instinctive, as He argues that disciples are to have a living standard greater than the world.

The pursuit of morality is not what made Jesus controversial. Jesus teaching that we should do unto others what we wish would be done to us was not a new idea. The "golden rule," a name that became attached to this teaching centuries later is actually echoed in many ancient Greco-Roman and Jewish teachers.<sup>1</sup> His offering of the kingdom in itself was not offensive. It was quite Jewish, even if Jesus' articulation and model of that rule lacked the coercive political power Jews had hoped would come with the new era.

What made Jesus controversial in a Jewish context were his claims of authority. He said the Son of man had authority to forgive sin (Mk 2:1–12). He called himself Lord of the Sabbath (Mk 2:28). He showed his authority in the temple precincts (Mk 11:15–19). He ruled the wind and the waves (Mk 4:35–41). He changed liturgy to refer not to Passover but Himself (Mk 14:22–25). He did not teach like the rabbis. He claimed God would vindicate Him and give Him a seat at the right hand of God (Mk 14:61–62). These are not the claims of a mere prophet. There is more to Jesus' teaching than heralding the promise of God. In proclaiming the kingdom, Jesus also showed himself to be the one who had the authority to bring in the promise. This is why Peter's declaration of Jesus as Messiah and not prophet is a key turning point in the story in the synoptic gospels (Mk 8:26–30). Jesus was central to what God was doing, so central that one could not talk about God's program without mentioning Jesus' role in it.

This feature is what made Jesus' ministry so maddening to many, more traditional Jews. They were focused monotheists reacting to a polytheistic world that surrounded them. To be faithful Jews meant living in a peculiar way, following His Law and its practices out of faithfulness and devotion to the One God and His covenant. This included distinctive and unusual practices in the ancient world like circumcision, Sabbath, dietary practices, and issues associated with purity, as well as limiting worship of God to only one temple. Jews focused on the one God, a stumbling block to Greeks and Romans who acknowledged multiple gods.

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<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:51*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 596–97, documents twelve ancient parallels to this saying.

When Jesus presented and enacted His authority in the midst of declaring the kingdom and performed acts that pointed to divine prerogative, this caused many Jews to step back. Actions, like forgiving sin or ruling over the Sabbath as if He had written the commandment, caused offense. By the time we get to the early church, Paul is indicating to us that Jesus and God are part of the same confession of the one God! Nothing says this as clearly as 1 Corinthians 8:4–6 or the hymn in Philippians 2.<sup>2</sup>

In the Corinthian text, Paul alters the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4. He takes the confession that Israel is to hear and live in the light of understanding that God is One and is Lord and splits those titles, so that God the Father causes the creation and Jesus mediates it. Both the Father and the Son are creators, another divine prerogative.

I will lay out the Greek text so the point is clear.

Περὶ τῆς βρώσεως οὖν τῶν εἰδωλοθύτων,  
οἶδαμεν  
ὅτι οὐδὲν εἶδωλον ἐν κόσμῳ  
καὶ ὅτι οὐδεὶς θεὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς.  
καὶ γὰρ εἶπερ εἰσὶν λεγόμενοι θεοὶ  
εἴτε ἐν οὐρανῷ εἴτε ἐπὶ γῆς,  
ὥσπερ εἰσὶν θεοὶ πολλοὶ καὶ κύριοι πολλοί,  
ἀλλ' ἡμῖν  
εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατὴρ  
ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν,  
καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς  
δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ.

“Now concerning meat offered to idols,  
We know  
That there is no idol in the world  
and there is no God but one.  
For since there are many so-called gods  
Whether in heaven or on earth  
Just as there are many gods and lords,  
But to us,  
[there is] one God the Father  
from whom are all things and we are for him.  
And one Lord Jesus Christ  
Through whom are all things and we are through him.”

There is no doubt Paul alludes to ideas tied to the *Shema* here. The idea that there is one God is distinctive to Judaism in this time. This belief stands in contrast to the many gods of the Greco-Roman world. Yet in this confession of the one God, there is the confession of the Father and Jesus Christ in

<sup>2</sup> Translations are the author's.

the same breath. More importantly, Jesus Christ is tied to the creation as creator, not as creature. What is more, in the LXX, the statement in Deut. 6:4 about the one God used the title Lord to describe God. That text reads, “Ἄκουε, Ἰσραὴλ· κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν·.” (“Hear, Israel, The Lord our God is one Lord.”) This title Paul has split to bring in Jesus Christ. Paul is not adding Jesus to a statement about God as a separate figure. That would be ditheism, something Deuteronomy 6 denies. This is what Richard Bauckham rightfully has called “Paul’s Christology of Divine Identity.”<sup>3</sup> Believers in God’s promise through Jesus worship one God, but that God and Lord as Creator entails Father and Jesus Christ. As Bauckham says, “The only possible way to understand Paul as maintaining monotheism is to understand him to be including Jesus in the unique identity of the one God affirmed in the Shema.”<sup>4</sup>

In Philippians 2:6–11, the hymn ends with a declaration that every knee shall bow and every tongue in creation will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God. Such worship was reserved in the old era for Israel’s God. Even more the language used of Jesus comes from Isaiah 45:23. This Isaianic text comes from a context in which it is the one God of Israel who is set forth as the only true God. This text from Isaiah is one of the clearest declarations of God’s uniqueness and sovereignty in the Hebrew Bible. God declares that allegiance will one day be uniquely His. There is no other God, nor is there any other savior or judge. The indication of this divine position is the fact that one day everyone will acknowledge this. Every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that God is the Lord and a powerful deliverer. The name given above every name is that which affirms the sovereignty of the Creator God over those whom He rules. There is no other place to go. There is no other one to whom to turn. One day all creation will know and affirm this. That is Isaiah’s teaching.

Now Paul was a rabbi. He surely knows this background as he cites this hymn *about Jesus* with its intentional allusion to Isaiah 45. In the hymn, the bowing of the knee and the confessing of the tongue include giving such honor to the Lord Jesus. His work of emptying and death is so in conjunction with the Father, and so rooted in a heavenly origin, that the honor due the God of Israel will come to be given to the one through whom God worked. We see that substituting Jesus in the place of the God of Israel is kosher, justified by the calling and activity of Jesus at God’s behest. Note how the hymn makes it clear that God is the one gifting Jesus with this name and role. Jesus does not act, nor does he claim to act, independently of the Father. But they are like a double helix in a piece of DNA, a package deal, operating as an inseparable team to deliver and save with a mighty

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 2008), 212.

<sup>4</sup> Bauckham, *Jesus and the One God*, 213. He goes on to say Jesus is the Lord whom the Shema affirms to be one.

hand stretched out, ironically, through the death of a frail human who once had been in the presence of God and who afterward was vindicated back to that original position. To see and speak of one is inevitably to speak of and see the other. So the hymn of Philippians 2 summarizes a core confession of who the saving Jesus is.

It is these kinds of understandings that stand behind what it means to acknowledge Jesus as God's promised one. Understanding and trusting Jesus began with how Jesus presented his role in the kingdom in His ministry and extended to the response of worship in the early church for all He had done. To believe in Him was not only to acknowledge His work; it was entry into a spiritual walk of faith that appreciated who had done the saving. Spiritual commitment and relationship to God was the product of such faith, something God solidifies by giving His Spirit to seal that identity. The key role of the Spirit is something Romans 6–8 makes clear.

So what is the significance of this Jewish background? It means that to embrace Jesus and His message was to distinguish yourself from Jews who did not see Jesus as sent from God and vindicated by Him so that Jesus sat at God's right hand. This view of kingdom and kingship, as Jesus taught, divided families and led to believers being persecuted. The earliest persecutions were led by Jews, such as Saul, who saw the early Jesus followers as people who had made too much of Jesus and not enough of Israel's God. My point is simply that to "come to Jesus" in the first century was to come to Him in terms of who He said He was as he performed His work on behalf of God. It was to see Jesus as God's promised One who stood at the center of the arrival of God's deliverance. It also was to declare as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection that one knew not only that Jesus was alive but that he was seated with God at His right hand, sharing in the divine work as an equal to God.

This appreciation of a living, exalted Jesus is clear from Peter's speech about the saving Lord and Christ in Acts 2, no matter how one reads the rest of the speech. Peter in Acts 2:32–36 says it this way,

This Jesus God raised, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore, exalted to the right hand of God, and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father, he has poured out what you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "*The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'*" [Psalm 110:1] Therefore let all the house of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made both Lord and Christ this Jesus whom you crucified.

Salvation now comes through Jesus. The Father works His promise through the One seated with Him. The Father delivers the Spirit through the One at His right hand. In all of this, the uniqueness of Jesus is embraced. To many Jews used to God possessing unique glory, such a position for Jesus spoke volumes and challenged much about their common belief.

My point is simple. Someone responding to Peter's portrait of the Jesus who delivers embraces a model of kingdom rule that altered how one saw God, even the God of Israel. Such a decision, if we are to use that term, meant a shift of worldviews and led to the charge that followers of Jesus had distorted the Law (Lk 23:2–3). This charge came from leading Jews who could not embrace Jesus' claims of divine prerogative authority nor the idea that a plurality existed within God. In sum, to come to Jesus in a Jewish context was to embrace the fact that God had exalted Him and enabled Jesus to become the beneficiary for those who called out in the name of Jesus Christ and received baptism through this name and authority. In Acts 2, we no longer call out to the God of Israel alone, but rather by getting baptized in Jesus Christ's name we understand that God works God's promise inseparably through Jesus as God distributes the gift of the Spirit through the now exalted One. In sum, to believe in Jesus was to believe in this act and what it entailed. Salvation was not merely a transaction; it was a belief that embraced this portrait of Jesus. This saving faith set the stage for the walk of discipleship and commitment to follow out of gratitude for what God had done by His grace.

## THE GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

The issue in the Greco-Roman context for someone considering Jesus was completely different. Here the issue was not the exclusivity of God, but a life lived in the context of a pantheon of gods. Whether one thought of the "Big Twelve" Olympian gods led by Zeus (to the Greeks) and Jupiter (to the Romans) or a plethora of lesser deities, the Greco-Roman world lived in a highly religious context where gods were everywhere and so were the temples honoring them.<sup>5</sup> For example, if one goes to Pompeii today and walks through the Forum area which was frozen in time by the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, one will see on the program that four temples are found to surround this central locale of the city. In that forum one finds temples to Vespasian (the emperor), the public lares, Jupiter, and Apollo. The temple of Jupiter stands at the head of the forum. Behind it loomed not too far in the distance Mount Vesuvius (see Picture 1). If one walks further away, even a temple to the Egyptian goddess Isis can be found in Pompeii. A house dedicated to a mystery religion also could be found down the street. The ancient world was not like the secular West. The creation was seen as alive

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<sup>5</sup> The twelve tied to Mount Olympus were Zeus/ Jupiter, Hera/Juno, Poseidon/ Neptune, Athena/Minerva, Apollo, Artemis/Diana, Aphrodite/Venus, Hermes/Mercury, Hephaistos/Vulcan, Ares/Mars, Demeter/Ceres, and Dionysius/Bacchus. The first name in the pairing is the Greek name, while the second is the Roman name for the god. Lesser gods included figures like Pan and the satyrs, not to mention the great emperors whom the culture deified.



**Picture 1.** The Temple of Jupiter in front of Pompeii Forum with Vesuvius in the background

and animated with gods and spirits. In the Greco-Roman view, it was best to keep as many of these gods happy as possible. Religion in this world was not about doctrine but about bargaining, honoring the gods so they would not become displeased with you. Each god had his realm and the need was to be sure as many of them were honored as was possible. Sacrifices were offered in a spirit of what in Latin was called *do et dies* (“I give so you might give”). The attitude was that one should conduct rites before the gods carefully and with respect lest they be offended and act against you. A rite undertaken in a wrong way was to be repeated.

But there is more. These gods were not only related to individuals, they were seen as paying attention to affairs of state. So there were civic cults as well, designed to make sure the gods were honored and the state was protected. Generals did not go to war without offering sacrifices and checking portents in order to be sure the gods favored their cause. Livy (56 BC–AD 17) in his *History* 19.10–14 tells of the story about how the goddess Cybele/Attis was brought from what is Modern Turkey to Rome in 204 BC because hail and other portents of evil had led the city to look for an answer to reverse the sequence of disasters. He notes, “So they began seriously to consider the best means of transferring the image of the goddess to Rome, in order to enjoy as soon as possible the victory which so many omens and oracles portended—from Delphi, from the Sybilline books, and from the in-



**Picture 2.** The lar worshipped in the house (Naples Museum)

explicable confidence of Scipio.” Her arrival into Rome led to a citywide celebration. The religious calendar, known as the *Fasti*, noted the observance of some 150 religious holidays for the public. That is a religious holiday every three days! The expectation was that faithful citizens would show their respect to the gods on these days. The fate of the city was seen to be associated with participation.

Beyond this there were family gods, known as lars (see picture 2 for a lar). These little idols occupied a niche in the house that served very much like a family altar. These niches either were carved out in the wall or were wooden cupboards hung there. One can see these niches preserved in Pompeii as well (See picture 3 for a niche). This part of a house formed a little house chapel, sometimes called the *aedicule*. Every day sacrifices of grain or other simple offerings were made to be sure the gods were honored. Plautus (254–184 BC) in *Aulularia* 1–25 describes the role of the household God in one of his plays as follows,





Picture 3. Niche for the lar in a home in Pompeii

THE HOUSEHOLD GOD [emerging from Euclius' house]: So that no one may wonder who I am, I will put it briefly: I am the *Lar familiaris* of the house out of which you see me come. I have possessed and watched over this house for years now, already for the father and grandfather of the man who lives in it now . . . He [i.e. the present owner] has only one daughter. She sacrifices incense or wine to me every day, or prays in some way to me again and again, decorating me with garlands.

In the *Fasti*, a work about the annual calendar, Ovid (43 BC–c AD 17) describes one ancient practice and its rationale, “In older days it was the custom to sit on long benches before the hearth, and it was believed that the gods were present at the meal . . . Even into our own days, a trace of this old custom has survived: a clean vessel bears the food that is sacrificed to Vesta.” (6.305–310). A text describing a private cult in Philadelphia in the first century BC notes in lines 12–15 an oath made to the gods about various aspects of one’s behavior.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The examples of ancient Greco-Roman life comes from Hans Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Greco-Roman Religion* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000), a fine survey of the background of the first century and its religious practices.

Life in the Greco-Roman world was saturated with religious belief and practice. One could not escape it. Observance and the gods were everywhere. With it was bound up a sense of loyalty to one's state and so to one's neighbor. Religion involving the gods was not a private affair, but a corporate act of identity.

I teach a class at Dallas on Greco-Roman backgrounds and when we finish covering Greco-Roman religion I have a discussion class on what they have learned and how it impacts how they read the Scripture. In that discussion the reactions are consistent. "I had no idea how pervasive religion was then." Another will say, "I thought only the Jews had involved religious ritual to make vivid their relationship to God." Still another common response is, "I had no idea that the gods were tied up in the religion of the state to the degree they were." They are describing the impact of seeing and sensing from the photos we view in class and the ancient texts we read during the semester how religion in the first century was not a tagalong enterprise. It impacted every area of life daily.

So what does this mean for the Greek, Roman, or other non-Jews who began to consider Jesus? It meant to confess the one God and Jesus entailed leaving all of this other practice behind. It was to opt out of all the social activity that involved the gods. That included leaving activity at the religious temple, in public civic rites, at home before the lares, and including associations with ancestors that were tied to some of the gods of the home. It led to Christians burning their magic books in Ephesus (Acts 19), as well as outsiders calling them "atheists" since they no longer believed in the gods of their neighbors. It meant Paul taught that even though in one sense Christians knew idols were nothing, one should not go to the temple and participate there (1 Cor 8–10). It involved a confessed break and a comprehensive social separation from their former religious practices. Once again the mere decision to embrace Jesus and His work as unique meant that one made more than an instant act or a momentary decision.

This act of faith involved a statement about the divine. It affirmed the singularity of believing in the One Creator God and the One Judge He had appointed. Both Peter and Paul say as much in Acts 10 and 17 respectively. Peter in Acts 10:42–43 says, "He [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to warn them that this is the one [Jesus] appointed by God as judge of the living and the dead. About this one all the prophets testify, that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name." Note once again how saving authority comes through the Name of this exalted One Jesus. Paul in Acts 17:30b–31 declares, "He [God] now commands all people everywhere to repent, because He has set a day on which He is going to judge the inhabited world in righteousness, by a man whom He designated, having provided proof to everyone by raising Him from the dead." My point is that to believe in Jesus in this context was to "turn from idols to the true God" (1 Thes 1:9–10). This turning was a social act that not only identified with what God had done through Jesus, but also that one had broken all their former divine relationships. One did not

make this move lightly. A decision for Jesus in the first century came with huge ramifications. In a real sense, it was to embrace a reorientation in one's life and walk a new path in rebirth.

## APPLICATION

As a New Testament scholar and believer, I often hear debates today about whether one is to come to faith and believe that Jesus is Lord or Savior. This bifurcation was not distinguished in the New Testament texts I read about faith in coming to God's grace in Jesus. Even more, the context of this confession shows that such a bifurcation was almost culturally impossible for the first century. So this look at the larger context of the first century is instructive, no matter which culture is in view, Jewish or Greco-Roman. You can take your pick. Either way the act of believing in Jesus meant leaving an older way of thinking about God. This faith had Jesus firmly entrenched as the One at God's right hand through whom salvation, judgment and even worship came. It was because Jesus is Lord, and exalted by God to show it, that salvation can be preached in His name and faith in Him launches forgiveness *and* a new life—what the New Testament intentionally calls rebirth.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament never intends us to separate forgiveness from new life. Rather forgiveness leads into new life. God and His grace lead to spiritual commitment in a response of faith. I cannot get there myself. Jesus must give me the forgiveness I so desperately need. He also must enable me by His Spirit to walk the walk. New life is not only about obtaining forgiveness; it is about entering into God's presence as His enabled child. In fact that entry into new life is the core of the gospel.

So Ephesians 2:8–10, teaches us not only that salvation is by grace through faith, as vv 8–9 teach, but that salvation teaches that we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works that God designed that we might walk in them. The point in this passage is that God saved us so we would live differently in the experience of His grace. It was part of the divine design for transformation. In fact, Titus 2:11–14 says it most clearly,

For the grace of God bringing salvation to all people has appeared. It [i.e., that grace] trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, righteous, and godly lives in the present age, as we wait for the happy completion of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for

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<sup>7</sup> I have detailed this emphasis on forgiveness and new life in defining the gospel in *Rediscovering the Real Lost Gospel: Rediscovering the Gospel as Good News* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2010). This book is a biblical theology of the gospel, showing how transformed life is at the gospel's core.

us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good.

The points of Jesus' death were to (1) offer himself for sin and (2) to purify a people to Himself who desire to honor God. God's grace gives the enablement that makes this transformation possible. Faith believes God for it.

This hope in the gospel is what Paul called in Romans 1:16–17, “the power of God unto salvation.” The gospel is about more than salvation; it is about enablement. This power is the reason Paul said he was not ashamed of the gospel. That power is the enablement to be and live like a child of God. God gives that power through the Son in the Spirit. Jesus discussed the sending of the Spirit in the Upper Room (Jn 14–16). Peter preached about this gift of the Spirit in Acts 2. Paul summarized this enablement as the core of his gospel in Romans. In Romans 4:16–5:5, what did Abraham believe? It was that God could bring life out of two old dead bodies. So in the gospel, God gives life to a spiritually dead body that he not only declares righteous, but also gives enabling life to through the Spirit. So the saving faith of Romans 4 leads into the story of the Spirit's work in Romans 5–8 (see especially 5:5).

Salvation is about a new journey that does not wait on eternity. Rather, eternity comes to us. For when we know the Father and the Son He sent, we have eternal life, not merely a life of duration, but a life rooted in and sent from eternity, a life of quality. Dallas Willard has spent his life writing about this life of quality in his many works urging us to the spiritual commitment that stands at the core of believing in Jesus.<sup>8</sup> May we walk in that newness of life enabled in our commitment by the very Spirit God, by His grace, gave us through Jesus Christ.

In sum, may we believe God for His grace and receive the power to be who He made us to be. For faith is not a decision of a moment, but an abiding virtue turning to God for a transforming life.

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<sup>8</sup> See especially Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (New York: HarperOne, 2006).

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