



Advent 2018

O Little Town of Bethlehem, Part 3

Tale of Two Kings

Matthew 2:1-12

David Sunday December 23, 2018

Merry Christmas to everyone, and for those of you who are visiting with us today, we're so glad you're here. Christmas is the miracle of miracles. We marvel and wonder and praise God for the gift of His Son. Let's turn to Matthew 2 in God's Word now.

The first verse tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. He didn't come into the world in a great and mighty city like Jerusalem or Rome or Alexandria. He chose a poor and lowly town, a little place, to show that He's a Savior Who has a heart for those who are lowly and needy. Wherever "meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Children, it was great to hear you sing today. Maybe you'll recognize these words:

It came without ribbons
It came without tags
It came without packages
Boxes or bags
He puzzled and puzzled
'Til his puzzler was sore
Then the Grinch thought of something
He hadn't before
"What if Christmas," he thought
"Doesn't come from a store?"
"What if Christmas, perhaps,
"Means a little bit more?"

We don't regard Dr. Seuss as much of an authority here at New Covenant, but I do think he was on to something here. As we open God's Word this morning, we're going to see that Christmas means far more than just "a little bit more" than what you can buy from a store. In fact, if you got all the wish lists on Amazon.com, or every wish list in the world, delivered to your doorstep this week, it would pale in comparison to the infinite wonder of the Gift God has given us in Jesus.

Today, we're going to see an angle of what this great story means, this story I never tire of preaching about. There are so many different facets to this diamond. We're going to look at Matthew 2:1-12. Hear God's glorious Word and worship as we listen:

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we are trembling today on the threshold of Your Word, eager to hear what You will speak to us from this wondrous story that will be told through all the ages, that You became flesh and dwelt among us; that we have seen His glory, the glory of Your only begotten Son, sent from You, Father, full of grace and full of truth. So I pray You would send Your Spirit today to empower the preaching of the Word, that it may come with clarity. Please, Lord, send Your Spirit to all our hearts to show us the beauty of Your Son Jesus. We pray this in the name of Him Who alone is worthy of our worship, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You've heard of the three kings and you've probably sung the song. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there is no biblical basis for three kings in this story. There are wise men from the east. The Bible does not say they were kings and we are not told how many came. Yes, they brought

three gifts, but that doesn't mean there were three kings. Kate has sometimes given me three gifts or more at Christmas. She's so sweet, she gives me whatever she thinks my heart desires. So it is possible to get three gifts from one person, or three gifts from 20 people. We don't know how many wise men there were.

That doesn't mean you can't sing the song or that you can't put the three wise men or three kings in your manger scene. You can do that as long as you understand that if the wise men heard you singing "We three kings of Orient are," they'd probably say, "Really? Where did you get that idea?" It's not in the Bible.

A Tale of Two Kings

In reality, there were two kings in this story: King Herod and King Jesus. We have before us a tale of two kings. Imagine what it was like for Herod the day these wise men arrived. They had come on a long journey. East of Jerusalem, east of Israel, across a vast desert that stretched hundreds of miles. Perhaps they traveled across this desert from Arabia; or some think maybe all the way from Persia, which is modern-day Iraq or Iran. All we know is it was a long and arduous journey.

It was not uncommon for caravans from the east to pass through Jerusalem with businessmen who came to trade their wares. But there was something ominous about them that troubled King Herod. He was not called Herod the Great for no reason. This was a king who did great architectural masterpieces for Israel. He's the one who fortified the fortress known as Masada. He's also the one who initiated a great reconstruction project of the second temple in Jerusalem. He was a formidable ruler and a king who administrated his kingdom with an iron fist.

When he heard what these wise men were saying, their words to him were deeply disturbing. What did he hear? Verse two: "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*" Most kings don't like to have foreigners come into their throne room and ask, "Where is the king? Where's the new king?" especially a man as paranoid as Herod.

See, Herod himself had never forgotten that he was not from the traditional royal house. His father, Antipater, was from Idumea—or from the place known as Edom in the Old Testament. His dad was an Edomite; his mother was from Arabia. Herod's family had accepted the Jewish religion, so they were regarded by the Romans as Jewish enough to reign over Israel. But the Jews themselves never really embraced Herod as their own. The historian Josephus records that there was an objection to Herod being made king on the grounds that he was only a half-Jew. So even

though Herod had done great things for Jerusalem in terms of architecture, he was not beloved in the hearts of the people.

When it says in verse three that “*all Jerusalem with him*” was deeply troubled, we shouldn’t conclude that they were against the prospect of a new king. Plenty of Jews would have been delighted to see King Herod dethroned. Rather, all of Jerusalem was deeply disturbed because they knew how neurotic their king was. They didn’t want an angry and threatened king, because they’d already seen how rabid he would become when his sovereignty was threatened.

Did you know that when King Herod took the throne, he immediately annihilated every last remaining remnant of the previous dynasty? We know from historical accounts that during the course of his reign, Herod put to death half the Sanhedrin, slayed 300 court officials at the merest suspicion of disloyalty, executed one of his wives—the one they said was his favorite wife—and killed his mother-in-law and three sons. Herod was so maniacal that as he laid dying, he decreed that all the notable men of Jerusalem should be brought together in the Hippodrome and annihilated as soon as his death was announced. What was his rationale for this? He wanted to make sure there would be weeping in Jerusalem on the day of his death instead of rejoicing.

In this chapter, Matthew focuses on the unbridled fury that consumed Herod when he heard about the Christ Who was born King of the Jews in Bethlehem. Matthew goes on to tell us Herod was such a ruthless man that he ordered the massacre of every baby boy under the age of two who lived in Bethlehem at that time—just to eliminate the possibility of the Messiah rising to a position of superior sovereignty over himself.

Bethlehem was just a little town. Maybe there were 20 or 30 babies under the age of two. But the weeping of Bethlehem would be so great that the prophet Jeremiah predicted that Rachel, who had been buried on the road to Bethlehem 1,500 years earlier, would be heard weeping and mourning from her grave. Matthew tells us that this prophecy in verses 17 and 18 was fulfilled during the time of Herod. Verse 18, “*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.*”

So instead of thinking of “We Three Kings,” focus on two. Matthew is emphatic in stressing that Herod is not the only king in Israel. A new king has been born. We see that in verse two: “*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*” It’s there again in verse four when Herod assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people, asking them where the Christ would be born. (Christ is just another word for the anointed Messiah King.) In verse six we see from Micah the prophet where we were last week, “*And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*”

What is Matthew telling us here? He's telling us that Christmas is confronting us with the reality that Jesus Christ is the center of the universe and we are not. Christ is King and Lord of all. You are not; I am not. And your everlasting joy, my everlasting joy, depends on whether that message comes to us as good news or bad news. If you are glad that Jesus is King and you are not, then you have found the secret of true wisdom and will experience everlasting joy when you embrace Him as your King. But if you resist Christ as the sovereign and absolute Ruler of your life, then you are choosing a path of folly, the path King Herod chose. The end of that path will not be joy.

As this story unfolds, the wise men from the east end up rejoicing exceedingly with great joy. But by the end of this chapter, Herod is dead and facing an eternity of misery without a moment of joy in the future (verse 19).

Everlasting joy or everlasting misery—it all hinges on how you respond personally to the question: “*Where is He Who has been born King of the Jews?*” Is Jesus on the throne of your life? Does your heart prepare Him room? Do you gladly, joyfully embrace Jesus as your King? That's the response Matthew and God the Holy Spirit are calling for from this passage.

I'm going to follow the lead of a number of commentators who outline from this passage four possible responses we could make to the news: “Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.” We could respond to the news that Jesus is King in four possible ways: apathy, anxiety, animosity or adoration.

Apathy

What do you think of these chief priests and scribes in verse four? Wouldn't you think these would be the people who would be most excited to welcome their Messiah? When Herod calls and asks them where the Christ would be born, it was like “Old Testament prophecy for 100” on the Jeopardy Bible edition. Boom! “What is Bethlehem of Judea?” They knew the answer. They could rattle off that answer, that prophecy, in their sleep. It's right there in Micah 5:2.

So why weren't they stirred in their spirits to make the five-mile journey down to that little town and see if in fact Micah's prophecy had come to its fulfillment? Why didn't they get up and go with the wise men? Why did they just go back to their scribal work, Bible studies and temple rituals instead of seeking the One to Whom all their Bible studies were pointing? It's a striking example of apathy, of indifference.

Here were wise men from the east traveling afar, yet the people who were only five miles away, who knew all about the predictions of His coming in their Old Testament, did not even leave Jerusalem to see if the King was there. Why was this?

Doug O'Donnell hits the nail on the head when he writes, "It is not surprising that they knew the answer where the Christ was to be born. It would be 'shame on them' if they didn't. What is surprising is that they did nothing with the answer." Here were foreigners "traversing afar, over field and fountain, moor and mountain," while the religious experts were always learning but never able to come to a knowledge of the truth. They're not even curious. "Could this be the One of Whom the Scriptures testify?"

Friends, we know that Jesus Christ is sitting on the throne of the universe and that the heavens are roaring the praise of His glory, that He has no rival, no equal, that now and forever He reigns as God. Isn't it convicting that we can attend church week after week and basically live as if no one is on the throne of our lives except "me, myself and I"? May the Lord search us and know our hearts today. How many rival thrones are there in our hearts? When and how do we give the throne that belongs only to Jesus to lesser loves and trivial pursuits? Is all our study and knowledge of the Scriptures leading us, as it should, to fall on our knees before Him and present our very selves as living sacrifices to the Lord and King of the universe (Romans 12:1-2)?

May the Lord deliver us from just playing church, from being Bible quiz champions but indifferent to the glory, presence, power and reign of Jesus Christ over every single aspect of our lives. These scribes are in this story as a rebuke to the complacency that can lull professing Christians into living as if King Jesus has no real sway over our lives today. May apathy not be our response to the Christmas story.

Anxiety

The second response we see in this passage is anxiety and fear. For most of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the news that wise men had come looking for the King made them very anxious. Verse three says they were deeply disturbed. Now, surely there were some in Jerusalem who, like Anna and Simeon, had searched the Scriptures and were waiting for their deliverer, their Messiah. They knew the prophecy of Jeremiah 23:5-6 (CSB):

"Look, the days are coming"—this is the Lord's declaration—"when I will raise up a Righteous Branch for David. He will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. This is the name he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness."

They knew those prophecies. Now here are the magi from the east seeking the One Who is born King of the Jews. They also had read Isaiah the prophet, who said in Isaiah 60:1-3 (CSB):

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord shines over you. For look, darkness will cover the earth, and total darkness the peoples; but the Lord will shine over you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to your shining brightness.

Here are wise men from the east, representing the nations coming to the light of the Messiah. Surely there were people in Jerusalem who knew this prophesy in Numbers 24:17 (CSB): “A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel.” They heard these wise men saying, “We saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.” They knew all this. But there was a cost involved in leaving Jerusalem and traveling to Bethlehem with these wise men. Herod and his henchmen would surely be keeping a close watch on any citizen who appeared to be attracted to this newborn King.

It’s the same way today, especially this time of year. There are many people today who recognize, “There is something compelling about Jesus.” I mean, even as we hear the Christmas songs, there are many people who are thinking, “Hmm, I need to think further about Jesus. I need to explore God a bit.” Yet they’re afraid to investigate further. “What will people think of me if I get serious about Jesus? Will I lose academic respect? What will it cost me financially? What might it mean for my marriage if I decide to look further into Jesus?” So out of fear of all the things that could be turned upside down, people say, “Well, I’m just not going to explore Jesus any further.” Because we’re afraid of all the things that could go wrong, we never ask, “What if Christianity is right?” We don’t explore, “What if Jesus really is the King?”

Tim Keller talks about an atheist philosopher by the name of Thomas Nagel, who is refreshingly candid about his feelings toward religion. Nagel writes:

I am talking about the fear of religion itself. I am speaking of experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true, and I’m made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and naturally I hope that my belief is right. I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God. I don’t want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not rare. [I doubt] there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there is a God.

No one, says this atheist philosopher, is really neutral. No one is truly indifferent. In essence Nagel is saying, “Look into your heart; here’s what you’ll find. Deep down inside, you’re afraid. You’re afraid of turning over the keys of your life. You’re afraid of giving up the throne and

relinquishing your obsession with following Sinatra's playlist, 'I did it my way.' You're afraid of giving absolute control to King Jesus."

So when you hear about Jesus and your heart is stirred, fear rises up, and you don't pursue Him any further. You're afraid of the implications. You're troubled by what it might cost you. And underneath that fear, Nagel says, there's a deep-seated resistance, what he calls a "cosmic authority problem." That problem is in every human heart which leads to possible human response number three to the news that Jesus is King.

Animosity

Some people respond with outright animosity. I think the most chilling words in the first 12 verses of Matthew 2 are Herod's words in verse eight (CSB): *"He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.'"*

Children, I thought about calling some of you up to be volunteers today, but you've already sung and done such a nice job. So I'm just going to ask you to imagine in your minds for a minute that you're at a Christmas pageant. You've been assigned to play the role of King Herod. You are given verse eight as one of your lines. I want you to imagine what tone of voice you would use when you say the words in verse eight. How would you fix your eyes? Would you use any facial expressions or body language?

As I picture Herod in verse eight, I picture a sinister glint in his eye. I hear a phony attempt at niceness in his voice. "Where is the king that I might go and worship him too?" There's a tremor there. There's a fury that is rising up in his soul that he can barely conceal. I picture that King Herod won't even look them straight in the eye, because if he did they would detect his murderous intent. Herod, at this very moment, is anti-Christ. He is an agent of that ancient serpent, the devil, who masked himself with cunning duplicity and claimed to offer a path to freedom through rebellion against the Word of God.

Ever since that ancient serpent slithered out of the Garden of Eden, he has had a single solitary objective: destroy the Messiah. That's the one thing he's always wanted to do. Herod is just one among millions who have been captured by the Christ-despising impulse to wipe out the reign of King Jesus. This animosity that takes hold of the hearts of men and women toward Jesus Christ only serves to show that Satan is threatened by Jesus. Satan has a single arch-rival on his most wanted list: Jesus.

That's why no name is more reviled and no name is more threatening in public discourse than the wonderful name of our Savior Jesus. Speak that name into conversations and people get

riled up. People get uneasy. You can't remain neutral with Jesus. Herod's hatred of Christ is barely possible to conceal. I think Tim Keller is right when he says, "There is a little King Herod inside every one of our hearts." The bigger our own personal kingdom and the more fear we have to lose, the greater our animosity at anyone who claims the right to demand absolute allegiance over our lives.

There is in the heart of every human being such a stronghold of autonomy and pride and self-determination, it takes a revolution to overthrow the tyranny of self-rule that is governing every one of our hearts. It takes a revolution of grace. Praise God, this revolution of grace is alive and well. It's conquering the world one soul at a time. It's calling for the advancement of the gospel. It's going to continue until every tribe, tongue and nation are wondrously invaded by the good news of great joy that began in Bethlehem that first Christmas morning.

Friends, God is not threatened by the animosity of human beings. Quite the contrary. Psalm 2:4-6 (CSB) says that when the nations rage and the rulers conspire together against the Lord and His anointed Messiah, "*The one enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord ridicules them. Then he speaks to them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath: 'I have installed my king on Zion, my holy mountain.'*" In that psalm, the Lord says to His Son, "*Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance and the ends of the earth your possession.*" That's exactly what we see happening in Matthew 2.

Adoration

As wise men are traveling all the way from the eastern ends of the earth to serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling as they fall on their knees and kiss the Son of God Who lies in a manger in Bethlehem, we see the worldwide reign of Jesus Christ starting to advance. The first people in Matthew's Gospel who come to worship Him are not Jews, but Arabs—Gentiles—people from a foreign country.

Their response is adoration because the God of all grace has put into the hearts of these men who were not Jews—who were magi, magicians, astrologers—to follow the star until it led to the newborn King. What is God showing us here? It's His plan, it's His gracious purpose, that His Son to Whom all authority in heaven and on earth belongs, will have for Himself disciples from every nation on the face of the earth. Jesus is King of Israel, but He's also King of all the nations.

Here's what every disciple of Jesus has in common. Everyone who belongs to Jesus responds with adoration. That's the response God the Holy Spirit is summoning from each and every one of our hearts today. He is saying to us, "O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord."

How do we do that? Just look at the wise men as an impressive example of what it looks like to adore Christ.

They did not stop their quest until they arrived at the place where Jesus was. Hearts that are set on adoration will not rest until the beloved One for Whom their soul longs appears, until they finally can come to the place where they say, “Jesus, You alone are worthy and I worship You.” That’s the heart of a disciple. We want to adore Him.

These wise men left their jobs, families and homes to follow a star on a perilous journey. It was probably on bumpy, stinky camels. Believe me, I rode a camel in Morocco. I rode it about two blocks and that was all I needed to be convinced that I would not want to ride a camel all the way across the Arabian desert. That was not a pleasant ride. These wise men said, “No journey is too far. No obstacle is too high. No sacrifice is too great, if only the path we are on leads us to the King. We must worship Him.”

I love this comment by Dan Doriani: “They knew little, but they acted on what little they knew.” I mean, who had more information about the Messiah in Matthew 2? Everyone had more information about the Messiah than the wise men. Surely the chief priests and the scribes had the whole Old Testament to summon them to worship Christ, the newborn King. But here, the ones who knew the most were not the ones who adored Jesus the best. It’s the ones whose hearts were captured by the one truth they did know: He’s the King. He is worthy of worship. That led them to fall at Jesus’ feet.

Friends, I’ve noticed this in my own life and in my observations of others. Knowledge of the Word of God is a wonderful attainment that we all should pursue with every fiber of our being. But it’s not always those who know the most who worship Christ most passionately. Sometimes knowledge can puff us up. Sometimes knowledge can anesthetize us to glory. Sometimes knowledge can make us skeptical. Friends, knowledge that doesn’t cause your heart to boil with worship will eventually cause your heart to harden. They knew little, but they acted on what little they knew.

They spared no expense to bring gifts that were worthy of the King. They’re like the Queen of Sheba who traveled from afar and lavished on King Solomon the choicest gifts of her dominion. These wise men traveled far and brought Jesus the richest treasures of their nations. They would not offer to the Lord that which cost them nothing, because worship that costs us nothing is not worship at all. Worship is costly. Someone once said, “The way to test whether or not our giving is costing us something is to ask if our wages or salary were ten times the amount we give to God each week, would we be well off?” Could you survive on ten times the amount you give to God? True worship is costly worship.

True worship is also joyful. Notice verse ten. They didn't give grudgingly. Look at what it says there: *"They rejoiced..."* But it doesn't stop there, does it? No, *"They rejoiced exceedingly..."* Okay. We're getting it. But that's not enough. *"They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."* It's joy times four that we see here in this passage. They are just overjoyed to be before Jesus. It says in verse 11 (CSB), *"Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother."* It's always that order in the Gospels—the child, Jesus, comes first, even before his blessed mother. *"They saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts."*

- Gold—a treasure fit for a King, here in baby clothes, the eternal King Who made the universe.
- Frankincense—the precious aromatic gum that was burned as incense and in constant use by the priests in the temple as they carried out their priestly duties. Here was Jesus, our great and final High Priest, Who by the sacrifice of Himself will perfect forever all those who come to God through Him.
- Myrrh, which was also a precious oil, but this one was used for embalming the dead. That might seem a strange gift for a baby King, but it's also a sign that already, looming over the manger, is the shadow of a cross. This baby, born to be King, will first be crucified before He'll claim His crown and ascend to His throne.

I love how Michael Green summarizes this: "In these three gifts we see Who Jesus is, what He came to do and what it cost Him."

- Who is He? He's the King.
- What did He come to do? He came to be the great High Priest Who offers His life as a sacrifice for our sins.
- What did it cost Him? Death on a cross.

Michael Green says, "Like the wise men, we bow in wonder before a God Who could love us so much."

Friends, at that moment the wise men didn't receive anything back from Jesus. He's just a little boy. But they weren't so short-sighted as to think, "You know, I came to church today. What did I get out of it? I put my offering in the offering plate. What is God doing for me?" That's not how they thought. Some have speculated that by giving these gifts to Mary and Joseph, the wise men were actually helping to insure the survival of the Messiah. Because how else were these poor peasants going to make a journey all the way to Egypt and live there on their own without a job or a

vocation until Herod's maniacal rage was finally ended by his death? People speculate, "Maybe they took the gifts from the wise men, like the gold, and used that to make that journey."

But here's the point. Whatever we give to Jesus in worship and adoration, we cannot possibly repay the Lord for all the good He's done for us—nor should we ever try. We can't possibly out-give Jesus. We adore Him for giving us infinitely more than we could ask or imagine. These wise men gave Him their costliest treasures, but Jesus eventually would give them and all who trust in Him eternal life and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Ephesians 1:3-10).

Jesus, in His endless grace to us, and in the bottomless riches of all that He is for us, will forever command our everlasting adoration. We'll never get to the end of the adoration of Christ our Lord. I love how an old Irish hymn puts it:

I cannot tell why He Whom angels worship,
Should set His love upon the sons of men,
Or why, as Shepherd, He should seek the wanderers,
To bring them back, they know not how or when.

But this I know, that He was born of Mary
When Bethlehem's manger was His only home,
And that He lived at Nazareth and labored,
And so the Savior, Savior of the world has come...

I cannot tell how He will win the nations,
How He will claim His earthly heritage.
How satisfy the needs and aspirations
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage.

But this I know, all flesh shall see His glory,
And He shall reap the harvest He has sown,
And some glad day His sun shall shine in splendor
When He, the Savior, Savior of the world is known.

[I Cannot Tell by William Fullerton, 1929; lyrics set to the Irish tune Londonderry]

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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