

IS PHILIPPIANS 2:5-9 ABOUT A PRE-EXISTENT BEING?

THE TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATION

There are several phrases in the Philippians 2:5-8 passage that Trinitarians view as proof that Jesus was God in heaven and that Jehovah's Witnesses and the Bible Student groups view as proof that Jesus was a spirit being from heaven. A typical translation of these verses is:

“Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed (or “was existing”) in the **form of God**, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but **emptied himself**, taking the form of a slave, and being **made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man**, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

TRINITARIAN AND JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES ASSUMPTIONS

1. That, by tradition, the passage refers to a Jesus in heaven.
2. The passage refers to a Jesus in heaven because of the past tense “he existed” or “was existing.”
3. That the phrase “form (Gk. *morphe*) of God” means essence and therefore Jesus was of the same essence as God. Or in the standard Trinitarian view the phrase “form of God” means that Jesus was one essence with God the Father.
4. In the kenotic view Jesus either, in heaven, “emptied himself” of his essence or he, in heaven, “emptied himself” of the privileges he had there.
5. The phrases “being made *in the likeness* of men. Being found in *appearance* as a man...” mean that Jesus was changed in essence from a spirit being into a human.

BASIC CORRECTION OF THESE ASSUMPTIONS

1. The passage does not say anything about heaven or a past life for Jesus; but rather it refers to “Christ” – “the Son of God” a title he bore only from his birth (Ps 2:7; Luke 1: 32, 35 and Matt. 1:18 and please see STUDY 14).
2. Even if this translation was correct it need only refer to Jesus' earthly life now past. However, this phrase is properly translated as “who **being**” or “who **existing**” and therefore showing the present participle and not a past tense.
3. The Greek word *morphe*, in fact, refers to outward appearance and **refers to a visible Jesus** and therefore not to an invisible Jesus in heaven. Furthermore, “form of God” is contrasted not with ‘form of a man’ but with “form of a slave” - a reference to one's **status or image**.
4. The grammar of this phrase is: “...he emptied himself **having taken** the form of a slave...” Because “form of a slave” is a visible outward appearance Jesus would already (“**having taken**”) be human when he emptied or poured out himself. So heaven is not the location where any such emptying took place. Rather, this phrase shows that Jesus made sacrifices throughout his life and finally sacrificed his life (Isaiah 53:12).
5. The word for word reading is: “in likeness of men having become; and to *fashion* having been found *as man...*” The context of verses 5-7b puts this phrase only as far back in time as sometime after Jesus' birth. As one having willingly taken the form of a slave Jesus took the place of sinful men (Rom. 8:3b, 2 Cor. 5:21). So the likeness here is not a reference to transferring into the physical substance of

humankind; but rather of “having become an image of (*sinful*) humanity” although he wasn’t in himself sinful (1 Pet. 2:22).

The Renowned Catholic biblical scholar Jerome Murphy O’Connor observed that:

Inevitably, those who begin their exegesis of this hymn with the assumption that it concerns a pre-existent divine being tend towards a docetic interpretation of these lines.

A basic difference in Jewish thinking and Greek thinking of the time was that Jews thought in terms of function and would use a great deal of metaphorical language; whereas Greeks thought more in terms of essence or substance, that is ontologically (substance) or metaphysically. Many scholars have now recognized this difference and have adjusted their interpretations accordingly.

BETTER READING OF THE GREEK

Philippians 2:5-9 is best read first from a word for word Greek interlinear translation. Because of a docetic and often Trinitarian pre-existence bias, our current translations do not accurately express the thoughts of these verses. Of course, some translations are better than others and all render many parts of these texts accurately.

The Kingdom Interlinear word for word of the NWT reads:

“This be you minding in you which also in **Christ** Jesus, who in **form of God existing** not snatching he considered the to be equal (things) to God, but himself he **emptied form of slave having taken**, in likeness of men having become; and to fashion having been found *as man* he made lowly himself having become obedient to death.”

The literal English form becomes:

Let this thinking be in you which was also in **Christ** Jesus, who *existing* in the **form of God** did not consider to be equal to God a thing to be grasped (*on to*), but he **poured out** himself **having taken** the **form** of a **slave**, having become in the likeness of men. Having been found in fashion *as man*, he humbled himself and became obedient to death.

Young’s Literal Translation reads:

“For let this mind be in you that is also in Christ Jesus, who *being* in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God, but did **empty** himself, the **form of a servant having taken**, in the likeness of men having been made, and in fashion having been found *as a man*.”

Scholar based Translation:

Let each of you adopt this way of thinking, which also was the way of thinking adopted by Messiah Jesus, ⁶ who being in the perfect visible image {status} of God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be exploited, ⁷ but he poured himself out, having taken the visible image {status} of a slave, having become in the likeness of men.

THE SUBJECT OF PHILIPPIANS 2:5-9 IS THE HUMAN MESSIAH

Verse 5 says:

- “Let each of you adopt this way of thinking, which also was the way of thinking adopted by Christ [*Messiah*] Jesus.”

So the subject of these verses is not a pre-existent archangel or heavenly being or ‘God the Son’ but the historical human Messiah Jesus – “For there is...one mediator...a man, Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5) who came into existence at his birth (Luke 1:35, 2:11). It is as O’Connor notes that:

Since the hymn deals with Christ in **his concrete terrestrial condition**, one should begin with the working hypothesis that the author views Christ as **man**...The anthropology of Wisdom provides an appropriate background on the assumption that the author of the hymn was thinking of Christ as man.

Also Associate Professor of NT Rodney Decker states regarding Philippians 2 that: "The context shows that it was only **as man** that Christ emptied himself." To this James Mackey adds: "the fact that the subject of the hymn is specifically named as **Messiah Jesus, a man** like ourselves..." Furthermore, the Greek term *morphe* refers to what is seen, so from the beginning the passage is speaking of the fully human visible Jesus.

The CONTEXT is: "but in humility of mind...let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus" (verses 3-5). *So the subject is not about a change of Jesus' essence or nature neither does it concern a pre-conception time for Jesus.*

ADAM CHRISTOLOGY IN CONTRAST TO THE GNOSTIC REDEEMER MYTH

Philippians 2:5-9 is now generally recognized by Bible scholars as a **psalm/hymn** that was probably drawn from Isaiah 53 concerning "the suffering servant" who "**poured out his soul to the death**" (verse 12). It is not a theological treatise. Concerning Philippians Karl-Josef Kuschel informs us that:

So this text would have been a piece of **Adam christology**, of the kind that also emerges in other contexts in the New Testament. It would be a further example of the widespread **two stage christology** of the earliest Jewish-Christian communities...and thus would not be in the context of mythical tradition, but of Old Testament tradition. So there is no question here of a pre-existent heavenly figure. Rather Christ is the great contrasting figure to Adam. *Born Before All Time*, p. 251.

In his paper *Trinity and Incarnation: In Search of Contemporary Orthodoxy* Colin Brown gives his understanding that:

the point of the hymn is not a comparison between Christ's pre-existent state as the divine son in glory and his state of humiliation as a servant. Rather, it is a **comparison between Christ and Adam** in which the term "form of God" is the equivalent of saying "Image of God."

Further confirmation of this James Dunn informs us that:

these passages were written in the middle of the first century, and the most obvious and really clear meaning is the Adam theology and christology widespread in earliest Christianity. In short, **Adam christology** provides not only a plausible context of thought for Phil 2:6-11 but also **the most plausible context** of thought. Alternative explanations in terms of a Gnostic or proto-Gnostic Primal Man speculation are not only unnecessary but also unconvincing...we have uncovered no real evidence that the concept of a heavenly archetype of Adam had developed beyond that of a Platonic idea by the time of Paul – no real evidence, in other words, of an already established belief in a heavenly first man who became the redeemer of Adam's offspring. *Christology in the Making*, pp. 125,126.

NOTE:

Two stage Christology means that there was no pre-existent life but only:

- 1) Jesus was born and lived his life in humility until death.
- 2) He was resurrected and exalted.

NOT A PAST TENSE “WAS IN THE FORM OF GOD”

In verse 6 of the Greek, Jesus is described as “existing (or **being**) in the *form* (Gk *morphe*) of God.” It does not say *was*, was existing or *existed*. “Being” is used in Young’s Literal, KJV, NKJV, NJB and NIV. Additionally Kuschel states that the word “being (Gk *hypachon*)”: “is a **present participle**; i.e. it does not define any particular time.” (*Born Before All Time*, p. 258). Examples are: “**being a prophet**” (*Acts 2:30*); “**If you being a Jew**” (*Gal. 2:14*). These do not mean being so before birth or ceasing to be so.

THE MEANING OF ‘MORPHE’

Kenneth Wuest shows that by Koine Greek times *morphe* had come to have the meaning of: “... **station in life**, a position one holds, one’s rank. And that is an approximation of *morphe* in this context [Phil 2].” (*The Practical use of the Greek New Testament*, p. 84). Indeed, the context confirms this understanding because *being a slave* is per se, a matter of status, rank, or position. In modern English the word **metamorphosis** can involve the change in appearance of a person e.g. weight-loss, or a change in a person’s character or function. But they are still a human and they have not undergone a change to a radically different substance. So *morphe* is here not being used in the Greek philosophical sense and therefore does not carry the thought of change **in the ontological sense** i.e. the substance or essence of something. The contrast is:

Being in the *morphe* of God is an expression of **divinity**. Bauer’s Gk/Eng Lexicon.

Being in the *morphe* of a slave is an expression of **servility**. " " "

Additionally *morphe*: = the form by which a person or thing strikes **the vision**; the **external** appearance. Thayer.

= **external** appearance. Gerhard Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of NT.

= **outward** appearance. Walter Bauer’s Greek Lexicon.

Morphe and *eikon* (image) are near synonyms. F.W. Eltester has shown that *eikon* and *morphe* are used as interchangeable terms in the Septuagint. Commenting on the contrast between “form of God” (Gk *morphe theou*) and “form of a slave” (*morphe doulou*) Jerome Murphy O’Connor notes that: “The absolute fidelity of Christ justified the choice of an alternative term (*morphe rather than eikon*), and permitted the contrast between *morphe theou* and *morphe doulou*.” So, rather than interpreting *morphe* in Greek philosophical terms, Jesus’ “being in **the image/form** of God” means that, as the human Messiah, he was the **visible image** of God, having **divine status**. As Son of God he had the right to function as God as had the rulers in Israel who functioned as **gods** (Psalm 82:6; John 10:34) e.g. “**See I have made you [Moses] God to Pharaoh**” (*Ex. 7:1*). Also the scribes state: “**who can forgive sins except one, God?**” (*Mark 2:7*). Yet, as Jesus said this authority was delegated to him by God:

❖ “**But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins upon the earth**” (*Mark 2:10*).

Jesus was also granted authority to raise the dead (John 5:21). Furthermore:

❖ “**all judgment has been entrusted to the Son**” (*John 5:22, 23*).

Therefore he functions as God but is not of God’s essence or substance.

NOTE: To convey the idea of *essential nature* one would have to use the word *eidos* rather than *morphe*.

THE ATTITUDE OF CHRIST CONTRASTED WITH THAT OF ADAM

Jesus did not regard **equality with God** a thing to be grasped onto (Gk *harpagmos*). James Dunn notes the alternatives as being: “something that was not possessed and so grasped at, or something already possessed and so **grasped retentively** (the ambiguity of *harpagmos*).” *Christology in the Making*, p. 116.

ADAM GRASPED FOR EQUALITY WITH GOD

Satan told Eve that she could “**be like God**”—having the same **status** as God because of the premature and inappropriate acquisition of power through knowledge (Genesis 3:5). After **Adam**’s sin God said “**the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil**” (3:22). This was a snatching at equality with God in respect to knowledge prematurely, yet offered by Satan rather than God. However, God denied Adam the prize of immortality by denying them further access to the tree of life.

JESUS DID NOT EXPLOIT HIS AGENTIVAL EQUALITY WITH GOD

In contrast with Adam, Jesus, through his humility, did not exploit his privileges as being the Lord Messiah. So it would seem that *harpagmos* in this instance is best expressed as in the NRSV:

- ❖ “...who, though he was in the form of God did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited.”

This presents the phrase “he was in the form {status} of God” as meaning “being equal with God.” Karl-Joseph Kuschel similarly explains:

That the Philippians hymn does **not speak of the pre-existence of Christ** at all ... but in good Jewish fashion as the counterpart of **Adam** ... His sinless condition gave him the right to be treated **as if he were God**. *Born Before All Time*, pp. 250-252.

And James Mackey states that:

there is scarcely enough difference between the Greek words *eikon* and *morphe* to prevent us from seeing in the Genesis creation and garden stories the source of our two phrases: man created in God’s image and likeness and **grasping after some status of equality** with God (‘become like one of us’, ‘be like God’). *The Christian experience of God as Trinity*, p.272.

In correspondence Anthony Buzzard stated that:

The article “to” (Gk *to einai isa theo*) “being like God” refers rather naturally to and defines the being in the form of God, i.e. **an agentival equality** which the philosophers did not understand. The point is that Jesus served while having his enormous status as reflecting the glory of God.

WHAT DOES “EMPTIED HIMSELF” MEAN?
THE DOCTRINE OF *KENOSIS*

From **1860**, a Lutheran theologian - Gotfried Thomasius began what has now developed into the false **DOCTRINE OF KENOSIS** i.e. that Christ emptied himself of **his essence**. **This seems to be the first time that Philippians 2:7 was applied in this way**. It appears that the main reason for the development of this doctrine by some Trinitarians was to explain how Jesus could be God and man without postulating two centres of consciousness as in the doctrine of the hypostatic union.

DID JESUS EMPTY HIMSELF OF HIS DIVINITY OR ‘GOD-FORM’

The New International Dictionary of NT Words asks: “Does Phil 2:7 really imply kenoticism? Neither the Gospels nor Phil 2 presents the picture of the abandonment of any divine attributes.” This dictionary does, however, show belief in pre-existence, but for other reasons. Nevertheless Philippians 2:7 does show Jesus accepting the **status** and role of a servant. (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27; John 13:3-16 and 15:20). So does this mean that Jesus emptied himself of himself or of his ‘diety/divinity’ (Trinitarian) or ‘god-form’ (JW) as if this were his essence? If he did empty himself of these attributes then we must ask:

1. How were the cosmic functions of the 2nd Person of the Trinity or the Archangel Michael maintained during his earthly sojourn?
2. How can one lay aside ones qualities, abilities, power, and knowledge and still be the same person? Surely Michael could no longer be Michael

So Colin Brown states that: "... In short, the emptying of Phil 2:6 does not seem to me to have anything to do with a supposed metaphysical **change of states**, but has everything to do with the life of servanthood."

BETTER TRANSLATION CONTEXTUALLY

The phrase "emptied himself" (Gk *ekenosen*) is also translated as: "but made himself of no reputation" KJV, NKJ. However, Grant Osborne professor of New Testament points out that:

There is no (genitive of) context given for the "emptying," and it is better in this light to recognize the intransitive nature of the verb. In *the semantic range* another use fits the context better, to "**pour out**" or "**make himself nothing**." This fits the transition from "*did not consider the equality a thing to be grasped*" to "*took on the form of a servant*" as well as the parallelism with "humbled" in verse 8. A proper regard for context removes the necessity of debating with the Kenotic school on their own grounds.

The Hermeneutical Spiral, p. 75.

So *ekenosen* is more correctly translated as "**but made himself nothing**" *ESV, NIV, NLT* or "**but made himself as nothing**" *BBE*. *It is a parallel thought to "poured out his soul to the death"* (Isaiah 53:12). Bauer's Gk/Eng. Lexicon of NT Literature says that: "An early Christian confession holds that the kenosis is not the incarnation but the cross (Isaiah 53:12)." This was a matter of self-renunciation by Jesus including divesting himself of his right to immortality/incorruptibility, something that was his because of his sinless condition. Paul was imitating Jesus' example when he said: "**I did not run or labor for nothing** (Gk *kenon*)" (*Phil. 2:16 NIV*).

WHEN DID JESUS "MAKE HIMSELF AS NOTHING?"

The NWT of verse 7 "emptied himself *and* **took** a slave's form" gives the incorrect impression that he emptied himself first and then became a slave; whereas, the Greek grammatical structure is: "himself he emptied form of slave **having taken**." This shows that Jesus emptied himself because he had either already, or at that point in time, "**taken** a slave's form." Also the word *and* as used in the NWT changes the correct order of events; yet this word does not occur in the Greek text and is not implied as Ernst Lohmeyer states. The correct structure also fits with the context, giving the meaning that Jesus, having become slave-like then immediately began emptying (daily sacrificing) himself. So Lohmeyer's translation reads: "...but sacrificed himself **having taken** the form of a slave. The *sacrificing* would have been Jesus' entire life course leading to his death. As A.H. McNeile former Regius Professor of Divinity expresses it:

In this case the aorist 'ekenosen' (he emptied himself) does **not refer to a single moment** of 'incarnation' but the completeness of **a series of repeated acts**; his earthly life, looked at as a whole, was an unflinching process of self-emptying.

Or as Jerome Murphy O'Connor expresses it: "We have here an 'emptying' related directly to the terrestrial condition of Christ..." Therefore, in his life course Jesus [*Messiah-the man*] laid aside such rightful dignity, prerogatives (immortality), privileges, and rulership; humbling himself to live a life of servitude which ended with his death. Would the Philippians be asked to copy the impossible example of emptying themselves of **their essence**? Rather, they were to "empty" themselves of their contentious, egotistical and selfish nature and imitate Jesus' lifetime example of humility and self-sacrifice. Paul does not appeal to us to be like an archangel or heavenly being. He appeals to us to be humble servants as humans. Additional context is shown when he says:

- ❖ “I (Paul) am being poured out like a drink offering upon the *sacrifice* and public service to which faith has led you” (Phil. 2:17).
Certainly Paul’s essence was not poured out.

WHAT DOES “TAKING THE FORM OF A SLAVE” MEAN?

All heavenly beings, including the archangel Michael, have always been servants of God. So this passage cannot apply to any heavenly being who supposedly became the human baby Jesus. That is, it does not refer to any change from *spirit substance* to *flesh and blood*. Rather, for Jesus “taking the form of a slave” means ***taking the status of a slave*** with the attitude of mind (verse 5) or disposition of a servant. So Jesus, although being the Messiah, took on **the status of fallen mankind** to *become a servant of mankind* and did not take up his rights and privileges as Messiah. There is no thought here of changing into the substance of a human; neither is any location change indicated; but the simple acceptance of a lowly status by one who, by right, has a high status. A growing number of theologians are viewing this passage as being not about pre-existence but being expressed within the confines of a ***two stage*** Christology. So Jesus’ “having become **in the likeness of men**” means that he grew up to be a man just as sinful men do. The phrase is effectively saying *having grown up to become a man as other men are* (Luke 2:40). It is as J.A.T. Robinson in *The Human Face of God* states: “Not by becoming a man **from being something else** (no one can do that), but by becoming fully and completely human.” (p. 88). Also Robinson notes that: “Luther...recognized...that Christ had to become a person through the normal process of maturation and moral growth,” (p. 79).

As a mortal it is impossible that Jesus had previously existed as an immortal i.e. as an angel or heavenly being (Luke 20:36). However, Jesus was **only like** other men and not the same as them because they needed to be reconciled to God, whereas he did not. Again the phrase about Jesus’ “having been **found in fashion (schema) as (a) man.**” has no metaphysical meaning. Similar to *morphe schema* means:

- 1) the generally recognized state or form in which something appears, outward appearance, form or shape. And 2) the functional aspect of something, way of life, of things; ‘this world in its present form is passing away’ (1 Cor. 7:31) Bauer’s Lexicon.

Yet the world of mankind will not have a change of the physical substance of which it is made, but rather of its character and manner of operation. Benjamin Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott renders this as “and being in condition as a man” and REB renders it as “sharing the human lot.” So according to Dunn it means that: “Christ is being evaluated as Adam - as representative man, as one with fallen man.” (the ‘a’ does not apply). Further, Lohmeyer renders verse 8: “and [though] being found as Son of Man.” This verse is alternatively rendered as: “...having been found in the human scheme of things” or as “having been found in the human condition.” Possibly this refers to the time that Jesus came to manhood at about 30 years of age and then presented himself for a baptism that led to his full servanthood – a life of sacrifice.

ERNST LOHMEYER RECOGNIZED THE ORIGINAL HYMN AS BEING OF TWO STROPHES OF 3-LINE STANZAS

6 [The one] existing in the form of God
 considered it not plunder
 to be like God,

7 but sacrificed himself,
 having taken the form of a slave,

having become an image of humanity;
and [though] being found “as Son of Man”

8 he humbled himself,
having become obedient unto death
[death on a cross]. (*Paul’s added comment*)

9 And therefore God exalted him highly
and bestowed on him the name above every name,

10 that in the name of Jesus
every knee should bow
in heaven, earth, and the underworld,

11 and every tongue acclaim:
“Jesus Christ is Lord”
to the glory of God, the Father.

TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY ON PHILIPPIANS 2:1-11

“1 So if there is any encouragement in Messiah, if any consolation of love, if any sharing in spirit, if any affection and compassions, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full harmony, and of one mind. 3 Do nothing out of selfish rivalry or empty conceit, but in humility consider others more important than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look out not only for your own interests, but also for the interests of others.

The Self-Sacrificing Choice Made by Messiah - Ultimate Example of Humility

5 Let each of you adopt this way of thinking, which also was the way of thinking adopted by Messiah Jesus,

6 who being in the perfect visible image {status} of God [*as Adam was*], did not consider equality [*representatively*] with God a thing to be exploited,

7 but he poured himself out [*a life of self-sacrifice terminating in the sacrifice of his life: 2:17 and Isa 53:12*], having taken the visible image {status} of a slave [*like Adam after his fall into sin*], having become in the likeness of men [*i.e. sinful men in contrast to the pre-sinning Adam*].

So having been identified as [representative] man, 8 he humbled himself [*becoming the sin offering*] and became obedient to death—even to death on a cross.

9 For this reason, God highly exalted him [*as the Last Adam*] and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

THE CONCLUSIONS OF LEADING BIBLE SCHOLARS REGARDING PHILIPPIANS TWO

“Several scholars have noted that “form of God” may be the equivalent of “image of God.” Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, J.D.G. Dunn, and others have suggested (in my judgment rightly) that the work is not about pre-existence and post-existence, but about the contrast between Christ and Adam.”

Kyrios Jesus Revisited by Professor Colin Brown.

“From this fact that the Jewish rather than Hellenistic syncretism may be the key to understanding the Philippians hymn, present day exegetes have drawn the radically opposite conclusion that the Philippians hymn does **not speak of the pre-existence of Christ at all.**” *Born Before All Time?* p. 250, by Karl-Josef Kuschel.

“The fact that in the context of the hymn in the actual epistle there is **no mention at all of this anonymous divine figure** who becomes man” *The Christian Experience of God as Trinity*, p. 52 by James P. Mackey.

“The picture is **not of a celestial figure** lowering himself to become a man, to be exalted still higher than he was before. Rather, it is that the entire fullness of God was enabled...to find embodiment in one who was completely one of us as any other descendant of Abraham” *The Human Face of God*, p.166 by J. A. T. Robinson.

“But of pre-existence and equality of being with God we **cannot discover any trace in Paul’s letters.**”
Son of God in the New Testament, p. 45 by Bas van Iersel.

“Philippians 2:6 is primarily concerned with making statements about high status and **by no means necessarily concerned with pre-existence.**” Klaus Berger (Heidelberg Protestant exegete).

“**No pre-existence** of Christ before the world with an independent significance can be recognized even **in Phil. 2.**”
Anton Vogtle (Freiburg exegete).

“Moreover it can readily be seen that the outline of thought in the Philippian hymn fully matches the **two-stage Christology** evident elsewhere in first generation Christianity – free acceptance of man’s lot followed out to death, and exaltation to the status of Lord over all” *Christology in the Making*, p. 115 by James Dunn.

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