AUSTIN PRESBYTERIAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A FOUCAULDIAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL READING OF EXODUS 1-12

SUBMITTED TO DR. GREGORY CUÉLLAR

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Michel Foucault (1926-1984) had significant influence in multiple spaces of the academy, including philosophy, the humanities, and the social sciences. However, his impact has been little felt within the world of biblical exegesis: a cursory search of current research will glean no real significant analysis of Scripture with a lens of Foucauldian discourse. It is with this in mind that this paper approaches Exodus. After a brief survey of Foucault and his development of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and its concepts, the paper will analyze Exodus 1-12, with special attention to Exodus 3:14 utilizing the discourse of the early Exodus narrative. Finally, a suggestion of meanings will be developed from a Foucauldian reading of the text and archeological analysis.

FOUCAULT: PERSON AND PROCESS

Foucault: Biography

Foucault was born in Poitiers, France on October 15, 1926. From an early age, he was distinguished as a brilliant thinker, and studied under Maurice Merlau-Ponty at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*.[1] He received his *doctorat d'état* in 1959. Over the period of the 1960s, Foucault wrote a series of books that would establish him as a significant philosopher, including *History of Madness in the Classical Age* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), and *The Order of Things* (1966). In these texts, Foucault moves from specific social-political critiques regarding psychological and medical power in modern society to an exposition on the

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1 "About Michel Foucault."

development of knowledge. Right around the turn of the decade, Foucault's published *The*

Archeology of Knowledge (1969), and was shortly after elected to the prestigious Collège de

France as Professor of the History of Systems of thought, a position he maintained until his death

in 1984 due to complications from AIDS.

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The Archaeology of Knowledge: Development and Methods
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Early Development and Foundations

      Foucault's main objective in his writing was to "create a history of the different modes by

which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" and the subsequent objectification of the

individual.[2] In his early work, Foucault was particularly interested in the way "modes of

inquiry… try to give themselves the status of sciences."[3] He argued that many of the "universal

scientific truths" that were the advent of 17th and 18th Enlightenment thought were really "often

mere expressions of ethical and political commitments of a particular society."[4] His aim, then, is

not to claim truth within science, but instead to engage what is presupposed as scientific truth

through the lens of socio-historical movements. Furthermore, Foucault had deep concerns about

the means in which the impact of the scientific put humanity in an "ambiguous position as an

object of knowledge and as a subject that knows."[5] This ambiguity obscures the realities of

humanity's finite nature: while humanity can recognize analyze itself through the use of science,

it cannot be outside its own finite referent. Therefore, Foucault argues, "if man's knowledge is

finite, it is because he is trapped, without possibility of liberation, within the positive contents of

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2 Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Foucault, *The order of things*, 340.

language, labour, and life; and inversely, if life, labour, and language may be posited in their positivity, it is because knowledge has finite forms."[6]

The Archaeology of Knowledge: Concepts and Themes

The Archeology of Knowledge was intended to outline Foucault's methodology. While there are many different concepts that terms that are meaningful in the text, there are a few that are more germane to approaching Exodus.

The Statement

Perhaps most simply, Deyfus et al define the statement as a "serious speech act".[7]

Foucault further defines the *statement* as

> The modality of existence proper to that group of signs:[8] a modality that allows it to be something more than a series of traces, something more than a succession of marks on a substance, something more than a mere object made by a human being; a modality that allows it to be in relation with a domain of objects, to prescribe a definite position to any possible subject, to be situated among other verbal performances, and to be endowed with a repeatable materiality.[9]

The statement goes beyond just words imprinted on paper or spoken aloud, but instead relates to "the operation that has been carried out by the formula itself, in its emergence: promise, order, decree, contract, agreement, observation."[10] The key is not the signs alone: a series of letters strewn about a refrigerator may just be the whimsy of a child learning about magnetism, or it could be a specific statement. Therefore, according to Foucault, the concept of the statement is interested in "what occurred by the very fact that a statement was made – and precisely this statement (and no other) in specific circumstances."[11] It is also isolated into that

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6 Ibid., 345.

7 Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, xxiv.

8 E.g. a *sentence* or *proposition*

9 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 107.

10 Ibid., 83.

11 Ibid.

one specific moment, as Foucault argues that "a statement exists outside any possibly of reappearing… in fact, exactly the same sentence [is] not necessarily the same statement."[12] On the other hand, Foucault also argues that should not just be considered something that is "treated as an event that occurred in a particular time and place, and that the most one can do is recall it – and celebrate it from afar off – in an act of memory."[13] This tension focuses an individual's attention away from the specific temporality, and towards the underlying subject and meaning.

Foucault also notes that a statement is different than other series of signs because it has a specific relationship to a subject. While an author is important in order to gain a sense of the specific moments that went into the birthing of a statement, one should not confuse the author as the subject. "I am writing" is less about the "I", and more about the entire statement's "mode of existence, what it means… to have come into existence, to have left traces, and perhaps to remain there, awaiting the moment when [it] might be of use once more; what it means for [it] to have appeared when and where [it] did, [it] and no others."[14] While the author may have birthed the statement, it is still bound by their inherited language, and so the attribution to meaning should not rest in the human, but instead in the statement itself, and what circumstances gave rise to it.

Enunciative Field

An Enunciative Field, according to Foucault, is what gives the statement its meaning: "Generally speaking, one can say that a sequence of linguistic elements is a statement only if it is immersed in an enunciative field, in which it then appears as a unique element."[15] The statement,

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12 Ibid., 89.

13 Ibid., 104.

14 Ibid., 109.

15 Ibid., 99.

in its specific (yet non-temporal) space, only makes sense with appropriate referents: "he's alive!" is a completely different statement in an emergency situation versus immediately after a baseball player hits a foul ball with two strikes. In each scenario, the statement is "constituted as serious by the current rules of a specific truth game in which they have a role."[16] A series of questions can help guide understanding the enunciative field, including "who is speaking, from what institutional site is he speaking, and what is his relationship to the objects of his discourse."[17]

Discourse, Discursive Formation, and the role of the Archaeologist

Briefly, discourse is a "group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus [an individual] shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse."[18] By the time of *Archeology*, Foucault had recognized that, rather than different statements that refer to a common object together, it instead is the inverse, so that the task of the archaeologist "consists of not – of no longer – treating discourses as a group of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations) but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak."[19] Foucault expounds on this idea in his reflection on *History of Madness*, in that mental illness as a concept "was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its development, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were taken as its own."[20] In other words, the reality of a person that would now be determined to have schizophrenia was alive

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16 Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 54.

17 Shumway, *Michel Foucault*, 101.

18 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 108.

19 Ibid., 49.

20 Ibid., 32.

before the development of psychiatry, but now is called schizophrenic with the creation of the object "mental illness". The task, then, is not one of hermeneutics, nor formalization "which attempts to reconstruct a deductive system of scientific propositions" but one that is unearthing a "rule-governed system."[21] That leads the archeologist not to imply meaning, but rather "to describe statements, to describe the enunciative function of which they are the bearers, to analyze the conditions in which this function operates, to cover the different domains that his function presupposes and the way in which those domains are articulated."[22]

ARCHEOLOGICAL EXEGESIS OF EXODUS 1-12

Methodology

In addition to the concepts addressed above, Kendall and Wickham provide seven components of archaeological research that will be drawn from after a description of the early Exodus narrative:

1. To chart the relation between the sayable and the visible;
2. To analyse the relation between one statement and other statements;
3. To formulate rules for the repeatability of statements (or, if you like, the use of statements);
4. To analyse the positions which are established between subjects… in regard to statements;
5. To describe 'surfaces of emergence' – places within which objects are designated and acted upon;
6. To describe 'institutions', which acquire authority and provide limits within which discursive objects may act or exist;
7. To describe 'forms of specification', which refer to the ways in which discursive objects are targeted. A 'form of specification' is a system for understand a particular phenomenon with the aim of relating it to other phenomena.[23]

Caution Before Proceeding

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21 Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 53.

22 Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 115.

23 Kendall and Wickham, *Using Foucault's Methods*, 26.

One important caution in using the Archeological Method, especially when considering traditional biblical exegesis, is that "Foucault's work does not allow us to reach general conclusions about the content of modern life – the point is to show precisely how some event has its own specificity."[24] The first role of the archaeological exegete is to describe and attempt to understand how the statement was developed, not to move directly into interpretation, nor attempt to assign some value to human intervention. In the case of Exodus, while there may be significant value to liberationists in the Exodus narrative, the question of the text must instead be how the object of "liberated" and "oppressed" individuals are given meaning through the statements within the text. So from the outset, a reading of the text must be non-interpretative.

Exegesis

Exodus: Historical Analysis

Generally, scholarly research points to Exodus being completed after the exile, between the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, "during a time when the nation's continuing existence as a distinct community was in prolonged doubt."[25] The best sense of the time after the exile is provided via the Ezra-Nehemiah narratives[26]. In brief, after the destruction of Jerusalem, a group of Israelites were sent into exile by the Babylonians. After the defeat of Babylon at the hands of the Persians, King Cyrus invited individuals to return to being the "length process of rebuilding of the Temple and Jerusalem. During this time, under Persian control, Israel reconstitutes itself as the "people of the Book," with scripture, specifically the first five books of the Bible… becoming authoritative for communal and personal life."[27] The books would have been written in their

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24 Ibid., 120.

25 "The Oxford Bible Commentary - Exodus - Exodus and History. - Oxford Biblical Studies Online."

26 It is important to note that these, too, are their own statements and discourses, and so must be considered at best quasi-historical. This is a difficulty of using Foucauldian archaeology in Scriptural analysis.

27 Eskenazi, "Introduction to Ezra," 671.

final form by priestly scribes, who would have had the education and ability to write down the text.

Exodus 3:14: Translation and Context

וַיֹּ֤אמֶר אֱלֹהִים֙ אֶל־מֹשֶׁ֔ה אֶֽהְיֶ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֣ר אֶֽהְיֶ֑ה וַיֹּ֗אמֶר כֹּ֤ה תֹאמַר֙ לִבְנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל אֶֽהְיֶ֖ה שְׁלָחַ֥נִי אֲלֵיכֶֽם [28]

Author Translation: "And God said to Moses: 'I am what I am' and he said 'say to the sons of Israel: 'I am - he sends me to you.'''

Sarna: "And God said to Moses: 'Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'''[29]

In this moment, Moses and God are together at the burning bush. God tells Moses that God heard the cries of the people who were enslaved at the hands of Egypt, and has decided to intercede to free them from bondage. Moses asks a series of questions, culminating into him asking who is sending him. God says that God is the God of Israel's forefathers, but finally says *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh* when Moses asks for a specific name.

Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh and Other Names

In this phrase there is a dynamic change in the name of deity, which shifts the discourse of the narrative preceding it. In 3:14, the narrator first describes God as אֱלֹהִים֙ (*'elohim*), a term that acts a general term for divinity and sacredness. However, when God speaks, God immediately names Godself, and not the *'elohim* of human convention, but *Ehyeh*. This has a significant effect, as "name-giving in the ancient world implied the wielding power over the one named."[30] *Ehyeh* has the power to name himself[31], wielding a self-determined power. *Ehyeh* progressively morphs into the formal name of God, known as YHVH[32] or the Tetragrammaton.

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28 Exodus 3:14 WTT

29 Sarna, *Exodus =*, 17–18.

30 Ibid., 18.

31 *Ehyeh* is a male-gendered term in Hebrew, and this paper will use the pronoun when related to *Ehyeh* or subsequent morphologies.

32 This paper takes its lead from Nahum Sarna, and will use "YHVH" when describing the God of Exodus 3:15

This self-determined name becomes what is used from then on both as YHVH declares in 3:15, but also as "Moses, in his direct speech, invariably uses the name YHVH, not *'elohim,* 'God.' Without doubt, the revelation of the divine name YHVH to Moses registers a new stage in the history of Israelite monotheism."[33]

Contrast this to the earlier narrative in Exodus: the people of Israel are called *benei yisra'el* (sons of Israel) until 1:13, when Egypt had finally "ruthlessly [Egypt] made life bitter for [Israel] with hard labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field."[34] Egyptians never exclusively call Israel *benei yisra'el*, either adding *'am* to connote a potential militaristic force[35] or as *'ivri* (usually translated as Hebrew), a term used to describe *benei yisra'el* throughout the description of Egyptian oppression. *'Ivri* people are also associated with individuals receiving violence in the Exodus narrative. It is the *'ivri* who have their firstborn killed, and when Moses comes upon the Egyptian taskmaster beating his kinsfolk, they are described as *'ivri*. Additionally, after the Moses kills the Egyptian taskmaster, it is still *'ivri* who challenge him with concerns of Egyptian retribution and further violence. It is only when *Ehyeh* begins to speak do the *'ivri* become *benei yisra'el* again.

Ehyeh with benei yisra'el

Ehyeh makes clear that he is YHVH of Israel's ancestry: "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" is narrated three times in chapter three, indicating "the 'I am' of the gloss in Exodus 3:13-14 is not the 'am' of existence, but the 'am' of presence – not like the Spanish *ser*, but like *estar* – and identifies Yahweh as a God who

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33 Sarna, *Exodus* =, 18.

34 Exodus 1:13, Sarna

35 Sarna, *Exodus* =, 5.

'is with' Moses and Israel."[36] This is very different than the Egyptians who "did not know Joseph" – did not know the history and ancestry of the Israelite people.[37]   *Ehyeh* is also silent throughout the narrative of Egyptian oppression, and is not spoken of throughout the early Exodus narrative: only the midwives who save Moses have fear of *'elohim*. *Ehyeh*, then, is not an active participant in the Egyptian oppression, but instead was a listener, hearing the people's cry, and "remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them."[38] In fact, it is only within this narrative in Exodus does *Ehyeh* reveal his name as YHVH: not even Abraham, Isaac or Jacob knew YHVH as YHVH.[39] It is only once Moses assumes his role starts his journey as leader does *Ehyeh* become YHVH. At that moment Moses is both leader and priest.

Once *Ehyeh* acknowledges his role as YHVH of Israelite ancestry, he becomes linked with *benei yisra'el*, intending to "stretch out [His] hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which [He] will work upon them; after that [Egypt] shall let you go."[40] YHVH accomplish this with a *yad chazakah, "literally 'a strong hand'… as opposed to the oppressive 'hand of Egypt' of verse 8."[41] *Ehyeh*-YHVH, then, not only has the power to name himself, but also has more power than that of Egypt.

Even with this acknowledgment in the narrative, the Israelites do not necessarily whole-heartedly believe Moses and by extension YHVH, after intensified oppression of the people after

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36 Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 52.

37 Exodus 1:8b

38 Exodus 2:24b-25

39 Exodus 6:3

40 Exodus 3:20

41 Sarna, *Exodus =*, 19.

an initial request to worship YHVH. However, God continues to demonstrate his power and will

for the Israelites, so that "[YHVH] may display these [His] signs among them, and that [Israel]

may recount in the hearing of [their] sons and of [their] sons' sons how [YHVH] made a

mockery of the Egypt and how [YHVH] displayed [His] signs among them – in order that you

may know that I am the LORD."[42] Eventually, *benei yisra'el* is freed from Egyptian captivity, but

not before the plague of the of the death of the first born, a chiastic coda to the death of the first

born at the beginning of the Exodus narrative that demonstrates YHVH's ultimate and total

power.

Archaeological Analysis

In attempting this analysis, there is a reality that Foucault was suspicious of traditional

hermeneutics and instead, allows a truth in what he described "in a wonderfully unguarded

moment, the 'night of truth'. His analyses constitute a remarkable hermeneutics of that night of

truth, a cold and more merciless scrutiny of the human condition that is, at the same time, bent

subtly in a direction not at all at odds with mercy."[43] With that and Kendall and Wickham's

questions broadly in mind, analysis may begin.

It is helpful to consider in brief Foucault's ideas on power and struggle at the start. For

him

> …power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks
> him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on
> him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of
> power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word *subject*:
> subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a
> conscience of self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates
> and makes subject to.

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42 Exodus 10:2

43 Ibid.

Generally, it can be said that there are three types of struggles: either against forms of domination… against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way.[44]

The Exodus narrative was written in a time of great social upheaval for the Israelites.

While King Cyrus had given the people freedom to return, the land was still under control of

Persia. Furthermore, while some people that were exiled returned to Jerusalem, "others stayed in

the lands ruled by Persia or moved on to other major cities in the eastern Mediterranean world."[45]

The Israelites, then, would have been engaged similar to Foucault's third type of struggle: both

dealing with the issues of submission to a Persian authority, but also against the tribal nature of

Israel that was now beginning to decay. This becomes the enunciative field in which the

statements are placed: how do the Scribes and leadership of Israel post-exile come to terms with

their circumstances? As a result, the narrative in Exodus 1-12 can be viewed as discourse on

power in Post-Exilic Jerusalem, especially for the leader/priest class. The exegesis of the texts

helps to identify the sayable: there are statements about the people of Israel, statements about

Moses, statements about Egypt (which could also be interpreted more broadly as an oppressive

state), statements about God, and statements about the interrelationship of the three.

The narrative places the *Ehyeh*-YHVH as the primary object of power and as a source of

identity – not *'ivri* but *benei yisra'el*. Furthermore, This God of the narrator's is the truest God –

while He has been with the Israelites in antiquity, only at this moment has *Ehyeh* decided to

reveal himself fully as YHVH. However, while this God is the most powerful object in the

narrative, overcoming an oppressive state, it is a God taken for granted by the people it is

connected to. Only Moses, as a representation of leader/priest caught between the identity of

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44 Dreyfus, Rabinow, and Foucault, *Michel Foucault, beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 212.

45 "After the Exile."

Egypt and Israel has any continued trust in *Ehyeh*. Throughout the narrative, violence is a common tool to repeat these statements – the power of YHVH, the oppressiveness of Egypt. However, violence is never done specifically by the Israelites. They instead are either the victims (through Egypt's oppression or Moses' attempt to spare the *'ivri*), or the benefactors (through YHVH's institution of the plagues). Moses acts as interlocutor and intermediary in order to explain YHVH's work and engage both Egypt and Israel. Throughout the narrative, it becomes more clear that while *Ehyeh*-YHVH has the most power, it is Moses who ultimately acts as catalyst and takes the position as the one who wields the power of YHVH: if Moses had not visited the burning bush, would *Ehyeh* still just be listening? YHVH, then, becomes the production of the discursive formation; the summation of the statements: that in this moment is the most real and true expression of YHVH, first revealed to leaders/priests, and then to the population in general; powerfully violent, with the capability to destroy tit-for-tat any oppressive regime with the same brutal tactics in order to be free. YHVH is power.

Moses, then, enters a position priestly leadership who wields YHVH. Egypt enters a position of oppressive ruler, and Israel a position of people who are in continuous subjection. The world post-exile acts as a "surface of emergence", and specifically the rebuilding of the Temple and formulation of the text. Individuals who are chronicled in the Ezra-Nehemiah narrative are primarily the ruling priestly class who are attempting to redevelop identity in building and writing, revealing the truest God to the people again while helping them remember their ancestry. This is revealed in part through Ezra 1-6, which reads similarly to other ancient Near East temple accounts where "divine inspiration had to be confirmed, the details of construction described, the temple successfully dedicated, and blessing given."[46] These were

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46 Laird, "The Temple Building Account in Ezra 1-6," 95.

often beliefs "produced by the dominant class and provide an 'unseen and unintended support for the rule of the dominant.'"[47] It is not surprising that the same needs for a YHVH-object would be within the text and discourse of Exodus.

YHVH as a discursive object provides a series of concepts that help provide further support for the rule of the leader/priest class. First, the Exodus discourse permits the leader/priest class to operate as though they have access to the highest and best knowledge about YHVH, as it had only been revealed through Moses on, not through previous ancestors. Secondly, it gives purpose to the priest/leader class as shepherds over an Israelite flock that both suffers violence and cannot not inflict violence itself. Finally, as the representatives of the power of YHVH, the leader/priest class also holds a certain persuasive power over people should the oppressive state become too much – the same YHVH that had the power to topple Egypt could do the same to anyone else, especially those who would come between YHVH and *benei yisra'el*. This provides a certain confidence to all Israelites, but especially the individuals who operate most within the Moses referent.

<center>CONCLUSION: OTHER DIRECTIONS</center>

In his series of lectures in 1977-1978, Foucault begins to conceptualize "pastoral power". In sum, it was a "power exercised on a multiplicity rather than a territory… that guides towards an end and functions as an intermediary towards the end… a power with a purpose for those on whom it is exercised, and not a purpose for some kind of superior unit like the city, territory, start… it is a power directed at all and each in their paradoxical equivalence, and not at the high unity formed by the whole."[48] It is the Christian West that had "coagulated all these themes of

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47 Ibid., 96.

48 Foucault et al., *Security, Territory, Population*, 174.

pastoral power into precise mechanists and definite intuitions."[49] The analysis performed in

Exodus 1-12 seems to demonstrate the early development of this "pastoral power". It would be

of value to perform a genealogical survey of the moves between the institution of the Second

Temple period and the move to text and how it created a class of individuals that would hold

pastoral power.

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