

# **The Land, the Covenant, and the Foreskin**

**by: Mark S. Haughwout**

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**Dr. George Savran**

**Hebrew University - Rothberg International School**

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## **Introduction**

In Genesis chapter 17, God appears to Abram and promises him and his seed the land of Canaan. God tells Abram, it seems, that all he must do is for him and his descendants to be circumcised. But did not God already promise Abram the land in Chapter 12, twenty-four years earlier? Is he now adding stipulations? Did he not make already give Abram a covenant without stipulations that said Abram's descendants would inherit the land in chapter 15? A close comparison between the Theophany and covenant in chapter 17 and the promises of God in the previous chapters is what follows. I intend to discover if the covenant(s) are still in effect today, what exactly the covenant(s) entailed and what is the connection is between circumcision and inheriting the land.

To this end I will first conduct an examination of the chapters leading up to chapter 17 in order to understand the facts from a chronological standpoint. Abraham obviously did not know everything all at once as a modern reader does by simply reading the story. Rather he experienced the following events/revelations over a 25 year period. Therefore it will be helpful to look at things from his perspective as this study progresses.

### **Chapter 12**

In 12:1-3 God promises to make Abram into a great nation, yet we already know from 11:30 that his wife was barren. It is interesting to note how the author starts to build tension in the story between these two contrasting ideas, the barren wife and the promise of many descendants, and how he causes that tension to grow throughout the following chapters and continues it even after Isaac is born. When Abraham finally begot the promised child, he then is commanded to sacrifice him. Just when the tension seems to be released the author takes it to a new level. If that were not enough, even though Abraham receives Isaac back from the dead, so to speak, his only son has no wife and thus is unable to reproduce. When he finally gets a wife, she too is barren. At long last when Isaac is 60 and Abraham is 160 years old the twins are born (Gen 25:24) and this tension in the story between God's promises and what Abraham actually was experiencing is resolved.

Note that although God tells Abram he will show him a land, at this point before Abram arrives in Canaan, the most that can be said is that he is showing him a place to live instead of his father's country. No promise of inheriting the land of Canaan or any

other land is yet made.

The first promise of God to Abram to give his seed the land of Canaan is shortly after Abram arrives in Canaan. Notice that YHVH does not promise to give the land to Abram but rather to his seed. Here too, as in chap. 17 YHVH not only speaks to, but also appears to Abram. “To your descendants (lit. ‘seed’ in the Hebrew) I will give this land.” (12:7 NKJV) Here God simply states he will give the land to Abram’s seed. He does not here make a covenant nor is he said here to swear. However much later in reflection (24:7) Abraham says that God swore “The LORD God of heaven...who spoke to me and swore to me, saying, ‘To your descendants I give this land’...”

Though no conditions are attached to this promise, neither does he specifically say the promise is unconditional. More than anything, we seem to have here a statement of fact. God is saying what will happen and to whom.

Notice also that although Lot, Abram’s nephew, was traveling with Abram, no mention is made of him nor to him nor about him in this appearance of God.

### **Chapter 13**

The sole selection of Abram and not Lot is emphasized when Abram and Lot separate and Lot moves out of the land of Canaan to the East. At this point (13:14-17) we read “And the LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him: “Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are - northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you.” Several developments should be noted here as compared to the promise in 12:7. Firstly, by implication, Lot is excluded from this promise in two ways. Firstly by the specific mention of his separation and his leaving the land of Canaan to seek greener pastures to the east. Secondly, he is excluded within the promise itself by the promise being given to Abram’s ‘seed’.

Lots physical separation leaves Abram and Sarah, who as of yet have no

descendants, without even any close relatives in the land of Canaan, which has become by now the promise land. However, immediately after the account of the promise, Lot is back in the picture (14:1ff) where he is seen being rescued by Abram. The author does a skillful job of removing Lot from the picture while Abram receives the promise.

Additionally a sense of the borders of the land is given. Namely all the land which Abram can see in all directions. But more specifically than this, in 13:12 we read "...and Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan". He had already come from Haran, or Padan-Aram in the North when he reached the bordering land of Canaan. Additionally he had gone south to Egypt and returned. Lot was living in the plain of the Jordan and the easterly lands. These combined with the Mediterranean Sea on the west provide a more specific sense boundary, albeit by implication.

Thirdly the promise is here extended to Abram himself, whereas in 12:7, only his seed is mentioned as the one who was to receive the land.

Fourthly, and very important, God promises to give Abram an uncountable number of descendants. This is important, because although this is the third time God promises something about Abram's descendants, Abram as of yet has no children. One descendant is needed to inherit the land, however quite a few are needed to become a 'great nation' ('goy' in the Hebrew. Yes, God literally promises to make Abram a 'great goy' - our modern use of the term is a little twisted. The biblical use of the term simply meant 'nation' and did not include the sense of 'non-Israelite' or 'pagan').

Fifthly, God now states that the promise of the land is forever, thus removing any idea of a time limitation.

Afterwards Abram is told to walk the length and width of the land, the bible does not record him actually doing this, rather he moves simply to Hebron and parks there. Ironically this is the only piece of land he actually ends up owning in his lifetime, when he buys a parcel there to bury Sarah (23:3ff).

## **Chapter 14**

### **Melchizedek**

In Genesis 14:18-20 we find an encounter between Abram and Melchizedek. This strange character is known to be a priest from our text and also from Psalm 110:4, which is the only other mention of him in the Hebrew bible. That he was a real priest to

the same God Abraham worshipped is shown in Abram's repetition of his words (14:19, 22). He was a priest apart from the Aaronic priesthood, since Levi had not yet been born. This fact along with the other details recorded in this chapter may give the source critic some clue as to the antiquity of this story.

Melchizedek's words:

"Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said:

'Blessed be Abram of God Most High,

Possessor of heaven and earth;

And blessed be God Most High,

Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.'

And he gave him a tithe of all." (Genesis 14:18-20)

Firstly the bread and wine are known to symbolize some sort of covenant or family relationship. These are the two items that came to be associated with the Passover feast. The Passover feast was the only feast which was specifically forbidden to uncircumcised men (Exodus 12:48).

Secondly Melchizedek calls God the possessor of heaven and earth, which phrase Abram repeats to the king of Sodom. Calling God 'possessor' is significant because God had already promised two times to Abram to give him someone else's land. In this statement by Melchizedek, God's priest, it is shown that God is the true owner of all the earth as opposed to the king of Sodom or the Canaanites or anyone else, and therefore can give it to whom he wants. Abram seems to have expected the fulfillment of the promise to come directly from God when God said "...all the land which you see I give to you..." (Genesis 13:15) and also when God promised to bless him in 12:2. Here with the king of Sodom and later (in 23:10ff) with Ephron the Hittite, Abram refuses to receive gifts, and especially that of the land. He wanted God to be the fulfiller of his promises, and not Ephron or the king of Sodom. For Abram it seems to be a matter of God's glory, for he tells the king of Sodom "I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing ... that is yours, lest you should say 'I have made Abram rich'"

(Genesis 14:22-23). Some scholars see in this statement an insult to the king of Sodom due to how sinful he was. This may be true, since Abram did receive gifts from both Pharaoh and Abimelech. But due to the fact that Abram allowed the king of Sodom to enrich others, a general protest of his behavior is not merely what is emphasized here. Rather, Abram who just encountered this priest of God - Melchizedek, seems to have been still in such an impressed state that he repeats Melchizedek's words saying "...God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth" and in his renewed state of zeal refuses the gifts from the king of Sodom. God had just blessed Abram, and therefore Abram did not want the king of Sodom to also be able to say he made Abram rich (blessed).

### **Chapter 15**

Obviously the beginning of Chapter 15 is tied to the end of Chapter 14, by the fact that God tells Abram "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward (salary)" (Genesis 15:1b). Abram had just turned down payment for his services, and now God promises to be his very high salary.

Chapter 15 is the fourth time God speaks to Abram, this time in a vision. In addition to the previous promises, God tells Abram he will defend him and be his very very large income. At this point Abram begins to question all these great promises for he has no heir. God promises him "...one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." (15:4). God again illustrates to him the greatness of the number of his descendants.

At this point we read "And he believed in the LORD, and he accounted it to him for righteousness." (15:6). This is significant, for until now no moral judgment concerning Abram had been declared. The covenant that God makes with Abram later in this chapter seems to be of the 'grant' type, that is to say that the greater party promises to the lesser party some reward because the lesser party had found favor already in the greater party's eyes, usually because of the lesser party's obedience or good service or faithfulness. In Abram's case it was due to his believing God.

In 15:7 God again promises him the land as a possession. At this point Abram asks "Lord YHVH, how shall I know that I will inherit it?" (15:8). Abram seems to here be asking for either a miraculous sign to confirm a prophetic word whose fulfillment

does not seem to be immediate or he may be asking for a deeper commitment than just a promise, in other words Abram may be asking God to make this promise sure by turning it into a covenant. God's answer could have simply been 'because I said so'. However we know from Jeremiah 18:7-10 and other passages that such promises of blessing could be revoked if the receiver turned to wickedness. Abram may have been thinking to himself that the promise might be dependant on his actions.

God's reply is similar to a traditional Middle Eastern covenant ceremony, where animals are cut in half and both sides of the covenant walk through the middle of the animals. This type of ceremony is where the biblical expression "to cut a covenant" comes from and this is exactly what 15:18 says, that on the same day God cut a covenant with Abram. God for his part of the covenant promises Abram to give his offspring the land of 10 people groups located between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates. Abram for his part says nothing, nor does he pass through the middle of the carcasses. However neither does God in an anthropomorphic form rather a 'smoking oven and a burning torch' pass between the pieces. It is possible that these two symbols represent Abram (or his descendants) and God, since they are the covenant members. However it is more likely that both symbols represent God, since he appeared to the Israelites in the wilderness in both smoke and fire. Yet that experience was several centuries after Abram lived, it therefore must be sought to understand what Abram considered the two symbols to mean. Since this was apparently a 'grant' type covenant, typical of the time period, Abram likely would have interpreted the symbols to represent God. This is the position Sarna takes: "Only God bound Himself to a solemn obligation, the patriarch having been the passive beneficiary." (Sarna p126).

Weinfeld states "The proclamation of the gift of land in Genesis 15 is also styled according to the prevalent judicial pattern." (p259) He also states that the phrase 'on that day' (15:18) has legal implications and that "the delineation of the borders and the specification of the granted territories in vv. 18-21 indeed constitute an important part of the grant documents in the ancient Near East." (Weinfeld p260) Sarna shows that the phrase "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it." is similar to Hittite treaties "which regulated relationships between the great

kings and their inferior vassals. The documents usually contain a preamble identifying the author of the pact, after which follows a historical prologue describing the past relationships between the contracting parties.” (Sarna pp126-7)

The other type of covenant, besides the ‘grant’ covenant, is that which is more like a contract and can be made between equal or unequal parties, in which both parties are bound to perform some sort of obligation or the covenant will be considered to be broken. This contractual type of covenant is what God made with Israel at Sinai, where the good blessings God promised would only be received if the Israelites obeyed the obligations set upon them (the commandments and statutes). This contractual type is not what is found here in chapter 15, but may be that which is found in chapter 17 (see below).

Weinfeld claims (p252) that the Genesis 15 covenant is also similar to an extra-biblical covenant (the Abban-Yarimlim deed) in that the lesser party provides the animals and the greater party swears the oath.

Weinfeld shows (p252-54) that sacrifices in connection with a covenant was typical, not only in the third millennium but also later in Greece and Rome. He also shows however that sometimes the pieces were not specifically intended for sacrifice but were merely part of the ritual and that similar rituals were to be found in Neo-Assyrian treaties. “The ritual itself-if it was performed-served only a symbolic and dramatic end: to tangibly impress upon the vassal the consequences that would follow inevitably should he infringe the covenant.” (Weinfeld p256) Sarna similarly states that the pieces were symbolic and were not intended for sacrifice (Sarna p126). A related concept is found in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 11:7 “So he took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hands of messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not go out with Saul and Samuel to battle, so it shall be done to his oxen.’”

This type of ritual of passing through pieces of animals is clearly demonstrated at Jeremiah 34:18-20ff “And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not performed the words of the covenant which they

made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it- the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf-I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. Their dead bodies shall be for meat for the birds of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.”

This covenant with the passing through the pieces gave Abram great reassurance concerning the promises, for it must be remembered that he lived in and grew up in societies where, as Sarna states, “the capriciousness of the gods was taken for granted” (Sarna p127).

15:16 states “But in the fourth generation they shall return here...” this may provide some sort of time scale as to when God will fulfill his promise to give Abram’s seed the land as an inheritance.

Sarna (p124) pointed out the difference in verb tenses between the promises in 12:7 and 13:15 where God says he ‘will give’ the land, as compared to the covenant in 15:18 where the verb is in the past ‘I have given’. This use of verbs demonstrates perfectly the difference between a promise and a ‘grant’ covenant. By using the past tense in 15:18 it is considered to be a ‘done deal’.

The important thing to note is that 15:18b is God’s first covenant with Abram and that covenant is to give Abram’s descendants (seed) the land of Canaan. No conditions were put on the covenant except perhaps that the word לזרעך ‘to your descendants’ is singular in the Hebrew and can connote either one offspring or more than one. Therefore it is possible that the covenant here is to give the land to only one of Abram’s offspring. If it is not to one, then there is no reason here not to understand this as referring to all the children born to Abram and not merely to one child. There is nothing here to indicate that this promise is intended exclusively for Abram’s grandson Jacob and then from that grandchild to all his children without exclusion. In other words why think that only Isaac is intended and then only Jacob and then all of Jacob’s sons and their multitude of descendants. Such a conclusion does not seem warranted here. However if only one descendant is intended as the heir, then that descendant would have the right to give it to the son or sons of his choice. However 17:8 may indicate a plural understanding here (the

pronoun ‘their’ in reference to the word for ‘descendants’).

## Chapter 16

Chapter 16 deals with the story of Abram begetting a child by Sarai’s handmaid Hagar. “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, ‘See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her!’” (Genesis 16:1-2a). Sarna points out that from Nuzi documents, the requirement of the wife to provide another woman to her husband in the case that she was childless was actually included in marriage contracts. Additionally he shows that both Hammurabi and the Nuzi documents require the maidservant to honor her mistress and that if she didn’t she could be punished but not sold (Sarna p128-9). This explains well the reaction of Sarai to Hagar (16:6) when Hagar despised her because of the latter’s conception and the former’s inability (16:4).

It is important to remember that so far that although God promised Abram an heir from his own body, that Sarai was not specified as the mother of this heir. In 16:10 the Angel of the LORD makes the same promise to Hagar that he made to Abram! Namely “I will multiply your descendants so they shall not be counted for multitude.” (16:10b). This verse would seem to confirm the promises already made in 13:16ff and 15:5. This seems to plainly point to Hagar as the chosen mother of the heir that would come from Abram’s own body. We know from 16:3 and 12:4, that Abram was 85 at Ishmael’s conception and from 16:16 that he was 86 at his birth. The very next verse 17:1 jumps ahead 13 years to the point when Abram is 99 years old. On the basis of the texts so far examined it would seem that Abram and everyone else was convinced for these 13 years that Ishmael was the heir of the promises and covenant.

However Weinfeld states “As is known to us from Nuzi, Alalah, Ugarit and Palestine, the father had the right to select a ‘firstborn’ as well as to make all his heirs share alike, and was not bound by the law of primogeniture.” (Weinfeld p246)

Psalm 89:27(28) reflects this idea of appointing a firstborn: “Also I will make

him (give him to be) My firstborn, The highest of the kings of the earth.” Israel is also called by God as his firstborn in Exodus 4:22 and Jeremiah 31:9 states “...For I am a Father to Israel, And Ephraim is My firstborn”. Of course Ephraim was not the firstborn to Joseph, rather Manasseh was, yet Ephraim’s grandfather chose Ephraim to be the firstborn.

Nahum Sarna points out that the Nuzi documents give us examples of how in the case of the lack of a natural heir, the childless person would adopt someone, normally a slave or a stranger. They go on to show that if afterwards a natural heir was born then the adopted person would take place as second born. (Sarna p122-3) Though this specifically relates to Eliezer of Damascus (15:2), it may also have implication for the position of Ishmael as heir.

Thus we know from biblical and extra biblical texts that Ishmael’s being the firstborn did not automatically guarantee he would get the rights of the firstborn. However at this point in time there was no reason on these grounds to believe he wouldn’t get the rights.

## **Chapter 17**

Circumcision is called the sign of the covenant in 17:12, but is more than just a symbol, rather it is here an integral part of the covenant for we read “And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.” Clearly circumcision is a requirement for keeping and being included in the covenant. However, as will be clearly seen, circumcision is not the sign of the promise of God to give Abraham the land. For if it was, one would necessarily have to say that covenant extended to Abraham’s servants, his son Ishmael, his other sons by Keturah and all other males of his household, in addition to Isaac. In 17:12 we read that this covenant requires the circumcision of “he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant.”

Does Chapter 17:1-6 review the previous covenant (15:18) and then go on to make a new one starting in verse 7, or does it all refer to the previous covenant made more than 13 years previous?

The idea that a new covenant is being made here makes sense on the ground that

the previous covenant was made at least 13 years previous before the birth of Ishmael. It does not seem legal that a covenant could be altered by one party, especially after such a long time. However Abram may have understood the idea that he was waiting to hear what his part of that covenant would be. It is possible that not only verse 7 and following are a new covenant, but that all of chapter 17 is. In that case the newer covenant should be seen as superseding and including the previous covenant, while adding some more details, including the giving of Abraham a son by Sarah. This was something Abraham wanted very much (15:2ff) and may have motivated Abraham to accept this new covenant in place of the older one. Had Abraham not accepted this new covenant, the old one by default would have remained in effect and the Ishmaelites would have had rightful claim thereby to the land of Canaan. Additionally Sarai would have died childless and Abraham would still be called Abram.

If it all refers to this previous covenant, than perhaps here God is telling Abraham what Abraham's part of the deal is as compared to 15:18ff where only God's part of the covenant is declared. This is the view that seems to be the simplest explanation, despite its difficulties. Abraham accepts the covenant by carrying out the act of circumcision, and thus also fulfilling his part of the bargain. Thus God is obligated to fulfill his part of the bargain which is:

- To give Abraham's descendants the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates (15:18)
- To make Abraham a father of many nations (17:4-6)
- To make Abraham exceedingly fruitful (17:6)
- To make Kings come from Abraham (17:6)
- To establish the covenant not only with Abraham but also his descendants (17:7)
- To be God to Abraham and his descendants (17:7)
- The covenant is forever (17:7)
- The land of Canaan is to be given as an eternal possession
- Sarai's new name is Sarah
- Sarah will be blessed
- Abraham will have a son by Sarah
- Sarah will become nations

- Sarah shall produce kings of peoples
- God will establish his covenant with Isaac and not Ishmael (17:19-21)
- Ishmael will be blessed
- Ishmael will be fruitful
- Ishmael will be multiplied exceedingly
- Ishmael will beget 12 princes
- Ishmael will be a great nation
- Sarah shall bear Isaac in one year

Notice that in this long list only two items in this eternal covenant have an ongoing fulfillment, as compared to a singular fulfillment such as the birth of a child. They are God's promise to be God to Abraham's seed and to give them the land forever. We know from history that the other parts have been fulfilled. Abraham's descendants are uncountable, Kings have arisen from among them, Isaac was born, Ishmael multiplied exceedingly, etc...

In chapter 21 the rejection of Ishmael found here in 17:18-21 is repeated. "Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed." (Genesis 21:12b-13)

Herein God reaffirms that Isaac was to be Abraham's heir and thereby the recipient of the promises and covenant.

Abraham's part of the deal in this covenant is to:

- Circumcise himself (17:10)
- his sons (17:10)
- his purchased slaves (17:12)
- all males born in his household (17:10, 12)
- all males found among Abraham's household (17:10)
- to circumcise on the 8<sup>th</sup> day (17:12)
- Those not circumcised will be excluded from the covenant people because he has violated the covenant. (17:14)

In 17:23ff Abraham accepts the covenant and circumcises all his household including

Ishmael.

The later prophetic and even later Christian teaching of a circumcision of the heart cannot be said to be a spiritual fulfillment of this particular covenant. For twice in the text the circumcision of the actual flesh is stressed. "...and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins..." (17:11a) and "And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." (17:14) This verse especially stresses the physical circumcision by going so far as to define what an uncircumcised male is and to say that such a one has broken the covenant.

A covenant of this type is in force until the death of all the members on one side or the other. So long as just one of Abraham's male descendants through Isaac (and also Jacob) is still alive and has a successive line of circumcised male ancestors all the way back to Abraham, then we know that at least that party to the covenant has a representative member. Certain sects of Christianity have a doctrine that would seem to hold that the other party to the covenant died and therefore this covenant is now null and void as are all other covenants made before the death of the Messiah. However the fact that the Messianic Jews of the first century continued this practice of circumcision and the fact that Paul circumcised Timothy, would indicate that it was considered early on that this covenant is still in effect.

The term עולם 'eternal' should not be understood in any other way, though some Christian scholars such as Adam Clarke in his commentary on this passage try to say that the term עולם meant the period of time leading up to the Messiah, this does not seem to be the case. The term is also used to describe God himself in Genesis 21:33, concerning which Clarke himself states that it means 'eternal'. Certainly no Christian scholar would claim that God was only going to exist until the Messiah came, for such would not only be blasphemy, but would be illogical.

## **Chapter 22**

Many of the promises made here were made previously, however again some new details are added. In 22:17-18 God promises the following to Abraham:

- blessing
- multiplication of descendants

- “your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies” (22:17)
- “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed” (22:18)

Abraham was already under contract to receive the first two items, but one might argue that due to the Hebrew syntax God is promising to take the blessing and multiplication to an even higher level. The second two items are new.

### **Conclusion**

Whether the covenant in chapter 17 replaces that in 15 or is part of the one in 15, the end result is the same, and circumcision in the flesh is what Abraham’s physical descendants through Isaac are obliged to do in order to be part of the ‘covenant people’ and to be recipients of the of God’s promises in that covenant. We noted that the only parts of the covenant that do not have a singular fulfillment are the commitment by God to be their God and the gift of the land which is forever. We also noted that Ishmael and Abraham’s other sons were specifically excluded with the choosing of Isaac by God himself to be the heir. It appears from this study that the Abrahamic covenant is still in effect today, though it must be remembered that that covenant contained no instructions whatsoever to the recipients of the land to forcefully occupy the land nor to forcefully expel the native inhabitants (such aspects relate to a later covenant of a different type). For future studies it may be proper to refer to not only an Abrahamic covenant (found in chapter 17), but also to implement the term ‘Abramic’ covenant (that found in chapter 15).

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