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New Testament Exegesis as an Academic Discipline with Relevance for Other Disciplines

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Abstract

This English translation of a lecture delivered in November 2011 on the occasion of the author's installation as Professor of New Testament at Uppsala University (Kelhoffer 2012) addresses several conceptual and methodological questions about New Testament Exegesis, including: 'What is New Testament Exegesis?', 'What does it mean to call New Testament Exegesis an *academic* discipline?' and 'How can this discipline be *relevant for other disciplines*?' A central argument is that the current balkanization of biblical studies is undesirable and that scholars who use more traditional or newer methods should engage, rather than talk past, each other. It could help to foster that process if we attend to a misconception of the 'historical-critical method' as a single method. Additionally, 'the linguistic turn' holds promise for future discussions.

Keywords

historical-critical method, linguistic turn, methodology, Scandinavian exegesis, Uppsala University

Introduction

Uppsala University lays claim to an esteemed tradition in biblical exegesis (Riesenfeld 1968; Hartman 1976; Ringgren and Hartman 1992; Gerhardsson 1994, 2000, 2005; Baasland 1995; Olsson 1999; Byrskog 2005; Svartvik 2006; Stenström 2011; and P. Ström 2011). It is therefore a great honor to join the Faculty of Theology at Uppsala University and to be given the Chair in New Testament Exegesis that has been held by internationally renowned scholars

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such as Anton Fridrichsen (1888–1953) and Lars Hartman (b. 1930). In this lecture, I raise six questions:

1. What is New Testament Exegesis?
2. What is my research profile in this area?
3. What does it mean to call New Testament Exegesis an *academic* discipline?
4. How can this discipline be *relevant for other disciplines*?
5. What is the *relationship* between newer and more traditional *methods* in New Testament Exegesis?
6. How can I say that New Testament Exegesis can have relevance *for all people*?

I conclude with a brief reflection on academic disciplines in general in the past and present.

1. What Is New Testament Exegesis?

In Greek, the verb *eksēgeomai* means ‘to lead out’. Our modern English word ‘*exegesis*’—or, in Swedish, ‘exegetik’; German: ‘Exegese’; French: ‘*exégèse*’—refers to retrieving *from* a text what it meant in its context, rather than coming *to* a text with a modern and possibly theologically or ideologically constructed notion about its meaning. Those who practice the former—or, in our case in the present postmodern *Zeitgeist*, who make this their goal (see Collins 2005)—may be called *exegetes*.

New Testament Exegesis focuses above all on the 27 diverse books written between *ca.* 50 and 120 CE that eventually came to be included in the early church’s collection of writings, known today as ‘the New Testament’. Exegetes also include in this discipline *other* Christian texts composed roughly contemporaneously with, or a little later than, the New Testament—for example, those of the apologist Justin Martyr and those referred to as ‘the Apostolic Fathers’ (which include Ignatius of Antioch’s seven letters, the *First Letter of Clement*, and the so-called *Second Letter of Clement*).

Scholarship on this assorted literature deals primarily with three foci—historical, philological and theological. In regard to *history*, one can, for example, ask about the author’s and the readers’/listeners’ situation and about their relationship to other Christian congregations and to their Jewish, Greek and Roman neighbors. Given the Jewish roots of the nascent Jesus movement, one can also ask if there actually was a clearly demarcated boundary between Christian and Jewish (and even between Christian and other) groups. In regard to *philology*, competency is needed in Classical Greek and other relevant languages (for example, Hebrew, Aramaic, Latin and Syriac), so one can compare New

Testament ideas and expressions with those in other ancient literature. All relevant secondary literature must also be taken into account, whether in English, German or French. In regard to *theology*, scholars must recognize that the discipline of New Testament Exegesis exists because the writings of the New Testament have contributed to a living tradition—in fact, to many living traditions—for nearly 2,000 years. Exploration of the theologies of the NT authors, of the history of interpretation and reception, and of how biblical interpretation has affected ideas and values in later contexts also come within the exegete's purview. Exegetes thus also give attention, for example, to feminist, postcolonial and queer hermeneutics in a critical analysis of early Christian literature. As an exegete who engages questions of later reception and interpretation, my task is not to say what the text must (or should) mean for you, but I can at least challenge you to reflect critically and constructively from your tradition and situation. And I am thankful if you do the same.

2. What Is My Research Profile within New Testament Exegesis?

I have just presented New Testament Exegesis in general and will now share a little about my research profile within this discipline. For those who are interested in the origins and development of early Christian beliefs and praxes, scholarly studies of biblical (and *extrabiblical*) literature can deepen and even change how the past is understood—thereby playing a role in contemporary discussions about biblical interpretation, religious identity and possibilities for interreligious dialogue. I have come to see that the literature eventually included in the New Testament reflects attempts to confirm and defend various *constructions of legitimacy* within the early church. My research, to a large extent, has dealt with how legitimacy is construed. In a dissertation on Mark 16.9-20, I studied, for example, miracle working and its place as a basis for legitimacy in the first three centuries (Kelhoffer 2000: 245-339). In *The Diet of John the Baptist* (2005), I highlight, among other things, the importance of food, biblical interpretation and asceticism in the formation of religious identity. My latest monograph, *Persecution, Persuasion and Power* (2010), delineates the view in many of the New Testament's writings that a readiness to be persecuted for Christ offers a basis for standing and legitimacy in the Christian community.

Today, my research has turned to the so-called *Second Letter of Clement*, one of 'the Apostolic Fathers'. With its many admonitions, *Second Clement* emphasizes how Christians must render 'payback' (*antimisthia*) to Christ or God in return for the gift of salvation (2 *Clem.* 1.3, 5; 9.7; 15.2; cf. 11.6). An analysis of the work reveals a distinctive understanding of legitimacy and Christian religious identity in the second century, construing Christ as patron of salvation and believers as clients indebted to Christ, their heavenly patron (Kelhoffer 2013).

I contribute also to the international scholarly discussion of early Christian literature as an associate editor for the monograph series *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* (Verlag Mohr Siebeck) and, within the Society of New Testament Studies, as co-chair of the group that examines *Christliche Literatur des späten ersten Jahrhunderts und des zweiten Jahrhunderts / Christian Literature of the Late First Century and the Second Century*. At Uppsala University, I am honored to have as my colleagues in New Testament Senior Lecturer Jonas Holmstrand and Senior Lecturer Cecilia Wassén. We have much to offer—both to students (including English-language exchange students) in the way of quality instruction and to researchers from other institutions in the way of scholarly collaboration.

3. Neither Theology's Handmaiden nor Theology's advocatus diaboli: What Does It Mean to Call New Testament Exegesis an Academic Discipline?

What does it mean to call New Testament Exegesis an *academic* discipline? In (many) previous generations, biblical exegesis was understood to serve as 'theology's handmaiden'. An exegete's task was simply to clarify what the Bible meant and to hand the result over to constructive, dogmatic or systematic theologians, who would then make pronouncements about orthodoxy for the church (note: singular) at that time.

It is fortunate that within the academy, and in ecumenically oriented churches, we are in a completely different situation today. A university shall not allow discrimination based on religious confession or other factors. Opportunities to study and conduct research in theology and religious studies shall be open not just to liberal Lutherans, (liberal) Catholics and (liberal?) agnostics but, indeed, to *all* who value critical examination and scholarly methods of inquiry.

The arrival of the so-called 'historical-critical method' in the nineteenth century meant that New Testament Exegesis often formed its identity in contradistinction to traditional dogmas that had been based on dubious interpretations of the Bible. Nowadays, scholarship recognizes that the New Testament reflects many different points of view. Encapsulating various traditions, four different Gospels attest to sundry interpretations of Jesus. The 'Paul' whom one can (more or less) ascertain from the apostle's seven authentic letters contrasts with the 'Pauls' (plural) who emerge from the Acts of the Apostles and from the six pseudepigraphic letters ascribed to Paul (for example, Second Thessalonians and First Timothy). Additionally, whereas Paul and the pseudepigraphic author of First Peter require that Christians submit to the governing authorities within the Roman Empire (Rom. 13.1-7; 1 Pet. 2.13-17), the John who wrote Revelation demands that his congregations set themselves apart from the Roman Empire,

because after three and a half years ‘with such violence Babylon the great city [i.e. Rome; see Rev. 18.10] will be thrown down, and will be found no more’ (Rev. 18.21; cf. 12.14; see further Kelhoffer 2010: 96, 104, 109, 152–56). Beyond the diversity within the New Testament, an even greater variety is to be found in the *reception and interpretation* of the New Testament, both in the sundry and sometimes fascinating interpretations of the church fathers and in interpretations made today in various developing countries which have never been dominated, or are no longer dominated, by a Christian culture.

To take a somewhat recent example of how (most) exegetes have extricated themselves from being ‘theology’s handmaiden’, we may turn to the legacy of the so-called ‘Lutheran Paul’. At the time of the Reformation, and for several centuries, Paul’s concept of ‘righteousness’ was often interpreted in accordance with the comparison that Paul was to Judaism as the Reformation was to Roman Catholicism—an illustration of exegesis serving, if subtly, dogmatic (Reformation) theology. But since the emergence of ‘Paul and the New Perspective’ in the 1980s (e.g. Sanders 1977; Wright 1978, 1980, 1992, 1997; Dunn 1983, 1990; and Zetterholm 2009: esp. 33–67), it is clear that Paul did not criticize a different religion (i.e. Judaism) but, rather, some of his Christ-believing brethren who had a completely different perspective from the one he had on the role of the Mosaic Law in the life of non-Jewish Christ believers. From this discourse, we have gained a much better understanding of Paul’s theology, of his Christian opponents’ theology, and of the competition for influence in the earliest church. The improved understanding of Paul’s theology in its original context has also facilitated better dialogue and relationship between ecumenically-minded Lutherans and Catholics (Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation 1999; Aune 2006).

New Testament Exegesis cannot do its real work if it is a handmaiden to theology. But neither can it forge its identity and *raison d’être* merely as an *advocatus diaboli*, in opposition to modern, possibly anachronistic, interpretations and receptions. No, I say: as an academic discipline, New Testament Exegesis must be neither theology’s handmaiden nor theology’s *advocatus diaboli*. How, then, can we move forward as an academic discipline with relevance for other disciplines? I shall now begin to address this question with reference to ‘the linguistic turn’.

4. How Can New Testament Exegesis Have Relevance for Other Disciplines?

In her book *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (2004), Elizabeth Clark addresses the problem that the discipline of ‘history’, and, in particular, her own specialty of ‘late ancient Christianity’ (i.e. early church

history), ‘became mired in scientific and literary paradigms that were rapidly being abandoned by practitioners of those disciplines... [F]or the better part of the twentieth century historians either ignored or rejected the assistance that philosophers and theorists offered in their attempt to render the historical discipline scientific’ (Clark 2004: 17). As a promising possibility for moving beyond this impasse, Clark recommends a poststructuralist approach: ‘Rejecting earlier critics’ desire to uncover a text’s unity and harmony, these theorists, by contrast, explore the ways in which texts incorporate within themselves seemingly contradictory and heterogeneous elements, aporias and “splicings” that trip readers up so as to invite a more complex reading’ of premodern texts, including early Christian literature (2004: 132).

In an attempt to give such ‘a more complex reading’ to texts on John the Baptist’s diet of ‘grasshoppers and wild honey’ (Mk. 1.6||Mt. 3.4), I used philological, sociological, anthropological and history-of-interpretation methods in order to uncover the most likely meanings of these foods for the historical Baptist, for the evangelists Mark and Matthew, and for the Greek, Syriac and Latin church fathers. At the end of this study, I proposed the following for our discipline:

Students of early Christianity need not only be the beneficiaries of philologists’, classicists’ and ancient historians’ hard work. We too can advance these (and other) areas. Indeed, we should make such contributions, lest our scholarship be considered derivative rather than equal in stature to the highest standards of these and other Humanities disciplines. Furthermore, at times we can (and should) bring our work into conversation with the social, and even the natural, sciences (Kelhoffer 2005: 199).

In the following section, I shall return to the relationship between newer and more traditional methodologies.

In her article, ‘The Politics of Patronage and the Politics of Kinship: The Meeting of the Ways’ (2009), Carolyn Osiek likewise exemplifies how New Testament Exegesis can provide insights to other disciplines. The Roman patronage system of relationships, she says, was based on reciprocal giving and taking between patrons and clients. Our sources from the ancient world preserve good information on how patronage relationships functioned among the elites—above all, between the emperor and his elite clients (e.g. Boissvain 1966; Saller 1982; Neyrey 2005). But if classicists and ancient historians want to understand how this system functioned among ordinary people of the lower classes, a critical analysis of early Christian literature (for example, Paul’s letters) is essential:

[W]hile patronage and benefaction among Roman elites has been well studied, little has been done to study the same social structures among non-elites... [W]hat we have

in the literary remains of the early Jesus followers is some of the best evidence for the social relations of non-elites in the early Empire, granted, with certain peculiarities not shared with their other contemporaries, but probably having more in common with [than differences from] them (Osiek 2009: 146).

For my current research on *Second Clement*, the description of Christ as patron of salvation and of Christians' obligations to Christ their heavenly patron is of particular interest.

5. What Is the Relationship between the Newer and More Traditional Methods in New Testament Exegesis, and Is the So-called 'Historical-Critical Method' Just One Method?

Contemporary scholarship does not speak of '*the* scholarly method' for research on the New Testament and other early Christian literature but, more accurately, of a diversity among the methods currently in use. In what follows, I defend two theses: first, that historically oriented methods are fundamental for scholarly studies of the New Testament. Second, while the explosion of various approaches in the last half-century offers a multitude of possibilities to researchers (e.g. Gerdmar and Syreeni 2006), an unfortunate byproduct has been the balkanization of biblical studies. That development points to an urgent need for meaningful exchange of ideas and approaches among scholars. In practice, scholars who use different methods rarely come together in order to consider seriously the advantages (*and* disadvantages) of different methods. How can we try to move beyond the current conundrum?

It is worth beginning with attentive reflection on the language we use. It is preferable, I would submit, to say that 'the historical-critical method' *is not* just *one* method. The expression is an umbrella term for a number of historically oriented, comparative and (most often) tradition-critical methods. None of these methods is necessarily critical or uncritical. In the investigation of early Christian literature, the *use* of any particular method or reading strategy can be, to a lesser or greater extent (or not at all), historical-critical. This is because methods are only a means for answering particular questions or solving particular problems and because a solution to a particular problem can be sought in a variety of more (or less) critical ways. This principle applies not only to tradition-historical methods (for example, source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism) but also to newer methods and perspectives—for example, narratological, sociological and anthropological studies, as well as various special interest hermeneutics (including feminist, queer theory and disability studies).

In this lecture I can only briefly consider when, in the history of biblical scholarship, the adjective 'historical-critical' (German: 'historisch-kritisch') came to

be so closely associated with the substantive ‘method’ that it came to be understood as *a* method—‘the historical-critical method’ (‘die historisch-kritische Methode’). The roots of this development can be traced to the German Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), who distinguished between ‘historical’ and ‘dogmatic’ method (1913). Conservative (Lutheran) theologians such as Gerhard Maier protested that the historical method did not yield a ‘canon within the canon’, and for this reason welcomed ‘the end of the historical-critical method’ (Maier 1974; ET 1977; see also Vogels 1980; Franzmann 1980; Johnson 1983; Swartley 1984; Linnemann 1986; ET 1990; Fryer 1987; and Hagner 1991). Instead of trying to use ‘the historical-critical method’, Maier advocated a return to a (pre-critical) biblicist theological method (which he called ‘the historical biblical method’). It should give scholars pause that Maier, an outspoken *opponent* of ‘the historical-critical method’, contributed to the use of this expression by incorporating its nomenclature into an argument against it.

In Anglophone scholarship, the influence of the book *The Historical-Critical Method*, by my friend and erstwhile colleague at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago Edgar Krentz, is not to be underestimated (Krentz 1975; repr. 2002; see also Achtemeier 1970; Frye 1973; and Barstad 1980). Krentz offers a wonderfully concise (and dense) explanation of the need for ‘the historical-critical method’, as well as its benefits for the church today. Dedicated to the president of the Christ-Seminex Seminary (St. Louis, Missouri) and written to answer objections, above all from conservative pastors and theologians within the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), Krentz’s book emerged within a bitterly polemical context. The 1977 publication of Gerhard Maier’s book in English translation by Concordia Publishing House was apparently the LCMS’s response to Krentz.

Even as late as 2008, the distinguished American scholar Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ published a book with the subtitle *In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method*. An unhappy result of such nomenclature is that it divides interpreters into ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’, depending on whether they ‘have’ the symbolic capital and, possibly based upon this, a scholarly stature (see Bourdieu 1986: 252–55; and Kelhoffer 2010: 9–24, esp. 14–16) because they use ‘the historical-critical method’. When a scholar’s standing within our discipline is thus classified, both sides will be prone to assume defensive positions and to be suspicious of one another. To say the least, this can make it more difficult to engage in a dialogue among those who use various methods.

It is unfortunate that rather few students, and apparently relatively few scholars, see that when we speak of ‘the historical-critical method’, we perpetuate a methodological nomenclature that was originally advocated by *its opponents*. I find it more helpful—and more accurate—to speak not of one particular method as ‘historical-critical’ (i.e. ‘eine [sogenannte] historisch-kritische Methode’) but to speak of the goal of doing ‘historical-critical exegesis’

(i.e. ‘historisch-kritische Exegese’). With rare exception (Ebeling 1950; ET 1963; and Zimmermann 1974), ‘historisch-kritische Exegese’ has been the standard terminology of German-language scholarship (e.g. Gunkel 1913; Preus 1963; Käsemann 1967; Hengel 1973; and Egger 1987). The difference between the two expressions lies primarily in how ‘historical-critical’ is used, whether describing exegesis in general (German-language) or as a purported *method* (Anglophone).

In an earlier publication, I suggested what, I hope, offers a way forward:

Unfortunately, certain scholars tout that newer methodologies have somehow superseded traditio-historical analyses or “the historical-critical method,” however construed. The future of early Christian studies lies not in antipathy between older and newer approaches but in dynamic interaction between them. Historians of religion have acknowledged as much for decades. It is time that the over-balkanized discipline of biblical studies move beyond such a short-sighted and unnecessary dichotomy (Kelhoffer 2005: 199; see further Kelhoffer 2007).

If one aims to do something interesting and worthwhile in biblical studies, it is woefully inadequate merely to hype the use of a newer method. And the mere translation of earlier results into a trendy terminology (from one of the social sciences, for example) does not deserve to be called ‘scholarship’. Apropos such translation, Troy W. Martin offers a pointed and just warning in his review of a sociologically oriented study of First Peter:

The strength of this monograph resides in its sensitivity to modern hermeneutical theory ... and in its reformulation of prior exegetical insights in the language of the social sciences (e.g., ‘temporal liminality’ instead of ‘eschatological journey’). It offers, however, few new exegetical insights of its own, and, at times, the social-scientific model controls the text rather than vice versa (Martin 2000: §7 [p. 2], on Bechtler 1998).

In all scholarship, regardless of the discipline, the important question is not which method(s) are used. What scholars want to know is whether a colleague has something new, interesting and instructive to present from his or her research. In the classroom, I have found it rather easy to explain this principle to students. We can hope that, among scholars, there will be better possibilities for meaningful conversation and interdisciplinary collaboration in the future.

6. How Can New Testament Exegesis Have Relevance for All People?

I now turn to the relevance of New Testament Exegesis for all people. Because biblical scholarship shares much in common with other disciplines within the

humanities—above all, with history, literature and philosophy—every educated person ought to be acquainted with the main insights of biblical scholarship in the last 200 years. Additionally, a basic knowledge of biblical literature is important for comprehending the myriad allusions to the Bible in modern literature, including modern fiction, and for understanding how the Bible has influenced constructions of identity in religious movements through the centuries. Sociologists and historians cannot afford to ignore the fact that biblical mythologies can still play a significant role in the creation of modern mythologies and constructions of identity. I therefore take it as an oversight that our university's large interdisciplinary research project, 'The Impact of Religion' (see http://www.crs.uu.se/Impact_of_religion/ [11 November 2011]), does not have a specialist in biblical studies or reception history.

Sometimes—and, we hope, not infrequently—an insight from New Testament Exegesis can have relevance not only for other disciplines but for all people. In *The Diet of John the Baptist* (2005: e.g. 203-205), I point out how food, biblical interpretation, and asceticism have played a role in the formation of religious identity. And in *Persecution, Persuasion and Power*, I call attention to how a readiness to be persecuted can serve as a basis for standing and legitimacy in many religious traditions:

In terms of the philosophy of religion, one may ask which comes first—an experience of persecution, or the concept of salvation history (or salvation mythology) that persecution legitimates? The question is equally pertinent for the apostle Paul, John Foxe, al-Qaeda, and their opponents/enemies, however construed... The endurance of persecution can become part of a group's collective memory, reinforcing the identity derived from oppression, whether that oppression is directed against our predecessors or us. One contribution of this monograph is to highlight the role that ascribing value to suffering and transferring that value for the purpose of legitimation can play in the formation of religious identity, including identity derived from salvation history/mythology. It should also give us pause that, once embedded within salvation history/mythology, a persecution can continue either to inspire or to delegitimize the faithful and their perceived oppressors (Kelhoffer 2010: 385).

Sometimes an exegete encounters a problem that requires dialogue with colleagues in other disciplines and even with all people:

Critical, careful, and even prayerful reflection on how we construe ourselves in relation to suffering is an agenda inadequately realized in the NT, a task that commends itself for twenty-first century ethics and theology... I make no pretension that an exegetical analysis of the NT could, by itself, solve this problem for contemporary Christian or other religious communities. If experts in other areas of theological and religious studies will add to the conversation, there will be potential for more nuanced reflection and dialogue. This study will have served its purpose if it better defines the

task and ethical responsibility of analyzing how our Scriptures, and we today, talk about persecution as a basis of legitimation, and if it leads to further critical reflection, discussion, and even reconciliation (Kelhoffer 2010: 386).

We exegetes cannot take for granted that others will appreciate the value and relevance of our work; the burden rests on us to communicate with those outside our guild.

7. Epilogue: Academic Disciplines Past, Present and Future

When I first reflected on what an inaugural lecture might entail, I was quite unsure how to proceed. As an academic ought to do, I went to the university library and eventually came upon a book with the title *Lecture Topics at Installations of Professors in Uppsala 1855–1966*, by Barbro Marin (1967). Marin's compilation of names, disciplines and lecture titles shows much about our university's history. It was intriguing to see that already in 1928, when Uppsala University installed a new professor in Sanskrit and Comparative Indo-European Linguistics (Jarl Charpentier), the new professor gave a lecture on 'Aposteln Thomas och Indien' ['The Apostle Thomas and India'], which was based on his newly published article 'St. Thomas the Apostle and India' (Charpentier 1927; Marin 1967: 24). Also in 1928, an exception was apparently made to the requirement that an inaugural lecture be given in *Swedish* when Anton Fridrichsen lectured in Norwegian on 'Det Nye testamentets tanker om religiøs mottagelighet og uimottagelighet' ['The New Testament's Thoughts on Religious Sensitivity and Insensitivity'] (Fridrichsen 1929; Marin 1967: 24).

Sometimes in Barbro Marin's compendium one encounters an attitude or ideology that, mercifully, has been expunged from today's academy. For example, we can be glad that after 1936 our university did not need another professor in 'rasbiologi' ['racial biology']. In that year, Gunnar Dahlberg's inaugural lecture was entitled 'Om tvillingfödelser' ['On the Births of Twins'] (Marin 1967: 28). As Marie Ström has recently reported in the newspaper *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, it was Dahlberg who, in opposition to his predecessor Herman Lundborg, argued that in the discipline of biology, 'race' was not a scholarly concept and that one had to oppose Sweden's then current program of compulsory sterilization of, *inter alios*, the mentally ill who were judged to be unsuitable to procreate (M. Ström 2011).

We may indeed wonder how in eighty or perhaps one hundred years our successors will view our own areas of research. Scholars do well to attend not only to their own discipline but also to what that discipline can offer to other disciplines and even to all people. I hope that our successors will appreciate our current endeavors.

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