

The “Song of Hannah” (1Sam 2:1–10) and Its Reception in Ancient Judaism and Christianity

The “Song of Hanna” is undoubtedly an important text for the development of Jewish and Christian spirituality. The comparison of the different text forms and their reception history¹ is worthwhile, as the following article shows.

1. The Hebrew Text of Hannah’s Song

The textual criticism cannot be presented in detail in the context of this article. Only the following details are important for the assessment of the current Masoretic Text:

The introduction to the speech was probably just the words “And Hannah spoke.” The version of the MT “And Hannah prayed and spoke” evaluates the song of Hannah as a hymn of praise.²

The middle line of v. 2 in today’s MT “except for you there is no (God)”³ is probably changed over from the Septuagint version.⁴ Concerning 4QSam^a, one cannot make any reliable statements due to the state of preservation for this partial verse.

V. 3 is disputed. According to the Ketib of the MT (לֹא נִתְכַנּוּ), the verse underlines the immensurability of the divine deeds. In LXX there is a statement about God and his possible plans themselves, based on לוֹ נִתְכַנּוּ, comparable to the Qere of the MT. One can vary whether MT wants to soften an older, still tangible idea in LXX⁵ or whether the passive construction of MT should be retained as a *lectio difficilior*.⁶

¹ Cf. in general COOK, *Hannah’s Desire, God’s Design*.

² McCARTER, *1 Samuel*, 68; KLEIN, *1 Samuel*, 13; LEWIS, “Textual History,” 25.

³ The confession to monotheism presupposes Isa 44:6f.; 45:5 and Deut 4:33, 39 (HENTSCHEL, *1 Samuel*, 53). It is disputed whether this verse was added later (LEWIS, “Textual History,” 26) or originally belongs to the text.

⁴ LXX again offers a reference to God’s holiness. We can ask whether MT shortens or LXX expands.

⁵ McCARTER, *1 Samuel*, 69. TSUMURA, *First Book of Samuel*, 138 n. 19, follows the Ketib לֹא נִתְכַנּוּ and translates: His deeds are inimmensurable.

⁶ STOEBE, *Das erste Buch Samuelis*, 101; KLEIN, *1 Samuel*, 13; LEWIS, “Textual History,” 31; HENTSCHEL, *1 Samuel*, 53. According to BARTELMUS, “Tempus,” 21f., the question is not discernible.

In V. 8f. there are text parts that are offered only by MT, and other text parts that are offered only by LXX. The latter contain the motive of answering to prayer, which can be judged as a secondary adaptation to the present context.⁷

V. 10 again begins with the reference to God's power against his adversary and ends with the intercession for the Anointed One. The Septuagint offers a text in between which reminds of Jer 9:22f. in many ways.⁸ 4Q51 obviously offers an (only conditionally readable) even more extensive text version. It may be that both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint have lost material.⁹

After these remarks on textual criticism, now the overview of the course of the text itself: The text interprets the experience of a positive change of one's own fate as an experience of divine help (v. 1), which refers to God's holy power (v. 2) as well as to His wisdom (v. 3). God's power – it alone is praised – shows itself generally in experiences of the turn of fate in the military (v. 4) as well as in the social sphere (v. 5–8a), but also, as is added for the sake of justification, in his act of creation (v. 8b); but it will also prove itself in the different fates of the pious and the wicked (v. 9). Her concluding glorification with recourse to the theophany tradition is followed by the confident request for the blessing of the Lord's Anointed (v. 10).

The song of Hannah is anchored in the context of Samuel's birth story only in the remark v. 5b and in general form with the reference to God's help in v. 1. It would not be difficult to detach it from the narrative context of Samuel's birth (1Sam 1:19–28) and his transfer to Eli (1Sam 2:11). At the same time, parallels to texts such as Ex 15 and Deut 32 are noticeable, which also can easily be detached from the narrative context. The incomparability of the God of Israel becomes known in Ex 15:11 similarly as in 1Sam 2:2; "God as rock" is metaphor in Deut 32:4 like 1Sam 2:2. In general, a proximity to the language of the Psalms can be found in the song of Hannah, visible for instance in the motifs of "enemies" and "salvation from death."¹⁰

A contradiction to the context exists in two places: 1. 1Sam 2:21 presupposes a total of six children for Hannah, in 1Sam 2:5b seven children

⁷ Cf. BARTELMUS, "Tempus," 22; LEWIS, "Textual History," 38.

⁸ Some scholars also regard the text as an insertion from Jer 9:22f. Whereas in Jer 9:23^{LXX} doing judgment and righteousness is God's work, 1Kgmds 2,10 fine describes it as man's task. The final sentence of Jer 9,23^{LXX} is not adopted.

⁹ MCCARTER, *1 Samuel*, 69. KLEIN, *1 Samuel*, 13, expects the translator to have an already glossed text as a template.

¹⁰ Cf. Ps 18:6; 30:4; 49:16; 86:13; 116:3.

are mentioned.¹¹ 2. Anointed kings did not yet exist at the time presented. The song of Hannah was probably only inserted later into the present context of the birth stories. The original context of use of the probably post-exilic¹² song can no longer be reconstructed; the formulations are so general that there is no unambiguous classification, even in the historical sense. Some motifs can refer to a military victory (v. 1, 4), others remain in the realm of the private (v. 5b). The fact that the song of Hannah is inserted here probably depends on v. 2.3. and on the final verse: The latter looks ahead to the emergence of the kingdom;¹³ v. 2f. interpret the whole story as a result of the power and wisdom of God¹⁴ who, by overcoming the plight of an unfruitful woman¹⁵, brings positive progress in the history of Israel as a whole possible.

2. The Septuagint Text of Hannah's Song

I will only deal with the most important variants of the Septuagint.

v.2

At the end, the metaphor צור (rock) is replaced by δίκαιος (righteous). The literal translation of צור, πέτρα, is preserved only in 2Kgdms 22:2^{Ant}. In many places of the Septuagint, ὁ θεός is simply set instead of צור.¹⁶ Graphically there is no bridge. In these cases, probably the translators are responsible for this rendering. It is striking for the Septuagint of Samuel and only here that צור is represented by terms whose Hebrew equivalents are also graphically close to צור: δίκαιος renders צדיק; φύλαξ traces back to a participle of נצר I., κτίστης to the participle יוצר (from יצר)¹⁷ whereas the rendering θεός is missing in the Septuagint of Samuel. In 2Kgdms 22:3, the Septuagint text tradition is divided between φύλαξ and κτίστης. Perhaps the copyists in the Hebrew tradition have already changed here.

¹¹ TSUMURA, *First Book of Samuel*, 145, interprets the number of “seven” “as a poetic idiom for perfection”.

¹² BARTELMUS, “Tempus,” 20 n. 27 (Lit!).

¹³ RENDTORFF, *Das Alte Testament*, 184, reckons with the simultaneous insertion of 1Sam 2:1–10 and 2 Sam 22, which span a messianic frame around the Samuel books. The thesis is plausible only if already in ancient Judaism we can presuppose a distinction between the books of Samuel and the books of kings which is not only technical.

¹⁴ Cf. STOEBE, *1. Samuel*, 106.

¹⁵ Cf. Gen 16:1–6; 30:1f.

¹⁶ Deut 32:4, 15, 30; Ps 27[28]:1; 61[62]:3, 7; 91[92]:16; 143[144]:1; Isa 30:29.

¹⁷ The noun κτίστης (for צור) meets in LXX with the exception of Sir 24:8 only in the literature written in Greek – for Sir 24:8 no Hebrew original is proven yet. But this is not a counterargument: In Isa 22:11; 46:11 יצר is rendered by κτίζειν.

Why was the rewording carried out? According to Staffan Olofsson and Anneli Aejmelaeus, the metaphor was avoided because it was considered a “dead metaphor”.¹⁸ But in my opinion this thesis attributes too much liberalism to the translators. Rather a general tendency of the Septuagint of Samuel is to be referred to: It avoids figurative metaphors¹⁹ that sound mythological at the same time.²⁰ Moreover, we cannot pray to a rock. This tendency does not re-occur in Qumran²¹ but in the Targumim where צור is thoroughly avoided.

v.8b.9

In the Masoretic Text there is a four-line section with the juxtaposition between the pious and the godless. In the Septuagint it is missing, probably because a copyist skipped these lines because of the same beginning.²² The Septuagint, on the other hand, offers with the motive of the divine answer to prayer a version adapted to the context, which, however, is generally considered secondary for the sake of this context adaptation.

v.10

Towards the end of the verse MT speaks of the “king” in the singular, LXX in the plural. Thus the LXX probably thinks of the series of the kings of Israel beginning now by Samuel, depicted in 1–4Kgdms. An eschatological understanding is thus definitely excluded.

3. The Reception of Hannah’s Song in the New Testament

Psalms continued to be written in Israel even after the canonical psalms. The *Psalms of Solomon*, but also the *songs of praise* of Qumran, are witnesses of an ongoing history of this genre, but also the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46–55) and the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:69–79). For the *Magnificat*, 1Sam 2 is commonly regarded as one of the most important biblical basic texts.²³

There is broad consensus that Luke 1:46–55 was originally formulated independently of its current context, but its origin is uncertain. Earlier the-

¹⁸ OLOFSSON, *God is my Rock*. AEJEMELAEUS, “Von Sprache zur Theologie,” 32–35.

¹⁹ SIEGERT, *Zwischen Hebräischer Bibel und Altem Testament*, 41.

²⁰ KOCH, “Lied,” 69, with regard to Targum Jonathan. The same is true, however, also with regard to the Septuagint.

²¹ In Qumran, “rock” is encountered as God’s predicate in 1QH 17,28; 19,15; perhaps also in 4Q418 Frg. 7,6.

²² Cf. KLEIN, *1 Samuel*, 13.

²³ Cf. in general MEYNET, “Dieu donne son nom à Jésus.”

ses, such as the thesis of an origin in the Maccabean movement²⁴, are no longer represented today, but there was no consensus as to whether the song was generally spoken in Jewish or especially in Zelotic circles or in groups around John the Baptist, or whether it originated in Jewish Christianity.²⁵ Michael Wolter rightly notes that from a methodological point of view it is fundamentally impossible to make such statements plausible.²⁶

The fullness of the Old Testament parallels to the individual motifs of Luke 1:46–55 cannot be listed here.²⁷ More important is the realization that this collage technique is already encountered in late Old Testament writings, in the Psalm of Jonah (Jonah 2:3–10) and in the Hymn of Judith (Jdt 16:1–17). Luke presents Mary with the Magnificat as anchored in the cultural tradition of Israel and also proves to be a good Bible expert in the history of literature.²⁸ But it is also theologically important for the evangelist to draw the events around Jesus into the history of the God of Israel with his people. Mary²⁹ responds with her praise in the same way that Israel has responded to the experience of God's help before. That is why it makes sense to change the reference values of God's action in Luke 1: the speaker, individual groups, finally Israel as a whole³⁰ are mentioned.

In this regard, the Magnificat is comparable to the song of Hannah, but in addition the relationship of certain motifs is to be referred to. In Luke 1:49b the reference to the holy name of God is taken from the song of Hannah (Luke 1:49), in Luke 1:51–53 the motive of 1Sam 2:4f. that God's intervention in the social area causes a reversal of the circumstances is adopted.³¹ Both texts on this motif transcend the situation for whose sake

²⁴ WINTER, "Magnificat and Benedictus," interprets the Song of Mary as prayer of thanks after the battle is won, written under the reign of Simon 142–135 B.C.E.

²⁵ In general cf. MITTMANN-RICHERT, *Magnificat*, 63–100.

²⁶ WOLTER, *Lukasevangelium*, 99.

²⁷ Cf. MITTMANN-RICHERT, *Magnificat*, 21.

²⁸ The evangelist thus proves himself to be a good historian who lets his narrators speak as appropriately as possible for the person and the situation (WOLTER, *Lukasevangelium*, 100, referring to Lucian of Samosata, *Hist. Conscr.* 58). This also solves the contradictions between Luke 1:46–55 and other texts on the subject of "poor and rich" in Luke-Acts.

²⁹ From a text-critical point of view, it is controversial whether Elisabeth or Maria is the singer of the Magnificat. In Elisabeth's favor one can refer to the echoes of the song of Hannah. The situation of the old childless Elisabeth corresponds to her situation, not that of the young Maria. But the argument can also be reversed: Because Elisabeth and not Mary suffer a similar fate as Hannah, this variant is to be regarded as an easing reading or as a correction by the scribes. The external text-critical testimony speaks above all for the attribution to Mary.

³⁰ V. 54 addressees the eschatological renewal of Israel, the servant of God (cf. Bar 3:37).

³¹ Isa 57:14–20; 61:1–11; 1Hen 92–104.

they are formulated. A reference not to the song of Hannah, but to Samuel's birth story is already present in V. 48a: "For he has looked upon the lowliness of his slave". This points back to Hanna's sighing prayer "o that the Lord might see my humiliation", which refers to her childlessness (1Sam 1:11). The noun *ταπείνωσις* then in Luke 1:48 does not subjectively refer to humility, but objectively to "lowliness", namely the meaninglessness from which God chooses Mary.

Thus in the Magnificat as in the song of Hannah the powerful intervention of God is sung about. Human standards are relativized³², but in the Magnificat from the events around Hannah it is not the biological miracle but the status reversal that is of interest.

In addition to the Magnificat, another testimony for the continued work of 1Sam 2:1–10 is to be named. Conservative Jews gave biblical names to their children, as the list of Mark 6:3 shows. Therefore the name Hannah is not conspicuous for the woman mentioned in Luke 2:36, especially since the name itself is theologically significant: Hannah means "gift of grace".

4. The Reception of Hannah's Song in Early Judaism

The reception of the Song of Hannah in Pseudo-Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* is highly peculiar. The introduction to the speech in LAB 51.3 shows that the MT version was the source in this case: "And Hannah prayed and spoke." The following hymn partly departs quite far from its original, but in return also establishes references within 1Sam 2, which are not yet present in the original. the paraphrase of V.1 is already directed at Samuel: "the people will be enlightened by his words, and he will show the nations the limits, and his horn will be greatly exalted." The reminder of V. 3 not to speak high-flown words is continued in a positive appeal: "Enjoy yourselves in glory as long as the light from which wisdom is born goes forth: that not those who possess most are called rich, nor those who have given birth in abundance are called mothers" (LAB 51.4). V. 5b and V. 6 are placed in a causal relationship: "for God kills in judgment and makes alive in mercy" (LAB 51.5). The postmortem fate of the pious and the wicked will be considered. The thought that the final court will still be

³² God's status-changing intervention is also named in 1Clem 59.3 as a confession of God's superior power over the world. In the First Letter to Clement, the motif does not aim at a relativization of the earthly church order, but rather at the hope that the non-Christians will come to knowledge.

delayed is tapped but not expanded (LAB 51.5).³³ The following invitation to praise God to Hannah and to her husband, which departs from the original, in turn focuses on the significance of Samuel, who is seen, as in 1Sam 7:16, as a priest and, as in the context of the biblical stories of Samuel as a whole, as a pioneer of the Davidic kingdom.

The Targum Jonathan, probably redacted in Babylon before the Arab invasion,³⁴ is to be discussed as a testimony of the rabbinical reception of the song of Hannah. In general, the text presupposed in it is close to the Masoretic Text. At least in the area of the Samuel Books, analogies to the Septuagint are mostly based on analogous perception of problematic statements of the original, but not on continuity of the text tradition.

In Targum Jonathan, 1Sam 2:1–10, like the other hymn-like interludes Judg 5 and 2Sam 22, contains great additions; they are already announced in the introduction “And Hannah prayed in a spirit of prophecy³⁵ and spoke”. What then follows hardly refers to Hanna’s original situation any more. At the beginning, the text thematizes Samuel’s Philistine victory (1Sam 7) and the activity of Samuel’s grandchildren as singers in the temple.³⁶ TgJon 1Sam 2:1–10 is altogether an apocalypse³⁷ with a schema of the four world empires that was taken over from Dan 2 but adapted to the actual course of history.³⁸ The incomparability of the God of Israel (v. 2) is demonstrated by the salvation of Jerusalem from Sanherib (701 B.C.E.); the warning against arrogance (v. 3) is illustrated by Nebuchadnezzar. The statement of the broken bow (v. 4) is related to the kings of Greece and the victory of the Maccabees, the statement of the saturation to Mordecai and Esther, who came from poverty to wealth and freedom. Their counterpart, the sons of Haman, are probably those to whom the world power Rome is attributed; the reproduction of V. 5b deals with the contrast between Jerusalem and Rome. The fact that the Lord “makes alive” is related to the resurrection from the dead; the difference between the pious and the godless in v. 8f. is particularly interesting with regard to their eschatological fate. In v. 10 the Anointed One is to be understood as the eschatological Messiah; the motif of the struggle of the nations and the name Gog from Ez 38f. are added. That is necessary because the pattern does not allow an anew inner-historical struggle.

³³ In LAB 51.5 it is presumably God himself who is still delaying the judgment. A motivation, however, is not given. For analogies in Christian literature see 2Thess 2:7; 2Petr 3:9.

³⁴ HARRINGTON and SALDARINI, *Targum*, 13.

³⁵ Hannah is also considered a prophetess by Philo, *Somn* 1:254, LCL 275:428.

³⁶ Cf. 1Chr 6:33; 15:17; 25:5; 2Chr 5:12.

³⁷ HARRINGTON and SALDARINI, *Targum*, 11.

³⁸ KOCH, “Lied,” 76–78. The contradiction of the book of Daniel that a Babylonian empire was followed by a Median empire is avoided.

One can ask whether these extensions owe themselves only to a general tendency already well-known in Second Temple Judaism, that one refers to biblical quotations³⁹ and persons as part of one's own tradition.⁴⁰ Sometimes exegetical traditions form the background. Already the introduction can signal this. The reference to the "spirit of prophecy" is not simply the result of the enthusiasm of the Targum Tradents for the song of Hannah but can also be attributed to close observation: When Hannah intercedes for the Lord's Anointed One, who did not yet exist at the time of her song, she foresaw this in the spirit of prophecy, since later there were actually anointed kings. The reference to Nebuchadnezzar in V.3 will have grown out of Dan 4.

5. The Reception of Hannah's Song in Early Christianity

Origen, Theodoret and The Venerable Bede wrote thoroughgoing interpretations of the text.⁴¹ The interpretations by Origen and Beda are, as is almost usual for patristic interpretations of Old Testament texts, allegorical exegesis. The "enemies" (v.1) are interpreted as unbelieving Jews as well as deviant Christians.⁴² In Origen's interpretation, v. 4 refers to the integration of gentiles who, according to Eph 2:12, 15, have lived in this world far from the covenant and without God.⁴³ Concerning the contrast between the child-rich and the childless in V.5b, Origen knows both the interpretation of the difference between Christians and Jews⁴⁴ and the interpretation of the difference between the fruit of righteousness, which is increasing, and the descendants of the flesh, which is decreasing.⁴⁵ That the Lord kills and

³⁹ Tob 2:6^{LXX}; 8:6^{LXX}; Dan 9:2.

⁴⁰ Neh 13:26; Sir 44–49; 1Macc 2:49–60.

⁴¹ Some authors of ancient Christian commentaries do not note the intertextual connections between 1Sam 2:1–10 and Luke 1:46–55. This is true for Origen, *Hom. Lc.* 8, FC 4/1, 116–122; ders., *Hom. 1Reg.*, GCS 33:1–25; The Venerable Bede, *In Lc.*, CCSL 120:37–39; Theophylact, *In Lc.*, PG 123:709c–713b.

⁴² Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.* 10, GCS 33:19; The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:22. Origen mentions Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion as examples of deviant Christians. The Venerable Bede does not name any names. For him, the problem was not topical.

⁴³ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.* 16, GCS 33:23f. The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:23, does not refer to Eph 2.

⁴⁴ Cf. also Cyprian, *Test.* 1:20, CCSL 3:20; Theodoret, *Qu. 1 Reg.*, PG 80:533c. Cyprian, *Test.* 3:4, CCSL 3:92, offers a number of typological interpretations especially for the number of seven children.

⁴⁵ ORIGEN, *Hom. 1Reg.* 18, GCS 33:24f. Cyprian offers an ethical interpretation of v.3f. under the heading *in nullo gloriandum, quando nostrum nihil sit*. According to Origen, *Frgm. in Cant.*, GCS 6:304, v. 3b witnesses the judgment from the works and admonishes humility.

makes alive (v.6) means that “He lets me die to sin and live for God.”⁴⁶ The seven number in V. 5b symbolizes plurality and perfectness⁴⁷ or the number of the fullness of the church.⁴⁸ Bede offers a fourfold interpretation of v. 6: First he formulates an anti-Jewish statement (*Mortificat sinagogam uiuificat ecclesiam*⁴⁹), then the motive of dying off sin and living God, in third place he refers to the sufferings of the apostle, in fourth place, introduced by the phrase *sed melius et sine ulla controversia*, to the resurrection of Christ.⁵⁰

Theodoret interprets the hymn of Hannah similar to the Targum Jonathan as prophecy: After Hannah had given birth to a prophet, she prophesies even after her birth. The statement of the weakening of the opponent is related to the expulsion of the devil, the theophany statement “the Lord went up into the sky and thundered”⁵¹ to the ascension of Christ, the judgment of God to the ends of the earth naturally to the Last Judgment.⁵² Theodoret refers the mentioning of “kings” in plural given by the Septuagint in V. 10 to the row of the kings of Israel from David to the Babylonian exile.⁵³ Thus, in my opinion, he has correctly met the request of the Septuagint.

In other cases, too, observations and questions worthy of attention become visible.

The joy “in God” means that only this joy and not the worldly joy is true joy.⁵⁴ This moralization may originally have been far removed from the poet of the song, but at least Origen can explain why it stands there and not otherwise. He interprets the admonition *Nolite multiplicare loqui excelsa* to the effect that it is not said *nolite loqui excelsa*. What we should really “talk high about” is the Holy Trinity.⁵⁵ The author of Hannah’s song may not have intended this, but the interpretation can again draw attention to the exact wording. With regard to the statement “No one is holy like the

⁴⁶ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.* 19, GCS 33:25.

⁴⁷ Cyril of Alexandria, *Frgm. cant. Annae*, PG 69:1276c. The fragmentary character of the text transmission does not allow an answer to the question whether the phrase signals that Cyril of Alexandria is dealing with the problem that in the context 1Reg 2:21 Hannah’s children were not seven but six (inclusive Samuel).

⁴⁸ The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:23f.; also Theodoret, *Qu. 1Reg.*, PG 80:533b.

⁴⁹ The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:23.

⁵⁰ The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:23f.

⁵¹ Similarly already Eusebius of Caesarea, *Dem. ev.* 4:16.42, GCS 23:191f.

⁵² Theodoret, *Qu. 1Reg.* 3, PG 80:533a; similarly already Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecl. proph.* 1.18, PG 22:1076d–1077a.

⁵³ Theodoret, *Qu. 1Reg.*, PG 80:533b.

⁵⁴ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.*, 10, GCS 33:17; similarly The Venerable Bede, *In 1Sam.*, CCSL 119:22.

⁵⁵ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.*, 13, GCS 33:21.

Lord”, Origen and Bede emphasize that it is not said “No one is holy except the Lord”. We should not renounce this hope of our holiness, as we are asked to do in the Bible: “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 19:2; 20:26).⁵⁶ Modern problems of the formal-historical determination of the text also are also discussed: neither the speech in the 3rd person nor even the salutation in 2 Pl. in V. 3 fits to the heading “prayer”. But also concerning 1Thess 5:17 we can ask how the “prayer without ceasing” demanded there should be possible in the daily life. The answer, which also makes the complete text of the Hannah understandable as prayer, is the spiritualization of prayer: Every action of the just can be interpreted as prayer, which he performs according to God’s will and in orientation to his commandment.⁵⁷

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⁵⁶ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.*, 11, GCS 33:20. The interpretation re-occurs in The Venerable Bede, *In Lc.*, CCSL 120:37, due to Luke 1:49b.

⁵⁷ Origen, *Hom. 1Reg.*, 9, GCS 33:14.

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