

Lesson 2

Gospel of John



From Disciples of John the Baptist to Disciples of the Messiah

Early World	Patriarchs	Egypt & Exodus	Desert Wanderings	Conquest & Judges	Royal Kingdom	Divided Kingdom	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Messianic Fulfillment	The Church

Introduction

In the latter part of the first chapter of John's Gospel, the action gets under way on the banks of the Jordan River where John the Baptist is confronted by a delegation of Jewish religious leaders from Jerusalem who are seeking to understand him and his mission. John the Baptist, steeped as he was in Old Testament teaching, makes it clear that he considers his work to be the fulfillment of Isaian prophecy—to prepare the way of the Lord (*Isa 40:3*). For John the Evangelist, writing his Gospel some years after these events took place, the connection between Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment is even more pronounced. It's almost impossible for modern readers to grasp the significance of salvation history without solid knowledge of the way that the New Testament is deeply rooted in the soil of the Old. An understanding of the testimony of John the Baptist demands familiarization with Divine Revelation as it first was given to the Jewish people.

John 1:19-51

1 ¹⁹And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²²They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." ²⁸This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

²⁹**The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"** ³⁰This is he of whom I said,

‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.’ ³¹I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.” ³²And John bore witness, “I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. ³³I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ ³⁴And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”

³⁵The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples; ³⁶and he looked at Jesus as he walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” ³⁷The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. ³⁸Jesus turned, and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” And they said to him, “Rabbi” (which means Teacher), “where are you staying?” ³⁹He said to them, “Come and see.” They came and saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. ⁴⁰One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. ⁴¹He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which means Christ). ⁴²He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas” (which means Peter).

⁴³The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. And he found Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” ⁴⁴Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. ⁴⁵Philip found Nathanael, and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” ⁴⁶Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” ⁴⁷Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” ⁴⁹Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” ⁵⁰Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these.” ⁵¹And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”

[Please Note: One of the best ways to meditate on God’s Word is through memorization. A suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the Scripture text, or you may choose a verse of your own.]

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Study Questions

It's best to read all of **John 1:19-51** and *Points to Ponder* before responding to the study questions. To aid in discussion, please note Scripture verses where you find your responses.

The Testimony of John the Baptist

John 1:19-28

1. Why would the Jewish religious authorities from Jerusalem ask John the Baptist if he were Elijah (see *Mal* 4:5-6 [*Mal* 3:23-24 in the New American Bible])? How can the Baptist deny that he's Elijah when Jesus specifically says John the Baptist is the Elijah who is to come (see *Mt* 11:13-14)? What do the Jewish religious authorities mean by asking John the Baptist if he's "the prophet" (see *Deut* 18:15-18 and *CCC* 523)?
2. John the Baptist quotes the prophet Isaiah. Read Isaiah chapter 40, and explain what this passage means in its original context. What does it suggest about John the Baptist's understanding of his own mission?

The Baptism of John

John 1:29-34

3. Read Ezekiel 36:25-28. What significance does the sacrament of Baptism have in light of this passage (see *CCC* 1262)?
4. Are the baptisms performed by John the Baptist sacramental? How does the Baptist view his relationship to the one "who comes after" him? John the Baptist baptizes "with water." What is the difference between this and Baptism "with the Holy Spirit" (see *CCC* 537)?

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5. **The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”** In John 1:29 (our suggested memory verse), John the Baptist refers to Jesus as the “Lamb of God.” What is the significance of the lamb in the Old Testament (see *CCC* 608)? How does Jesus fulfill this idea?
6. Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins. The Baptist didn’t “know” Jesus because he didn’t recognize Jesus as Messiah until God the Father revealed it to him. In John 1:31, what does the Baptist see as his own purpose in life?

John the Baptist’s Disciples Follow Jesus

John 1:35-42

7. In John 1:35-37, who are the two disciples standing with John the Baptist? Why does the Evangelist reiterate John the Baptist’s acclamation of Jesus as “Lamb of God”?
8. The Evangelist translates such Hebrew titles and names as “Rabbi,” “Messiah,” and “Cephas” because he’s writing in Greek to a mostly Gentile audience. In biblical tradition, a name change indicates a change in identity, especially regarding the person’s relationship to God. An example of this is when Jacob’s name is changed to Israel in Genesis 32:28. What do the names “Cephas” and “Peter” mean (see *Mt* 16:18)?

Jesus Goes to Galilee

John 1:43-51

9. In John 1:45, what does Philip imply when he tells Nathanael: “We have found him”? What is significant about the fact that “Moses in the law and also the prophets” wrote about Jesus?

10. What is Nathanael’s initial opinion of Jesus? The word “Nazareth” sounds like the Hebrew word for “branch.” How does this detail relate to the prophecies of Isaiah and Zechariah (see *Isa* 11:1-3a and *Zech* 3:8-10)? The exchange between Jesus and Nathanael assumes readers are familiar with these and other Old Testament images and passages. How do these particular passages account for Nathanael’s reaction to Jesus?

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are designed to help you reflect further about how ideas in John 1:19-51 might apply to your own life:

1. Simon Peter heard about Jesus through Andrew, who heard about Jesus through John the Baptist. In what ways has news of Jesus come to you through other people? What one person in your life has been most influential in teaching you about Jesus Christ?
2. Nathanael had an “ah-ha!” moment when he met Jesus. Moments of revelation can occur suddenly, as if out of thin air, or they can grow from the soil of previous thought, prayer and experience, as Nathanael’s appears to have done. What types of spiritual preparation might have laid the foundation for some of the more important revelations in your life?

Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder—*John 1:19-51*

A Basic Rule of Scriptural Interpretation

If a modern writer quips: “Use the force, Luke,” readers don’t simply see four words. Instead, they’re reminded of the entire *Star Wars* film saga and the huge number of associations it calls to mind. Similarly, if somebody says, “Oh, say, can you see?” that immediately calls to mind “The Star-Spangled Banner” and with it a host of images having to do with American patriotism. Literary and cultural references are like plants with deep and complex root systems. Making a brief quotation or allusion to something that’s familiar to many people acts as a literary short cut that instantly can connect with as many as a dozen or more other ideas and images.

The same principle adheres with biblical quotations. New Testament writers (and even many modern secular authors) use Old Testament references as their cultural common coin. The early Christian audience for whom the New Testament was written knew the Old Testament as well as a modern American audience knows *Star Wars* or the “The Star-Spangled Banner.” The apostle

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John's audience was steeped in Old Testament teaching. Every reference exists in the context of a complex treasure trove of biblical passages and images. Just as a modern writer would expect readers immediately to recall the "The Star-Spangled Banner" based on a few words, or to recognize the whole *Star Wars* universe in the glimpse of a light saber or the ominous sound of Darth Vader's breathing, so the authors of Scripture knew—and knew their audience would recognize—the much larger context surrounding any given Old Testament quote or allusion.

When John the Baptist describes himself as "the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord'" (*Isa 40:3*), he knows—and knows that his listeners know—not just the particular passage he's citing but the entire final section of Isaiah. The Baptist expects his audience to be familiar with the circumstances surrounding these original prophecies—including restoration of Judah after the Babylonian Captivity and the Israelites' call to be a witness to the nations. John the Baptist fully anticipates that his listeners will recognize how he's applying imagery used by Isaiah almost six centuries earlier. In order to fully understand the Evangelist's meaning 2,000 years after he was writing, modern readers need to have the same knowledge of messianic prophecies that his original readers did. This basic rule of thumb applies to every Scripture citation in the New Testament and will govern the way Old Testament references are viewed throughout the fourth Gospel.

John the Forerunner

The Old Testament preserves a prophetic tradition that looks forward to the appearance of important figures in salvation history. For example, God tells the people of Israel that he'll raise up for them a prophet like Moses from among their brethren, and he promises: "I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (*Deut 18:18*). Other prophets say that the messianic age, sometimes referred to as the day of the LORD, will be immediately preceded by the appearance of a forerunner acting as herald of this event. Malachi, speaking for God, tells his audience: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse" (*Mal 4:5-6*).

It's for this reason that the Jewish religious leaders of Jerusalem send a delegation to John the Baptist in order to learn more about him and his mission. Jews didn't think Moses had predicted that a long string of prophets just like him would arise after his death. Rather, the Jews saw the entire line of Old Testament prophets pointing toward and prefiguring some final and ultimate prophet. This is why they ask John the Baptist: "Are you the prophet?" The Baptist denies that he is, and his denial is truthful because it's Jesus, not John the Baptist, who's the ultimate prophet (just as Jesus also is the ultimate king and the ultimate high priest). Although the Baptist denies that he himself is Elijah, Jesus asserts that John the Baptist is, in a sense, Elijah (*Mt 11:13-14*). There's an explanation for this apparent contradiction. The Jewish religious leaders were expecting Elijah to return from heaven at any time—the crowds who stood at the foot of the cross watching Jesus' crucifixion were expecting much the same thing (*Mt 27:47*). John the Baptist clearly indicates that he and Elijah aren't the same person. Jesus is equally emphatic that the Baptist, like Elisha in 2 Kings 2:9-14, speaks in the Spirit and power of Elijah in order to call the people of Israel back to the covenant of the Old Testament.

After John the Baptist establishes who he isn't, he establishes who he is. He answers the Jewish religious authorities by quoting the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the LORD,' as the prophet Isaiah said" (*Isa* 40:3). The collection of writings in Isaiah 40—66 is very different from the writings in Isaiah 1—39. Early chapters of Isaiah, sometimes referred to as the Book of Judgment, contain hair-raising pronouncements given by God through the prophet to both Judah and Israel. Written during the years leading up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C, these dire judgments give way to chapters 40 through 66 of Isaiah, often called the Book of Consolations. This latter section of Isaiah is written in a comforting tone to console the exiles, and it anticipates their eventual return from the Babylonian Captivity.

John the Baptist expects his audience to know the circumstances surrounding the writing of Isaiah 40—66. He also expects them to understand his own mission as the ultimate fulfillment of what was provisionally fulfilled by the prophet Isaiah in comforting the exiles returning from Babylon. The Baptist declares himself to be the one to finally and fully inaugurate the promises made by Isaiah. The Baptist is telling the religious authorities at Jerusalem that the people of Israel, downtrodden for 600 years, finally are to be granted the salvation promised by the Isaian prophecies. That salvation won't consist merely of the return of exiles to Jerusalem, the construction of a Temple, or the nation's reunification under the political rule of a Davidic king. Rather, John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the prophets before Jesus, indicates that all these Old Testament events foreshadowed the ultimate liberation, restoration, and consolation to be brought about by the promised Messiah—and that Messiah is now at hand in the person of Jesus.

The Baptism of John

John the Baptist preaches a baptism "of repentance." Baptism as a gesture of cleansing would have been viewed by the Baptist's audience in its Old Testament context. John the Baptist understands that a particular part of his mission is to help the Israelites fulfill their call to be a "light for the nations." Almost six centuries after Isaiah sounded this call, the people of Israel still are failing in their mission from God—they need cleansing as much as the Gentiles do.

For this reason, baptism by John constitutes both an invitation to forgiveness and an indictment for sin. This two-pronged connection isn't lost on the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jerusalem. They, of all people, are in a position to recognize the integral link between Baptism and the New Covenant foretold by the prophets. That's precisely why they ask John the Baptist: "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" At the back of this question is the awareness (shared by John the Baptist, the Pharisees, Jesus, and the Evangelist) of this important Old Testament prophecy from Ezekiel:

"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the

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countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. You shall dwell in the land which I gave to your fathers; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God. And I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses; and I will summon the grain and make it abundant and lay no famine upon you. I will make the fruit of the tree and the increase of the field abundant, that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine among the nations. Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good; and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominable deeds. It is not for your sake that I will act, says the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel” (*Ezek 36:22-32*).

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God condemned the people of Israel for presuming upon the Old Covenant while imitating the Gentiles to whom they were supposed to bear witness. It was the worst of all possible positions for the Israelites to have chosen. They assumed that because they were God’s chosen people they could do what they wanted with impunity, even while they were abandoning the Old Covenant in order to worship the false gods of the Canaanites. Ezekiel announces that God intends to save the Israelites for his *own* glory, not because of theirs, and the prophet speaks of “sprinkling clean water” on the people. Washing with water was therefore a recognized sign that was to precede the New Covenant. John the Baptist uses this sign as an indictment of the people of Israel and a warning that the nation still needs cleansing because it’s just as sinful as the Gentile nations to whom it’s to bear witness. Ezekiel’s proclamation that “you shall be clean” prophesies that sacramental Baptism would do what circumcision couldn’t. The baptisms performed by John aren’t sacramental but a prefiguration of the fullness of the sacrament of Baptism to be inaugurated by the risen Jesus (*Mt 28:19*).

John the Baptist also connects the images of sprinkling and baptism with the Lamb of God. This important link recalls Moses sealing the covenant between God and Israel by sprinkling the blood of the Passover Lamb on the people (*Heb 9:19-22*). It also recalls Isaian writings, in which the “suffering servant,” a messianic figure, will “sprinkle many nations” (*Isa 52:15*—Douay-Rheims translation) and bear the sins of the people “like a lamb” (*Isa 53:7*).

It’s this Lamb of God whom John the Baptist now bids his disciples to follow. The Evangelist repeatedly emphasizes Jesus’ superior role, probably for the benefit of the Baptist’s disciples who, like Apollos and others in the area of Ephesus at the time the Gospel was being written (*Acts 19:1-5*), have only heard part of the good news of Jesus and need to be educated about the one whom John the Baptist came to herald.

Can Anything Good Come Out of Nazareth?

The apostle John tells readers that he's chosen to narrate only a very small number of sayings and deeds from the life of Jesus (*Jn* 21:25). He's selected his material carefully and left nothing to chance. Knowing this, it's worth asking why the peculiar scene involving the call of Nathanael is included in the fourth Gospel (*Jn* 1:43-51). It's also worth asking why on earth Nathanael, after sneering at the idea of a prophet from Nazareth, reacts to a seemingly trivial remark by Jesus ("I saw you under the fig tree") with such an astonishing display of faith ("Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"). To understand, it's important to remember that the Evangelist expects readers to have a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament and to be able to "connect the dots" between the events he's relating and the quotations at work in this passage.

First, Jesus refers to Nathanael as "an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." This is a subtle allusion to the patriarch Jacob—whose very name means "deceiver" or "supplanter" and whose life was characterized by deceit, guile, and guilt. Jacob was renamed "Israel" (*Gen* 32:28), and his descendants became the 12 tribes of Israel.

Second, "Nazareth" contains a pun on the Hebrew word *netzer*, which means "branch," one of the most important and well-known titles for the Messiah in the Old Testament. Isaiah, for example, prophesies: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots" (*Isa* 11:1). Branch imagery suffuses the third through sixth chapters of Zechariah. Indeed, Zechariah is of particular importance because of a figure named Yeshua who appears in the third chapter as the symbol of the Hebrew nation. A priest among the returning exiles, Yeshua is enthroned as a king. Yeshua (a name that can be translated "Joshua" or "Jesus") is cleansed and re-clothed in the uniform of a priest, and then told: "Hear now, O Joshua the high priest, you and your friends who sit before you, for they are men of good omen: behold, I will bring my servant the Branch. For behold, upon the stone which I have set before Joshua, upon a single stone with seven facets, I will engrave its inscription, says the LORD of hosts, and I will remove the guilt of this land in a single day. In that day, says the LORD of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor under his vine and under his fig tree" (*Zech* 3:8-10).

Centuries later, John's Gospel focuses on the story of a man named Yeshua from Branch town who speaks to "Israel" in a way that clearly alludes to this famous prophetic text. The Evangelist's audience would have known all about the promised removal of guilt in a single day and about the long-awaited messianic age when everyone would invite his neighbor "under his vine and under his fig tree." Under a fig tree was considered the ideal spot for a pious Jew to meditate on the Torah and to contemplate the words of the prophets. This may well have been what Nathanael was in fact doing under the fig tree.

In a moment of divine illumination, Nathanael asks: "Can anything good come from Branchville?" "Yeshua" stands before him and declares Nathanael one "in whom is no guile," and Nathanael, the one who was "under the fig tree," suddenly sees the connection between all this and the prophetic passages in Isaiah and Zechariah. Nathanael's knowledge of the Scriptures is illuminated by a divine gift of faith, and he recognizes who this "Yeshua" really is. Through his faith, Nathanael knows that the historical "Yeshua" of whom Zechariah wrote was a type or foreshadowing of the promised Messiah—the very Jesus of Nazareth standing before him.

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Scholars point out that Jewish liturgy, like Catholic worship, emphasizes different portions of Scripture at different times of the year. Just before the important religious holiday of the Passover (which is when John the Evangelist sets this story in his Gospel), the Jewish lectionary focused on readings from Zechariah. It would have been quite natural for Nathanael to have been meditating on precisely these readings when he met Jesus. In short, Nathanael's divine insight didn't happen in a vacuum but was built on his study of and meditation upon Scripture.

Catechism Connections

- To learn more about John the Baptist's role as the immediate precursor (or forerunner) of the Messiah, especially how the Baptist went before Jesus "in the spirit and power of Elijah," see CCC 523.
- For further information about Jesus' own Baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist, see CCC 536.
- CCC 608 and 719 explain how John the Baptist was given a divine understanding of his own special role in relationship to Jesus as Messiah.

Rome to Home

According to the teaching of Pope John Paul II, John's Gospel points out the way that the redemptive suffering of Jesus accomplishes a new unity and dignity for humans as adopted children of God.

The foundation of the community willed by God in his eternal plan is the work of redemption, which frees human beings from the division and dispersion produced by sin. The Bible teaches us that sin is the source of hostility and violence, as appears in the fratricide committed by Cain (*Gen 4:8*), and as that fragmentation of nations which in its negative aspects finds its paradigmatic expression in the account of the tower of Babel.

God willed to free humanity from this state through Christ. This saving will of his seems to echo in Caiaphas' speech to the Sanhedrin, in regard to which John the Evangelist writes: "Since he was high priest for that year, he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation, and not only for the nation, but also to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (*Jn 11:51-52*). Caiaphas said these words in order to convince the Sanhedrin to condemn Jesus to death, on the pretext that he was causing political danger for the nation in regard to the Romans who were then occupying Palestine. But John knew well that Jesus had come to take away sin from the world and to save men (*Jn 1:29*), and so he did not hesitate to give those words of Caiaphas a prophetic meaning, as a revelation of the divine plan. It was written in that plan that Christ, through the redemptive sacrifice accomplished by his death on the cross, would become the source of a new unity for mankind, called in Christ, to regain their dignity as adopted children of God. In that sacrifice on the cross the Church was born as a community of salvation.

—general audience, July 31, 1991

Summary

In John 1:19-51, we observed that:

1. When New Testament writers quote or allude to Old Testament passages, they expect their readers to know the full context of those passages.
2. John the Baptist sees himself as the herald of restoration mentioned in Isaian prophecy—a prophecy provisionally fulfilled by the restoration of Israel after the Babylonian Captivity.
3. John the Baptist sees himself as the forerunner to the Messiah.
4. John the Baptist connects his Baptism with prophecies in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah and the thirty-sixth chapter of Ezekiel.
5. Although baptisms performed by John the Baptist are both invitations to repentance and indictments for sin, those baptisms aren't sacramental.
6. Jesus is called the “Lamb of God” by John the Baptist to point out Jesus' relationship to the Old Testament sacrificial lamb of the covenant.
7. The Evangelist records the story of the call of Nathanael and relates Nathanael to the patriarch Jacob in Genesis and Jesus to Old Testament prophecies in Isaiah and Zechariah about a “branch” from whom will come the promised Messiah.

John Notes

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