

Part 27: Posttribulationism

by John F. Walvoord

John F. Walvoord explores the doctrine of Posttribulationism, its variations, and its implications for the church's understanding of end times.

Scripture: Jeremiah 30:7, Daniel 12:1, Matthew 24:21, Luke 21:36, John 16:33, Acts 14:22, Romans 2:9, 1 Thessalonians 5:9, Revelation 2:10, Revelation 3:10

Topics: "Tribulation Theology", "Eschatology Studies"

Description

John F. Walvoord discusses the contrasting views of Posttribulationism and Pretribulationism within the church, highlighting the majority acceptance of Pretribulationism among premillenarians. Posttribulationism is described as the belief that the church will go through the predicted tribulation, embraced by various denominations. The variations within Posttribulationism are explored, with some viewing the entire present age as the tribulation while others see it as a future period. The arguments for Posttribulationism are examined, including the ad hominem approach and the historical perspective, with a focus on the nature of the tribulation and the church.

Transcript

Posttribulationism has long been a common doctrine held by the majority of the church. Most premillenarians today, however, hold to the pretribulational translation of the church. As ordinarily defined, posttribulationism is the teaching that the church will be translated after the predicted tribulation, and therefore its adherents believe that the church must pass through this prophesied time of trouble. Posttribulationism is the ordinary view of practically all amillenarians and postmillenarians. It is embraced by Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic; it is followed by many Protestants, conservative as well as modern liberals. Posttribulationism, as far as the church as a whole is concerned, is the majority view. Among premillenarians, however, the majority accept the pretribulational position, though at the present time there is a resurgence of posttribulationism. Generally speaking, pretribulationism is an outgrowth of premillennial interpretation of the Scriptures and is properly considered a teaching within this point of view. Very rarely is it encountered outside premillennialism. To a large extent, pretribulationism depends upon much the same arguments and principles of interpretation as characterize premillennialism, while posttribulationism fits other millennial views.

Variations of Posttribulationism

While posttribulationism in itself is a simple concept, so many variations are found within the general teaching that it is difficult to affirm a norm. Two prevailing concepts account for most viewpoints within posttribulationism: (1) the teaching that the entire present age is the tribulation; (2) the teaching that the tribulation will occur at the end of the present age preceding the translation and second advent of Christ. These two concepts are seldom kept in strict distinction, but describe the two tendencies. The former requires more spiritualization of Scripture than the latter.

George L. Rose declares plainly in his defense of posttribulationism that the tribulation began with the early church: "The record left us in the book of The Acts of the Apostles leaves no room to doubt that, 'tribulation' began almost as soon as the Church was born.... At the time of Stephen's death 'there was a GREAT PERSECUTION against the church which was at Jerusalem...Saul made havock of the church, entering into every house, arresting men and women committed them to prison' (Acts 8:1-3). This 'great persecution' mentioned in Acts 8:1, is called 'tribulation' in Acts 11:19 therefore, 'great persecution' is 'great tribulation.' The same Greek word, thlipsis, being used in the same manner which Jesus used it in Matt 24:21, in speaking of 'great tribulation'..."[1] George L. Rose, *Tribulation Till Translation*, pp. 68-69. On the basis of this concept of the tribulation, there is no room left for argument--the church is already in the tribulation and has been since the first century. The whole issue is settled by identifying the great tribulation with the trials of the church throughout the present age.

Fromow dismisses the argument for pretribulationism in much the same fashion as Rose. Fromow states: "The Church is already passing through 'the Great Tribulation.'... This term Great embraces the whole period of the Church's course on earth, and should not be confined to the final 3½ years or the second half of Daniel's seventieth week of intensest tribulation. It began with the first saints after the Fall, and includes all who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb until the Second Advent of Christ." [2] George H. Fromow, *Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?* p. 2. Fromow does Rose one better. Instead of beginning with the present age, Fromow begins the tribulation with Adam. Under either view, the church must obviously pass through the tribulation.

Most posttribulationists, however, do not attempt to settle the issue in such a summary manner. While pointing out, as pretribulationists also do, that there will be tribulation throughout the age, the many predictions of a particular "great tribulation" described as without precedent in its severity (Jer 30:7; Dan 12:1; Matt 24:21) is taken by the majority of posttribulationists as indicating a future period of great trouble occurring prior to the second advent of Christ. This point of view has the advantage in that those who hold this view are able to take with some literalness the description of the period, which would be impossible if it were the entire present age.

Representative of this viewpoint is the amillenarian Louis Berkhof who names five definite signs preceding the second advent, one of which is the great tribulation. Berkhof states: "Jesus certainly mentions the great tribulation as one of the signs of His coming and of the end of the world, Matt 24:3." [3] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 700. Likewise, Norman S. McPherson, a premillenarian who defends the posttribulationist position, writes: "This Great Tribulation is described as a time of unprecedented suffering to come upon the world. It will begin soon after the abomination, predicted by Daniel, stands in the holy place of the restored Jewish temple. It will be followed by the glorious appearing of Christ who comes for the purpose of gathering out of the world His elect." [4] Norman S. McPherson, *Triumph Through Tribulation*, p. 13. It may be concluded, therefore, that there are two widely differing viewpoints among posttribulationists respecting their definition of what it means for the church to pass through the tribulation. One understands the tribulation to refer to trouble which characterizes the present age. The other regards

the tribulation as future.

The distinction between the two views within posttribulationism is nominal, however. Rose, after arguing strenuously that the church is already in the great tribulation, makes a sharp distinction between (1) "the great tribulation," (2) "the unprecedented 'time of trouble'," and (3) the "'great day of wrath' which will come upon the ungodly." [5] Rose, op. cit., pp. 76-77. In a word, according to Rose, the great tribulation is the entire period of persecution of the elect since Adam; the "time of trouble" is a future period of trial for the elect; the "great day of wrath" is the future time of judgment of the wicked. By this device, Rose proves that the church, on the one hand, is already in the tribulation; on the other hand, is headed for a future time of trouble. He can therefore prove that the church will go through the tribulation, indeed is already in tribulation, and at the same time deny that the second coming is imminent.

Arguments for Posttribulationism

On one point all posttribulationists agree. If there is a future time of trouble just prior to the second advent, the church will need to pass through the period before the second advent of Christ brings deliverance. Pretribulationists, on the other hand, affirm that the church will be translated before that final time of trial. In order to weigh the strength of the posttribulationist position, twelve major arguments advanced in support of posttribulationism will be considered in an objective way with such criticism as may be required under each point.

Ad hominem argument. One of the unfortunate features of the argument for posttribulationism is the general tendency toward the ad hominem type of debate wherein attacks upon the persons who hold the pretribulation position are substituted for solid argument from the Scriptures. While posttribulationists are not alone in this, any impartial observer will soon find that posttribulationist literature, particularly of the controversial type, abounds in such references.

Alexander Reese, who has produced the classic defense of posttribulationism, gives large space in his argument for invective against pretribulationists. Hogg and Vine in their analysis of Reese's ad hominem argument summarize it as follows: "Mr. Reese does not seem to have made up his mind whether those whom he attacks so trenchantly are fools, or only knaves; his language, indeed, frequently suggests that they are both! Here are some things he says about them taken at random as the pages are turned: They are guilty of 'aggressive sophistry and fanatic exegesis,' and of 'paltry reasoning.' They prefer 'any rubbish to the true and obvious explanation' of a passage, and they 'wrest the Scriptures.' Their preference for the line of teaching they favor is 'no longer a question of exegesis.... It is simply a question of ethics....' They are not God-fearing readers of the Bible, but 'theorists,' 'showing little acquaintance with great exegesis.' Their teaching is 'inconsistent and ludicrous' in its 'absurdity.'... 'They wrote their errors on their broad phylacteries.'... They 'are misguided and misleading teachers.'" [6] Hogg and Vine, *The Church and the Tribulation*, pp. 9-10.

Fromow writes: "We would lovingly ask, is there not a strain of weak-kneed, invertebrate, spineless sentiment in this idea of escaping tribulation?" [7] Fromow, op. cit., p. 4. Oswald T. Allis in his discussion of pretribulationism takes as his one and main point: "1. Pretribulationism Appeals to Unworthy Motives." [8] Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 207. He describes pretribulationism as "an essential feature of Dispensationalism" [9] *Ibid.*, p. 216. leading to "tragic results." [10] *Loc. cit.* Allis charges in his opening statement: "Before examining the evidence brought forward in support of this doctrine, it may be well to notice how singularly calculated it is to appeal to those selfish and unworthy impulses from which no

Christian is wholly immune," i.e., to avoid suffering in the tribulation.[11] Ibid., p. 207. He further accuses pretribulationists as being "encouraged to view the present evil state of the world with composure which savors not a little of complacency." [12] Loc. cit. While some of Allis' argument is directed against the doctrine rather than the adherents, his main argument is that pretribulationists appeal "to selfish and unworthy impulses" and adopt a doctrine which has "tragic" and "radical" bearing on orthodox doctrine as a whole. Unless martyrdom is something to be earnestly desired and cheerfully sought, it is difficult to see why it is so contrary to Christian principles to desire to avoid these contingencies. While the charge is made that this has influenced pretribulationists, neither Allis nor anyone else has ever shown that the natural desire to avoid the awful period of the tribulation has ever been an influential factor in the doctrines related to pretribulationism. Rather, pretribulationism is based solely on principles of interpretation and exegetical reasons as Allis inadvertently admits when he defines pretribulationism as "an essential feature of Dispensationalism." [13] Ibid., p. 216.

The appeal to passion and prejudice and the open attempt to charge pretribulationists with unworthy and unspiritual motives is to slander the many godly men who have sincerely held this position after prayerfully seeking the teaching of the Scriptures on this point. It should be obvious to any impartial observer that the differences between pretribulationists and posttribulationists are doctrinal and exegetical, not spiritual, and that worthy and godly men are found on both sides of this question. This entire approach, given such prominence by posttribulationists, does their cause more harm than good and raises the question as to why such an approach is used if their doctrine has a sound exegetical basis. Inasmuch as posttribulationists themselves give this argument first place in prominence, it has been necessary to dispose of it in that order. Actually, posttribulationism is founded upon doctrinal premises which now may be discussed.

The historical argument. One of the strongest arguments of the posttribulationist view is the claim that pretribulationism is a new doctrine. Reese after citing a formidable array of ancient and modern scholars who were posttribulationists states: "The fact that so many eminent men, after independent study of the Scriptures, reached similar conclusions regarding the subject of Christ's Coming and Kingdom, creates a strong presumption--on pre-millennial presuppositions--that such views are scriptural, and that nothing plainly taught in Scripture, and essential to the Church's hope, was overlooked." [14] Reese, *The Approaching Advent of Christ*, p. 19. He goes on to trace the rise of pretribulationism: "About 1830, however, a new school arose within the fold of Pre-millennialism that sought to overthrow what, since the Apostolic Age, have been considered by all pre-millennialists as established results, and to institute in their place a series of doctrines that had never been heard of before. The school I refer to is that of 'The Brethren' or 'Plymouth Brethren,' founded by J. N. Darby." [15] Loc. cit. Similar quotations could be multiplied from other posttribulationists.

In making the charge, however, posttribulationists choose to ignore facts which greatly limit the pertinence of this point. Posttribulationists themselves consider the doctrine of the second advent a series of events, rather than one great climactic act of God. Rose in his posttribulationist argument postulates a period of time between the translation of the church and the second advent proper in which "the great day of wrath" falls upon the wicked. He believes that between the rapture and the judgment of the nations (Matt 25) many will receive Christ as Savior: "But when Christ comes in power and great glory, and every eye shall see him; two things will take place within a very short time. First, the wilfully wicked will be destroyed with the brightness of His coming in the conflict that immediately occurs. Second, 'Multitudes that are in the valley of decision,' will immediately receive Christ." [16] Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

According to Rose, the righteous in the judgment of the nations are those who receive Christ in the period between the rapture and the judgment of the nations. If it is possible within the framework of posttribulationism to have a series of events of which the rapture is in "the early morning of the 'day of the Lord,'" [17] *Ibid.*, p. 277. why is it so unthinkable to move it still earlier in the series and make it precede the time of tribulation? If the church is to be distinguished from the righteous among the nations at the judgment of Matthew 25, why not distinguish the church from the tribulation saints as well?

The fact is that Reese, who was quoted earlier, has overstated the significance of the viewpoint of the early church relative to this question. There was no doctrine on this question which could be considered "established results." The early church believed in a coming time of trouble, in the imminent coming of the Lord, and the millennium to follow. How the coming of the Lord could be a daily expectation as is clearly indicated by the early Fathers, and at the same time have a lengthy series of events preceding the second advent, was apparently not discussed or ever resolved in the early church. If major doctrines like the Trinity and the procession of the Spirit took centuries to find acceptable statement, it is hardly to be expected that the problems of Eschatology would be all settled in the early centuries. The inroads of the spiritualizing principles of Origen, which caused the downfall of premillennialism in the third and fourth centuries along with the departure from the Scriptures which characterized the organized church until the Protestant Reformation, were hardly a climate in which an intricate problem such as pretribulationism versus posttribulationism could be solved.

The early church was far from settled on details of Eschatology though definitely premillennial. It was actually impossible for the tribulation question even to be discussed intelligently until the Protestant Reformation had restored a theological foundation which would support it. Unfortunately the Reformers went back to Augustine for the Eschatology instead of the early chiliastic Fathers, and until premillennialism was again established in the post-Reformation period the advance in the interpretation of prophecy had to wait. In a word, the early Fathers were neither pretribulationist nor posttribulationist in the modern meaning of the term. They simply had not raised the questions which are involved in this controversy.

Henry C. Thiessen has given a good summary of the testimony of the early church on this question: "Let us first note that, according to Moffat, 'Rabbinic piety (Sanh. 98b) expected exemption from the tribulation of the latter days only for those who were absorbed in good works and in sacred studies.' [Cf. possible allusion of Christ to this teaching, Luke 21:36.] Thus there was a Jewish background for the expectation that some men would not pass through the Tribulation. When we come to the early Fathers we find an almost total silence as to the Tribulation period. They abundantly testify to the fact of tribulations, but they say little about the future period called by preeminence The Tribulation. This fact should cause us no perplexity. These writers lived during the second and third centuries, and we all know that those were the centuries of the great Roman persecutions. The Church was passing through sore trials, and it did not much concern itself with the question of Tribulation yet to come. Perhaps it did not understand the exact nature of the period." [18] Henry C. Thiessen, "Will the Church Pass Through the Tribulation?" *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 92:189-90, April-June, 1935.

It may, therefore, be concluded that while the early church did not teach twentieth-century pretribulationism, neither did it teach modern posttribulationism. It is therefore a problem which must be settled on exegesis of the Scriptures rather than by polling the early Fathers.

Argument from the nature of the tribulation. Much of the controversy of the tribulation issue arises from a failure to agree on the definition of the tribulation itself. Among posttribulationists there is utter confusion on this point, some insisting the entire present age is the tribulation; others, like pretribulationists, regarding it as a future period. Obviously there can be no objective discussion concerning the church going through the tribulation until there is some agreement on basic terms.

Pretribulationists would agree with posttribulationists that the church has always had a measure of trial and tribulation. This is mentioned too often in Scripture to leave any room for argument (Matt 13:21; John 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 2:9; Rev 2:10). It is summed up in the words of Christ, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). Many posttribulationists, however, agree with pretribulationists in holding that the great tribulation of which Christ spoke (Matt 24:21) is to be distinguished from this general experience of trial. The great tribulation, then, is a future period, properly identified with the last three and one-half years preceding the coming of Christ to establish His kingdom on earth. If so, the fact that the church is already in many trials is quite beside the point in determining whether it goes through the future period.

McPherson, a posttribulationist, rightly begins his discussion of posttribulational arguments by treating the definition of the tribulation itself. He finds that out of fifty-five occurrences of the verb *thlibo* and the noun *thlipsis* only three refer specifically to the great tribulation.[19] McPherson, *op. cit.*, p. 13. He therefore concludes that, while most of the passages refer to the present age, the three mentioned refer specifically to a future period.

The minority of posttribulationists who want to settle the whole question on the basis of Scriptures referring to present trials seem to be influenced by the desire to make pretribulationism ridiculous. The arguments of Fromow and Rose to this point, referred to previously, are of this character. In taking this line of argument, however, they do not face the evident fact that a period of trouble cannot be unprecedented and at the same time general throughout the age. The time of trouble referred to by Christ as the "great tribulation" was to have such a specific character as to make it a sign of the approaching second advent. The tendency of posttribulationism to blur the Scriptural description of the tribulation arises from the necessity to defend posttribulationism from certain contradictions. One of these is the question as to why saints of the present age who are perfectly justified by faith, given a perfect position of sanctification, and declared to be in Christ, should have to suffer the "great day of his wrath" in the tribulation. While Christians can be disciplined and chastened, they cannot justly be exposed to the wrath of God.

This apparent difficulty within posttribulationism is handled in various ways, but usually by distinguishing as Rose does, the time of trouble from the "great day of wrath." [20] Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77. Their thought is that Christians in the future time of trouble will experience persecution and trial but not wrath.

Harold J. Ockenga in defending posttribulationism makes the same distinction: "The church will endure the wrath of men, but will not suffer the wrath of God.... This distinction which has been of great help to me is generally overlooked by pretribulation dispensationalists.... Pretribulation rapturists identify the tribulation with the wrath of God. If this can be proved, we must believe that the church will be taken out of the world before the tribulation, for there is no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus." [21] Harold J. Ockenga, "Will the Church Go Through the Tribulation? Yes." *Christian Life*, February 1955, p. 22.

The answer to this argument is found in the study of the passages describing the tribulation. No doubt, there will be special judgments which will fall only upon the unsaved. In Revelation 9, for instance, distinction is made between saved and unsaved in the judgment which falls upon the earth. In Revelation

7, a company of 144,000 are sealed from the twelve tribes of Israel and are apparently protected. On the other hand, many of the judgments by their very nature cannot distinguish saved from unsaved. The judgments of famine and the sword, or earthquakes and stars falling from heaven, war and pestilence, are not by their nature suitable for discriminatory judgment. They would fall upon just and unjust alike.

The principal difficulty of this posttribulation argument lies not in the question of whether the church will experience wrath as such but rather whether it will enter the day of wrath, i.e., the time period in which wrath will be poured out. In 1 Thessalonians 5:5, Christians are assured that they are "children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness." The context is dealing with a time period, "the day of the Lord." In this connection again, it is stated, "For God hath not appointed us to wrath" (1 Thess 5:9). The church of Philadelphia was promised: "I will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth" (Rev 3:10). They were promised deliverance from the period of future trouble. Christ in Luke 21:36 exhorts them: "Watch ye therefore, and pray always, that ye may be accounted worthy to escape all these things that shall come to pass, and to stand before the Son of man." The only way one could escape "all these things" mentioned in the context--the events preceding the return of Christ in glory--would be to escape the period in which they occurred by being in a different place, i.e., being "before the Son of man," who immediately before the second advent would be in glory. While therefore there may be a difference in the purpose of trial for the Christian and judgment upon the wicked, there is no justification for believing that the horrors of the great tribulation will thereby be relieved for those who believe in Christ in that day. Instead, they will have persecution and martyrdom in addition to the natural catastrophes which characterize that hour.

Speaking in general, therefore, the posttribulation argument is that Christians, while being sorely tried, will escape the judgments of the tribulation. The pretribulationist, while conceding there may be some difference in divine dealing with saved and unsaved in the period, believes that it will afford little relief for the saint in that day. It will give little comfort for Christians anticipating the future that there is this nominal difference in divine dealings with saved and unsaved in the tribulation.

Argument from the nature of the church. One of the major differences which separate posttribulationists from pretribulationists is disagreement on the nature of the church. Posttribulationists tend to include the saints of all ages in the church. Scripture clearly indicates that there will be saints in the great tribulation period. If all saints are in the church, then the church would necessarily go through the tribulation. Many pretribulationists, however, believe that the word church, when used of the body of Christ--the whole of the saved in the present age--is limited in Scripture to saints of the present age. Old Testament saints and those who are saved in the tribulation and millennium are distinct from the church according to this view. This difference in definition is crucial in the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation because the word ecclesia (church) is never used in a tribulation passage. Only by identifying the saints of the tribulation with the church can posttribulationists offer any positive proof of the presence of the church.

Typical of the posttribulation position is Fromow's statement: "A full survey of O.T. mentions of 'the Saints' or 'Gracious Ones' and of the 'Assembly' or 'Great Congregation,' terms employed throughout the Psalms and Prophecies of the O.T. would dispel the notion that the redeemed people of God of this age, or the Church, are not to be found in O.T. record and prophecy. We and they are members of the same body." [22] Fromow, op. cit., p. 6. Fromow goes on to identify the term "elect" as another synonym. [23] Ibid., p. 7.

McPherson presents the same argument in connection with the elect of Matthew 24:22. He writes: "There is nothing here to indicate who the elect are, although there is every likelihood the term refers to the Church, inasmuch as of the fifteen other occurrences of the word elect in the New Testament, one refers to Christ, another to certain angels, and there is no sound reason for supposing the other thirteen do not refer to the Church, or individual members of the Church." [24] McPherson, op. cit., p. 8.

The answer to the posttribulational definition of the church was discussed at length in connection with the relation of premillennialism to the church, and it need not be repeated here. It was pointed out then that while the word *ecclesia*, translated church, is found frequently in the Old Testament Septuagint translation and also in the New Testament to refer to various congregations assembled geographically, the word is never used in the sense of the corporate body of the saved except in this dispensation. Further, the word does not occur at all in the tribulation passages. These arguments are frequently brushed aside without an attempt to answer them by posttribulationists as witnessed in the quotations just given from Fromow and McPherson.

The highly significant fact stands without refutation from any posttribulationist that the *ecclesia*, the church as the body of Christ, is never mentioned as being in the tribulation in the major passages such as Revelation 4-19, Matthew 24--25, and is not found in any other tribulation context. The burden of proof is not on the pretribulationists. If the church is in the tribulation, why do not the posttribulationists cite texts where *ecclesia* is used in the translation in reference to a saved company? While an argument from silence is never final in itself, the whole point of posttribulationism would be conclusively won by just one reference placing the church in the tribulation.

Posttribulationists are wont to ask triumphantly, as does Orson P. Jones, "Did Jesus warn us to expect him BEFORE THE TRIBULATION? Did any apostle pen a line to the effect that Jesus will come BEFORE THE TRIBULATION? Chapter and verse! Please! If not a verse can be found stating that Jesus will come before the tribulation, why is it so widely taught? and seldom questioned?" [25] Orson P. Jones, "Plain Speaking on the Rapture Question." Unpublished tract. Jones goes on to point out that the Bible teaches that Christ will come after the tribulation. Pretribulationists all teach that Christ will return to the earth after the tribulation--this is not disputed. This fact does not settle the question of when the translation will take place. This sort of illogic advanced by Jones only adds to the confusion and proves nothing. If one were ready to reply in kind, one could ask: "Where in the Bible is the translation of the church stated to be after the tribulation?" "Where does it say that the *ecclesia* is in the tribulation?" "Chapter and verse, please!" The fact is that neither posttribulationism nor pretribulationism is an explicit teaching of Scripture. The Bible does not in so many words state either. Pretribulationism is based on the fact that it allows a harmony of the Scriptures relating to the second advent. The separation of the translation from the return of Christ to earth permits each of the two events, so different in character, to have its own place. It solves the problem of the confusing and contradictory details in the posttribulational interpretation illustrated in the difficulty of the posttribulationists themselves to work out a harmony of prophecies related to the second advent.

The doctrine of the church is, then, determined in the question of whether the church will go through the tribulation. All agree that saints will be found in the tribulation. Pretribulationism necessarily requires a distinction between these saints and the saints of the present age forming the church. This difference of opinion has seldom had a fair handling from posttribulationists who usually adopt a "Tut, tut, of course the church includes all saints" attitude. The pretribulational position is dismissed as "dispensational," as if that was the coup de grace of pretribulationism. Not only is pretribulationism dependent upon an ecclesiology

which recognizes the unique place of the church of the present age, but it is also true that premillennialism logically stems from distinguishing Israel and the church much on the same theological basis. Agreement must be reached first on the pertinence of Ecclesiology to Eschatology before any significant debate can be held on the relative merits of posttribulationism versus pretribulationism.

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