"The life of Solomon brings hope to weary souls and challenge to complacent hearts. Jonathan Griffiths writes as a scholar but, more to the point, as a pastor who watches over the souls of those in his care. These studies are engaging, trustworthy, and heart-warming. I warmly commend them and thank Jonathan for giving them to us."

Christopher Ash, Writer-in-Residence, Tyndale House

"This careful exposition is beautifully applied. It draws out timeless lessons not only for the individual pastorally, but also to wider issues of national and international life. Above all, it directs the reader to the greatest King and his work of grace in the life of the believer. It will do you good!"

William Taylor, Rector, St Helen's Bishopsgate

"As I read Jonathan's excellent exposition of the life of King Solomon, I found myself taught, exhorted, warned, encouraged — and wanting to pray about the points he draws out. As you enjoy this book and its clear and relevant applications for today's world, you will be richly nourished for your walk with our King, Jesus."

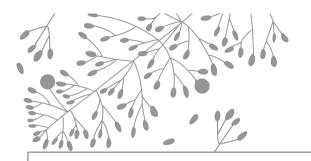
Alasdair Paine, Vicar, St Andrew the Great, Cambridge

"As Jonathan leads us through the life of Solomon, he points us, at every turn, to the grace of God in his kindness toward Solomon. He shows us how studying Solomon prepares us to meet the wisest of all kings, Jesus. This book is a helpful reminder of how short we fall but how God's grace makes all the difference."

Marjorie Meeks, Associate Director of Women's Workshops, Charles Simeon Trust

"Jonathan has given us a lovely, consistent model of reading the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus' person and work. It's a heart-warming and practical read."

Matt Fuller, Senior Pastor, Christ Church Mayfair







WISDOM ど

KNOWLEDGE

God's grace in the life of Solomon

JONATHAN GRIFFITHS





To my parents-in-law Richard and Vicky Nicholl With love

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WISDOM & WARNINGS

From a distance, we might think of King Solomon as a spiritual hero and a giant of the faith. We marvel at his wealth, leadership, and especially the remarkable wisdom that God gave him. His wisdom is evergreen—always fresh and always relevant. Indeed, God gave Solomon special insight into the basic structures of how this world works and how it functions best. God taught him how to manage himself and how to manage others. What timeless leadership skills! And if you spend time in Solomon's writings in Proverbs (one of the Bible books I like to read most frequently), you find incredible insight into how to live wisely and well in God's world.

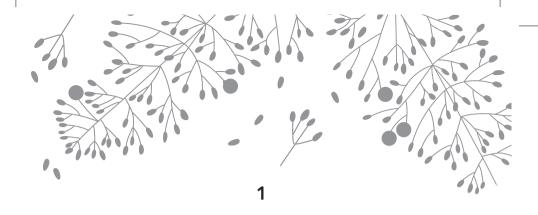
Now Solomon may be remembered for his proverbial wisdom, but his story does not start there. It really starts in 1 Kings. Here we find a sober and realistic portrait of a highly gifted but deeply conflicted human being. At times we may even wonder: why does the Lord continue to bother with Solomon? He is immensely wise but so very weak. He loves God, yet he rebels and ignores God's promises. He has enormous resources and power, yet his life is, in many

respects, a mess. This great king is, in fact, not unlike you and me, whether we are flawed Christian leaders, devoted disciples, or conflicted seekers.

So Solomon is an empathetic challenge to each of us to consider the wisdom and warnings wrapped up in his life story. But when we draw close, we see something more: the persistent and unexpected grace of God. The Lord will use him, not because Solomon is faultless and ever faithful, but because God is full of stunning grace.

There is more, however: beyond the picture of grace encapsulated in Solomon's personal story we discover that he becomes the channel for the fulfillment of the gracious promises and purposes of God through the gospel. As we immerse ourselves in the Bible's account, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that Solomon points us to another king—the supreme King of kings, the embodiment of wisdom itself, the ultimate fulfillment of God's grace, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the greater King who, in the wisdom of God, gave himself to save us, and now calls each of us to trust him, to serve him, and to live out his love to a graceless world.

I hope this study of Solomon will deepen your understanding of God and his Word while feeding your soul. I would encourage you to read the relevant section of 1 Kings before beginning each chapter. At the end of the book, you will find reflection questions which I trust will be helpful for personal devotion or a group study. Likewise, I hope that Bible teachers will find here some insight and encouragement for the exposition of God's Word—which could, in turn, benefit those who sit under their teaching.



BOLD ACTION GROUNDED IN GRACE

1 KINGS 1 - 2

"Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place." (1 Kings 1:30)

When we look at the progress of the kingdom of God in our world today—the place of the church and the advance of the gospel—it may all seem shaky and uncertain. We know God has promised that his kingdom will grow, but so often the world is hostile and even the church itself appears frail, weak, and compromised. Can God's promises be fulfilled? Can his plans reach fruition?

These questions are not new. As we trace the progress of God's plans throughout history from the days of ancient Israel until today, we see dramatic ups and downs, turning points when things looked bleak and believers questioned how God's plans could ever be accomplished.

4 | WISDOM & KNOWLEDGE

The year is 970 BC or thereabouts. The Old Testament's greatest king, David, is at the end of his life and in his chamber, frail and unable even to keep warm. Little known to him, a dramatic battle of succession is brewing.

In this moment of transition and vulnerability, the progress of God's kingdom appears doubtful. But appearances can be deceptive, as we shall see.

God's kingdom advances according to his gracious plan

In 2 Samuel 7, the Lord made a wonderful promise to David; it is one of the great foundational promises of the Old Testament. The Lord says to David through the prophet Nathan:

"When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." (2 Samuel 7:12-13)

A few chapters later in 2 Samuel 12, we are told that this child is Solomon, who would be special both to David and to the Lord. We are told that the Lord loved Solomon and sent Nathan the prophet to affirm this. David rightly took all this to mean that Solomon was the son destined to rule after him, and he swore to his wife Bathsheba that her son Solomon would be king.

David knows the game plan; Bathsheba knows it; Nathan evidently knows it.

But here in 1 Kings 1 we have a big problem. David is weak and near the end of his life. The state of affairs is laid bare in verse 1: "Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not even get warm."

David is there in his La-Z-Boy. The daytime TV is playing at low volume. He has his lunch brought to him on a tray. While his powers are diminishing and his awareness of events beyond his room is limited, there is a plot afoot by the son of one of his other wives to take hold of the keys of the kingdom: "Now Adonijah the son of Haggith exalted himself, saying, 'I will be king.' And he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him" (verse 5).

Adonijah is an ambitious, handsome, grasping, and rather spoiled son of David who decides that he will take the kingdom for himself. He will take what he has not been given. Dad is weak and near the end, Adonijah thinks. He is confined to his room with servants taking care of him—now is my opportunity.

Now notice this fascinating comment in verse 6: "His father had never at any time displeased him by asking 'Why have you done thus and so?" If you have teenagers, you know a quick way to displease them is to ask them a question when the car comes back with a dent in the door, or when no change is brought home from the fifty-dollar bill given earlier in the evening, or when the report card

is a disaster. You say to them, "Why have you done this?" They do not like being asked, but it is a basic parental necessity to probe. David evidently did not ask Adonijah the necessary questions when he was growing up.

So now we see a rather self-indulgent adult taking his opportunity. He is going to grab the crown; he is going to take the kingdom. But here is the problem: he is the wrong son. Adonijah is not set apart. Adonijah is not the fulfillment of the gracious promise of 2 Samuel 7.

Of course, in human terms, it looks like Adonijah has a pretty good shot. He is ambitious, energetic, good-looking. He musters a force; he has influential people behind him. He looks like the type A personality who normally gets his way.

But this would be a disaster. Apart from the fact that this is not the divine plan, we sense that if a spoiled, selfexalting son gets the reins of power, it is going to be ruinous for the people and the nation.

I do not want to ruin the ending here, but the fact is that Adonijah does not win. He does not get the throne. His plot fails. Notice the final verse of chapter 2: "So the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon" (verse 46). That is where Adonijah's plot lands. As we stand back and look at these historic events, we have to conclude this: God's gracious promise and God's sovereign plan will not fail.

It was always God's purpose for Solomon to take the throne, for Solomon to build the temple, for Solomon to rule as the supremely wise king of Israel's history. That is what God intended and what he promised. And despite human machinations, plots, and plans, despite the selfish ambition of the dandy prince, despite his conspiring and the worldly power he managed to amass in his support—despite them all—God's plan prevailed.

Moreover, as we zoom out from 1 Kings and consider the wider storyline of the Bible, we learn that God has a plan and a purpose for his greater Son to reign supreme over all things. The New Testament makes it clear in God's promise to David back in 2 Samuel 7. God promises a king who would be a son of David and Son of God and whose kingdom would be established forever. Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of that promise. Solomon is only ever an interim fulfillment, a truth that we will get to later.

The New Testament speaks of God's plan to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth (see Ephesians 1:10). Paul says in Philippians 2:10-11 that God exalted the crucified and risen Jesus "so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

That is God's plan for his chosen King, his beloved Son. But we find ourselves today in a time of uncertainty that seems like a turning point or a moment of crisis. The gospel largely feels unwelcome. The Lord Jesus is frequently dishonored. The church is pressed further to the margins of society. Worldly rulers boast of their power; princes of this world seek to assert themselves over against God and his appointed King. While we may

shudder at these things, we need to admit that we, the people of God, are divided and compromised too.

Can we imagine the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess? Can we picture gathering in the new creation—in the promised Zion of God before the throne of God's appointed King—in total peace and bliss?

We may be tempted to doubt that God's plan remains on track. We may worry his purposes will not prevail. Let us always remember, the kingdom of God advances according to his gracious plan. First Kings begins with the kingdom in crisis but by chapter 2, we hear this refrain: "Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingdom was firmly established" and "the kingdom was established in the hand of Solomon" (verses 12 and 46).

God's kingdom advances despite the frailty of his leaders

I remember the feeling when Billy Graham died. Perhaps you shared this feeling that somehow we as evangelicals had lost someone we could never regain. It was not that we were rudderless or leaderless, but I could not quite imagine us without Billy.

I had a similar feeling when John Stott, another statesman of the church, went to glory. What would we do without Stott, without his clarity and his gracious articulation of truth?

Who are your contemporary heroes of the faith? I wonder who around the globe you could not really

imagine us without. We all have our heroes of faith, those whose leadership or ministry have impacted and formed us. Some of them will be famous; perhaps for you it is someone quite unknown. But we all know the sense of relying upon a leader or servant of God and finding a degree of security and a sense of direction through them. Such people are gifts to us. They are daily reminders of God's grace.

King David was one of the greatest leaders God gave to his people Israel. He became the archetypal king of the Old Testament, even though he was a mere shepherd boy, unremarkable within his family. He was an unlikely candidate to rule. But God was with him, and he gave him victory over Goliath. He protected him from the destructive anger of King Saul. He caused him to triumph over his enemies. He established him as a great king and blessed the nation through him.

Now here in 1 Kings 1 we encounter him weak, frail, and drawing close to the end. Great King David "was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm" (verse 1).

We may know this scene of frailty all too well. Perhaps you are actually a little too familiar with it because this is your stage of life even now. You are in the seniors' home, the long-term care facility. You are being cared for by others. The strength and glories of your youth are decades past, and the people who support you now could probably scarcely imagine you in your prime and believe the things you did in your days of former strength.

Or you may have elderly friends or family at David's stage. For Israel, no doubt, this is a hard thing to see and take in. David had been everything for the people. He was God's anointed; he brought them peace and security. He led them to know and worship the Lord. Now he was fading, and soon he would be gone.

The point here is simple but profound. The weakness of this great leader and the death of this mighty king is not the end of the story. No, far from it. And David, for his part, knew it. He knew that God had a gracious plan that stretched beyond his life and his reign. His concern was to see Solomon's rule established. In the Lord's kindness and grace, he did see it.

When news of Adonijah's plot to take the throne reached David, he called his wife Bathsheba in and made his intention clear:

"And the king swore, saying, 'As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my soul out of every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, saying, "Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne in my place," even so will I do this day."" (verses 29-30)

David took steps to make that happen. He sent for Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet and Benaiah, one of his brave men, and charged them to bring Solomon on David's own mule and to anoint him king.

Then, once all was in place, David died:

"Then David slept with his fathers and was buried in the city of David. And the time that David reigned over Israel was forty years. He reigned seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. So Solomon sat on the throne of David his father, and his kingdom was firmly established." (1 Kings 2:10-12)

David understood that God's purposes extended beyond his own life. As great as he was, he knew that the kingdom's progress and the Lord's promises would not die with him. They would not die with Solomon either because even Solomon, of course, was not the ultimate king. He was not the final culmination of God's gracious plan.

So here is the lesson for us today: God's appointed leaders, his great men and women of faith, are mortal and they will die. Their era of influence will come to an end. But God's plans and purposes rest on one set of shoulders only: his true King, his beloved Son. They rest on the One who died and rose again, who ascended on high, who will come again in glory, and who will reign for all eternity to come.

God's kingdom advances by his gracious providence and prompting

In human terms, Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba, the mother of Solomon, save the day. Adonijah has gathered his group in secret at a place called the Serpent's Stone (1 Kings 1:9). He has made a great sacrifice there and staged his own crowning as king. All this was done out

of the sight and earshot of David. But the old prophet Nathan somehow heard about it, and he went straight to David's wife, the mother of Solomon:

"Then Nathan said to Bathsheba the mother of Solomon, 'Have you not heard that Adonijah the son of Haggith has become king and David our lord does not know it? Now therefore come, let me give you advice, that you may save your own life and the life of your son Solomon. Go in at once to King David, and say to him, "Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your servant, saying, 'Solomon your son shall reign after me, and he shall sit on my throne'? Why then is Adonijah king?" Then while you are still speaking with the king, I also will come in after you and confirm your words.'" (verses 11-14)

Adonijah seemed to have a good shot at making his plot work. Remember, he had chariots and horsemen—fifty men to run before him. He had the looks and the lineage, and he had powerful people behind him, even Abiathar the priest. To challenge him at this point was risky. Nathan knew that the lives of Bathsheba and Solomon were at stake.

But Nathan also knew that the Lord's favor was on Solomon. He knew of an oath—not recorded in Scripture but referred to here—which David had taken that Solomon would be king, and he took that to be the Lord's will in this. So he acted boldly. He approached Bathsheba, and she, too, was willing to act. There was wisdom in the

approach; Bathsheba had access to the ailing king, and Nathan would only follow as she led.

Now even with access to David, they could not be confident that the old, frail man actually had the power and sway to make things happen. But they knew they were in the right. They knew that they were in line with God's will; they knew they were on the right side of God's history in this.¹ So they took courage and acted. They went before David and he heard them, and despite his frailty, he took swift action.

It is fascinating to observe how God does things. As we read the big story of Scripture, again and again we find God doing things, it seems, the hard way and the surprising way. Within the sovereignty of God, the drama of 1 Kings 1 surely was not necessary. He could have prevented all this. But he allowed the twisty plot and the ungodly machinations. He allowed the time of pressure, uncertainty, and danger.

Within that time, God prompted one key servant, and then another, to take bold action. And he was pleased to use that action. They were acting at risk to themselves. They were acting against the tide of politics and power. There was every chance, humanly speaking, that their initiative should fail.

But of course, all this comes down to the Lord and his grace. Nathan would not have known anything about the plot had not the Lord providentially ordered things

¹ See John Woodhouse, "The Right Side of History," in John Woodhouse, 1 Kings: Power, Politics, and the Hope of the World (Crossway, 2018), pp. 53-5.

in such a way that Nathan could find out. David would not have necessarily given Nathan and Bathsheba a real hearing had not the Lord directed his heart. David would not have had the strength and the clarity of mind to take action in response had the Lord not strengthened his hand. Their effort would not have met with success had the Lord not been in it. The Lord is very definitely the hero of the story here.

But, at the same time, God was pleased in this circumstance to use willing servants to do his bidding. It is worth noting that Nathan the prophet and Bathsheba the wife of David were both rather out of the picture in the court of Israel by this time. Their day of prominence was years back. We have not heard of them in the biblical narrative for quite a long time. *But the Lord remembered them.* And the Lord prompted Nathan, who saw the need to act and intervene. He found a willing partner in Bathsheba. Together they took courage and took action.

We see here the gracious providence and wisdom of God in using willing servants who will respond to his promptings and take bold action when needed. This has happened repeatedly throughout the history of the people of God. We think of Martin Luther and his willingness to stand up to a gospel-denying church. He put his reputation, career, and personal safety on the line to nail those Ninety-five Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. We see God's grace in the willingness of William Wilberforce to act out of biblical conviction concerning the evil of the slave trade, standing

up in his day to take unpopular action, to risk scorn and loss, to do what was so clearly within the will of God. We see how God blessed him in that.

In every age there is the need for God's people to respond to his promptings and follow his providences, to take action for the sake of the gospel and the kingdom. It may be in small ways such as responding to the prompting of the Spirit to speak to a friend about Jesus. It may be on a larger scale such as to challenge false teaching in the church, to stand up for the people of God in the public square, or to publicly give witness as a Christian despite the scorn that may come.

Nathan and Bathsheba are an encouragement to us. They underscore God's grace: God invites even those who seem past their days of leadership and influence to respond in faith for the sake of his kingdom. They remind us that the Lord delights in using each of us—whether young or old, male or female—who will rest upon his promises, trust in his sovereign plan, go against the tide, and take bold action for the sake of his kingdom. They are an encouragement to us especially in an age when brave and independent action grounded in faith and conviction will increasingly be needed.

The story of 1 Kings will quickly take us to the glory days of Solomon's rule. But to get there, we needed the quiet but bold, swift and faith-filled action of Nathan and Bathsheba.

When the need arises, when conviction from the Word of God drives us, when the Spirit prompts us, will we be instruments in the Lord's hands to do his bidding for the sake of the kingdom? We must not forget that God's kingdom advances by his providence and prompting.

God's kingdom advances through obedience to his Word

Once Solomon is made king, his father has a few words to say to him which are recorded in 1 Kings 2. David does not have much time left, but he wants to make sure that Solomon's reign is established on a firm foundation:

"When David's time to die drew near, he commanded Solomon his son, saying, 'I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the Lord your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn, that the Lord may establish his word that he spoke concerning me, saying, "If your sons pay close attention to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel."" (verses 1-4)

For David, these words of conviction were no doubt shaped by his own experience and his own failure. The great blot on David's life was his affair with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband. Although he had experienced the Lord's forgiveness and grace, David knew painfully the cost of compromise. And he knew that the Lord required faithfulness. So, he called Solomon to heed the Word of God, to walk in his ways, and keep his law.

You see, success would mean nothing and would be fleeting if it was not grounded in integrity and obedience. Solomon knew the lesson; he followed it for a time and taught it to others. But sadly, he ignored it by the end of his life. It is a sobering lesson. No matter how impressive the leader or the servant of God, no matter how fruitful their service—no matter how much is achieved—it will crumble to nothing if it is not grounded in faithful obedience. What a cautionary word for you and me in our service of the Lord. Obedience comes first. Obedience matters.

As you and I serve the Lord in kingdom work, we need to take warning: obedience must be the foundation; it must be the core. Where we are tempted to cut corners—whether to ignore sin, sidestep obedience, to imagine that fruitfulness is all that matters and that fruitfulness trumps faithfulness—we need to take warning.

Let us also take comfort here, because we know that David's words to his son Solomon are only fulfilled truly in his greater Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, whose life was the only one in all human history marked by perfect obedience. He was the only one who ever lived and perfectly kept the charge of 1 Kings 2:3 so that the promise of 1 Kings 2:4 might be fulfilled: David would never lack a man of his family to sit on the throne. Jesus lived in perfect integrity and obedience so that he could die as our substitute to pay for our unfaithfulness and

our failure by giving up his perfect life. He offered up his record of perfect obedience and took our record of guilt at the cross. Because of this, he was raised in glory and will rule in eternity.

God's kingdom advances in the judgment of his enemies

In 1 Kings 2, we find Solomon's rule established. The point is repeated at the end of the two key sections of the chapter for emphasis (see verses 12 and 46). Much of the focus in the early sections of chapter 2 is dealing with the enemies of the royal family.

David, before he dies, calls Solomon to execute justice on two men who were guilty in his eyes. Concerning Joab the son of Zeruiah, David has this instruction for Solomon: "Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace" (verse 6).

For Shimei the son of Gera, he says this: "Now therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man. You will know what you ought to do to him, and you shall bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol" (verse 9). These are the last recorded words David has to say to Solomon.

After David's death, Adonijah comes back on the scene. He sidles up to Bathsheba with a request. He wants to marry Abishag the Shunammite, the beautiful young woman who attended David and who probably would have been regarded as something akin to his concubine. The request comes to Solomon, and he is furious. He sees that this is an attempt to gain legitimacy in some way

and to usurp David's legacy. Adonijah is trying again to grasp the crown. When Bathsheba relays the request to Solomon, he replies, perhaps sarcastically in verse 22, "Ask for him the kingdom also." And very quickly Solomon has him put to death (verse 25).

We might well wonder why Solomon's reign has to begin with quite so much unpleasantness. Solomon then expels Abiathar the priest for his support of Adonijah. Having done that, he turns his attention to Shimei, the other man David said must pay for his wrongdoing. Solomon gave Shimei a chance, but Shimei would not honor the terms of the agreement. So Solomon orders him killed as well (verse 46).

The chapter closes with "the kingdom ... established in the hand of Solomon" (verse 46).

The scene is rather sobering. Solomon is dealing firmly and decisively and, at the same time, justly, with the enemies of the king and kingdom. We might shrink back at this. We might find it uncomfortable to read. But the narrative makes it clear: these acts of judgment establish his throne and ensure his ability to rule.

You see, judgment is a reminder for us that God prizes justice. He is patient, to be sure, but he is committed to dealing with sin. And we know that the Lord Jesus will, on a day to come, sit upon a judgment throne and execute justice for all that has been done on the face of the earth. He will bring judgment against his enemies. So Solomon's actions here are something of a prophetic picture of the judgment to come and of the work of the great King.

All this is a warning for the enemies of God: his appointed King must deal with sin. Even old wrongs like the wrongs in David's memory, old wrongs long forgotten by the world or perhaps unseen by others, will be brought to light and addressed in the coming day.

It is a comfort, too, for the people of God who long to see wrongs set right and wickedness addressed: God's King does not shrink back.

At the start of chapter 1, it looked rather uncertain whether Solomon would reign at all. Now by the end of chapter 2, he has executed judgment on his enemies, and his kingdom is firmly established. What a powerful picture pointing forward to the Lord Jesus. In his earthly life, many dismissed him as irrelevant; they despised him and rejected him, most profoundly at his death. But on a day to come, when he sits upon the throne, every knee must bow.

We look at the progress of the kingdom of God in our world today, and we may wonder: *can God's promises be fulfilled?* Solomon's story gives us hope and underscores God's grace. He enables those who seem past their days of influence to respond in faith for the sake of his kingdom.

In times of uncertainty, how is God's kingdom advanced? In accordance with his gracious plan. Despite the frailty and even the death of his great leaders. By his providence and prompting. Through obedience to his Word. And in the judgment of his enemies.

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