

This Month's Cover

Our cover this month is *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* by Henry Oswald Tanner (1859-1937). It is oil on canvas, measuring 4'1"x3'4", and was completed in 1908. It is on display at the Dallas (TX) Museum of Art. The painting depicts Jesus at roughly the age of 5 or 6, standing by his mother in a warm embrace, studying a scroll of the Hebrew Scriptures. Mary is dressed in the traditional blue gown, although in reality, as a first century working-class woman, she would most likely have worn earth colors. Tanner scrupulously avoided the sentimentality that was in most religious paintings of his time, so neither has a halo. He rarely used halos in his paintings.

Henry Oswald Tanner was the first black painter to gain international fame. He was born in Philadelphia in 1859, the son of a prominent AME pastor who later became a bishop. His talent was recognized early, and in 1879 he was admitted to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, where he studied for many years as the only black student. Pennsylvania was not legally segregated, yet there was clear racial separation. Many of his fellow students resented having him in their midst, especially since his talent had earned him high regard from the faculty, and they saw him as competition. One night they left him in the middle of Broad Street tied to his easel. Despite this and several other such incidents he completed his studies, and then in 1891 he moved to a less racially hostile Paris. At that time Paris was a mecca for rising artists, among whom he felt welcome. He lived in France for the rest of his life, dividing his time between Paris and a farm in Normandy. In his earlier life he painted in the Realistic style, and most of his works dealt with daily life and landscapes. He later moved toward mainly

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religious subjects in a style that showed the influence of French Impressionism. This became his primary field of subjects in the latter part of his career. He studied at the *Académie Julian*, where he was highly acclaimed, and in 1896 his *Daniel in the Lions' Den* was accepted in the *Salon*, the exclusive art show of the *Académie des Beaux-Arts*. In 1899 in London he married Jessie Olsson, an internationally renowned Swedish opera singer. The French had no problem with an inter-racial marriage, but the couple received criticism from some Americans. In 1903, while they were traveling in New York, his son Jesse was born. He and Jessie were the models for this painting. During World War I Tanner worked with the French Red Cross, painting many patriotic posters for them. He also worked as a liaison with the black American troops in Paris (the U.S. Army was still segregated at that time). Jessie died in 1925, and he grieved for many years, selling the farm in Normandy where they had been so happy. Having received many awards for his work, he was named in 1926 by the French Government as a *Chevalier* (knight) of the Legion of Honor. He died peacefully in Paris in 1937, and was buried there beside his wife.

Richard R. Losch+

A Word from the Editor

From the time humans became capable of observing the world and contemplating it, they have reflected on the problem of evil and pain. There have been countless explanations put forth, including the anger of the gods, the fall of mankind from grace, the work of a demon or anti-God, and pure random chance. None of these explanations is particularly satisfactory, but one thing we must be aware of if we are to deal with the question of evil and pain is that evil and pain are not the same thing. Evil will always result in pain to some degree. Pain, while it may result from evil, is not evil in itself. For example, there is nothing intrinsically evil in a tornado, flood or earthquake. These can cause immense suffering, but they are not evil. Pain can actually be good. If it were not for pain, we might

not withdraw our hand from a hot stove before it is seriously damaged. Without pain, the cancer or disease that is lurking inside us might not be discovered in time to cure it. Pain is natural, but evil requires a human hand. Whether or not you believe that evil is caused by Satan, even if it is he needs a human hand to carry out his will in the world. There are some truly evil people who have conscious malicious intentions, but they are actually quite rare. By far, most of the evil that is done in the world is done by basically decent people through ignorance, thoughtlessness and even through good intentions. It is said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If we mean to do good but consider only the immediate results without considering the long-term consequences, our good intentions could (and often do) result in calamity. What was intended to be a good work can sometimes cause great pain and suffering to others and even to ourselves. This is evil, and results directly from human action (or sometimes from inaction).

It is evident from the history of the world and of humanity that we are not going to eliminate either pain or evil. It is in our power, however, to reduce them significantly. Good intentions may often lead to pain, but they do not necessarily have to. What is most often lacking when good intentions produce bad results is the application of wisdom. Wisdom is an innate quality that some have to a far greater degree than others, yet it is also something that can be taught and learned. Wisdom is nothing more than the application of knowledge, good judgment, moral standards and experience (our own and that of others). However, if we lack knowledge, have no standard of morality, or fail to heed experience, no amount of what we think to be good judgment will protect us from bad decisions. By far the greatest sources of knowledge and vicarious experience are the centuries of literature and history that are available to us; and the standard of morality on which most of western civilization is based is the Bible. Whether or not we agree with that standard, it is nonetheless the basis of western culture, and we must be familiar with it if we are to have anything on which to build

a standard for ourselves. It is true that these standards may sometimes be offensive to others' tastes and feelings, but I say that this is good. Being offended is a wonderful stimulus to thinking. If we remove from our lives all the things that offend us, we also remove the most valuable tools we have for learning wisdom. Using these tools, however, we have everything necessary to achieve wisdom. If we fail to use them and teach them, we are doomed to continue paving that road to hell.

Father Rick Losch

Be Wordly Wise

Prophecy, Prophesy and Prophet

The words prophecy and prophesy are frequently misused, and as frequently misspelled. Prophecy is a noun, and its last syllable rhymes with see.¹ Prophesy is a verb, and it rhymes with sigh. (There is no such verb as prophecize, yet it is often heard.) A prophet's function is to prophesy (*sigh*) by making a prophecy (*see*). A common error is thinking that a prophet is an oracle. An oracle allegedly sees into the future and thus can report or comment on what it going to happen. This is not the role of a prophet. A prophet is a spokesman, not a seer or soothsayer. A prophet does not see the future, he simply relays to his readers or hearers the words of God as he has received them.²

To some extent anyone with a little reason and common sense can forecast the future. If you see heavy black clouds gathering and hear the rumble of thunder, you can with some surety forecast that there will soon be a storm. In a parade, you may see only a couple of horses and riders, yet when you hear musical instruments, you can forecast that a band will come by soon. This does not make you a seer or soothsayer, nor does it

¹ It might help to remember that prophecy with a *c* rhyme with *c*.

² Theologians often disagree as to whether a true prophet relays the exact words that God has spoken to him, or puts into his own words his understanding of what God wants him to say. Their position usually depends on whether or not they take the Bible literally.

make you a prophet. A prophet may foretell the future if that is what God has revealed to him. The prophet Amos predicted the destruction of Israel, but that does not mean that he saw the future himself.¹ It is therefore incorrect, for example, to call a meteorologist a weather prophet. He is simply using reason and common sense, based on scientific observation and training, to forecast the weather. He does not prophesy, he forecasts, and we must remember that even that is still only a best guess.

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Missing Jerusalem Wall Discovered

In July 2021 the Israel Antiquities Authority announced the discovery of a critically important missing section of the Iron Age defensive wall in Jerusalem. Artifacts discovered at the site confirm that this was the wall that Judah's King Hezekiah built in preparation for the Assyrian invasion in about 701 BC (Isa. 22:9). It is the same wall that the Babylonians breached when they destroyed Jerusalem and exiled its people in 586 BC (2 Kings 25:10). Two other sections were discovered the 1960s and '70s, but the long section between them could not be found. This cast doubt on whether they were in fact part of Hezekiah's wall, and even on whether that wall ever actually existed. This discovery confirms that it did indeed exist, and there is little or no doubt that it is Hezekiah's wall. It is about 15' thick and 10' high, and is located at the edge of the City of David (Jerusalem's oldest district). It is on the steep slope of the Kidron Valley, making it a strong defense of the eastern portion of the city. Other walls of Hezekiah's time have been found, including the Broad Wall, which was a prodigious 23' thick and 25' tall. Archaeology has once again confirmed that what once some thought might be myth is actually real history.

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¹ God may have revealed it to him, but the political and military omens were already pretty clear that Israel was doomed if it did not make some major moral and socio-economic changes very quickly. Sadly, it did not. The Assyrians destroyed the nation, and its 10 tribes were lost to history.

By the Rivers of Babylon (Part I)

Psalm 13:1 laments, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.” In 586 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon conquered Jerusalem, and carried King Jehoiachin, his whole royal household, and 10,000 Judahite elites into exile in Babylonia.¹ In the following decade there were two more waves of exiles taken, representing several thousand more. These included all the aristocracy, the scholars and teachers, the religious leaders, and the artisans and craftsmen. The only ones left behind in Judah were the unskilled and uneducated masses, who were incapable of organizing themselves to be any threat to the Babylonians. The exiles were finally freed and allowed to return to Judah when Cyrus the Great of Persia conquered Babylonia in 538 BC. With the short life expectancy of those days, after 50 years in Babylonia only a few remembered life in Judah. Even so, a significant number of Judahites, including many who had been born in Babylonia, chose to return and rebuild their homeland. This period, known as the Babylonian Captivity, has traditionally been looked upon as a time of great suffering for the Judahites, from which they were released and freed by the wise and benevolent Cyrus.²

In almost every ancient culture, slavery was a major institution and a primary source of labor, from the lowliest

¹ The term Jewish (as a religion) is not a correct designation for these people until after Ezra and Nehemiah's reform of their religion after returning to Judah. The word Jew derives from the Hebrew *Jehudi* (יְהוּדִי), Judahite.

² Cyrus was indeed a wise and benevolent ruler, and very much ahead of his time. He helped the Judahites return to Jerusalem, and even provided them with military protection, financial aid, and advisors to help them rebuild. This was more than mere altruism, however. He was wise enough to see the value of having a strong and grateful vassal state on his western frontier. To this day, Jewish tradition honors Cyrus as a benefactor.

tasks right up to teaching, medicine, finance, and the arts. Ancient slavery was very different from the racially-based slavery of the last few centuries, but it was still slavery, and it was still onerous. Although slaves were bought and sold and many were born into slavery, the vast majority of ancient slaves were war captives. One of the financial benefits of ancient warfare was the enormous wealth that could be obtained by enslaving whole populations and then selling them. For 2500 years this slavery image has been the one that has pervaded the tradition of the Babylonian Captivity. The only problem is that it is a completely incorrect one, because they were not slaves.

The Babylonians, following the example of their Assyrians predecessors, took a very different and enlightened position as to what to do with conquered peoples. They would bring back the best—the talented and educated leaders—and spread them throughout the kingdom, giving them incentives to assimilate, share their talents and skills, and hopefully be absorbed into the Babylonian culture.¹ The ones they left behind were the disorganized rabble who, without leadership, were easy to control, and offered no threat of rebellion or vengeance. While this is not the common image of the Babylonian Captivity, which is one of great oppression and suffering, scholars have known for centuries that though it was extremely painful to be ripped away from home and homeland, life for the Judahites in Babylon, while far from joyful, was not all that bad.

Modern archaeology continues to confirm what scholars

¹ When the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel 150 years earlier, they did the same thing. It worked so well that by the time Cyrus conquered Mesopotamia, the total exiled population of Israel had been absorbed and had disappeared. They were ten of the twelve Israelite tribes, and are now referred to as the “Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.” The Kingdom of Judah was made up mainly of two large tribes, Judah and Benjamin.

have long believed, that even though the exile was a painful cultural and spiritual trauma, the suffering has been exaggerated in the popular image. The Bible indicates that King Jehoiachin and his family received better treatment even than other captive kings (2 Kg. 25:30; Jer. 52:31ff), and clay tablets found in Nebuchadnezzar's palace show that royal captives received generous monthly rations of grain, wine and oil (in the ancient Middle East this was the equivalent of a monthly salary).

(To be continued next month)

Richard R. Losch+

Gods, Dragons and Superheroes

From the earliest that humans became able to communicate verbally, an important part of culture has been stories, legends and myths. There is a difference between the three. A story is simply a narrative of events, a legend is a story that endures over time, and a myth is a legend that conveys a valuable lesson or moral truth. Any of them can be totally imaginative (Cinderella), based on fact but richly embellished (Antony and Cleopatra), or completely factual (Lindberg's transatlantic flight). Ancient myths and legends seem to fascinate us most, with their giants, dragons and monsters, their brave and chivalrous heroes, and their benevolent, malevolent and often capricious gods. Unfortunately, we also tend to be rather arrogantly condescending to the ancients who told these stories. How could any intelligent and educated person believe that Poseidon sired the malign cyclops Polyphemus, who was outwitted by Odysseus? Or that the god Mars raped the human princess Rhea Sylvia, producing the twins Romulus and Remus who, after being suckled by a wolf, founded Rome? Or that Odin sent the Valkyries to bring fallen heroes to Valhalla? On the other hand, who believes that the billionaire orphan Bruce Wayne dresses up like a bat and fights crime in Gotham City? Or that an alien infant from an exploding planet came to Earth, grew up with superpowers, and donned a blue union suit and cape to fight

for Truth, Justice and the American Way? Or that a pointy-eared half-human Vulcan from the future is the epitome of logic? No one believes these stories literally, of course, and yet they are so deeply embedded in our culture that like the ancient myths, they may well endure for centuries. Likewise, in ancient times only the very ignorant believed literally the legends that we call myths, yet they continued to tell them, and they appreciated the values of honor, valor and fidelity that they represented. They also taught them as warnings of the consequences of dishonor, cowardice, hubris and falsehood.

The Greeks and Romans were not particularly religious people in the modern sense of that word. They did not go to the temples regularly to worship, and they had no desire to establish a personal relationship with the gods—in fact, they believed that attempting to do so was dangerously arrogant. They did not believe that the gods created the universe, but rather that they, like mankind, were a creation of it, but on a much higher and more powerful plane. With a very few exceptions (such as Prometheus, who gave us fire¹), the gods saw mankind as nothing but a nuisance and an occasional plaything. This is not to say that the Greeks and Romans were not religious in another sense, however. They were very much aware of the presence of external and sometimes controlling forces, which they personified as gods and spirits.² They lived with an around-the-clock awareness of the presence and power of these forces. While these gods did not expect to be loved, they very much demanded obedience. Disobedience could incur their wrath,

¹ Prometheus was not a true god. He was a Titan, a proto-god from whose race the gods evolved. Zeus punished him eternally for giving us fire.

² Most ancient gods were not spirits, but had bodies. The Greeks and Romans scorned other religions, like the Egyptians, who assigned animal bodies to their gods. The Greco-Roman gods had human form, but instead of blood they had *ichor*, a sparkling silvery fluid that gave them immortality and divine powers. A human could become a god by eating *ambrosia*, the food of the gods, which changed his blood into ichor. This had to be by divine permission, though. Tantalus spent eternity suffering in hell because he stole ambrosia and ate it.

and this was a danger not only to the disobedient person, but also to his family, his friends, and even his city or country. One man's major disobedience or contempt for a god could destroy a whole country. Almost no one denied the existence of deity. What the ancients called an atheist was someone whose attitude toward the gods was one of disregard or disobedience, thus endangering the community. This is why the Christians, who would not sacrifice to the gods, were called atheists and were persecuted—they endangered Rome. There was no official Roman religion other than that one must make the required sacrifices and say the occasional required prayers to the primary Roman gods. No one, even the gods, cared what you thought as long as you said and did the right things. Beyond that, you were free to worship any other gods you wanted, including those of foreign cultures. The Christians would have been in no trouble if they had been willing to throw a few grains of incense on Jupiter's altar before going off to worship Christ. They would not, of course, and thus they were seen as "atheists" who threatened to bring the wrath of the gods down on Rome. The fact that most intelligent Romans did not take the myths literally is an important factor in there not having been an intensive genocide of Christians.

We love our tales of heroes and superheroes, faithfully struggling against dragons, monsters and supervillains. We don't believe them literally, but we do believe them in that they assure us that there is always hope of the overcoming of evil by good. Truth, Justice and the American Way have their defenders. Luke Skywalker may not be real, but what he represents is an inspiration to us and a reminder that there are powers that can even overcome a mighty evil empire. So it was with the myths of the ancients. They sustained and encouraged a people who lived in a daunting and dangerous world, reminding them that there is always an explanation for the mysterious, and that there is always hope. That is the purpose of legends and myths, and that is why they endure.

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Jewish Dietary Laws

The Jewish dietary laws are very ancient, being rooted in the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the Old Testament). Jesus and his disciples were faithful, observant Jews, and the gospels make it quite clear that they observed these laws. Some claim that they violated the Torah, but this shows a misunderstanding of Judaism in his time. What they violated (such as the ban on healing on the Sabbath and the requirement for ritual handwashing before eating) were late oral traditions introduced by the Pharisees as enhancements to the law. They are not in the written law, and Jesus never violated the law of the written Torah itself.

Most people are aware of the dietary laws, yet know little more about them than that acceptable food is called kosher, and that pork products are forbidden. *Kasher* (קָשֶׁר) is Hebrew for clean or fit [for consumption], but the usual pronunciation of it, kosher, comes from the eastern European (Ashkenazi) pronunciation. The observance of the dietary laws is called *kashrut* (קִשְׁרוּת). Food that is unacceptable is *treif* (pronounced *trafe*). This is a Yiddish word (טרייפ) that comes from the Hebrew *trafah* (טרפה), torn. Most of the dietary laws come from Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14. The degree to which *kashrut* is observed covers a wide spectrum, from strict adherence to the letter of the law, to a symbolic observance of only a few of its principles on special occasions. Most Jews identify themselves either as “religious/observant,” or as “secular.” A religious Jew is one who believes in God and worships him, and regularly observes the ancient Jewish traditions at least to some degree. A secular Jew is one who honors his Jewish heritage and because of that observes some of the traditions on special occasions (such as at Passover), but for whom religion itself is not particularly important. Some secular Jews are atheists, but the majority simply place religion as a low priority in their lives. Many Christians can be said to follow the same pattern.

Even the observance of *kashrut* falls across a wide spectrum. For example, the law forbids mixing meat products and milk

products at the same meal. On one end of the spectrum, it would mean no more than that, such as not having cream in the coffee at a meat-based meal. Some will set a time limit between eating meat and milk, such as waiting a certain number of hours until the stomach has completely digested one before eating the other. On the other end of the spectrum, some have two completely separate sets of tableware, cookware and utensils, one for meat dishes and the other for milk dishes. At the ultimate extreme, there are even homes that have two dishwashers, one for each set of dishes. This is rare, but there are some who take the dietary restrictions that seriously.

Many of the restrictions were made to separate the Jews from the pagan influences of their neighbors, such as the restriction on mixing meat and milk. The Canaanites had a ritual that involved seething a baby goat in its own mother's milk (Ex. 23:19), then eating it as part of sexually-oriented fertility rites. Another separation restriction was banning not only eating with Gentiles, but also eating anything from a vessel that a Gentile had touched. The only wine that could be drunk was wine made by Jews under carefully regulated conditions. Wine made by Gentiles was forbidden. If a Gentile touched a clay vessel, it had to be destroyed. If he touched a stone vessel it had to be ritually purified before it could be used again. Clay will absorb some of what is in it, while stone will not. Clay can never be completely cleaned by just washing it in water (which was the only method they had), while stone can. The reason for these restrictions seems to be clear. They kept contact with Gentiles, and thus with their pagan ideas, at a minimum.

Scholars have studied these dietary restrictions for millennia, trying to determine the reasons for many of them. Some seem fairly obvious, such as the ban on shellfish. The only seafood the law allows is fish with scales and bony fins, banning all shellfish such as lobsters, shrimp and clams. To anyone who has gotten sick from eating bad shellfish, this is quite understandable. When fish goes bad, the smell and taste are immediately obvious, but shellfish can seem safe even when they

have become dangerous. This does not explain the prohibition on shark. Sharks are true fish, and are not only edible, but also delicious.¹ They do not have scales or bony fins, however, and are thus forbidden. The ban may be based on the fact that sharks have fleshy fins and no bones (only cartilage), and thus to the ancients may have seemed abnormal or demonic.

There is no immediately obvious health reason for the prohibition of pork. Pork can cause trichinosis (a parasitic disease that is very painful and sometimes fatal if not treated), but other than that it is no more dangerous than any other meat. Before modern science, however, there was no reason to suspect pork for trichinosis. The time between eating pork and the appearance of symptoms is long enough that there would be no reason to make the connection. This is evidenced by the fact that pork was a favorite meat in most other parts of the world. There may be another explanation, however. Unlike most other mammals, pigs have a very poor internal cooling system. In warm weather the only way they can cool themselves is to wallow in water or mud. In most parts of the world there are plenty of streams and mudholes for them, but these are rare in most of the arid Middle East. Pigs were brought to that part of the world in the second millennium BC, and some eventually escaped into the wild. To cool themselves, since there were so few waterholes, they were forced to wallow in their own waste. People would have concluded that any animal that would do that must be an abomination to God. The Israelites were not the only ones to ban pork. It was prohibited by most Middle Eastern peoples, and Muslims still ban it today. When the Philistines arrived from somewhere in the Aegean in about 1200 BC, they brought pigs with them. The Philistines were bitter enemies of the Israelites, and their love of pork confirmed that pigs must be hateful to God. By Jesus' time, herds of swine were common in the Gentile

¹ Those who remember when McDonald's introduced the Filet-O-Fish sandwich will agree that it was then significantly tastier than it is today. This is because the fish originally used was mako shark. The government eventually banned its use because of the threat to the shark population.

regions of Galilee – remember that Jesus cast the demons into the swine at Gadara (Lk. 8:26ff). Pork is not the only meat restriction. In *kashrut*, the only acceptable food mammals are those that chew the cud and have a cloven hoof. Thus sheep, goats, deer and cattle are acceptable, but horses, rabbits, wolves and of course pigs are not. Perhaps since such a wide variety of animals roamed the Middle East in ancient times, this was to make the decision easier as to what was “clean” and what was not. The various Gentile peoples ate many forbidden foods, including dogs, often as part of their pagan rituals.

One important restriction of *kashrut* is the ban on eating blood in any form (Gen. 9:4, Lev. 17:10f). Almost all ancient people believed that life is in the blood, and the law says that while you may eat the flesh of certain animals, you are not to eat the “life” (the soul). For meat to be kosher, therefore, it must be completely drained of the blood before it can be eaten.¹

One of the great advantages of *kashrut* is that an observant Jew cannot put any food into his mouth without being reminded that he is a Jew, because he must do two things: he must be sure that the food is kosher, and he must say a brief prayer of thanksgiving (a “grace”). This reminds him every time he eats that he is the servant of a provident God.

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The Epistle is Online

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¹ This is one reason that Jewish cuisine is so delicious. Once meat has been “koshered” (cleansed of all its blood and had all the excess fat removed), it is often rather bland. Over the millennia, Jewish cooks have developed ways to prepare it that make it amazingly tasty.

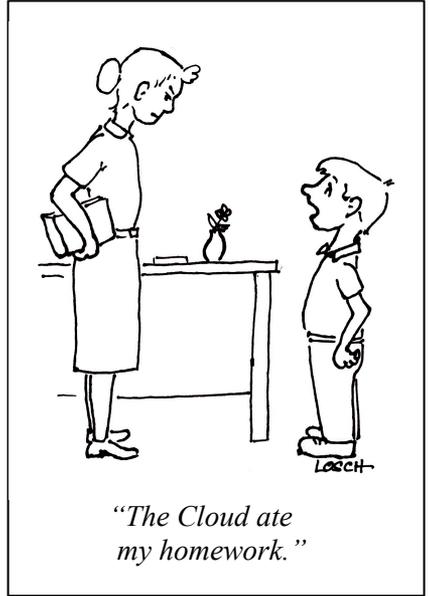
A Touch of Trivia

In 1496, Garcia Rodríguez de Montalvo wrote *Las Sergas de Esplandián* (The Adventures of Esplandián), an extremely popular novel. In it the inhabitants of an island paradise named California, which is laden with gold and jewels, are all women. They help Esplandián explore. When Hernan Cortes was exploring the American Pacific coast, he landed on what he mistakenly thought was an island. It was so beautiful that he named it California, after the island in the novel.

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JAMIE

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