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## God in Human Suffering (Job 36:1-15): A Theological Discourse

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### Abstract

*This paper titled “God in Human Suffering (Job 36:1-15): A Theological Discourse”, is geared towards investigating the reality of human suffering while discussing its theological underpinnings. Today, the world is besieged with different forms of difficulties and challenges which have plunged many into the realms of hardship and sufferings. Wars and violent conflicts, ill- health and diseases of different types, social, cultural, economic and natural factors continue to cause the human person to suffer. Worst still, the Christian who believes in so good a God, who created the world and died to redeemed the world, is not left out. Thus the question: if God who is good created the world good, why do humans suffer? This paper therefore argues that God did not create evil and subsequently is not responsible for human suffering. It argues that suffering is inevitable to human existence and that sin, natural, economic and human factors are responsible for the cause of human suffering. This paper adopted the historical critical method of exegesis while employing both the diachronic and synchronic approaches of this method in analyzing Job 36:1-15. Also, the contextual method was applied especially in contextualizing Job 36:1-15 to Christians who suffer in Nigeria. This paper discovered that suffering is indeed a reality among humans and that human existence presupposes human suffering in some regard. Also, in the exegesis of Job 36:1-15. It was discovered that suffering serves as a means of deliverance and a ransom to the person who suffers. Furthermore, the exegesis show that the one who suffers must return to God in obedience, love and hope for a change of fortune. It discovered that God is not responsible for human suffering but that certain human actions, choices and decisions in themselves are capable of causing humans to suffer. This paper recommended that those who are in position of authority, who make decisions and choices on behalf of the larger community of humans must consider the best interest of others in their actions. Also, it recommends that Christians who suffer, must channel their challenges to Jesus in hope. Finally, it recommends that all who suffer, must embark on legitimate efforts to alleviate their awkward situations.*

**Keywords:** Christian, Evil, God, Human Suffering

## 1.0 Introduction

The reality of evil and its different ways of manifestations in human existence has continued to puzzle human minds and intellect especially when the biblical teaching that God created the world and everything he created is good (cf. Gen 1:1-32), is put into proper perspective. It suffices to say that evil exists wherever the human person exist and thus becomes clear that one cannot speak about evil without speaking about human existence. This apparent connectedness between human existence and the reality of evil, serves as a catalyst for the all- important question: Who created evil?

While theologians have continued to attempt to proffer answers to this question over the years, one must take cognizance of the fact that evil exists in reality in different ways or manifests itself in different ways. Therefore, the many wars (civil, regional and world), which have taken numerous lives, destroyed properties, shattered lives, etc. represent one major way through which evil in human existence manifests itself. Furthermore, the different forms of economic hardships caused by corrupt politicians and bad, ineffectual political and economic decisions have continued to sustain the existence of evil. The reality of human tragedies of different types which include: sicknesses and ill health; the pandemics, that completely destroyed human life, disasters albeit natural that claim lives and destroy properties and bring gloom to human existence, suicides and terrorist acts which continuously bring sorrow, darkness and gloom to human existence. Consequently, suffering is an offshoot of evil. That is, evil brings about human suffering and as identified above, suffering is a reality in human existence and massively connected to human life.

Interestingly, the Christian believes that Christ took away all human sufferings and sins when he died on the cross (cf. Isa. 53:4; Matt 8:17) and significantly, this belief prompts the questions: if God took away human sufferings, why are humans still suffering? Is God present in human suffering? How should one react to suffering? These questions and many more, inform this paper titled: God in Human Suffering (Job 36:1-15): A Theological Discourse.

### 1.1 Statement of the Problem

For the Christian, the salvific mission of Jesus more than anything else, brought about freedom from sin and all forms of sufferings. However, the fact that human suffering remains a reality, continues to puzzle the Christian and creates a dilemma in respect to comprehending why would suffering persists in the world that is created good by God and among Christians who believe and put their trust in so good a God?

The book of Job presents a classical example of the problem of evil as manifested in the tragedy faced by Job which culminated in the great sufferings he underwent. Job's situation in a way, serves as the foundation upon which any sort of suffering among Christians could be explained and understood. Yet, the story of Job, is one that presents the fundamental attitude and disposition towards human suffering. Specifically, Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar attempted to provide answers to Job's question concerning why he should suffer in such great a manner. These friends, wanted Job to accept that he is guilty and his guilt accounted for his ordeals. On the other hand, Job accused God of been unfair to him, insisting that he is a righteous man and thus, is not supposed to pass through such ordeal. Therefore, it becomes clear that Job's three friends proffered wrong arguments in relation

to why Job suffered and Job himself was in great error in accusing God of been unjust to him.

While ruminating on the above complexities in the book of Job, the important questions to ask include: Is God aware of human suffering? Is there an end to human suffering? Are there any benefits that can be gleaned from human suffering? Does human suffering amount to the failure of God in keeping his own safe from evil? Is human suffering inevitable? These and many more questions trouble the minds of Christians and Theologians as the phenomenon, human suffering, continues to besiege the human person.

Consequently, this paper titled "God in human Suffering (Job 36:1-15): A Theological Discourse", is geared towards examining human suffering and argues that God is present with the human person (Christian) in the face of suffering.

## 2.0 The Text of Job 36:1-15

### 2.1 Preliminary Discourse on Job 36:1-15

Basically the book of Job together with the books of Ecclesiastes and Proverbs belong to the genre called the wisdom literature. However, following form-critical studies, portions of the book of Job have been ascribed to different genres (Alden, 2001). In this wise, the book of Job is described as a lawsuit. The interventions of Elihu which run through Job 32:1-37:24, where the text of study is located, serves as an appeal, preceding Job chapters 38-41 where God appears as a litigant (Hartley, 1988). In another study, the book of Job is described as a dramatized lament which deployed legal language, thus aiding the development of Job's complaints and his accusation of God. The friends' speech are considered to be both words of consolation and disputation while that of God is also considered to be a disputation (Hartley, 1988). In any case, Hartley describes both thoughts as inadequate, while considering the lawsuit as one sided; dramatized lament is considered a descriptive term that does not best represent literary genre. Going forward, Hartley clarifies the fact that Job 36:2-21 to which the text of study (Job 36:1-15) is part of, as an instruction and thus, Elihu plays the role of Job's instructor and YHWH's forerunner (Hartley, 1988).

The text of Job 36:1-15 is a part of a larger context, Job 36:1-37:24, which is termed Elihu's Fourth Speech (Hartley, 1988). Consequently, Hartley describes the entire section as follows: "For this disputation speech, Elihu draws heavily on hymnic lines in praise of God and on theophanic descriptions. He turns these lines into rhetorical questions in his attempt to persuade Job to seek God. The speech has four sections: an introduction (36:1-4), God's disciplinary ways (36:5-25), God's greatness (36:26-37:20), and the divine splendor (37:21-24)" (Hartley, 1988, p. 468).

From the above, it is clear that Job 36:1-15 falls into the first and second divisions above, which extends from Job 36:1-25, and include both the introduction and deals with God's disciplinary ways. Furthermore, Job 36:1-15 stands out as a unit that can be studied within the context of its content. That is, Job 36:1-15 specifically addresses the fact that God makes use of the sufferings of the sufferer to redeem the one who suffers (Lange, Schaff, Lewis, Zekler, Evans, 2008). Interestingly, it contains the idea that one's attitude towards suffering greatly determines whether suffering becomes a blessing or leads to death (Job 36:8-12). Furthermore, strengthening the uniqueness of Job 36:1-15, is its unique vocabulary. That is, words such as: זָקִים ( *qā'im* ), זִיקָם ( *zīqām* ), בָּהָבֶלֶ ( *bəhābēl* 'ōnī ), מוּסָר ( *m ūsār* ), Turn away

(šūḇ), חַלְעָשׁ ('*halēs*') and וַיִּגֵּל ('*wəyigel*'), differentiates its content from that of the verses that follows after (Job 36:16-33).

Therefore, this paper structures the text of Job 36:1-15 as follows:

1. Job 36:1-4 Introduction/Elihu justifies why he speaks
2. Job 36:5-7 God deals with humans on the basis of their life style
3. Job 36:8-12 The Corrective Benefits of Suffering
4. Job 36:13-15 Conclusion/Reemphasizing the need for a better temperament in suffering)

### 2.1.1 Analyses of Job 36:1-15

Chapters 36 and 37 introduce the final speech of Elihu. Here, Elihu clearly justifies why he continues to speak (verses 2-4), argues that God deals and treat humans severely and largely relates with humans on the basis of righteous and unrighteous live styles (Verses 5-7), how God deals or treat humans based on their temperament in the face of human suffering (verse 8-15), Job's perception of the suffering of humans is wrong (verses 16-21), how rather, Job should loud God's works to be great (36:24, 37:14), God who is a teacher, not taught, cannot be condemned etc. (36:24-37-24).

#### Job 36:1-4 (Introduction/Elihu justifies why he speaks)

Essentially, Elihu's fourth speech, serves as an announcement that states clearly that further and yet more salient instructions are about to be communicated. Instructions that will boarder around the nature and operations of God especially as it relates to human suffering (Lange, Schaff, Lewis, Zekler, Evans, 2008.). Elihu employed Job to be patient with him as he provides defense for God, assuring him that he can provide clarity as regards the actions of God since the knowledge he possesses comes from God. This knowledge דָּעָה ( *dē'ā*.), is comprehensive, perfect and devoid of rebuttal or contradiction, expressing Elihu's ability to speak on the subject matter. Significantly, Elihu's action, is to demonstrate that God, the maker, acts righteously and he is compelled to defend God's integrity in the face of Job's suffering (Lange, Schaff, Lewis, Zekler, Evans, 2008). Therefore, in three short strophes, Elihu, proofs how God in his righteousness, deals and appropriates human destinies Lange et.al. 2008).

#### Job 36:5-7 (God's relationship with both the righteous and the sinner)

God is mighty and all powerful and does not despise anyone. In other words, the mighty God extends his benevolence and justice to all. However, the wicked does not remain, as the wicked suffers for being wicked. The wicked get what they deserve as they do not enjoy divine providence and intervention. On the other hand, those who suffer in the hand of the wicked, will experience divine providence. God's intervention implies that he treat them fairly and with justice. Interestingly, Elihu's answer in verse 6, is a direct reaction to Job's question in chapter 21:7, where he asked, "Why do the wicked live? It becomes clear that verse 6a, presents a negative reaction to the wicked. That is, the one who abandons God's ways while verse 6b presents a positive reaction to the righteous who suffers, who necessarily enjoys God's support. Thus, God continually sets his attention on the righteous and as such, he gives them protection and absolute care. The one who suffers and yet, puts his trust in God, is not neglected by God but experiences upliftment and change of fortune. So the righteous is protected by God (Reyburn, 1992).

#### Job 36:8-12 (The Corrective Benefits of Suffering)

Elihu continues in verses 8-9 where he interestingly, reminded Job that even though God takes care of the righteous, he nonetheless, frowns at the righteous whenever they stray from the right path or way. The use of the word 'fetters' (*ziqqīm*) and the phrase 'cords of affliction' (*bəhabālē 'ōnī*), clearly put forward how God continually relates with the righteous especially when the righteous strays away from the right path. Hartley (1988) summarizes the above as follows:

The chains not only keep them from traveling further down a wrong road, but they also inflict pain to make the errant conscious of the impending doom that lies at the end of the wayward path they have taken. After binding them, God *tells them what they have done*. He makes them aware *that they have acted arrogantly*. Whereas pride blinds their conscience, God seeks to bring them to their senses so that they might turn from their evil course. Moved by mercy he reveals to them *their transgressions* (p. 471).

God continues to apply discipline or give instructions to those who stray from the right path and thus, demands that they turn away from their evil path. The phrase 'open their ear' implies that the one who strayed away, listens and obeys the instructions of God (*mūsār*) and this positive attitude, elicits turning away from 'evil' (*'āwen*). Turn away (*šūḇ*), therefore means repentance and the one who strays, necessarily needs to repent from the evil ways in order to enjoy God's loving care (Hartley, 1988).

Elihu contrasts two possible reactions of the errant righteous in relation to God's instruction (*mūsār*) and in verses 11a and 12a, he insists that in as much as the one who strays, *obeys* (*šāma*) and *serves* (*āḇaḏ*) God, remarkable changes would be noticed in their situation with God richly blessing them. On the other hand, refusal to obey (*lō' šāma*) God's *mūsār* will certainly attract death (Hartley, 1988). In any case, the bane of the unrepentant one is premised on the lack of knowledge which simply means they do not faithfully obey God. Thus, as they reject God, God on his path withdraws his sustaining presence and consequently, they expire (Hartley, 1988). What Elihu emphasized between verses 8-12 is that, one's attitude towards suffering matters a lot. Human attitude in the face of suffering must be right. Rightness in this context implies, recognizing God in the face of suffering and surrendering to him and his power. On the contrary, wrong attitude would mean, failure to see and recognize God's hand in trials and tribulation.

#### Job 36:13-15 Conclusion/Reemphasizing the need for a better temperament in suffering)

In concluding his speech, Elihu in verses 13-15 re-emphasized that failure to respond positively to the מוֹסָר (*mūsār*) of God and Turn away (*šūḇ*) from evil, will provoke God's anger. These verses further highlight the fact that despite the actions of God in binding those who stray away from the right path with chains, they have remained unresponsive to God's instructions and discipline and consequently, death becomes their lot (Hartley, 1988). Finally, verse 15 provides the summary of the entire speech that Elihu sets out to present to Job in relation to exposing God's ability to design human destiny in the face of suffering. Therefore, verse 15 stresses that the purpose of this first half of Elihu's speech is to show Job that God leads those who suffer to greater blessings which he has prepared for them. God "rescues at last out of his misery the man who quietly and willingly endures, just by virtue of his constant endurance; He makes his suffering serve as a means of deliverance and a ransom to him" (Lange, et.al. 2008).



### 3.0 The reality of Human Suffering

The reality of human suffering raises the question of how perfect did God create the world and why would the human person have to face suffering in all its attendant manifestations? The fact, however is that, humans as much as they exist in this world, would continue to face the reality of suffering and this reality is even grim for some when the context of their existence, the socio-cultural, political, economic conditions they find themselves are put into proper perspective. Thus, suffering is inevitable in human existence. In other words, physical, mental and even spiritual suffering are intrinsic to the program of human life. Consequently, there is the need for openness and the ability to embrace suffering with the hopes of overcoming it. Basically, the fact that suffering is inevitable suggests the truth that there are causes of suffering that are external to the human person. That is, these causes are out of the control of the human person, as ordinarily, assuming everything remains normal, one would not trigger a cause that would subject one to suffering.

Therefore, human suffering may be caused by harmful natural conditions such as: earthquakes, flooding due to excess rainfall, bush fires, volcanic eruption, tsunami or hurricane, drought as a result of low rainfall and or climate change and other extreme natural conditions which in themselves, would cause a state of untold hardship, pain and suffering to the human person. Harmful political systems and conditions might also, aid the reality of suffering. Within this context, the event of war, political agitations leading to terrorist attacks and other forms of violence, bad government policies and styles which create a state of abject poverty and lack among the citizens. Intolerance draconian laws that infringe on human rights and integrity. Also, poor economic policies and weak political will to make decisions that would put a stop to all factors that makes the economic poor. Thus, poor economic conditions create a weak economy that is bastardized by high inflation, unemployment, low purchasing power and ultimately, the inability to eat three square meals a day (Ulrich, 2009).

In addition, the reality of human suffering is reinforced by harmful social conditions which greatly affects the basic social needs of the human person. Basic social needs such as: satisfying hunger and thirst, maintaining decent housing and health care, housing and security. No doubt, the inability of the human person to meet up with these, subjects the human person to suffering of unquantifiable proportion. Furthermore, emotional, spiritual and cognitive conditions that are harmful also contribute to making suffering a reality in human existence. Consider the inability for someone to have clear perspective of his or her future, lack of self-respect, the feeling of rejection and not belonging, inability to comprehend the social and natural world one exists in, the inability to love, the pain of losing a loved one, broken relationships, material loss, the inability to grasp the meaning of life and existence, these and many more engineer the sense of misery and ultimately suffering in the human person and certainly, continues to make suffering a reality (Ulrich, 2009).

#### 3.1 God and Suffering: A Christian Theodicy

With no doubt, theologians over the centuries have had to debate vigorously in terms of explaining the existence of God who is goodness and the existence of evil and human suffering in the good world created by God. God is unique and according to the Christian faith, God is "one in nature, substance and essence" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013, no. 200). God is truth

and love and the truth and faithfulness of his word in all things can be trusted at all times. In this regard, the beginning of sin and the fall of man is due to the lie of the tempter who seduced man unto doubting God's words, kindness and faithfulness (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). God is the initiator of creation and essentially, creation has its own goodness and proper perfection. Creation thus as ordered by God, journeys towards its destined perfection (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). In essence, God through divine providence, guides all his creatures with wisdom and love to their ultimate end (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013).

However, one may ask, since God is the almighty, creator of the good world and cares for all his creatures, why does evil exist and by extension why do humans suffer? One may also ask, why did God who is omnibenevolent, omnipotent and omniscient not create a world that is free from evil and human suffering? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that God in his infinite wisdom and goodness, willed to create a world that is in a state of journeying towards its ultimate perfection (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). Consequently, it is important to note that in God's plan, the process of becoming involves the appearance of certain beings and the disappearance of certain others. The existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). Therefore, as long as creation has not reached its perfection, with physical good, there exists physical evil.

The human person as a creature of God, is on a journey towards perfection, a journey towards the ultimate destiny. This journey is defined through the use of human freedom and choices and thus, the human person can go astray and within this context, one can speak of moral evil (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). It becomes clear that the fact that the created world is on a journey towards perfection, allows for moral and physical evil. Put more succinctly, God is not directly or indirectly responsible for evil in the world but permits it and mysteriously knows how to derive good from it (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013). "The fact that God permits physical and even moral evil is a mystery that God illuminates by his son Jesus Christ who died and rose to vanquish evil. Faith gives us the certainty that God would not permit an evil if he did not cause a good to come from that very evil, by way that we shall fully know only in eternal life" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2013, no. 324).

From the foregoing, it becomes clear that human suffering is a consequence of the original sin and according to the Catechism of the Church, "as a result of original sin, human nature is weakened in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and damnation of death, and inclined to sin" (418). Consequently, the human person became susceptible to every form of factor that is capable of inflicting pain and causing suffering. The human person is vulnerable to diseases of different types and other biological ailments that cause great sufferings and eventually lead to the death of the human person. Also, human suffering apart from been the direct consequence of the fall, the wrong use of human freedom in relation to the choices made by humans contribute to the existence of suffering in the world. Decisions emanating from wrong political policies, greed beclouding judgment in the area of the economy, actions that undermine the environmental equilibrium etc. all create fertile ground for an atmosphere that encourages human suffering (Bryson and Fellow).

Interestingly, suffering certainly plays a very important role in the moral life of the person who suffers. In a way, suffering atones for sin (Bryson and Fellow). That is, human suffering if properly embraced, could provide a veritable platform for turning away from the wrong path by the one who suffers and turning towards God. Human suffering has the capacity to aid the moral progress of the one who suffers. In other words, when human suffering is offered to God, it acquires new meaning, it becomes a participation in the saving work of Jesus. God does not cause human suffering, but he does something about human suffering. That is, in his suffering, he explains the role of suffering in human life. The death of Jesus, does for the human person what they cannot do for themselves. His crucifixion and ignominious death on the cross truly represented human suffering and certainly, we heal from our sins as we identify our suffering with the suffering of Jesus (Bryson and Fellow).

### 3.2 Job 36:1-15 in the Context of Human Suffering

The fourth speech of Elihu no doubt brings a new dimension into the discourse of human suffering in the book of Job. Elihu basically argues from a theological point of view and consider God as infinitely mighty, a wise Being, just and is an ever loving and caring father, who in his righteousness, determines the lots of all humans, bringing about chastisement with great severity and “yet ever with a merciful purpose” (Lange, et.al. 2008). Elihu therefore, explains the meaning of human suffering to Job and he emphasized that God allowed him, Job, to suffer in order to teach him. By extension, suffering has the purpose of making people to turn away from their sins (Reyburn, 1992). God therefore, permits or allows suffering and very importantly, the righteous who becomes proud and strays away from the path of God, is allowed to suffer. “The purpose for which they are allowed to suffer is to make them aware of their sins and to help them recognize that being raised to important positions has made them proud” (Reyburn, 1992). Thus, in the exercise of the human freedom, the human person strays as a result of wrong decisions and choices and this brings sufferings upon the human person. In any case, these are disciplinary in nature and are meant to bring back the strayed person to God.

Significantly, God is present with the one who suffers and is always prepared and ready to intervene in the situation of the one who suffers. Such intervention with no doubt, guarantees restoration. Restoration that is premised on the ability of the one who suffers to take advantage of the sufferings as instructions guiding him or her back to God. The Text therefore brings to the fore the fact that, the wicked suffers and when the righteous appears to suffer, the righteous who suffers must have, like the wicked, walked away from God.

### 3.3 Job 36:1-15 in the Context of the Socio-Economic Situation among Christians in Nigeria

There can be no time more fitting to speak about suffering in relation to Christians especially in Nigeria than this present time. That is, the socio-economic indices all point to the fact that more Nigerians are suffering than ever before. Interestingly, no one is spared as both the righteous and the wicked are faced with hardship and pain that bring great suffering. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the factors responsible for this round of sufferings, are based solely on the actions of the leaders of the people, political leader who in their policies, have not only made the economy so bad but have by implication, thrown the citizens into a state of economic quagmire. Consequently, citizens cannot afford basic necessities of livelihood as many go hungry and in

some cases, die of hunger. Many cannot afford to pay medical bills and are forced out of hospitals or do not visit the hospital at all and resign to fate. Also, the politicization of religion and the use of ethnic diversity as means to score political mileage has also contributed to the suffering many Nigerians have had to endure.

This obviously is responsible for the cases of religious intolerance witnessed in Nigeria and especially in the Muslim populated states of Northern Nigeria. An act that has caused the death of many, led to the destruction of properties worth trillions of naira, displaced many, making them refugees in their home land and has completely taken away comfort and bestowed misery, pain and suffering to Nigerians. The suffering induced by environmental degradation and climate change cannot be brushed aside. This suffering is seen in the massive flooding that continues to ravage several farm lands, thereby causing food shortage, destructions of houses and properties and rendering people homeless.

Ruminating on the above, it is clear that suffering within the context of Nigeria, is man-made. That is, in the exercise of freewill, in the choices and decisions made by the ruling class and political leaders, Nigeria has been plunged into a state of utter lack and inadequacy. The consequence of this is that, Nigerians are faced with hardship that causes pain and brings about suffering of untold proportions. In all of this, God is not absent but present especially with all those who continue to hold onto him. In other words, God does not abandon his own and will not at any time abandon his own. He therefore, is a companion of the Christian who suffers and as long as the one who suffers reposes hope and trust in him, he surely brings deliverance and a change of fortune.

## 4.0 Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, it is clear from the paper titled “God in Human Suffering (Job 36:1-15): A Theological Discourse”, that God did not abscond at any time in human history. In other words, God has remained a worthy companion to the human person especially in moments of hardship and subsequently suffering. Thus, God is present with the Christian who suffers, not as the cause of the suffering but as the one who would reverse the situation. Suffering becomes as it were, a form of punishment for deviating from the path of God or a disciplinary measure that is meant to redirect the one who suffers to true repentance and consequently, submission to God. Finally, the sufferings of the citizen, be it economic, social, emotional or otherwise, is a product of the wrong use of the capacity to make choices and decisions either by the government or by the individual who suffers. By way of recommendations, this paper recommends that: Christians are to imbibe the spirit of patience and perseverance in the face of suffering. It also calls for political leadership to align itself with sincerity of purpose and strife at all times to ensure that decision or choices are for the best interest of the citizens. In addition, it urges Christians who suffer to learn to submit their pains and sufferings to Jesus who himself suffered and died in order that Christians might experience relief and comfort. Finally, Christians are not to fold their hand and do nothing in the face of hardship and suffering. Rather, legitimate efforts must be made at improving on their situations.

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