
AUGUSTINE, SCRIPTURE, AND *CITY OF GOD*

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Submit: 5 August 2021 Revised: 23 June 2022 Accepted: 30 June 2022

Abstract

This article discusses how Augustine describes the City of God in his understanding of the Bible. The results of the article Augustine's use of Scripture in the City of God is authoritative and paradigmatic, providing the only sufficient foundation of truth for the development of his civic theology. This is apparent in the way he introduces Scriptural passages as either the final word in a matter or by interweaving his sentences and paragraphs therewith in both a theological and illustrative fashion. In doing so, he creates a sort of 'matrix' or blanket of Scripture to support, define, and perpetuate his arguments from beginning to end. This would not be possible if he did not believe the Bible to have been the sole source of divine grace and truth, a sufficient and inerrant testimony from God to man and the ultimate source of authority for faith.

Keywords: augustine; scripture; city of god

INTRODUCTION

Of Augustine's vast repertoire of works, *City of God* stands as his *magnum opus*, being by far the most expansive and comprehensive work of his entire catalogue. There is little that Augustine left unsaid in this work; it touches on nearly every aspect of human thought and Christian theology, sweeping from the inner recesses of the human soul outward and upward toward the final celestial glory and, at times, even anticipating concepts from much later thinkers such as Anselm, Descartes, Locke, Edwards, Calvin, and Berkley. *City of God* is particularly striking for the uniqueness of its content and style; how can one classify it? It covers the scope of history, yet it is not a chronicle of history; it plumbs the depths of and establishes a system of theology, yet it is not a systematic theology; it is therefore something much more, a blend of both genres into a completely new format, something Dr. Evans refers to as a "universal history,"¹ traversing the entire scope of time in a contemplation of God's purposes therein. In order to contain the entirety of subjective reality in one work, however,

¹ Evans, G.R, *City of God* (Penguin: 2003), introduction, I.

Augustine must have an objective standpoint from whence to operate, an eternal foundation of authority wherefrom he can view the temporal. In my seminar for the *Athanasius Lecture Series* I posited that Augustine's theology in *City of God* was one founded on grace and truth as its primary interpretive principles, and those principles find their common denominator in the sufficient and infallible divine revelation contained in Scripture (as shall be seen). Scripture thus plays a foundational place in Augustine's civic theology and coupled with the centrality and prominence of this massive work within not only his volume of work, but also the expanse of his doctrine, it thus follows that *City of God* provides an excellent case study of how Augustine used Scripture and the role it played in his epistemology and the theology that resulted therefrom.

Before moving forward, it is important to understand the intellectual climate wherein Augustine was writing. The philosophy of his day was dominated by academic skepticism, which held that truth in any sense could not be known for certain. Augustine, having grown up intellectually within the confines of this mode of thinking, reacted against it very strongly from an early age, which is apparent from his testimony in *Confessions* VI.4. In a sense, he turned skepticism against itself; the traditional skeptic will not hold anything that can be doubted as truth, and will subsequently find doubt in everything. Augustine believed the former, but came to a different conclusion with regards to the latter, perhaps based on the influence of the writings of the famous Roman lawyer and rhetorician Cicero: one *can* know truth without doubt, and therefore one should passionately seek it. B.B Warfield writes, "From Cicero he derived rather a burning zeal in the pursuit of truth than a definite body of philosophical tenets or even a philosophical point of view," and although at times Augustine's "thoughts surged in great waves toward" the teachings of the 4th century academy, "he was shocked by their skepticism." This meant that Augustine "would not commit himself to any truth for which he did not have ready at hand complete demonstration," which only served to increase his thirst for knowledge.²

Thus it should come as no surprise that, when the subjective work of the Holy Spirit enflamed his heart, a passion for Scripture as that objective testament to God's absolute truth

² See B.B. Warfield's *Calvin and Augustine*, under the section entitled *Augustine's Doctrine of Knowledge*.

was enkindled. This is clearly attested to by his famous conversion story, found in *Confessions* (VIII.12):

“...I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart, when suddenly I heard the voice of a boy or a girl I know not which—coming from the neighboring house, chanting over and over again, “Pick it up, read it; pick it up, read it” [Lat. “tolle, lege; tolle, lege”]. Immediately I ceased weeping and began most earnestly to think whether it was usual for children in some kind of game to sing such a song, but I could not remember ever having heard the like. So, damming the torrent of my tears, I got to my feet, for I could not but think that this was a divine command to open the Bible and read the first passage I should light upon ... I quickly returned to the bench where Alypius was sitting, for there I had put down the apostle’s book when I had left there. I snatched it up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof” [Rom. 13:14]. I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away” (emphases added).

From this point on it was Scripture that would provide that single garrison of truth from which Augustine would deploy against untruth. As A.C. Outler remarks, “The center of his ‘system’ is in the Holy Scriptures, as they ordered and moved his heart and mind. It was in Scripture that, first and last, Augustine found the focus of his religious authority.”³

DISCUSSION

Analysis

This is exactly why Scripture is placed at such a strategic and central point in Augustine’s development of civic theology in *City of God*. Augustine divides the text into two halves⁴, with Books I-X being his apologetic against Roman thought and Books XI-XXII acting as the main, theological portion of the work. I have noted that the use of Scripture between the first and second halves of *City of God* easily doubles in frequency when we reach the theological half. However, this does not mean that Scripture isn’t used in key locations throughout the apologetic half as well. It is usually implemented when Augustine has, in his mode of argumentation, first refuted whatever idea it is he is seeking to disprove; after

³ From his introduction to the 1955 edition of *Confessions*.

⁴ See *Retractions* II.69.

having cast enough doubt on the ideology of his opponents,⁵ he then brings Scripture in as the logical alternative. Book Two is telling; after having walked through the moral evils of the Roman commonwealth throughout history, he concludes in II.29 by implementing Scriptural imagery of ‘sleepers’ awakening from their ideological slumber (cf. Rom. 13:11-12; Eph. 5:14), effectively calling his non-Christian readers to repentance: “Now become fully awake!... The Heavenly City outshines Rome, beyond comparison. There, instead of victory, is truth; instead of high rank, holiness; instead of peace, felicity; instead of life, eternity.”⁶ This type of usage is also apparent in Book Ten, where, after having spent nearly the entire chapter refuting the philosophy of the Neo-Platonist Porphyry by way of *reductio ad absurdum*, he ends with the ‘finishing blow’ (as it were) of Scripture, citing Genesis 12:18, Galatian 3:19, Psalms 67:1, 2, John 14:6, Isaiah 2:2,3, and Luke 24:44-47 in the span of a paragraph (XX.32). Before moving on, it should be noted, however, that although his argumentation in this first half is primarily elenctic, he also makes it clear to his readers that it is his foundation of thought, placing James 4:6⁷ at the very beginning of the work (I.1).

In the second half of *City of God* Scripture plays a much more deictic role in Augustine’s argumentation. He begins by affirming it as that sole testimony of divine truth and placing the text itself in immediate view. Hence Book Eleven begins thus:

“The City of God of which we are treating is vouched for by those Scriptures whose supremacy over every product of human genius does not depend on the chance impulses of the minds of men, but is manifestly due to the guiding power of God’s supreme providence, and exercises sovereign authority over the literature of all mankind.” (XI.1)

Augustine then goes on to directly quote Ps. 87:3, “Glorious things have been said of you, City of God,” a passage introduced in II.21 that acts as his biblical basis for the discussion of the City of God (the focus of the entire second half of the volume).⁸ Though this is

⁵ Keep in mind the basic epistemology of the academics against many of which Augustine is reasoning. He knows that all he has to do is cast enough doubt on their arguments that, by their own way of reasoning, they will abandon them in light of the apparently logical Word of God.

⁶ This and the following *City of God* quotations will be from the translation by Henry Bettenson (Penguin: 2003), which I highly recommend.

⁷ Note that this verse is not used here simply by way of chance; it will factor heavily into his (quite biblical) concept of the characteristically proud mindset of the city of man being deposed in contrast with the exaltation of the humble citizens of the City of God. See his use of Mt. 23:12 in XIV.13.

⁸ He also cites Ps. 48:1,2 & 46:4.

somewhat of an allegorical take on what the psalmist meant by “City of God,”⁹ Augustine makes it clear that it is the Scripture itself, not “human genius,” that is the basis for his investigation into the course of divine providence, alluding to Second Peter 1:20-21 and placing the Bible in a structurally foundational point in the text. In fact, Book Eleven – the first book in his theological portion of *City of God* – has more statements dealing with the nature of Scripture than any other book in the work: in chapter three he refers to Scripture as “all that He decided was enough for man” – that’s *sufficiency*; in chapter six he states that “the Bible never lies” – that’s *inerrancy*. In essence, Augustine makes it clear that, before we begin discussing matters of eternal significance, we need to have an eternal basis from which to do so, and that basis is Scripture.

The rest of *City of God* is thus concerned almost entirely with Scripture-based subject matter and is a contemplation thereof.¹⁰ One could almost liken Augustine’s method herein to that of a systematic theology; he is attempting to cover the expanse of universal history from the inception of the City of God to its ultimate glorification, and therefore he must integrate biblical texts based on the subject at hand. Note how he uses Scripture as the pillar of his discussion of (for example) the death of the unbaptized, as well as how he assimilates it into his flow of thought:

“...Whatever unbaptized persons die confessing Christ, this confession is of the same efficacy for the remission of sins as if they were washed in the sacred font of baptism. For He who said, ‘Unless a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,’ [John 3:5] made also an exception in their favor, in that other sentence where He no less absolutely said, ‘Whosoever shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven,’ [Matthew 10:32] and in another place, ‘Whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall find it.’ [Matthew 16:25] And this explains the verse, ‘Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.’ [Ps. 116:15] For what is more precious than a death by which a man’s sins are all forgiven, and his merits increased an hundredfold? For those who have been baptized when they could no longer escape death, and have departed this life with all their sins blotted out have not equal merit with those who did not defer death, though it was in their power to do so, but preferred to end their life by confessing Christ, rather than by denying Him to secure an opportunity of baptism.” (XIII.7)

By using Scripture in this manner he makes it clear that the authority upon which he speaks is not his own, but that his words are concurrent with those of the inspired text. This is just one of many examples that could be provided of how this both natural and

⁹ I.e. Jerusalem, which Augustine holds to be typological in and of itself.

¹⁰ The only exception being the first half of Book Eighteen, where he digresses to cover the history of the city of man from the perspective of Eusebius’ *Chronicle*.

authoritative use Scripture is typical throughout *City of God*. Here is another instance, where Augustine emphasizes both God's omniscience and His free justification by imputed righteousness:

"He Himself knows you, even where no one knows, since 'he who thinks himself to be something important, when he is nothing, is fooling himself.' [Gal. 3:6] These words are directed to the adversaries of the City of God, who belong to Babylonia, who presume on their own strength, and glory in themselves, instead of in God. Among them are also the Israelites by physical descent, the earth-born citizens of the earthly Jerusalem, who, in the words of the Apostle, 'know nothing of God's righteousness' [Rom. 10:3] – that is, the righteousness which God gives, who alone is righteous and makes men righteous – 'and desire to establish their own righteousness' – that is, they suppose it to be something gained by themselves, instead of given by God and so they have not submitted to God's righteousness. Arrogant as they are, they think that by their own righteousness, not God's, they can please God, who is 'the God of all knowledge' and therefore also the judge of men's inner thoughts; for in them He sees men's imaginations, knowing them to be futile, if they are only men's, and do not come from Him." (XVII.4)

This passage is particularly interesting in that he retains Romans 10:3 as the central verse, but uses other texts to help explain it, all in turn helping to explain a concept from Hannah's Song in I Samuel 2. As in XIII.7, Scripture is given a centrifugal position in the literary and theological structure of the text and helps shape the logical outflow of his argument.

One final case shall be looked at. In XI.1 Augustine began the theological portion of *City of God* on a foundation of Scripture, which he then used it in a consistently authoritative fashion throughout, and, as we shall see, he will end in the same manner. After having discussed the heavenly state he begins to bring his book to a close with this statement regarding the nature of the Christian's rest as a perpetual Sabbath:

"Certainly that city shall have no greater joy than the celebration of the grace of Christ, who redeemed us by His blood. There shall be accomplished the words of the psalm, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' [Ps. 4:10] There shall be the great Sabbath which has no evening, which God celebrated among His first works, as it is written, 'And God rested on the seventh day from all His works which He had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it; because that in it He had rested from all His work which God began to make.' [Genesis 2:2-3] For we shall ourselves be the seventh day, when we shall be filled and replenished with God's blessing and sanctification. There shall we be still, and know that He is God..." (XXII. 30)

In this eloquent summary we thus see a rather poetic use of Genesis, the book of beginnings, to help move this massive work toward its end. Divorced from Scripture it would have been exactly the idle speculation he had been looking to avoid, but with the Word of God so intricately woven into the construction of his theology he has, in a way, supported the entire structure with a framework of ultimate and eternal authority.

Peripheral Issues

The Canon

I think it can be safely stated that the largest disconnect the present evangelical reader will have with Augustine's use of Scripture in not only *City of God*, but also his other works, is his uncertainty and inconsistency regarding canonicity. One could argue that his heavy use of allegory is what sets him apart from the contemporary Christian interpreter, but it is interesting to observe how his allegorizations can be largely consolidated into the problems regarding the text itself from which he bases his hermeneutic. For example, though Augustine holds to the infallibility of Scripture and the unity thereof as the spoken Word of God (XI.1,3; XV.8; etc.), he holds to a difficult concept of dual-canoncity in the Old Testament, giving credence to the unverifiable myth surrounding the creation of the Greek Septuagint (XVIII. 42) and placing it on equal ground with the original Hebrew Scriptures (XVIII.43). Augustine is fully aware of the discrepancies between the two, but insists on their equivalency based on the church's early reception of the popular Greek translation, as well as its use in the New Testament. He sees them as shedding light on one another, highlighting the centrality of the work of "the same Spirit" in both, yet seeming to admit to a large degree of unknowability betwixt the two: "...Whatever is found in both editions, that one and the same Spirit willed to say through both" (XVIII. 43). Perhaps Augustine can hardly be blamed for attempting to retain the ambiguity of the issue surrounding the place of the Septuagint in Bible interpretation, an issue that continues to plague scholars even to this day; nonetheless, it represents a curious inconsistency in his own thinking regarding the nature of truth as a knowable and unified absolute and Scripture as the fullness thereof.¹¹

This inconsistency is particularly noticeable in its effect on his hermeneutic. The Septuagint is infamous for its spiritualization of the Old Testament, being at some points unrecognizable from the Hebrew original. This is most prevalent in the prophets, wherefrom Augustine gleans much of his eschatology. He is much more willing to consult the Septuagint's spiritualization of a passage instead of taking the literal meaning of the prophetic text, which is apparent in, for example, the second half of the expansive Book

¹¹ See also his treatment of the Septuagint in *On Christian Teaching*, II.15 par. 22.

Eighteen.¹² I would encourage a further investigation into books XVIII-XX for insight into Augustine's theological dependence on the Septuagint,¹³ as a study of the actual subject would require much more time and space than is currently available here. For now, it should suffice to say that, because the Septuagint spiritualizes (and because the New Testament authors used the Septuagint¹⁴), Augustine feels little hesitation in allegorizing passages he deems 'obscure.'¹⁵

There is also a slight issue over exactly which books Augustine considers 'divinely inspired.' In *City of God* in particular he speaks the most about canonicity in XV.23, XVII.20,24, and XVIII.38. Despite using the books known as the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus in an authoritative manner throughout, he admits in XVII.20 that only Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs are considered canonical during his time (though he clearly states that he thinks the former two to have been authored by Solomon). In XVII.24 he notes that the last books of the Old Testament to have canonical authority are Malachi, Haggai, Zechariah, and Ezra, as per Jewish tradition, which excludes, for example, the books like Sirach and Esdras.

Thankfully, we have a full list given by Augustine in *On Christian Teaching* II.8: the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, the "four of the Kingdom" (I & II Samuel together with I & II Kings), "the two of the Paralipomenon" (the title in the Septuagint for I & II Chronicles), Job, Tobit, Esther, Judith, I & II Maccabees, "the two of Ezra" (Ezra together with Nehemiah), Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekial, concluding his list by stating, "To these forty-four books is confined the

¹² From a purely Dispensational point of view this is apparent in his skewed chronology surrounding the end time events. For example, in XX.8 Augustine finds 3 ½ years (a bifurcation of the 7 tribulation years, taking only the second, 'bad' half) of the devil being 'unbound' at the end of the 'present' (spiritual) Millennium, because in XX.7 he is unwilling to take the "1,000" of Revelation 20 literally. This is partially related to an allegorical interpretation of Christ's illustration of the binding of the strong man in Mk. 3:27.

¹³ The errors of which are compounded between the Greek LXX and the Old Latin translation therefrom that he used, as opposed to Jerome's Vulgate, which was translated not from LXX, but from the Hebrew (as Augustine notes in XVIII.43).

¹⁴ In XV.2 he uses Paul's use of the term "allegory" (ἀλληγοροῦμενα) in Galatians 4:24 as justification for going further and allegorizing the whole Old Testament.

¹⁵ As per the hermeneutical method he outlines in *On Christian Teaching* Bk. II, where he advocates allegory as necessary in cases where the original language does not help in clarifying obscurities.

authority of the Old Testament.” In the New Testament he lists in entirety what both Catholics and Protestants currently have in their respective canons. Again, he notes in *On Christian Teaching* II.8 an issue surrounding the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, but he decides that, despite the issues brought against their authority at the time, “they are to be counted among the prophetic books” due to supposed Solomonic authorship.

This sort of variance with the Old Testament canon seems to have been a common issue at the time. Edmund Hill notes, “The African Church in Augustine’s time was one of the first Latin-speaking regional Churches to publish a list of the books it accepted as canonical, in councils held at Hippo Regius in 393 and Carthage in 397,” citing cohesion with the later list affirmed by the Council of Trent¹⁶; however, this is at variance with not only Jewish tradition, but also other church authorities, such as Athanasius in his *39th Festal Letter* (367 A.D.) or Augustine’s contemporary, Jerome. It could be concluded, then, that, to a certain degree, Augustine’s list of the canon has been influenced by his acceptance of the translational work of the Septuagint at ‘inspired,’¹⁷ as well as regional preference.

However, before moving on, it must be noted that another option for interpreting Augustine’s view of canonicity exists. Genevan scholar, theologian, and pastor Francis Turretin has noted the varied semantic range of the word “canon” by the early church, noting a possible double-usage in Augustine’s thought, as well as contrasting the North African bishop’s usage of the word with that of Jerome’s. This may not be a matter of dueling canons, as some have tried to affirm; rather, it may be that Augustine refers to “the canon of ecclesiastical reading,” not “the canon of faith,” which would simply mean that “Augustine attached a wider signification to the word ‘canon’ than Jerome.”¹⁸ For example, in *Contra*

¹⁶ Note 16 on page 163 of the New City Press edition of *On Christian Teaching* (with the emended title, *Teaching Christianity*). However, interpretational lucidity is needed; these councils may be referencing a more liturgical canon for pastoral and ecclesiastical reading, referencing, and edification, not an actual canon of inspired Scripture for faith, for the Third Council of Carthage also states that the accounts of the martyrs should be read in like manner. Furthermore, the authenticity and date of the canons in question may be doubtful. See Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.9.6-7 (p. 104f.).

¹⁷ Note that the Septuagint also included many of the books considered as deuterocanonical or apocryphal.

¹⁸ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2.9.7 (p. 104). Jerome has been specific in distinguishing uses of *canon* in relation to reading and authority: “As then the Church reads Judith, Tobit and the books of Maccabees, but does not admit them among the canonical Scriptures, so let it read these two volumes (Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus) for the edification of the people, not to give authority to the doctrines of the Church.”

Faustus 11.5 Augustine seems to acknowledge this distinction by noting that “there is a distinct boundary line separating all productions subsequent to apostolic times from the authoritative canonical books of the Old and New Testaments.”¹⁹ This view would make sense given Augustine’s initial skepticism about the authenticity of various books of the Apocrypha (as noted above) and would subsequently bring him in line with the earliest and most orthodox tradition of canonical authority. It also makes sense when one considers the occupational difference between Augustine and Jerome; as a bishop and pastor, Augustine would be primarily concerned with a canon for ecclesiastical reading, whereas the scholar Jerome would foremost have in mind the more fundamental and directly textual concern of canonical authority and authenticity. Admittedly, however, much work needs to be done with this subject matter, especially when one considers Augustine’s peculiar beliefs about the Septuagint.

Inspiration

In closing, a brief note should be made concerning how Augustine viewed the process of divine inspiration itself. Classic statements on the subject such as the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy make it clear that the object of divine inspiration is Scripture itself, that no violence was done to the human will in the process, and that God used the resources, personality, etc. of His chosen author to accomplish His purposes in inscripturation. From various statements in *City of God* we can ascertain that Augustine’s own view of inspiration coheres nicely with the current precedent. Take, for example, the phrase in XV.8 where he says of Moses, “The design of that writer (who in this manner was the instrument of the Holy Ghost),” etc., indicating the verity of authorial intent, while at the same time stating that Moses was, in the process, an instrument of the Holy Spirit. He says something similar in XI.3, noting that the Holy Spirit spoke by the tongues of the prophets, Christ, and the apostles in such a way that is sufficient and in accordance with His purpose. Interestingly, XI.1 seems also to imply a passive process of inspiration related to God’s providence, as is implied by the phrase, “the guiding power of God’s supreme providence” (see the full quote on page 3), the

¹⁹ This would then mean that when Augustine speaks of the authority of apocryphal books, he is referring to a relative authority and not an inherent and divine authority.

language of which should have perhaps been more emphatic if Augustine had meant that Scripture was dictated. He even seems to use language that anticipates (and perhaps even influenced) Calvin's famous statement in the *Institutes* (1.13.1) regarding Scripture as an *accommodation* of God's knowledge to our level of understanding, as is seen here:

"For Scripture is concerned for man, and it uses such language to terrify the proud, to arouse the careless, to exercise the inquirer, and to nourish the intelligent; and it would not have this effect if it did not first bend down and, as we may say, descend to the level of those on the ground." (XV.25)

Both Calvin and Augustine's statements respect the integrity of Scripture as coming from and bearing the same authority as God, as well as the fact that it uses very human language, indicative of human instrumentality. It thus seems safe to conclude that Augustine held to much the same view of inspiration commonly embraced by us today, inasmuch as we can gather from *City of God*.

CONCLUSION

Augustine's use of Scripture in *City of God* is authoritative and paradigmatic, providing the only sufficient foundation of truth for the development of his civic theology. This is apparent in the way he introduces Scriptural passages as either the final word in a matter or by interweaving his sentences and paragraphs therewith in both a theological and illustrative fashion. In doing so, he creates a sort of 'matrix' or blanket of Scripture to support, define, and perpetuate his arguments from beginning to end. This would not be possible if he did not believe the Bible to have been the sole source of divine grace and truth, a sufficient and inerrant testimony from God to man and the ultimate source of authority for faith. Thus Augustine's method of argumentation and his development of doctrine in *City of God* is one that effluxes from the fountainhead of God's Word. This is significant to the breadth of Augustinian studies because it establishes that, here in his *magnum opus*, he felt that the highest source of theology came, not from his ecclesiastical office as Bishop of Carthage, but from Scripture, which he used to develop a work that would touch on nearly every subject matter related to the Christian faith and establish a paradigm from which to view the entire scheme of redemptive history.

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