

Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John

Edited by
JOHN LIERMAN

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Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

These essays come from a cutting edge of study of the Fourth Gospel. They challenge widely held views and present new hypotheses about the Gospel's origins and significance. The contributors discuss a range of topics including the authenticity of the sayings of Jesus, the relationship of Luke and John, John's witness to Palestinian messianism, the importance of both the events of A.D. 70 and Moses motifs to John's Christology, distinctive aspects of discipleship in the Fourth Gospel, and the reception of that Gospel in the second-century church. Several of the essays explore how John's narrative contributes to the theology of his discourses.

This book had its genesis at a conference held in Cambridge under the auspices of the international center for biblical research, Tyndale House dedicated to exploring creative approaches to John's Gospel.

I am grateful to Dr Peter Head, Sir Kirby Laing Research Fellow, Tyndale House Cambridge, for bringing together the scholars for that conference and conceiving the idea of publishing a volume of essays. Both Professor David Wenham and Dr Andrew Gregory were very helpful in the latter stages of this project. Miss Katie Leggett must be thanked for helping prepare the extensive indexes.

I am grateful to the University of Sioux Falls for supporting faculty scholarship and for providing a clear summer schedule in which to bring this work to a conclusion.

Sioux Falls, South Dakota, 31 August 2006

John Lierman

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Paradigms and Possibilities in the Study of John's Gospel

DAVID WENHAM
Oxford

1. Introduction

There is nothing new under the sun. Moreover, “of making many books there is no end. Much study is a weariness of the flesh” (Eccl. 11:12). Dangers of pointlessness, fruitlessness, and fatigue notwithstanding, the author of Ecclesiastes knew there was a place for new books – he wrote one – and for new thinking. In his day, as in ours, there were old platitudes to be challenged, new questions to be asked, new ideas to be heard. He wrote accordingly. We still need such books.

But do we need them in the ancient discipline of biblical studies? Biblical scholars are often asked how there can still be anything new to say about the Bible. Are scholars playing games, seeking originality where originality is no longer possible? Or is biblical scholarship perhaps really a matter of vanity (of vanities)? This certainly seems possible. Scholars regularly talk to other scholars about scholarly issues in a language that only other scholars can understand. A few mainly way-out and exotic theories make the headlines, and occasionally even make money, but the great bulk of scholarship has little obvious impact in the wider world.

In reply, the scholar insists that if the Bible has not changed, its readers have. New questions and perspectives appear on the agenda: liberation theology, for example, has helped us look at the Bible with new eyes, as have feminism, the charismatic movement, narrative approaches to literature, and post-modernism. Some of these perspectives are more esoteric than others, but even the ones that target mainly the academic mind eventually trickle out of the academy. At the same time, some new developments are mainly popular, for example the recent renewed interest in the apocryphal gospels, with Dan Brown's fictional *Da Vinci Code* raising all sorts of questions in people's minds.

There are, of course, dangers with scholarship that responds to new agendas. One in particular is that of remaking theology to suit ourselves (as Albert Schweitzer famously observed apropos of the quest for the historical Jesus); to put it more starkly, we may end up making God in our

own image. That broad and attractive road leads to disaster, but the ease with which the turn may be taken is no reason to disengage from modern questions; it is a reason to be careful how we build our theology. It is a reason for seeking to let God's word speak into our situation, and for being open to having our views corrected and changed.

But if one danger is of responding to today's agendas by allowing them to control us, another danger is of responding purely negatively and defensively, rather than appreciating the illumination that occurs when new questions are asked. New approaches may be positively illuminating and it always remains the case that "the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word."¹

This volume looks at questions, old and new, to do with John's Gospel. It arose out of the Cambridge Tyndale Fellowship New Testament Study Group, 2002, where various scholars, nearly all of them experts in one way or another on the Fourth Gospel, presented findings on key issues. These papers are presented here not as agreed findings of the conference (we did not always agree), but as stimuli to debate and discussion of the Gospel. They question some widely held views, and utilize some modern approaches. In this essay I draw attention to some questions in which old scholarly approaches and attitudes may have hampered our understanding of John's Gospel and where new thinking seems called for.

2. Questions of History and Sources

The history versus theology question remains as interesting and important as ever, so far as John's Gospel is concerned. The Gospel clearly claims (a) to be based on the witness of "the beloved disciple," and (b) that its account of Jesus' signs is true and believable witness (20:31). Maurice Casey, however, in *Is John's Gospel True?*, answers his own question with a resounding "No!," finding the Gospel reprehensibly unhistorical and anti-Semitic to boot.² Other scholars are more circumspect, but many agree that the Gospel is only remotely connected to the beloved disciple and that the signs, such as the raising of Lazarus, while powerfully expressive of John's theology, have little basis in history. And granted, the absence of the raising of the Lazarus from all the Synoptic Gospels is remarkable, as

¹ To quote the seventeenth-century John Robinson.

² London: Routledge, 1996.

is the failure of the Synoptics to record any of the famous Johannine “I am” sayings of Jesus.³

However, the case against John as historian is not closed. Major studies have found in favour of John, e.g. works by J. A. T. Robinson⁴ and Craig Blomberg,⁵ and this volume contributes further work on this question, including Peter Ensor’s wide-ranging study and Richard Bauckham’s focussed discussion of Jewish Messianism in relation to John. Of course, John is a theologian, writing in his own style and serving his own agenda, but the gap between the portrait of Jesus in John and the Synoptic Gospels is nothing like as large as scholars sometimes make out.⁶

The relationship of John to the Synoptics is tricky.⁷ The consensus has been that John’s Gospel was the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written (this seems to have been the view of the early church), and the tendency has been to conclude that John’s is the least historically useful of the Gospels. However, scholarly consensuses are not always right and indeed can be very misleading. In this case, it is a dangerous assumption that posteriority in date means inferiority in history.

As for the view that John’s Gospel was the last to be written, Andrew Gregory puts an interesting cat among the pigeons in his contribution to this volume, when he takes up the idea of several recent scholars that the author of Luke’s Gospel knew and used John. This demotion of the “Fourth” Gospel to third position may or may not be right, as Andrew observes; but the proposal opens up the question of John’s sources. Scholars, when noting parallels between John and Luke, have tended to assume that John has borrowed from Luke. But that may not be the case at all: it could be that Luke knew John, e.g. in Luke 24:12, which Gregory discusses, or that Luke and John have drawn on a common tradition.

This last possibility should be taken very seriously. James Dunn has recently, and rightly, invited scholars to realise that the “default setting” for Jesus traditions was oral transmission, and that purely literary hypotheses of Gospel relationships, attractively simple, are also deceptively simple.⁸

³ Gerd Lüdemann cites the absence of the “I am” sayings from the Synoptic Gospels as one of the most obvious proofs of the unhistorical nature of the Gospels, *Jesus After 2000 Years* (London: SCM, 2000), 1.

⁴ *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985).

⁵ *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel* (Leicester: IVP, 2001).

⁶ Witness, for example, the extraordinarily “Johannine thunderbolt” of Matt. 11:25–27 || Luke 10:21–22 or the “I am”-like sentiments of Matt. 7:13, 14.

⁷ For one major rethink see Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2006).

⁸ “Altering the Default Setting: Re-envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Traditions,” *NTS* 49 (2003): 139–175; see also his major work, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), e.g. 192–254.

It is as certain as most scholarly findings that Matthew and Luke, if they used Mark, also knew many of the “Markan” traditions through oral tradition, and it is similarly likely that Luke and John knew common oral traditions.

This view draws support from Paul, since he shows signs of knowing “Johannine” tradition (i.e., traditions of Jesus, presumably oral as known to Paul, attested in John’s Gospel). A most intriguing case of this is his injunction in Gal. 6:2: “bear one another’s burdens, and so you will fulfil the law of Christ.” Scholars have wrestled long and hard with what Paul meant by “the law of Christ” in a letter where he emphasizes freedom from the law. Few note that John’s Jesus similarly sums up his demands in one command and that it too has to do with Christians relating to “one another”: “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love among one another” (John 13:34). An attractive possibility is that Paul and John have the same Jesus tradition in mind.

An alternative identifies the “law of Christ” in Gal. 6:2 with the command, “love your neighbour as yourself,” which Paul specifically highlights a little earlier, in Gal. 5:14: “for the whole law has been fulfilled in one word, in ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’” Two considerations weigh against this identification: (1) “love your neighbour as yourself” is a law of Moses, endorsed by Jesus but not very obviously describable as “the law of Christ.”⁹ (2) “Love your neighbour” in Gal. 5:14 is not the primary command in its context, but is quoted in support of what Paul says in Gal. 5:13:

5:13 Serve/be slaves to one another in love,

5:14 for the whole law has been fulfilled in one word, in “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Paul actually expresses the law of Christ in 5:13, in the demand to relate to one another in love, and this is what he glosses in 6:2 as “bear one another’s burdens.” Galatians 5:14 connects that law of Christ to the thrust of the law of Moses, crystallized in Moses’ own command to love one’s neighbour, but the law of Christ itself, in Gal. 5:13, more closely parallels the “new command” of Jesus in John 13:34 than the greatest commandment of Moses. Moreover, Gal. 5:13 links loving to serving, and this makes the connection to the Jesus tradition all the stronger, since in John 13:34 the command to love one another comes shortly after a supremely vivid display of servanthood: Jesus washing the disciples’ feet. His call

⁹ James calls it the “royal law” (2:8), perhaps because of its importance in Jesus’ kingdom teaching.

for mutual love is a call for them to behave in that way toward each other.¹⁰

It intrigues me that scholars have not connected the Pauline and Johannine texts.¹¹ But this probably illustrates the way that consensus can mislead. Scholars have seen John as the latest and least historical Gospel, and so when John is the only Gospel to ascribe the command “love one another” to Jesus – the synoptic Jesus endorses love of neighbour and love of enemies, but not love of “one another” – scholars have assumed that this is Johannine teaching rather than dominical, and therefore long post-dates Paul, all the more so given that it has been thought to fit in with the sectarian (post-Jamnian) attitude that scholars have detected in John’s Gospel. It hardly crosses the mind that one of the earliest of Paul’s letters, written perhaps forty or fifty years before John’s Gospel, might attest a “Johannine” tradition of Jesus. However, the unthinkable often needs thinking.¹²

3. Questions of Context, Corpus, and Community

But if there is reason to revisit scholarly views of the origins of John’s traditions, there is also reason to revisit some of the commonly held views about the context out of which the author of John’s gospel came.

¹⁰ The emphasis on servanthood is, of course, not unique to John, but is well-attested in the Synoptic tradition; for example, in Mark 10:43 Jesus comments: “whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (cf. Matt. 23:11, 12). It turns out that, though the actual expression “love one another” is not found in the Synoptics, the idea is there. The Johannine tradition is not out on a limb, but has a basis in the earliest Jesus tradition.

¹¹ But see R. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 288. Generally on John and Paul see the summary comments by S. S. Smalley in his *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), 193–95; he helpfully quotes William Sanday on connections between Pauline and Johannine traditions via the “main underground.”

¹² Another example of early “Johannine” tradition is, arguably, Matt. 11:25–27 || Luke 10:21–22: scholars cheerfully call the verses in Matthew and Luke a “Johannine thunderbolt” in Q, and they are indeed very Johannine, with their emphasis on revelation (to disciples not others), on the Father and the Son, on “knowing” Father and Son. But what is such a striking Johannine sounding passage doing in Q, which many regard as one of the earliest strands of Gospel tradition? The answer can only be that it is not a thunderbolt, but evidence that Johannine ideas, even Johannine Christology, have their roots in some of the earliest Jesus traditions of which we have knowledge. (If Q did not exist, as I am inclined to think, the saying in Matthew and Luke still shows that Johannine ideas and language are not unique to John. See my discussion in *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 129–36, including my comments about Paul’s possible knowledge of the “Q” tradition.)

Many once judged John's Gospel a strongly Hellenistic gospel, and this was thought to explain the distinctiveness of John by comparison with the Synoptics. Scholars have largely discarded this view now, and in this volume both Bauckham's article and the contrasting contribution by John Lierman on the possible Mosaic background to John's Christology lend weight to the view that John's Gospel is thoroughly Jewish in its orientation.¹³

The most widely held view about John's Jewish context is that the Gospel probably came out of a crisis created for Christians by the Council of Jamnia, supposedly held around A.D. 90.¹⁴ This hypothesis fits quite well the traditional dating of the Gospel, based on evidence from the early Church, late in the first century. However, it is another example of a broad, yet precariously based, consensus. In this volume, Andreas Köstenberger lends his weight to those questioning the view; he sees the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 as the background to John rather than Jamnia, hence John's emphasis on Jesus as the fulfilment and replacement of Temple festivals and associated Jewish institutions.

Although the case for reading John in a Jewish context is strong, scholarly pendulums frequently swing too far and we should not fall into the old trap of exaggerating the gap between things Jewish and things Hellenistic. Judaism and Christianity operated in a Greco-Roman world, and were influenced by it. So, no doubt, was the author of John. In his contribution to this volume, Bill Salier offers us an interesting reading of John in the context of the first century Roman emperor cult. It is difficult to be sure how important the cult and the issues it raised may have been for the author of the Gospel but, as Bill brings out, the choice between Jesus and the emperor is quite explicit in 19:12–15.

Another suggestion, less widely discussed, for the context of John's Gospel is that the Gospel addresses the same situation as 1 John: 1 John 2:18–19 refers to a split in the church, in which ἀντιχριστοί left the church, apparently claiming to be Spirit-inspired, and were undermining people's faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God come in the flesh (4:2–4). An appropriate response to such a crisis might have been a Gospel emphasizing Jesus as the Christ the Son of God (John 20:31), come in the

¹³ Compare also J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), bringing out parallels between John and the Qumran texts, and Cor Bennema, *The Power of Saving Wisdom* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2002), on John and the Jewish wisdom tradition. To recognize John as Jewish is not to deny the influence of Hellenism on him or his community or his Gospel.

¹⁴ For the classic exposition of this view see J. L. Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

flesh (1:12), and urging people not to break away but to “abide” in Christ and to “love one another.”

A difficulty with this explanation is that it is widely accepted that the Gospel preceded the epistle (another scholarly consensus), and indeed that the Gospel helped provoke the crisis that called forth the epistle: the “naïve docetism” of John’s Gospel (to use Ernst Käsemann’s famous expression) led some to espouse a docetic christology and thus leave the church.¹⁵ However, this view raises all sorts of difficult questions, e.g. about the heresy or heresies referred to in 1 John – were the false prophets docetic? – and about the Gospel – would it have encouraged docetism? The Gospel portrays a Jesus with divine authority, but also one who became flesh, shared human emotions, and died at great cost to himself. A key element of the scholarly consensus that John’s Gospel is “docetizing” is another “consensus” that it was so regarded by the Church Fathers. Chuck Hill’s contribution to this volume questions the consensus that John’s Gospel was perceived as Gnostic by either the orthodox or the Gnostics in the time of the early church.

These questions about the Gospel and the epistle(s) raise wider questions about the Johannine corpus and “community.” Is the common view that the first epistle of John was written by someone different from the author of the Gospel, despite the close similarities, persuasive? If not, what does this tell us about the Gospel and its author? Was the Gospel in fact written first?¹⁶ And how does the book of Revelation fit in, if at all?¹⁷ As for the “Johannine community,” was there such a thing, and, if so, what can we say about it?¹⁸

¹⁵ *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968), e.g. p. 26.

¹⁶ Although many scholars date the epistle after the Gospel, some argue the opposite view. W. G. Kümmel’s opinion was that the “attempts to prove 1 John earlier ... or later ... than John are not convincing,” *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1966), 312. Even if the Gospel preceded the epistle, it may be that the sorts of divisions the epistle describes broke out before the writing of the Gospel.

¹⁷ See S. S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John: A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Apocalypse* (London: SPCK, 2005), 4–5 for brief but particularly interesting comments.

¹⁸ Reconstructions of communities behind the Gospels are often speculative, notably so when it comes to something like the “Q” community, but scholars love to attempt it. The argument of Richard Bauckham and others in *The Gospel for All Christians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998) that the evangelists were writing for all Christians, not just for particular communities, is important, though the Johannine epistles show that there were particular churches somehow linked with “John.”

4. Community, Eternal Life, and Sacraments

John's Gospel has sometimes been seen as individualistic, offering eternal life to individuals on the basis of faith, and not having much place for church and community. This has been seen as reflecting John's supposed Greek outlook: the synoptic and Jewish idea of the kingdom of God approaching on a "horizontal" time line has been eclipsed in John by a vertical, personal and realised eschatology associated with the term "eternal life." However, as we have seen, John is now recognized as thoroughly Jewish, and his view of eternal life is not individual but communal, being defined in 17:3 as "knowing the Father and the Son." The knowledge here is not Gnostic enlightenment, but relational knowledge: it is being brought into the circle of the divine love (of the Father and the Son), indeed into the divine family, with love and unity as its hallmark (14:23, 13:34, 17:22, 23). John's Gospel in fact has a very strong community emphasis. The work of Jesus is to gather God's scattered people into one flock (11:52, 10:16). The commands of Jesus to his disciples are "to love one another" and to "abide in me" (13:34, 15:4). Both commands are commands to individuals, but both are commands about community and about maintaining the unity which is eternal life.¹⁹

Individualistic readings of John have probably appealed particularly to Protestants and evangelicals, who consciously or unconsciously have been very wary of any "early Catholicism." This wariness – or prejudice – has surely been a factor in some popular non-sacramental readings of John. Whether it is Bultmann's conclusion that the words in 6:51–58 about the flesh and blood of Jesus are not part of the original Gospel, or the common evangelical reluctance to see the "water" of John 3:5 as baptismal, anti-sacramental exegesis of John arguably owes more to commentators' anxieties about sacramentalism than it does to sensible reading of the text.

When Jesus says in John 3:5 that "unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God," it is amazing that anyone sees the water as anything but baptismal. It is amazing given (a) the emphasis on baptism in John chapters 1–4, especially in chapters 3 and 4 where Jesus and his disciples are baptizing and thus "making disciples" (4:1), and (b) the evidence elsewhere in the New Testament that baptism was the normative way of becoming a Christian and that it was associated with the giving of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 12:12). The alternative suggestion, that the "water" may be a reference to natural birth (whether to the waters of the womb or to male semen), is quite unpersuasive by comparison. As for the argument that Ezek. 36:22–28, with its reference to cleansing water, is a likely background to John 3:5, this is entirely plausi-

¹⁹ In 1 John those who went out failed to "remain/abide" (2:19).

ble, but the Ezekiel text is a likely background not just for John but for the whole baptist movement, which John chapters 1–4 describes.

Perhaps the most persuasive objection to the baptismal interpretation of John 3:5 is that John's Gospel emphatically and consistently says that it is by believing in Jesus that people have eternal life (e.g. 3:16); an additional sacramental requirement seems out of keeping. But this is to misunderstand baptism in the New Testament church; the evidence we have suggests that baptism was part of conversion, not an additional rite; to be more precise, baptism was the way people put their faith in Jesus. The response to "what must I do to be saved?" was not "pray a prayer of commitment in your heart" (as in much modern evangelical evangelistic practice), but "repent and be baptized" (Acts 2:38). Baptism involved believing in the heart and confessing with the lips ("Jesus is Lord") and going down into the water (Rom. 10:10). We cannot prove that this was John's understanding, but 4:1 suggests that baptism was the way people became disciples of Jesus.²⁰ So Nicodemus is challenged not just to an internal decision about Jesus, but to join the disciples of Jesus through the outward act of baptism.²¹

Something similar must be said about 6:51–58, where Jesus says "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you." Protestant and evangelical anxieties lead some to deny this to be an original part of John's text, and others to deny that the words are eucharistic. But it again seems almost unthinkable that the words could have been heard in any other way in the church, if it had the Eucharist as its central act of worship. It is quite clear that in John chapter 6 faith receives Jesus as the bread of life, and 6:51–58 specifically call for faith in the death of Jesus (see 6:51 on the giving of Jesus' flesh). But how does the follower of Jesus express his or her faith in the Lord's death? Not just by meditation on the cross, but through the Lord's Supper, in which the Lord's death is "received" in the way the Lord commanded. We cannot prove that this was John's understanding, but it is clear how important the Eucharist was for the authors, and presumably for the churches, of Matthew, Mark, Luke and the letters of Paul; it is probable that it was just as important for John.²² If so, John's theology and community turn out to be

²⁰ The modern marriage ceremony may provide something of a parallel to ancient baptism, in that it involves the heart, words, actions, commitment and a decisive change of status and life.

²¹ See D. Rensberger, *Overcoming the World* (London: SPCK, 1989), 66–81, on baptism and Eucharist in John.

²² We must be cautious of concluding that, because John does not refer to the Eucharist elsewhere, it was not important to him. Paul only refers to the Eucharist in 1 Corinthians; if we did not have that letter, we might conclude that Paul and his churches were ignorant of the Eucharist. First Corinthians makes clear, however, that the Eucha-

less idiosyncratic, less out on a limb than is sometimes imagined; they are part of the Christian mainstream.

5. Narrative Readings of John's Gospel

To locate John in the Christian mainstream is not to deny the Gospel's distinctiveness, and an important part of that distinctiveness lies in the way the story of Jesus is narrated. One of the major gains in Gospel studies in recent years has been the discovery – or rediscovery – of the Gospels as stories. Mark's Gospel is not just a collection of pericopae, but a carefully crafted work leading us first to Peter's confession of Jesus as Christ in 8:29 and then to the cross and the centurion's confession of Jesus as Son of God. Matthew too has a well-marked structure with its five discourses and its climax in 28:16–20. The author of Luke tells a story in two volumes, the Gospel starting and ending in Jerusalem, and Acts taking us to Rome. The Synoptic Gospels do not just string pearls, they narrate.

John's story starts with the magnificent Logos prologue, and ends (if chapter 21 is a sort of appendix) with Thomas coming to faith, confessing Jesus as "my Lord and my God," and Jesus commending such faith to the reader (20:24–31). Richard Burridge correctly identifies the bookends of the Gospel narratives as highly significant, an indubitably apt observation when the bookends are as explicitly theological as John's are.²³ Yet the narrative between the bookends can be equally meaning-full, and precisely as narrative. Exploring this is one of the particular contributions of this volume, with several of our authors fruitfully adopting narrative approaches. Steve Motyer comments on different narrative approaches before offering his own reading of the narrative of John 1–5; Gary Burge relates the themes of understanding, misunderstanding and revelation to the church's charismatic experience of the Spirit; Gabi Renz looks at the subtlety and ambiguity of John's portrayal of Nicodemus; and Mark Stibbe examines the narrative portrayal of God the Father.

6. John 13 as Literary, Theological, and Historical Text

Narrative and other literary readings can greatly illuminate the reading of John's Gospel. For example, scholars sometimes speak of John's Gospel as a two-level drama, and, although that rubric is sometimes used in ways

rist was a tradition that Paul passed on as of great importance and that it was central not peripheral to the Pauline churches.

²³ *Four Gospels One Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1994).

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