

The Last Supper: The Testament of Jesus

by REINHARD SCHWARZ

LUTHER DEFINED THE Last Supper very precisely as the making of a testament by Jesus. He finds all the determining marks of this activity in the New Testament witness to Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples "in the night in which he was betrayed" (1 Cor. 11:23). By the very action of making a testament himself, Jesus at one and the same time instituted his testamental activity as a sacrament. This is to be carefully observed in the doctrine of the



Supper, since in the Sacraments we have to do with actions, which in turn to be accorded their particular character must be described as actions.

In his critique of the sacrifice of the Mass Luther did not simply cut out the action character of the sacrament without replacement. For him, the action of making a testament is the heart of the sacrament. Testament-making activity therefore replaces the sacrificial activity, because in the testament Jesus turns to his disciples in a saving act, simultaneously establishing a particular bond between himself and them.

The Idea of Testament in Luther 1519–1521

In the decisive years 1520–1521 every work in which Luther deals with the problem of the Mass sets the idea of testament in the center. First in "A Treatise on the New Testament, That Is, the Holy Mass,"¹ then in "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church,"² and further in the two treatises paralleling each other written at Wartburg Castle, "On the Abolition of the Private Mass," and "On the Misuse of the Mass."³ Already on his exegesis of Galatians 3:15–18⁴ in the Galatians commentary of 1519, Luther had so expounded the concept of testament as to make it fruitful for the interpretation of the Supper. To every legacy as a "last will and testament" there belongs, Luther observes, a testator who makes the legacy, one person or an entire group to whom it is to be distributed, the testamentary promise itself, and finally the inheritance bequeathed in the testament. Thus God promised a testament to Abraham and his posterity when he bequeathed him a saving possession that would include all peoples. Luther, with Paul, interprets that possession as the righteousness of faith. In Jesus Christ, Abraham's descendant and Son of God, indeed through his very death, this divine testament of promise is opened up so that ever since the legacy of salvation can be distributed. For with Hebrews 9:17 one must say that a testament goes into effect only with the death of the testator, only then can the legacy be appropriated by the one intended in the testament.

Luther can bring the concepts covenant (*pactum*) and testament into agreement in this context, even though they do not denote the same thing.⁵ Whoever makes a covenant must remain alive; for a testament to go into effect, however, the one who makes it must

die. But in Jesus Christ both come together. In him God, over whom death has no power, has made a covenant with humanity. And Jesus Christ himself issued his testamentary legacy in the face of death. Just as Jesus Christ is "both God and Man, so Testament and Covenant are in this case the same."⁶

No big step is needed to apply these ideas from the exegesis of Galatians to the understanding of the Supper. Luther took this step early in 1520, first in the "Treatise on Good Works," briefly indicating it in a short exposition on the meaning of the Mass as the Testament of Christ,⁷ and more extensively and for the first time thematically a bit later in the "Treatise on the New Testament, That is, on The Holy Mass."⁸ The enumeration of the individual aspects of testament-making varies in the above mentioned thematic treatments of the question of the Supper. The four points already named in the Galatians commentary are expanded by Luther in the "Treatise on the New Testament" first by the "seal or warranty (*Wahrzeichen*)" of Bread and Wine, under which Christ is present with his body and blood,⁹ and further by the duty enjoined upon us to hold Christ in memory or commemoration¹⁰ as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 11:26. For "this is what an earthly testator does, who bequeaths something to his heirs, that he may leave behind him a good name, the good will of men, and a blessed memory, that he should not be forgotten."¹¹ In *The Babylonian Captivity* when he deals with the question of the essence of the Supper Luther proceeds from the premise that it is the very testament Christ has given for believers to participate in after his death.¹² On this "immovable foundation" Luther sets three points: the death of the testator, the promise of the inheritance, and the designation of the heir.¹³ All three points are contained in the words spoken at the Supper, which taken as a whole form the last will and testament promised by Jesus.¹⁴ In 1521 Luther returns to the four-point distinction as it had been set forth in the Galatians commentary.¹⁵ Here he sets a definition: "A testament is nothing but the last will of one who is dying, telling how his heirs are to live with and dispose of his properties after his death."¹⁶

Since Luther in general perceives the promise of salvation to be the fundamental content of the sacraments it is important for him to bring the promise of salvation into internal agreement with the explanation of the Supper as testament. In the words of the Supper Jesus had promised the saving gift of the forgiveness of sins to all

believers as the legacy of his death.¹⁷ However from the perspective of the donor there is a difference between a promise or offer and the making of a testament. "A testament is made by one who is going to die. A promise, however, is made by one who will continue to live."¹⁸ In the person who in this instance is the donor of both promise and testament, however, the difference disappears. When "God now and again in the scripture calls his promise a 'testament' he wants thereby to indicate that he would die. And again when he calls it a promise he wants to indicate that he would live. And thus he would give us to understand with his own words that he would become human, die, and nevertheless live eternally."¹⁹ These expositions find their parallel in Luther's reflections on the relation between covenant or covenantal pact (*pactum*) and testament in the Galatians commentary. Here as there the difference in the concepts is mirrored in the difference between the humanity and the divinity of Jesus Christ. The situation in the Supper is determined by the impending death of Jesus. But the content of the legacy that Jesus bequeaths in this situation has its telos in the eternal life that God guarantees. The testament of Jesus is in its content testament and covenantal pact, a promise of life in community with God. Luther finds the entirety of salvation in the testamental promise of Jesus. In the Small Catechism he explains later with reference to the Supper: "Where there is forgiveness of sins, there is also life and salvation." He understands the promise of the Supper in the same sense already in 1520/21.²⁰

We can clarify further. God's forgiving love restores humans out of the lostness of sin and death into communion with God once again, so that humans thereby receive for themselves eternal life and complete salvation. The divinity of Jesus encompasses his full authority to declare God's grace to humans in their sin and separation from God. This full authority gave to the public works of Jesus the peculiar power that unleashed faith in some but in others caused offense because they could not tolerate such divine authority in this man. In the face of his impending condemnation for blasphemy Jesus once again confirmed the full authority of the forgiveness of sins to his disciples. He did that expressly in view of the threat of death hanging over him. He accepts his death for the sake of the forgiveness of sins so that the confirmation of his full divine authority becomes itself the declaration of his testament. The reality of this situation in the face of the impending death dem-

onstrates the humanity of Jesus. He demonstrates it himself. For in that he confirms his full divine authority to forgive unto his death he identifies himself with his earthly life in flesh and blood. He affirms the fact that he had shared his earthly life with those who had received the grace of God through his address. At the same time he underlines his word of testament by giving his disciples bread and wine and designating it as his body and blood which he will surrender into death. Bread and wine, which Jesus identifies with his body and blood in his testamental word become in this situation the "pledge" and "seal" of the testamentary promise.²¹

Exegetical, Christological and Sacramentological Foundations.

Luther puts all his emphasis on the claim that in the words of the testament Jesus applies God's grace to us. It is therefore a complete perversion to celebrate the Supper as a sacrifice in which something is presented to God. But rather than interpreting Luther's critical expose of the explanation of the sacrifice of the Mass in detail and testing its validity through a comparison with the theology current in the church in his day, it is more important to me first of all to insist that for Luther the entire activity of the Supper is determined by the idea of testament. That is demonstrated already in the fact that in the writings 1520/21 he consistently, even if with slight omissions, keeps adding more elements which go together to make up the testamental activity of Jesus. That has exegetical, christological, and sacramentological importance.

Peter Stuhlmacher²² has recently shown from the texts of the Supper that according to the original witness of the New Testament the Supper is rooted in a farewell meal. The meal was connected with a Jerusalem passover meal of Jesus and his disciples but was already overshadowed by the anticipated death sentence on Jesus. The origin of the Supper accordingly lies in a quite uniquely determined meal celebration and not in a regular custom of meal celebrations of Jesus with his disciples during the time of his earthly activity. Already in the traditions of the New Testament witnesses the farewell meal had separated itself from the Passover meal, shifting the points of view. The farewell meal activity could be separated from the Passover meal because of the twofold act in which Jesus distributed bread and wine to his disciples with the word of promise

had taken on an importance of its own even over against the Passover meal itself.

To be sure, Luther's understanding of the Supper as the testamental activity of Jesus is not found as such (as an explicit form) in any of the various New Testament Supper texts. But Luther's interpretation is not simply an arbitrary selection of isolated themes from the New Testament texts or a collation of such themes. Rather what comes to light in Luther's interpretation is a plumbing of the depths of the Supper's action to which all the New Testament witnesses point.

The underlying test for every conception of the Supper is that of the manner in which it can align itself with the situation of Jesus "in the night in which he was betrayed," even though the history of the liturgy of the Supper shows that the connection with this situation has not always been preserved. In the late medieval doctrine of the Supper, the act of consecration, the central part of the sacrifice of the mass, was expressly connected with the last meal of Jesus with his disciples. In that meal celebration, therefore, Jesus had ostensibly acted out a sacramental rite of sacrifice, in a sense a previewing of his own sacrificial death. He was thereby supposed to have transferred to his disciples themselves the priestly duty of redoing retrospectively a sacramental representation of his sacrificial death. In a sense, the sacrificial rite at the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples therefore relates to the church's sacrifice of the mass in mirror-image-like fashion. The symmetrical axis lies, so viewed, in the sacrificial death of Christ, whose sacramental representation once previewed by Jesus is now again retrospectively celebrated. The sacramental activity of Jesus among his disciples therefore finds its meaning in the supposition that Jesus intended to institute the churchly celebration of the sacrifice of the mass.

It is a quite different matter when the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples is understood as his making of a testament. Then this activity itself commands its own place within the passion story because therein Jesus, in the form of a testament given to his disciples, reinforces his divine authority as proclaimer of grace. The testamental promise of forgiveness fits exactly the situation of the impending death of Jesus. As has been established above, the testamental activity of Jesus itself brings the true divinity as well as the true humanity of Jesus to expression. Contrariwise, it is questionable whether the christological dimensions would be thus es-

tablished if the Last Supper of Jesus were to be understood as an anticipatory sacramental representation of his sacrificial death. Would not the overwhelming power with which death also strikes Jesus be depotentiated? In any case for Christology it means something quite different if Jesus "in the night in which he was betrayed" views his death as a sacramental act from what it means if he already in this moment represents his death as a sacrificial death.

Ecclesiastical theology in Luther's day had, as indicated briefly above, interpreted the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples as the rite of institution for the Sacrament of the Altar. With this view came the assumption that Jesus with his words, "Do this in remembrance of me" had given to his apostles and their successors, according to the example of the rite here celebrated by him, the commission to offer the sacrifice of the mass in perpetuity to God, and that he had simultaneously with these words ordained the apostles as priests and bestowed on them the full power to consecrate and sacrifice. This interpretation gave the meal activity of Jesus the character of a sacramental sacrifice-celebration, which was the basis for the ecclesiastical sacrament of the sacrifice of the mass.

Our comparison shows that exegetical and christological points of view shift when Luther interprets the Last Supper of Jesus as his testamental action. Luther strongly emphasized the difference for sacramental theology over against the ecclesiastical teaching of the time. In the testamental action of Jesus what occurs exclusively for Luther is the turning to us humans of God's forgiving love. There is no place here for the offering of something of worth to God and for God, not even in the highest form of the bringing of a sacrifice, as happened in the death of Jesus. Whatever the death of Jesus may mean for faith, even should faith grasp it as a sacrificial death, remains completely the mystery of this death event itself. The testamental activity, like every testamentary declaration, does indeed have death in view. Nevertheless, as the act of testament-making, it has its own weight even over against the event of death itself.

Influence in the Reformation era

Luther's new understanding of the Supper was quickly appropriated by other Reformation preachers. Urbanus Rhegius in Augsburg provides a good example as early as 1521. Not only was he, it

appears, the first preacher outside of Wittenberg who provides evidence of the new understanding of the Supper but there are also brief printed works from the years following in which he interprets the Supper, albeit with variations, as the making of a testament. As preacher of the Augsburg Domkirche he said on the Corpus Christi festival in 1521 (May 30)²³ that “the holy and most venerable Sacrament of the Altar” is from its very origin “a Testament of Christ” just as other testaments are a promise of those who are under the threat of death and about to die who announce a heritage and designate heirs” [A 3v]. What Jesus has promised to his disciples and “through them also to us all” [A 4r] in the words of the Supper as “an incomparable inheritance” [A 3v] is indulgence (*Abläss*—forgiveness) from sin, an eternal joy” [A 3v], and “eternal life” [A 4r], an immeasurable treasure,” “the true treasure of grace” [A 4v], not to be exchanged for the “indulgence (*Abläss*) from punishment” that the church offers in her prayer and indulgence traffic. “We will not be unchristian Christians who don’t want to bear the cross with the Savior, but ask only that he forgive us our sin” [A 4v].

One year later Urbanus Rhegius had coupled the idea of testament with the idea of communion (*Gemeinschaft*).²⁴ For with the forgiveness of sins Jesus established a communion of all believers with himself and with another. “All the spiritual benefits of Christ and his saints are yours in common [A 2v], and, to be sure, all the suffering as well. It is similar to the situation in the civil community when someone gives a hand-written sign or some such as certification “that he is a citizen of the same city, a member of the same community so that he has everything that affects the city in common with his fellow citizens, happiness and suffering, the useful and the harmful. Everything, name, honor, freedom, business, mores, custom, help, counsel” [A 2v], is common to him in the same city.

In his next treatise on the Supper of 1523 Rhegius did not put the idea of testament so prominently in the center, but it still makes its appearance. In this instance he puts all his emphasis on the insistence that the devotion of the Supper be carried by faith in the promise of grace given by Jesus in the words of the Supper.

Rhegius reissued this tract in 1525²⁵ with the addition of some short texts—in part prayers—all intended to foster an evangelical piety vis a vis the Supper. For our purposes the second addition is worth mentioning (“The five main articles of this most blessed Testament”). He makes five points according to which the Supper

is to be viewed as the Testament of Jesus. This summary has a tradition of its own which I cannot go into here. I must content myself with the indication that with the handing on of this text one finds two woodcuts which depict the new evangelical understanding of the Supper in telling fashion. At least one of them can be reproduced in somewhat reduced size in the space allowed in this essay.²⁶

In both woodcuts the scene of the Last Supper of Jesus is combined with the distribution of bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ to the faithful. The room of the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples has opened itself up for all who in faith wish to participate in the inheritance given by Jesus. It is simply assumed that the promises of Jesus to his disciples are valid for all believers because the Word of Jesus transcends space and time. The idea of distribution of the testament transposes the Supper communicants directly into the situation in which Jesus had spoken the words of the testament. To put it differently, the words of Jesus which had made his Last Supper with his disciples into a testamental action also make the Supper in the Christian congregation into the testamental action of Jesus.

In later years Luther never surrendered the idea of testament even though the discussion of the question of the presence of the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine then repressed all other points of view. The basis for the treatment of the passion texts during Holy Week in Wittenberg, and also for Luther's passion sermons, had since the mid-twenties been Bugenhagen's combining and harmonizing of the passion texts from the four Gospels.²⁷ According to Bugenhagen's exposition the Supper event is clearly distinguished from the Passover meal. The Passover lamb must be eaten perpetually, whereas Jesus and his disciples sat down²⁸ to the activity which became the origin of the Christian Last Supper. Jesus "makes a Testament" in this action; he does not institute a sacrifice.²⁹ When Bugenhagen writes that we Christians should remember that the Body of Christ was given over to death and the blood of Christ poured out on the cross for our sins, he did not therewith interpret Christ's death on the cross so as to collapse it into the action of the Supper itself. He added, furthermore, that that remembrance of the death of Jesus is faith which already makes blessed "alone without the sacrament" and without which the external partaking of the Sacrament is nothing.³⁰ Nevertheless Christians know how to trea-

sure the Supper: "Troubled consciences use this sign happily from the heart as Christ has instituted it because therewith the conscience is comforted and faith is strengthened."³¹

As the making of a testament by Jesus the Supper unambiguously has Jesus as the acting subject. Who the acting subject is in the Supper was among other things a controversial issue between Luther and Zwingli. In Zwingli's view the Supper is a communal action of convinced believers who thereby remember thankfully Jesus' death on the cross and commit themselves therewith to the duty that goes with it. Therefore Luther could say of the representatives of the Zwinglian doctrine of the Supper: They "make of the Supper a symbol, that is, a memorial, by which one can identify Christians externally . . . so that it is simply to be a memorial among Christians themselves, not with respect to God, by which they practice and maintain love among themselves."³²

Against that Luther maintains: "We know however, that it is and is called the Lord's Supper, not the Christians' Supper. Because the Lord has not only instituted it, but also makes it and hosts it himself and is the cook, waiter, food and drink himself . . . So Jesus does not say when he commands and institutes it, "Do this as your password so as to recognize and love each other, but rather, 'Do this in remembrance of me.' If we are to do it in remembrance of him it is therefore instituted in his service, to his glory. But how do we serve him? . . . I esteem him in that faith is strengthened and we learn to know him."³³ The drastic words insist that Jesus himself administers the Supper, he acts himself expressly through the words of the Supper. Therewith he himself sets forth food and drink as his gift and portions it out. But in the Supper food and drink serve the purpose of confirming the essential promises of the inheritance, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Through his bestowal of the inheritance Jesus as the acting agent turns the meal activity into the making of a testament.

In May of 1536 when several cities from South Germany that had earlier tended towards Zwingli's doctrine of the Supper adopted the Wittenberg doctrine under the leadership of Bucer, the conviction was expressed in the "Wittenberg Concord" that "the grace and benefit of Christ . . . was appropriated."³⁴ In Luther's conception such appropriation occurs in that Christ himself acts through his Word of Grace. His will to be gracious in the institution of the Supper—not a priestly act of consecration—also preserves, according

to the Wittenberg Concord, the presence of his body and blood in bread and wine. Therefore since Jesus' Words of Institution are taken as the making of a testament, this presence of body and blood is given only as long as the Supper is celebrated and does not last beyond this situation.³⁵

When Luther repeatedly contents himself by grounding the essence and significance of the Supper in the institution by Jesus, so to him the Last Supper of Jesus is the permanent ground for the insistence that the Lord is the acting subject in every Supper through his Words of Institution. In these words the Lord makes himself present, as he does everywhere where his gospel is preached. But he makes himself present through the Supper also in the particular manner of his body and blood. His presence in bread and wine has its salvific meaning in the promise of grace of the Words of Institution. Thus also for the older Luther the action of the Supper has its spiritual center in the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Therefore it is no wonder that in a 1537 sermon, similarly to those of 1520/21, he says that Christ in his words at the Supper has bequeathed "his Testament,"—"last Word and Will."³⁶

Significance for Present Understanding of the Supper

For some years now in the churches of the Reformation a new quest for the meaning of the Last Supper has been evident, for its power to create community and to strengthen hope. In ecumenical dialogues agreement on the Supper has been sought through recourse to the anamnesis of God's saving activity in the cross of Christ or through the idea of the remembrance of the sacrifice. In every contemporary concern for a renewal of understanding in the Supper one ought to attend to two questions that pose themselves out of Luther's interpretation of the Supper as the making of a testament by Jesus: The question of the acting subject in the Supper and the question of what character the Supper has in nuce from its very origin. Luther provided clear answers to these questions. He is able to defend his understanding of the Supper not only according to sacramental theology but also exegetically and christologically in precise regard for the situation of Jesus "in the night in which he was betrayed." In that situation Jesus, in full authority to proclaim to humanity God's saving grace, had instituted the Supper as his

testamental action. From this theological center much that is sought in the modern quest for the meaning of the Supper opens up of itself. For as testamental action the Supper strengthens both the consciousness of community as well as eschatological hope. God's forgiveness in the promise of Jesus which he confirms through his bodily presence renews above all community between God and humanity and also thereby establishes the community of Christians with one another. The grace of God commonly received and equally valid for all is the true basis of communal life. The promise of forgiveness of sins gives eternal life just as the love which God in Jesus Christ grants to humans mediates eschatological certainty (Rom 8:38 f) which will not be surpassed or at the most imagined by the idea of a heavenly communal Supper. Jesus' making of a testament points in itself to his death, which the community is called to remember, even if the Supper in its essence is not a remembrance-activity. For this reason also a remembrance of the sacrifice in the anamnesis of the Supper cannot transform itself into a sacrificial memorial. Amid all the concern for enrichment in the understanding of the Supper we must remain in this theological center, true, according to the measure of our knowledge, to the Founder in his will to establish his testament.

Translated by Gerhard Forde

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NOTES

1. WA 6:357. 10ff; LW 35:79–111.
2. WA 6:513. 14ff; LW 36:11–126.
3. WA 8, 44, 30ff and 521, 32ff. LW 36:179–180, 181–182. None of the [German] editions of selected works of Luther in this century outside of the six volume edition "Ausgewählte Schriften" edited by K. Bornkamm and G. Ebeling, Frankfurt/M. 1983 (Insel Verlag) have taken up this important writing of Luther's. The Insel-Ausgabe contains a shortened version of the German, Vol 3, 85–164.
4. WA 2:519. 3ff; 521, 25ff.; LW 27:264, 268.
5. WA 2:521. 33ff.; LW 27:268.
6. WA 2:521. 36ff.; LW 27:268. "*Sicut idem Deus et homo, ita idem pactum et testamentum.*"
7. WA 6:230. 10ff.; LW 44:55–56.

8. Above, n. 1.
9. WA 6:359. 18ff.; LW 35:86-87.
10. WA 6:359. 30ff.; LW 35:87.
11. WA 6:359. 34ff.; LW 35:87.
12. WA 6:513. 14ff.; LW 36:37.
13. WA 6:513. 25ff.; LW 36:38.
14. WA 6:513. 24ff.; LW 36:38.
15. WA 8:444. 18ff, or 521, 16ff.
16. WA 8:521. 14ff.; LW 36:179. Cf WA 8:444. 18ff: "*Est igitur testamentum nuncupatio morituri, qua disponit suam hereditatem certis heredibus.*"
17. WA 6:513. 34ff.; LW 36:38.
18. WA 8:521. 4ff.; LW 36:179.
19. WA 8:521. 10ff.; LW 36:179. Cf WA 6, 513, 36ff. LW 36:38.
20. WA 6:358. 14ff.; LW 35:85. WA 6:513. 34ff.; LW 36:38. See also WA 8:436. 18ff; or 511. 27ff.; (LW 36:169), and 518. 18ff (LW 36:176).
21. WA 6:359. 18ff.; LW 35:86-87. See above, n. 9. Cf. WA 6:518. 10ff (LW 36:44), WA 8:440. 24ff.
22. "*Das neustamentliche Zeugnis vom Herrenmahl,*" ZThK, 84, 1987, S. 1-35.
23. "Ain Sermon von dem hochwirdigen sacrament des Altars, gepredigt durch Doctor Urbanum Regium, Thuombprediger zuo Augspurg, am tag Corporis Christi; 1521.
24. *Underricht wie sic ein Christenmensch halten sol das er frucht der Mess erlang und Christlich zue gotz tisch ganng* [1522].
25. *Von dem hochwirdigen Sacrament des altars inderricht, was man aus heyliger geschrift wissen magk . . . zu Augspurg gepredigt corporis Christi bis auf den achtenden* [1525].
26. It is the title-page woodcut of the treatise, "Wie ein Christenmensch ein tegliche beicht und bekantnus gegen got von hertzen sol thuen, gezogen auss der geschriff. Mit was gestalt und glauben wir uns sollen halten gegen dem Testament und disch Christi" that appeared anonymously without indication of printer, place, or year. See above, p. 391.
27. The first printing of the Latin edition came in 1524. The German version appeared for the first time in 1526; it was included in Luther's so-called Winter Postils without Bugenhagen's commentary in 1528. WA 21:165-180.
28. *Die Historia des leydens und der Auferstehung unseres Herrn Jhesu Christi aus den vier Evangelisten.* Wittenberg 1526, Bl. C i v.
29. Ibid. Bl. C 2 v.
30. Ibid. Bl. C 2 v.
31. Ibid. Bl. C 2 v/3 r.
32. WA 23:269. 19ff.; LW 37:141.
33. WA 23:271. 8ff.; LW 37:142. Cf WA 45:200. 11. Christ as host of the Supper is the *Speisemeister*.
34. WA B 12:207. 26ff.
35. WA B 12:206. 11ff. Cf WA 7:327. 13ff. (LW 32:18.) To Martin Schalling 27. 11. 1535.
36. WA 45:200. 25 ff.



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