

Robert Vannoy, Major Prophets, Lecture 3

Exploring Isaiah 2:1-4 from a Postmillennial and Amillennial Perspective

Isaiah 2:1-4 From a Post-Millennial Perspective [Alexander]

There are three interpretative eschatological positions: the Premillennial, the Amillennial, and Postmillennial positions. Let me give you an idea of how the Post-mils work with the passage. I'll do that using J. A. Alexander. I might mention, his commentary on Isaiah is a very useful commentary. He cites a lot of other sources, and he goes into the original texts. There's a lot of helpful material there. He does so from a Post-mil perspective when you come to the sections of Isaiah that have an eschatological aspect to them.

Exaltation of the Church

Look at number 2 in your citations. I've just lifted some excerpts on various verses. Note the first paragraph: "In the first part, the prophet foretells the future exaltation of the church and the accession of the Gentiles in chapters 2-4." So you see, he sees the whole prophecy as the future exaltation of the church. The wording of that "the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the chief of the mountain raised above the hills,"--that's Jerusalem. That is symbolic of the church. "All nations will flow to it," that's the Gentiles coming into the church. He goes on to say, "After the title similar to that in chapter 1:1 the prophecies of the church at some distant period will be exalted and conspicuous and the nations resorting to it for instruction and true religion." As a consequence of which he sees war cease and universal peace prevail--verses 2-4. So you see, as the gospel goes forth and people from all nations come to Christ, the ultimate results will be the cessation of war and establishment of universal peace.

Regarding Isaiah, chapter 2, verse 2, he says, "The prophecy begins with an abrupt prediction of the exaltation of the church. The confluence of nations to it and the general classification of the consequence, verses 2-4. Instead of saying, in modern phraseology, that the church is a society that shall become conspicuous and attract all nations, he

represents it by the mountain upon which the temple stood as having been raised and fixed above other mountains so it could be visible in all directions.” He says, “It’s symbolic language that fits the church.” That’s on page 97. I might mention that, that first sentence is page 95 and the second paragraph is 96 in his commentary. “This confluence of the nations is described more fully and its motives stated in their own words, namely a desired to be instructed in the true religion of which Jerusalem, or Zion, under the old dispensation was the sole depositor.” That’s page 98. “For out of Zion shall go forth the law” is true religion as rule of duty and the word of Jehovah; the true religion is revealed from Jerusalem—the church.

Gospel Spreading Brings Peace

Verse 4 is really the crux of the passage. That’s where, “Swords will be beat into plowshares; neither should they learn war anymore.” He says, “Here one who would appear in the preceding verses as law-giver and teacher of the nations is now represented as arbiter, or umpire, ending their disputes by specific intervention as the necessary consequence of which war ceases. The very knowledge of the art is lost and its implements applied to other uses. This prediction was not fulfilled in the general peace under Emperor Augustus, which was only temporary. Nor is it now fulfilled. The event is suspended upon the previous condition, namely, the confluence of the nations to the church, which has not taken place. This is a strong inducement to diffuse the gospel, which in the meantime is peaceful, and in the spirit tending to that in the actual effect, wherever, [and notice], so far as it exerts its influence without obstruction. ‘And he shall judge or arbitrate between nations and decide for many people, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift sword against nations, neither shall they learn war anymore.’”

See, what he’s saying is that is to happen through the spread of the gospel, we just haven’t gotten far enough down the road yet. Of course, he was writing nearly a century ago. But, we’re not a whole lot closer now as we were then as far as seeing these results of the cessation of war. But that’s the postmil interpretation. It’s the motivation to spread

the gospel because through the spread of the gospel these conditions will come as a result of regeneration in the hearts of men. That's a representation of Alexander from a postmill interpretation.

Another illustration of that position is Delitzsch of the Keil and Delitzsch commentary. Page 5 of your citations. Of verse 3, Delitzsch says this is on page 116: "It was fulfilled as Theodoret observes in the fact that the word of the gospel rising from Jerusalem, as from a fountain, flowed through the whole of the known world. But these fulfillments were only preludes to a conclusion which is still to be looked for in the future of what is promised in the following verses which is still unfulfilled."

Then verse 4, which is on page 116 and 117: "And he will judge between the nations and deliver justice to many people as they look forward to converting their swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; nations will not pick up sword against nation neither do they exercise themselves in war anymore. With such power is this peace-sustaining word of God. There is no more need in weapons of iron. They are turned into the weapons of peaceful employment. There is no more need for military practice, for there's no use in exercising oneself in what cannot be applied as useful. There is peace: not an armed peace, but a full, true, God-given and blessed peace. It is in war that the power of the Beast culminates in the history of the world. The Beast will then be destroyed. The true humanity will send his chosen up and gain the mastery. The world will keep the Sabbath."

Notice his next statement. "May we not indulge the hope on the ground of such prophetic words as these, that the history of the world will not terminate without having kept the Sabbath? Shall we correct Isaiah, according to Quenset, lest we should become chiliasts, [that is Premillennialists, people that see a future Millennial period]? 'The humanitarian ideas of Christendom, says the thoughtful Jewish scholar, has its roots in the Pentateuch and the more in Deuteronomy; but in the prophets, particularly in Isaiah, reach a height that will not be obtained and fully realized by the modern world for centuries to come.'" Then Delitzsch says, "Yet they [the prophetic words] will be realized. What the prophetic words appropriated by Isaiah here affirms is the moral

posture, the goal of sacred history that predicted the counsel of God.” So a Postmillennial view sees this prophecy as telling us that through the church and the spread of the gospel to the ends of the earth, eventually conditions will be created in which war ceases.

Isaiah 2:1-4 From an Amillennial Perspective [Young]

Alright that’s a Post-millennial understanding of it. Let’s go back to an Amillennial understanding. I have touched on that in discussing Young’s view of “the last days” and the way in which he sees this prophecy fitting into the “last days.” But look at page 8. The citation we haven’t looked at, right in the middle of the page; this comes from pages 101 and 102 of Young’s commentary on Isaiah where it says, “By means of this picture, Isaiah wishes to teach the truth that the worship of the Lord is expressed by metonymy, as ‘the mountain of the house of the Lord.’ [So you see you’re in figurative language.] The worship of the Lord then, expressed by metonymy, as ‘the mountain of the house of the Lord,’ will triumph over all other religions and forms of worship. The place in which the superiority of the worship of the Lord is revealed is that of the recognition outside of Israel. In Isaiah’s day, this worship was comparatively obscure and was practically confined to Israel. The nations regarded the Lord as the God merely of Israel, a local deity like Chemosh of the Moabites. The latter days, however, in as much as Zion would be exalted, this religion of Israel would be known throughout the world. In the light of the New Testament, we may say that the reference of this prophecy is to the church which Jesus Christ founded, beginning at Jerusalem. The disciples went throughout the world proclaiming the true salvation. This church as the pillar and ground of the truth is to be preached for every creature.” So at that point you have an agreement between the Postmillennialists. and the Amillennialists as to the role of the church and the spread of the gospel. That’s E. J. Young.

Follow along there; this comes from page 102. 12 is a footnote, “By a number of modern writers this passage is said to be fulfilled during the Millennium to follow the return of Christ. In reply.” [Listen to his reply.] “We must note this prophecy is attributed to the latter days, which are the Messianic days.” Because it’s the “latter days,”

it can't be the Millennium. "Furthermore, the blessings taken are spiritual. Men will seek the Lord that they may walk in his ways. But men take the Lord only when the Lord draws them to do so. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in connection of the preaching of the gospel."

Then notice the next paragraph, which comes from page 103 of Young: "No longer does merely one nation know the Lord, but all nations know him. When Isaiah says, 'many people,' he does not mean all people, but simply a great multitude. Those who formerly were but strangers and foreigners are now fellow citizens with the saints. During the Old Testament dispensation, the glory of the gospel was hid with the nations. In the latter days however, the church stands out, and to it men of all nations will come. The people are now scattered nations returning to the Lord and they will become one. All nations will flow unto Zion. No nation will be excluded. Out of all these nations there will be many people. Zion is the center of truth. If a man wishes to hear the truth, he must go to the place where the truth is found, namely, the Church of the living God where the truth of God flows from."

Then the next paragraph. This goes back to the heart of the amil position. He says, "There are two prevalent types of answers to the interpretation given in this commentary: on the one hand there are those who say that it is possible, that war may cease entirely in this time in the age before the return of Christ from heaven [that would be a postmil position.] On the other hand, there are those known as dispensationalists who maintain that the prophecy is not fulfilled in the present age but will be fulfilled in the Millennium which follows the return of Christ."

Notice his comment about that view. "This latter type of interpretation does violence of a serious kind. [To what?] To the general structure of biblical eschatology." In other words, his argument here is more in the structure of the position "the system does violence. We may answer both these positions as follows." So now here is what he sets over against either a postmil interpretation or premil interpretation: "We may enter both these positions as follows. In so far as men learn of the Lord and are taught of him, they will seek to apply in their lives the principles of his government." Qualification, you

see, is “in so far as men learn of Lord and seek to apply the principles of his government. Consequently, even at the present day, [and here is the qualification], in so far as men believe the gospel and seek to practice it in their lives this prophesy finds fulfillment. At the same time it must be remembered that sin is still present, and it will not be until the complete removal of sin in the Second Advent of the Lord that this prophesy will be realized in its completeness. Whereas therefore the latter days continue until the Second Coming of the Lord, the blessed conditions, which are introduced by these last days, will abide forever. This prophesy will only be understood in the general light of the general structure of eschatology.”

You see he is right back to that thing which is in the last paragraph of that same page, which is really a footnote to that paragraph in the text. “That it is absolutely fulfilled in principle, but only in principle. It is fulfilled insofar as men commit themselves to the Lord and obedience to the Lord that these conditions of peace are realized.” In the completeness, he says, it’s not within the latter days. He is pushing it into the eternal stage.

What is the degree of spiritualization of what is being understood by “beating swords into plowshares?” Are you going to say that doesn’t really mean that wars are going to cease, but it’s peace in the heart of man? Young does not go quite that far. There are some amil interpreters who do. Young gets around that problem by qualifying it. We will see this peace to the extent that men submit themselves to the will of the Lord; but because sin is still present, it’s never going to be perfect. So that the complete fulfillment has to go beyond the last days into the eternal state. As he says, there are difficulties with this. All we can do is be faithful to the structure of eschatology. So it’s his system that is forcing him in this direction.

Vannoy’s Premillennial Response

I have a real problem with the view. I don’t think it does justice to the language of the text. When it says in verse 4, “He will judge between the nations and settle the disputes of many peoples. They will beat their swords into the plowshares, their spears

into pruning hooks; nation will not take up sword against nation,” there is no qualification there. That’s not talking about something partially fulfilled, or fulfilled in principle, but later to be completely fulfilled. He is describing what is going to happen when people receive the law of the Lord as it goes forth from Zion, and he judges the nations and rules.

Calvin’s Amillennial Perspective

Let’s look at Calvin on page 3 and 4. I’m not going to read all this from Calvin. The second paragraph: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares.” Calvin also believes it’s talking about the church just as Young does. But he says, “He [Isaiah] next mentions the beneficial result which will follow when Christ shall have brought the Gentiles and nations under his dominion. Nothing is more desirable than peace, but while all imagine that they desire it, they disturb it by the madness of their lust. For pride and covetous ambition lead men to rise up in cruelty against each other. Since, therefore, men are naturally led away by their evil passions to serve society, Isaiah here promises correction of this evil--the gospel of reconciliation. 2 Corinthians 5:18 removes the enmity between us and God, so it brings men into peace and harmony with each other. The meaning amounts to this: that Christ’s people will be meek, and laying aside fierceness, will be devoted to the pursuit of peace.” Last paragraph on that page. “Besides, Isaiah promises that when the gospel shall be published, it will be an excellent remedy for putting an end of quarrelling.”

You could wish it were so. You don’t have to look at too many churches to find that that is not functioning too well. Of course, the way these people would respond to that would be: “Well, people are not really submitting to the Lord and following his will, or there wouldn’t be this quarreling.” That may be true. But is that what this prophecy is talking about? Continuing with Calvin, “It will be an excellent remedy for putting an end of quarrels, and not only so, but that when resentments have been laid aside, men will be disposed to assist each other. For he does not merely say ‘swords shall be broken into pieces,’ but they shall be turned into mattocks. By which he shows there will be so great

a change that instead of annoying one another, committing various injustice acts as they formerly had done, they will cultivate peace and friendship and will employ their exertions for the common benefits of all.”

Down to the next paragraph, “‘Neither shall they practice war anymore.’ The [Hebrew] word *lamad* signifies either ‘to be accustomed to’ or ‘to learn,’ but the meaning of the prophet is plain enough. They will not train themselves in destructive arts and will not strive with each other in acts of cruelty and injustice as they were formerly accustomed to do. Hence we infer that they have made”—notice this sentence—“little proficiency in the gospel whose hearts have not been formed to meekness and among whom there does not reign the brotherly love which leads men to perform kind offices to each other.”

Now, next paragraph, and it’s interesting Calvin brings this up, because from what he said this far it would seem that if you were a Christian and you would be a follower of the Lord, you’d have to be a pacifist. Calvin was aware of that. Notice his next paragraph: “Some mad men torture this passage to promote anarchy. As if it took away from the church entirely the right to use the sword, and bring it [this passage from Isaiah] forward to condemn with great disparity every kind of war. For example, if a prince defends a people entrusted to him to protect them against injustice, for these people it is unlawful for Christians to use the sword. But it is easy to reply to this. For the prophet speaks metaphorically about the kingdom of Christ.” In other words, its figurative language, not to be taken literally. “He speaks metaphorically about the kingdom of Christ, which leads men through mutual kindness to become reconciled to each other.” What he is saying is what is being talked about here is not actual warfare--what we normally think of when we talk about war. It’s a matter of relationships between believers. The scriptures frequently employ a metaphor in which the thing signified is the matter that is assigned, as in that passage: “He who has no sword, let him buy one.” Christ certainly did not intend to induce his followers to fight, but intimated the time of war was at hand.

Look at the last paragraph: “It may be objected that in a state of harmony and peace, the sword will no longer be needed. I reply that peace exists,” and here he sounds

just like Young and, in fact, Young probably drew it from Calvin. “I reply that peace exists among us just as far as the kingly power of Christ is acknowledged, and that these two things have a mutual relation. Would that Christ reigned entirely in us, but he doesn’t. So we still have these problems.”

And then the last, fourth line up, the last part of that paragraph. “The fulfillment of this prophecy to its full extent must not be looked for on earth.” He pushes it again. “It is enough that we experience the beginning. Being reconciled to God through Christ is in mutual friendship bringing harmony.”

Notice in all this the problem of the latter days for the Amillennialist. He takes the latter days as this time between the advents. He has a very difficult time seeing how precisely the words of this prophecy are fulfilled presently. So they have to resort to this principle or to some type of qualified fulfillment.

Laetsch’s Amillennial Perspective

Let me give you one other Amillennialist. I do this more as an illustration of a somewhat different approach. That is Theodore Laetsch, and that’s on page 6. Laetsch is a Lutheran, a Missouri Synod Lutheran, but also an Amillennialist. His commentary is on the Minor Prophets, and this paragraph on page 6 from Laetsch is taken from his comments on the Micah parallel passage that “swords shall be beat into plowshares.” It’s from Micah, but it’s the same issue. “Micah himself speaks not of political peace among the nations of the world, he speaks here very definitely of God’s kingdom of grace established by the word of God preceding from Zion and Jerusalem and gathering people throughout the world into one Christian Church.” Then notice in this next sentence, which is interesting to me. “The Christian from Alabama and the Christian from Ohio, one wearing the southern gray and the other in northern blue were fighting against each other in bloody battle. Yet both were brethren in Christ, both members of his kingdom of peace, both wanting faith in their common Savior, and both enjoying the peace procured for them by the Prince of Peace and praying for the spiritual welfare of each other.” So he would say verse 4 was fulfilled even in the midst of the conflict of the Civil War

between the North and the South when believers were killing each other but at the same time realizing their oneness in Christ and the peace of Christ that he gave in their hearts. See, Young backs off of that complete spiritualization in the present state, pushing the complete spiritualization into the eternal state, as does Calvin.

Summary of Difficulties with the Amillennial and Postmillennial Positions

Now, it seems to me, we have looked at the postmillennial and the amillennial views. It seems to me the premillennial view avoids the problems of both these positions. The postmil have a problem with other scriptures that say things get worse and worse. And you still have the problem of whether the spread of the gospel is actually going to produce this kind of a situation. The amil position is locked into this between advents position and must qualify the fulfillment, and see at least in some sense a figurative fulfillment. The premil view seems to me to have the least problems. It can take Jerusalem literally, which seems to be required particularly in the Micah context of the same prophecy. Jerusalem is to be destroyed and plowed like a field, but in the future days it's going to be exalted; and the word of the Lord is going to go forth from Jerusalem, and the Lord himself is going to judge the nations and people are going to beat their swords into plowshares, and there will be war no more. So it seems to me that the prophecy can be best understood to lead you to a premil conclusion as far as times of fulfillment. The other two views have serious problems.

On Literal and Figurative Interpretation

But let me raise another question. This still does not totally resolve the issue of literal versus figurative meaning in verse 2. We discussed last quarter this whole issue of literal versus figurative, and I tried to discuss that somewhat abstractly then. I tried to say at that point that it is a difficult problem. I don't know of any simple rule of thumb. To say I always take something literally is not adequate. Sometimes things are obviously intended to be figurative. The question is when is something intended to be taken figuratively and when is something intended to be taken literally? That is something you

have to wrestle with. It is something that is involved in the process of interpretation.

When you read Isaiah chapter 2, verse 2, “In the last days, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” What is that talking about? And what degree of literal versus figurative do you bring to that text? You see, the amils would take an extreme figurative interpretation and say that this is simply speaking of the prominence of the church. It’s using the Old Testament Zion, or Jerusalem, to represent the church. So, “The mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” They say this is talking about the church.

Others will say: “No it’s not talking about the church. We ought to understand it literally. It’s talking about Jerusalem, particularly because of the context in Micah.” But, if you take it literally as referring to Jerusalem, then what about some of that language of that last phrase, “It will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it.” Do you take that literally? Does that mean there will be a geological uplift, and the highest mountain in the world will be Zion? Or is that a figure for saying that Jerusalem, a literal city, is going to be the most prominent city in the world. I’m inclined to think that is the way we are to understand it. But that is figurative. That’s an element of a figure. There are those who say that latter part of verse 2, “be raised above the hills,” is also to be taken literally, and that there will be a geographic elevation of Jerusalem at the end times. J. Barton Payne takes that view.

Now, if you say you’re a literalist, is that statement indicative of the prominence of Jerusalem? Then you are back into this question of literal versus figurative. I think we all want to say we interpret literally. Yes, but what does that mean if you interpret literally? It doesn’t mean there are no figures anywhere. You have to wrestle with things like that. There are three options there. You can go to an extreme figurative interpretation with respect to this verse and say it’s not Jerusalem at all, it’s the church. You can go to a sort of modified figurative understanding and say it is Jerusalem, but it’s talking about the prominence of Jerusalem. Or you can go to a completely literal

interpretation and say it is Jerusalem, and it is talking about geographical elevation.

How do you tell what is figurative and literal? You have to look at the scriptural uses elsewhere and at the context of the passage. You see where this goes: it says, “Many people will come, and say ‘Let’s go up to the mountain of the Lord, he will teach us his ways.’” The rest of the passage says what is prominent here is Jerusalem at the center from which the Lord will rule. So it’s the prominence of Jerusalem. But that’s something I don’t think you can be absolutely certain about.

Look at page 6 of your citations from J. Barton Payne: “Isa 2:2a; 4:1a ‘The mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established above the hills.’ Similar changes in topography that are foretold in Zechariah 14:4b and 10.” These are Zechariah’s prophecies, numbers 70 and 75 that are in his Encyclopedia. “So despite various allegorizing interpretations that have been proposed by both liberals and other conservatives for this ‘exalting of Zion,’ the biblical teaching seems to be miraculous geological changes, fulfillment in the latter days. Physical changes as the temple of Mount Moriah is elevated above its surroundings.” Now he says “elevated above its surroundings.” It says it will be “raised above the hills, the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be chief among the mountains.” I guess you could ask: chief among what mountains? Presumably, the highest mountain in that area. What surroundings? 5 miles, 10 miles, 50 or 100 miles; I don’t know.

Objection to Premill “learn War anymore” and Vannoy’s Response

Another question that is often asked usually as a critique of a premil understanding of this, is in Isaiah 2:4: “Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.” That last phrase “neither shall they learn war anymore,” that’s the King James version. The NIV says, “Nor will they train for war anymore.” Those who disagree with the premil position say, “How can you say that in a premil context that there won’t be war anymore? The key passage of the Millennial position in Revelation 20 speaks at the end of the Millennial period Satan’s being loosed, and there is a war. So if you’re going to say that this passage refers to the Millennial period, isn’t that in

contradiction with the prediction that there won't be war anymore? The King James says, "Neither shall learn war anymore." The NIV, "Nor will they train for war anymore." The NASB is the strongest: "And never again will they learn war anymore." But all these translations suggest that this time of peace is going to be established, and war will be over forever. The question is how do you harmonize that with the premil position?

I would make this suggestion in response to that. In Hebrew, we have this combination of the negative "lo' + imperfect verb + 'od." Look at the use in Exodus 2:3: "And when she could *no longer* hide him." That's in the context of Moses's being hidden in the bulrushes just prior to that. "When she could *no longer* hide him, she put him in the bulrushes." But "when she could *no longer* hide him." It has the idea of the lack of continuation. It's not necessarily never again but lack of continuation.

Look at Joshua 5:1: "Neither was there spirit in them *anymore*." Joshua 5:1 is in the context of the conquest when Israel crossed the Jordan River and came into Canaan by that miraculous stopping of the waters. The inhabitants of Canaan were so fearful that they didn't have any spirit to go and attack the Israelites. That's why the Israelites could observe the Passover and circumcise all the males that hadn't been circumcised before. "Neither was there spirit in them *anymore*." That doesn't mean that never again would there be any spirit in them to attack the Israelites because they did later. But it was a cessation, a lack of continuation of that spirit to attack. It is not the idea of never again. Josh 5:12: "Neither had the children of Israel manna *anymore*."

Now, there you could perhaps debate it because I think in the context the point is the manna stopped. At the point when they entered the land of Canaan it ceased permanently. They had been receiving manna every single day for years. Then it ceased; it did not continue. So it seems to me that the idea is not 'ad 'olam [forever]. That's not in that statement in Isaiah 2:4. It doesn't say "there will *not ever again* be war," and in that sense the NASB is wrong in translating it "never again will they learn war." It's not that they will "never again learn war," but a lack of continuance is suggested by this "od lo' + 'od."

Question on clarifying Joshua 5: The point of emphasis is that when they entered

Canaan, the manna ceased. They would not continue to be sustained by the manna. But on the other hand, it may resume. The point is: it is not right now continuing. I think that is the point of the way it is worded in Isaiah 2:4. “Neither shall they learn war anymore.” “They are not going to continue to learn war anymore”; there is going to be a lack of continuation of something that has existed over the entire course of human history. That’s why it is so striking. Never has there been a time in human history when there haven’t been wars going on. There is never going to be a time in human history when there are not wars going on until Christ returns. But at that point, when he establishes his kingdom, there is going to be a change. There’s not going to be a continuation of that sort of environment that has always been a part of human existence, and that is war. That doesn’t mean that a thousand years later it may not resume, but there will not be a continuation of something that has always been part of the human situation. So I don’t think that that last phrase is an objection that rules out the validity of a premil interpretation of the passage as some have tried to argue it does.

Young and Calvin say it’s fulfilled in principle now, and complete fulfillment is in the eternal state. The problem with that is “in the last days.” How can you say “the last days” is the eternal state? “The last days” seems to put it in this continuum of the flow of human history, not in the eternal state.

The NIV has, “Neither will they train for war anymore.” The Hebrew *lamad* means, literally, “learn.” There is coming a time when war is simply inappropriate. The book of Revelation says that at the end of the Millennium there will again be a war. At that point there is going to be another war. The postmil position was largely held in the 1800’s and died out in the World Wars. Recently, with the Theonomy movement, it has seen a small revival.

Well that’s enough for today. We’ll pick it up from there next time.

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